

Special Events[®]

M A G A Z I N E

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S C H E M A T I C S

— for —

Theme Addicts

The Seventh Annual Theme Collection

Also Inside: ISES NEWS

Lauren Levine & Howard Foer

MOST NEW LAWYERS begin their careers trying cases. However, when Lauren Levine graduated from Georgetown Law School in Washington, D.C., she preferred to try recipes. Realizing she'd rather serve food than subpoenas, Levine took a job at a local D.C. catering firm, where she met a young chef named Howard Foer. Though Levine's goal was to cook food, her gregarious personality was perfectly suited to selling it. She took a position in sales, which she held for about a year before taking a chef job at D.C.'s then newly re-opened landmark eatery Occidental



Howard Foer and Lauren Levine

Restaurant. Foer also left catering, and began working as a chef at a local French restaurant. The two remained good friends. "Though we both really missed catering," Levine says.

However, once a caterer, always a caterer. In 1987, Levine and Foer started their own catering company, Festive Foods, in Bethesda, Maryland, with Foer manning the kitchen and Levine handling sales. About three years after starting the business, they added party rental to Festive Foods' services—an alliance common to large D.C.-area caterers—making it a full-service catering company. Working so closely—not to mention such long hours—with one another eventually led to falling in love, and the business partners soon became marriage partners.

THE FULL-SERVICE ADVANTAGE

Levine: "If you want to be competitive, especially in this market, you have to offer more. The more you can do, and the less the client has to do, the better. We started renting linens two years after we started the business because linens have an impact on what an event can look like. We now have about 500 different fabrics and an in-house seamstress, in addition to china, silver, glassware. But it takes a lot of time and money to build a rental inventory."

THE 90 PERCENT SOLUTION

Levine: "D.C. is a competitive market, but I like the competition. It has kept the public's standards high, which is great for a caterer. From the start, we set ourselves apart. We've always baked our own breads, cured our own meats, made all our own condiments. In this city, 90 percent of the client's decision is food-based, 10 percent budget."

HOW NOT TO CRASH AND BURN

Levine: "The thing about catering is you either crash and burn, or it gets in your blood. It's in our blood. We're pretty much lifers here. Continuity is very important in this business. To keep our employees, we have to keep it interesting and exciting for them, too. So, we are always looking for a new challenge to stay current and interested. Buying Poplar Springs raised the bar for us. And it has given us a new appreciation for sites and what they go through. It's nice to have our hands in several aspects of the industry."

In 1995, Levine gave birth to daughter Rylee (son Jake followed in 1996). That same year, Festive Foods made a move that is becoming a profitable trend among catering companies: It purchased an event site—a historic, 200-acre estate in the Virginia countryside called Poplar Springs. To manage the site, which is about an hour from

Bethesda, they hired the original owner as an on-site event coordinator. Currently, Poplar Springs, which is rented for an additional fee separate from the catering costs, hosts 75 events a year and can seat 250 indoors. And, since the house has 10 bedrooms, each with a bath, Levine and Foer have plans to open it up to wedding parties and families wishing to spend the wedding weekend on-site. "We'll wait to do that next year," Levine says. "We want to do it right."

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