

**A**s creators of custom-tailored food extravaganzas, caterers have come a long way from the days when all they had to worry about was providing tasty, hot food at a specified location. Whether it's a chef-led cooking class for six, breakfast for 60 in the great Canadian wilderness, or an elaborately detailed theme party for 600, today's dynamic caterer is up for the challenge.

Despite economic turbulence, the past few years have seen the development of a new level of maturity in off-premise catering. On the client side, media-inspired culinary awareness and a greater appreciation of food have resulted in a demand for sophisticated food experiences. In response, caterers, and the companies that support them, have collaborated to improve on the design, preparation and presentation of mobile meals.

Meet four catering companies that not only exemplify this uncompromising commitment to success, they do it their own way.

—photography (left) by roger yip—

**Daniel et Daniel  
Event Creation and  
Catering, Toronto**  
[www.danieletdaniel.ca](http://www.danieletdaniel.ca)

**THESE DAYS**, Daniel Megly, president and co-owner of Toronto's Daniel et Daniel, finds his visits to international trade shows rewarding. "[Catering in] Toronto is right up there on a world scale," he says, acknowledging the company he and chef/co-owner Daniel Clairret have nurtured for more than 24 years has contributed to that status.

He's also quick to credit the ongoing improvements in the quality and variety of the city's service providers, including venues, rental specialists, linen companies and custom furniture makers. "They make us look good, and make it that much easier for us to do our best work." In 2003, Megly's company posted sales just shy of \$6 million with corporate clients representing the bulk of business.

With the wide variety of equipment and other supplies available on-demand, Megly's overhead costs are low, allowing the company to invest in refrigerated trucks, signature dishware and upgrades to computers and catering software — items essential to its current core business of large-scale events. "More than ever, we need flexibility to meet client expectations and deliver as unique an experience as we can," he says.

To that end, Megly's team of event planners are leaning towards trendy tasting menus, designing stand-up meals based on small portions of six to 10 items, such as a *demi-tasse* of soup, a bite of rack of lamb with *foie gras*, cheese samplers and mini desserts, complemented with wine-tasting stations. "Because people are more conscious of what and how much they eat, this lets them satisfy their cravings yet not feel full or guilty," says Megly. "It's also easier for clients who want to offer exotic foods, such as game meats, because guests can easily decline that item yet still manage [to have] a meal."

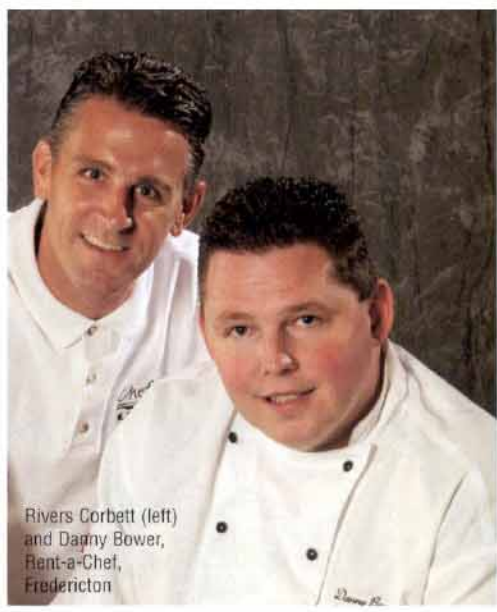
Though this style of service presents a greater challenge than conventional sit-downs, with more kitchen prep, on-site plating and reliance on knowledge beyond servers to manage the meal, Megly says it plays to the company's key strength. "We have a well-trained staff, some with 10 years' experience and we've trained many of the contract servers as well," he says, noting a total payroll of 65 full-time staff in three kitchens, the offices and Daniel et Daniel's busy retail shop.

"It's easy for any new caterer to get a great-looking PR kit or Web site and compete head-to-head with the big guys," he says. "But the real test comes in delivering tasty, hot food from an improvised set-up in a hallway. Experience is our edge when adversity is high."

**Rent-a-Chef,  
Fredericton**  
[www.rentachef.tv](http://www.rentachef.tv)

**WITH A CONCEPT** that embraces showmanship as much as it does cooking, Rivers Corbett's role is as impresario as well as it is president and co-owner.

When they launched the Fredericton-based company five years ago, Corbett and co-owner and chef Danny Bower opted to build their business on what they describe as "culinary adventures." They identified two opportunities



Rivers Corbett (left) and Danny Bower, Rent-a-Chef, Fredericton

in their market, which includes Southern New Brunswick and select projects in Atlantic Canada. "We found a demand for customization in designing events and menus beyond the standard off-the-shelf approach offered by many local hoteliers, as well as a growing interest in meeting and interacting with chefs, who are becoming like celebrities," he explains.

In putting its team of eight full-time and 30 sub-contracted chefs front-and-centre, Rent-a-Chef has created a diversified business model based on 50-per-cent demonstration/education functions and 30-per-cent event catering. The remaining 20 per cent is spread between business-to-business consulting and the company's new Meal Chef program, which uses its central commissary to produce a line of healthy, frozen and ready-to-eat meals for wholesale and retail.

Corbett credits the popularity of food-based TV content for the demand for product demonstrations and cooking classes. Some of the company's regular clients for these programs include Sobey's grocery chain, P.E.I.-based Paderno cookware and, via its network of contract chefs, Ontario's LCBO retail outlets.

On the catering side, Corbett says military, government and big business represent 85 per cent of their regular clientele, primarily because "they're willing to spend more on the experience and display some showmanship for their own guests." For clients with tighter budgets, the company has recently added tray catering and luncheon platters to their offering. Catering for weddings, dinner parties and other small-scale functions is on the rise, though the company has set a minimum commission of \$500 to keep its calendar open to larger events, which average four per week.

