





▲ FINE DINING

(From top) Ms Barrie opened Fine Palate restaurant at Waterloo Street so that she could host food tastings in a more centralised location; the current F&B labour crunch is posing a problem; but the food is always top quality

The company's business positioning was not a calculated move based on market research but a natural progression. "The continuous referrals are a sign that there was a gap in the market," she said. Fine Palate very quickly created a name for itself in the industry, purely by word of mouth.

Ms Barrie's previous work experience has certainly helped her in growing this business, but the perfectionist in her played the biggest part. "My clients were sometimes taken aback by the degree of information I demanded to know," she said. Besides having a clear objective of the event, she would also prefer her clients to be familiar with the guests' demographics, down to their likes and dislikes.

"If I was the one throwing this party personally, I would think one guest by one guest, their needs and preferences. When I'm doing an event for a client, I need that information so that I can apply the same principle," she said.

She once read this quote and has strived to live to it: "Only the generous can make a sandwich worth eating." Ms Barrie said that she is unlike many business-minded people, who would, early in the venture, work out the net profit and find ways to increase the margin. "I once saw in a chain establishment, a staff member weighing spaghetti on a scale and cutting one of the strands off," she said. "This is exactly the opposite of how I think. I want to make a better impression, even if my client doesn't want to pay the full price for it."

One reason why Ms Barrie is adamant about quality is because she is passionate about food. Her inspirational figure is British celebrity chef Jamie Oliver. Like him, she likes no-nonsense, unpretentious food made from good ingredients and produce. She is also a meticulous cook. Once, she flew a week ahead to Shanghai, where her client's event was held, to find out what the Shanghainese look for in a dish. "What we serve could be western – however, it will satisfy their palate. That's why we're called Fine Palate," she said.

In 2000, the business became a lifeline when she broke up with her husband. With an employment pass, she was able to stay in Singapore to be with her children. The nature of her work also allowed her to be with them before and after school. "I was at the right place in the right time for my situation then," she said.

Singapore was also the best place to be in because it welcomed multinational corporations, which made up most of her clientele. Plus, there was a lack of competition here. "If I was doing what I do in Australia or England, it may be a lot easier because there's a ready talent pool, but I would have a much bigger competition too," she said.

In February this year, Ms Barrie invested half a



▲ GETTING PERSONAL

(Clockwise, from top) Ms Barrie pays attention to the details; she likes no-nonsense, unpretentious food made from good ingredients and produce, and expects higher demand for bespoke catering services

million dollars to open the Fine Palate restaurant at Waterloo Street so that she can host food tastings in a more centralised location. Previously, her central kitchen was at an industrial building in Bukit Batok.

The restaurant also allows her to build a continuous relationship with her clients. "You may use me for your engagement party and not need me for the next three years until you have a baby shower. However, if you like what I do, you can come here with your friends for lunch or dinner," she said. During her interview with *The SME Magazine* on a Saturday afternoon, the restaurant was full



» FINE PALATE

Industry: F&B catering

Clientele: 70 per cent are companies from the banking, shipping and luxury brands industries; 30 per cent come from family occasions such as birthdays and housewarming parties

Turnover: \$1 million last year, expecting \$1.5 million this year

and a quarter of the customers were her previous clients.

Despite the good response to the restaurant, Ms Barrie has no plans to expand it, as she feels that there are still a lot of catering opportunities in Singapore. She has noticed that corporate lunches and boardroom entertaining have seeped into the local culture, and is expecting higher demand for bespoke catering services.

Currently, 70 per cent of her clients are companies from the banking, shipping and luxury brands industries. The remaining 30 per cent come from family occasions such as birthdays and housewarming parties. Last year, her turnover was \$1 million. This year, she is expecting \$1.5 million – if the challenges that she is facing can be resolved.

The current F&B labour crunch, partly caused by the opening of the integrated resorts, is posing "a very serious problem" to her business. "I have explained my difficulties to MOM (Ministry of Manpower), I'm sure there are others doing the same thing. However, I don't see a resolution yet," she said.

The second challenge is a slightly bigger headache. Pointing to a copy of the day's newspaper, she said that the credit crises in Europe and America are threatening to send her targeted expatriate customers back home. "Our business is not bread and butter. It's luxury, a type of business that is very much connected to the economy," she said.

Since she has no control over the economy, on top of giving her best like she always does, Ms Barrie can only hope for the best. ■

DEVELOPING A FINE PALATE

Heather Barrie went from being a passionate home cook to running a catering company that goes beyond serving fine food to also provide bespoke services

[by **Sheere Ng**]

LIKE many expatriate wives, Heather Barrie quit her job and moved to Singapore when her husband was posted here. But the former computer dealer soon became bored as a stay-home mum. To kill time, she turned to her original passion – cooking. That was in 1992, when Singapore had limited offerings of European cuisines. “The cheese, fresh pasta and pizzas in local supermarkets were not quite there,” said Ms Barrie.

This opened doors for the native Australian to teach cooking, particularly to the expatriate community who were missing their hometown grub. She also taught them how to plan menus and style settings for home entertaining – a useful skill to have in their dinner-party lifestyle.

But Ms Barrie did not stop there. She started planning for her students’ family functions, from cosy eight-person meals to, over time, corporate events hosting hundreds of people. In 1996, she registered her catering business and named it Fine Palate.

Unlike most catering companies, Fine Palate provides bespoke services, serving high quality and exquisite food that is mostly unique to each event. Other industry players tend not to customise their services because it is both uneconomical and challenging to come up with a new concept for every customer.