

Caterer makes a crisp career move

ENTERPRISE | Vancouver's Lesley Stowe expands her horizons as demand soars for her gourmet creation

BY JILL LAMBERT

Vancouver caterer Lesley Stowe isn't leaving the food scene entirely, but thanks to the success of her new product, Raincoast Crisps, she's changing direction.

When Stowe got into the gourmet food business in the 1980s, the food scene here was still fairly unsophisticated. Here was plain eating, meat and potatoes, formal French cuisine or tamped-down Chinese food. There were exceptions: Umberto Menghi and chefs such as John Bishop had begun to put Vancouver's incredible abundance of local ingredients into play. Into this environment Stowe brought a culinary education from the renowned French cooking school La Varenne and some great ideas about food.

After spending a year in Paris as a stagiere, a teaching assistant at La Varenne, she started up a cooking school at the Wise Owl kitchen shop in Kits.

From there she went to the Salt Box in the Cellar, a gourmet shop with a cater-

ing business and cooking school. In 1985, she rented a kitchen on Commercial Drive, hired staff and went into the catering business.

Back in the 1980s, a party menu might have included chilled prawns wrapped in snow peas, mini-quiches, salmon mousse with dill sauce, beef Wellington and lemon dacquoise. By the 1990s, she was serving crab cakes and sushi, grilled Tuscan vegetables and wild rice orzo pilaf, sea bass with mango lime fruit salsa, tiramisu and crème brulee Napoleans. "I'd say the Mediterranean influence was strongest from the mid-'80s through the 1990s; estate olive oils and aged artisan balsamic vinegars were the darlings of that period, so anything drizzled or dipped with these ingredients was considered very current."

Stowe also produced a line of special desserts, which she sold to restaurants, clients such as English Bay Café, Rain-tree Restaurant, Bishop's and Lonsdale Quay agreed.

The desserts were almost too successful. For Raintree, Stowe created a popular



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Lesley Stowe's food store is a Vancouver success story; now her creativity is finding a wider outlet.

chocolate caramel hazelnut mousse cake. For Bishop's, a special papaya passionfruit tart. And then, there was Death By Chocolate, Stowe's own creation, which featured a dense flourless chocolate cake served with a dramatic splash of raspberry coulis. It became a huge hit at Bishop's, and for Stowe, a victim of its own success. "It became so popular that they decided they should be making it themselves."

After four years, Stowe surveyed the scene and made her move. "There was a need for a specialty food store in the city that wasn't a European deli. So I decided to add another dimension to our business — a storefront, so our food could be available daily." Her next location, on Third at Burrard, suited her well — she's

been there for 14 years.

With the new premises came a new mission — to educate Vancouver about great ingredients and to make those ingredients available. Inspired by the example of Dean and Deluca in New York, Stowe was the first to carry many of the gourmet brands now more widely available — Valrhona chocolate and Rustichella d'Abruzzo pasta, estate olive oils and Gelato Fresco.

Stowe developed a line of products to sell in the store alongside the imported goods. The decision paid off, with a major hit that's taking her in a new direction: Raincoast Crisps. Inspired by crunchy bagel thins that worked so well with her dips and spreads, Stowe created

the crackers and sold them with great success to her own clientele.

She's now making enough to supply 60 stores in B.C. and Alberta; there's a waiting list of about 40 more stores. Stowe is planning to increase production at a larger facility and is looking into national and North American distribution. In order to pursue this, she had to make yet another change to her business; Michele Winniski is now running the catering side of the operation under a new name, Tulips and Tarts. Although Stowe still provides the food for the catering service and runs the storefront at her Third Avenue location, she's got her eye where it should be — on the future.

Jill Lambert is a Vancouver food writer.