Filling the plates at those events are dishes based on staples such as beef, chicken or lobster, but with a lighter health-conscious treatment. "We don't get much demand for organic products, vegetarian dishes or exotic ingredients, since most of our clients are not risk-takers."

Corbett says the company's biggest challenge, and thus its

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF RENT-A-CHEF

largest investment, lies in recruitment and human resources. Its catering concept demands a staff with more than culinary skills. "They have to bring flair and personality to every event, even a luncheon, because even sandwiches need to 'wow' guests."

Though most Rent-a-Chef events are traditional buffets, dinners or cocktail receptions, they never shy away from a creative challenge. "If someone wants a chef to come to a log cabin in an isolated area and create a magical feast using only a barbecue, we'll do it. Top-level catering today is all about being resourceful."

**Critics Choice  
Caterers, North  
Vancouver**  
[www.criticchoicecaterers.com](http://www.criticchoicecaterers.com)

**SANDY MURPHY WILL** stop at nothing to get food to her clients. As owner/operator, Murphy, along with her team at Critics Choice Caterers, is one of Vancouver's first mobile caterers to the region's busy Hollywood North film and TV industry. "We've lowered four-course meals in buckets down into ravines, and floated our kitchen trucks on barges in Burrard Inlet," says Murphy. "Those kinds of experiences serve us well in any job we take on," which, these days includes more corporate parties, weddings and themed events as the boom of local film and television productions is slowing.

"Film is down to 30 per cent of our business, though it's still a steady cash flow," adds Murphy. The company's two mobile kitchens are supported by a 5,000-sq.-ft. central

kitchen and warehouse facility.

Over the course of a shoot, often lasting up to three months, on-set menus must provide a varied and balanced offering 24/7 and comprise a minimum of 30-per-cent vegetarian meals. Murphy is often asked to make meals that comply with the diet du jour (Atkins, South Beach) for trend-conscious Hollywood stars. "The stars typically send an assistant to fetch their meal, and we'll often serve it on china versus paper or plastic plates," says Murphy. Salads, desserts and other snacks are served buffet style.

When they're not catering for the entertainment industry, Murphy's five core chefs diligently prepare for the week's four to five catering events. These are organized with the help of an independent event coordinator and event designer. "We're moving towards a one-stop-shopping operation, which I think will ensure a successful future," says Murphy.

As a lover of the dramatic, Murphy's specialty is elaborate theme parties, one of which, a Harry Potter-themed family brunch for a Vancouver legal firm, earned a prestigious "Event of the Year" Star Award nomination at this year's Canadian Events Industry Awards. For that party, Murphy and her design team concocted kid-friendly edible sculptures of apples and gummy worms, cookie magic wands, fabricated giant spiders to crawl across trays of cupcakes and iced breakfast pastries in ghoulish colours. "There's a lot more room now for artistry and showbiz in catering, but in the end it comes down to the quality of the food, and that's where experience really matters."

**Dish Catering,  
Ottawa**  
[www.dishcatering.ca](http://www.dishcatering.ca)

**ERIN CLATNEY'S 15 YEARS** of front- and back-of-house experience in pubs and fine dining restaurants around Southern Ontario was the only solid foundation of her catering venture.

"I had no business plan, nor did I sit down to map this out," says Clatney, Dish's president and owner.

When a friend enlisted Clatney's catering services for a single event, Clatney under-priced her services. "I lost my shirt," she declares. Fortunately, that first cheap event snowballed into a bona fide business. "I'm the accidental caterer," she laughs. Beyond great word-of-mouth marketing, she credits positive press coverage for a critical boost. "If the media dub you the 'new hot thing,' it can carry you for awhile."

Based in a 1,200-sq.-ft. commercial kitchen in Ottawa's gourmet-entertaining neighbourhood of Westboro, Dish specializes in high-end catering for dinner parties, weddings and other events, employs two full-time chefs, as well as a sommelier and an event planner, both on a contract basis. The company projects sales of \$250,000 in 2004, based on an average of two to three events per week.

With the intent to specialize in on-site cooking, Clatney invested her first year's profits in equipment: four induction cooktops, a 15-ft.-by-15-ft. walk-in cooler, carry-alls and vehicles. "Having the cooks [at the event venue] makes it more dynamic and adds another dimension people rarely get at a restaurant, unless they have a chef's table," she explains.

Clatney accompanies her team to every event and has developed

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Erin Clatney (left) and David Lang, Dish Catering, Ottawa

an exclusive staff of freelance servers that "have the knowledge, a connection with food and are able to present it in a way that tantalizes guests," she says. Dish's scrumptious menus highlight local, seasonal and mostly organic foods. "We know local suppliers and producers personally and can describe how the products are grown or raised, which makes a difference to clients of high-end catering."

Her most requested events are for stand-up cocktail/dinner parties with 12- to 15-course tasting menus, most paired with wines, and including popular bites of duck, quab and game meats. "I encourage people to order foods they wouldn't prepare at home, and we ensure it's presented in a way that encourages everyone to try it," Clatney explains. Coping with fad diets is a hassle, she says, though her team always puts extra effort into organic and vegetarian dishes "because guests appreciate it and most hosts are willing to reward it."

Clatney has added event planning and personalized services, which have been hits with clients. "For example, we'll order wine on consignment and offer clients the opportunity to reserve cases of desired bottles to make their event that much more exclusive."

As she juggles the growth of her small business with her family life and three young children, Clatney is determined to make sure the quality of Dish's food and service never wavers. "[Though] demand is high, we're limiting the number of events we take on to maintain quality of our food and also of our personal relationships," she says. "We don't intend to mass-produce or dilute our personal on-site attention."

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL COMBERTE OTTAWA

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