

Thao Moore is building Green Mangos Catering from scratch after stints at superb Twin Cities restaurants...

November 16, 2008

A ripening passion: Thao Moore is building Green Mangos Catering from scratch after stints at superb Twin Cities restaurants as well as the catering operations that refined her sense of how to express her love of food. One pound, two pounds or five pounds?

"Everything I buy cuts into my profit," said Moore, 37, who launched Green Mangos Catering with her husband, Tom, just over a year ago. "People say, 'What's a buck? What's \$2? But it adds up. I try to be smart about how I shop.'" Moore's careful eye on the bottom line has helped her Woodbury-based business get off to a solid start despite a tough economic climate. She is predicting first-year revenue of \$20,000 for Green Mangos and expects to hit \$50,000 by the end of next year.

That disciplined approach was apparent on a Tuesday morning ingredient run for her next event -- a client lunch at Lancet Software in Burnsville.

The menu:roasted beef tenderloin with an herbed butter sauce, vodka cream pasta, shrimp pad Thai, a house salad, creme fraiche mashed potatoes and tres leches cake.

Moore figures ingredients should not make up for more than 30 percent of what she charges to cater a meal. But while cost of ingredients is key, taste and quality are king. She chooses firm tofu over medium or soft. "It cooks better," she says. And she goes for Hunt's whole canned tomatoes instead of the store brand because they are higher quality, but not much more in price.

Born in Vung Tau, Vietnam, Moore fled the country by boat with her family in 1975. They landed in Guam, but ended up in Minnesota when a church in Richfield offered to sponsor them. Moore, who was just 4 years old at the time, says she doesn't remember much about the experience, but it was a tough transition for her family. Her parents, considered well-to-do in Vietnam, had to start all over again. The youngest of the three kids, Moore graduated from high school in Bloomington and studied business management and marketing at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. Upon graduation, she joined State Farm as a claims representative. But after she had been there 12 years, the company said it was moving its Woodbury division to Nebraska. By this point, Moore was married and her second child was on the way. (Her oldest, Jacob, is now 5, and Jasmine is 3.) Moving wasn't really an option. Tom Moore was a corporate manager at Target. "Early on, we decided we were going to follow his career," Moore said. So

she decided it was time for a career change.

One day, after spending half an hour examining the variety of peppers at the Woodbury Cub Foods, Moore realized her real passion: food. Though she'd always enjoyed cooking for friends and family, she realized she wanted to learn more. In 2006, she enrolled in the Art Institutes International Minnesota. In her 30s by then, Moore worried about how far behind her peers she was. So many of them had worked in restaurants as servers or line cooks. Others had manned their parents' bakeries. "Most chefs my age had been in the industry for many years," she said. But her knack for cooking quickly shone through. She was a finalist in the 2007 Next Best Chef competition in Bloomington and a regional finalist in the 2008 S. Pellegrino's "Almost Famous" chef competition in Chicago.

She worked briefly at the Oceanaire Seafood Room and Le Belle Vie and with a few caterers in town. Ultimately, she chose catering over restaurants because she thought it would be a more family-friendly path. Shortly after she graduated from culinary school, Green Mangos was born. She took its name from a Southeast Asian cookbook, "Green Mangos and Lemon Grass," she found in a bookstore. Though she and her husband own the business together, Moore pretty much runs the show. One of her first orders of business was to find a commercial kitchen in the Twin Cities that she could rent for a few hours at a time. She looked at kitchens at banquet facilities, bakeries, churches and schools. Most didn't meet her needs. Several that did just didn't want the liability of a caterer using their facility. Green Mangos landed its first gig before Moore had a kitchen -- or her catering license. Lancet Software, the company that designed her Web site, wanted her to cater a corporate lunch for 17 people. Through a local networking group -- Women Who Really Cook -- she finally found a kitchen in Minneapolis that she still uses today.

Lancet became a satisfied repeat customer, hiring Green Mangos for two or three events a month. "I don't think you could go to any catering menu in the Twin Cities and find the range of offerings she has," said Randy Mattran, Lancet's vice president of professional services. Lancet could go with sandwiches and chips, but the extra expense has so far been worth it. "People want to come to our next event so they can see what we'll be serving," Mattran said. Lancet's luncheons are buffet style and Moore can handle those by herself. But for larger events, she has a sous chef and a line cook on hand, as well as a pool of 10 servers. In five years, Moore would like to have her own kitchen. In 10 years, she envisions one or two more full-time chefs on staff. But that's a ways away. The last thing she wants to do is get ahead of herself. "I still feel like we're so young," she said.

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