

# Best Eating

Georgia Straight

## How we cook and what ingredients we identify with say a lot about us

By Angela Murrills

Ever noticed that people who over-mayo their sandwiches invariably have a certain oily quality? Or that bakers of three-tier chocolate cakes are generally less spontaneous than their spatula-clattering friends whose tables groan with Tuscan platters served family style? You're not just what you eat. You are also how you slice, chop, mix, and cook what goes on your plate. These thoughts and more flit through my mind as I stand at a table ripping the guts out of a Dungeness crab. Crunching cartilage with gusto, needling out strands of flesh, I'm having a fine time now that I've slunk away from the group in the kitchen next door where somebody else's musical choice booms over the sound system. My wheedling excuse for solitude: I don't want crab juice to splash over my fellow cooks. Hmm...doesn't play well with others, devious too. It's just as well that I'm not being judged for suitedness to the business world.

I might be if the organizer of this event, Julie Burke, had a facilitator watching and analyzing every move. For the past three years, Burke, a Vancouverite, has channelled two decades of catering experience and a corporate stint into a culinary team-building company called Tall Order. Its slogan: building relationships with food. Her Web site ([www.tallorder.ca/](http://www.tallorder.ca/)) reveals the scope of the programs she runs throughout Canada, the U.S., and even France, where she once had 20 engineers rattling pots. The "Extreme Cooking" side of her business is a "more fun, more collaborative event", she explains, suitable for a team that has, for example, recently completed a gruelling project or for 750 individuals who have just met up for the start of a conference. Depending on the client's needs, it can take a number of forms. For instance, the 14 of us (mostly media) who met up at Granville Island Public Market early one morning were split into groups, given paper money to "bid" for recipes, and handed hard cash to buy the necessary supplies. What comes out of this exercise are two valuable pieces of knowledge: cooperation is key ("My group needs 10 eggs and your group needs two, so let's buy a dozen between us") and market stall holders invariably have cases of ripe avocados secreted away. You just have to ask.

Burke's other approach is more strategic when a client wants an assessment. The objective might be analyzing leadership styles in, for instance, two recently merged companies, or arranging a corporate retreat that reveals whether participants are introverts or extroverts. In these cases, she brings in a professional facilitator who "goes into the kitchen, watches, makes notes from the hat exercise on". Ah yes, the hat exercise involved wearing a chef's toque bearing the name of the food you most identified with—California roll, three-alarm chili—as you shopped Granville Island. I, and another, refused to play. Having gone public with that, I don't foresee calls from human-resources departments anytime soon.

To be scrupulously honest, I've volunteered to cook and dismember the Dungeness crab because I know how to do it and I'm reluctant to see 20 bucks of delicious seafood reduced to road kill by incompetent hands. (I can hear that facilitator scribbling furiously.) "One woman had an emotional issue with dealing with a live crab," Burke says, adding that, when a crustacean is involved, the group cook-in sometimes echoes the famous scene in *Annie Hall* when Woody Allen confronted a lobster.

Burke reveals that when she's in the kitchen with a corporate group under assessment, "we throw little tricks. For instance, we make people change groups. Here you are making your ginger snaps and you have to stop and make Greek salads." How participants read a recipe is also revealing, she says. Even though told to do so before they even pick up a spoon, a lot of people dive right in without so much as a glance at ingredients and technique. And those phyllo-triangle instructions aren't there just for fun. They'll expose your work approach. "People tend to leave that one till last instead of doing the hard work first," Burke says.

Sometimes that work is deliberately made harder. Our team bitched about the tiny paring knives we were issued. "We remove certain equipment to make it harder. Sometimes we don't have a Cuisinart to whip cream. In the business world, you are given what you're given to work with." What Burke would love to see is this kind of process factored into the hiring process. She envisages a team that includes a candidate up for a job. Cooking is when "they let their guard down and reveal their true self."

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