

abigail kirsch:

catering's *grande dame*



ABIGAIL KIRSCH IS THE *DOYENNE* of the moveable feast. When she started her own catering business over 30 years ago, she was the first woman in the New York area and one of few in the country to venture into the male-dominated profession of serving people en masse. Today, caterers model their operations after Kirsch's innovative strategies—from orchestrating the moves of a large wait staff to the intuitive knack of serving that perfectly chilled scoop of ice cream to 2,000 people under a hot tent. It's like watching a choreographed work of art when all 12 people at a table get served at the exact same moment.

text by abby luby
photos by jerry novesky

Kirsch founded her catering company, Abigail Kirsch Catering Relationships, in 1975 and led the rising wave of *haute cuisine* catering. The company today is a multi-million dollar business with on-premise catering at its home base, the grand stone mansion Tappan Hill, in Tarrytown, overlooking the Hudson River, at The New York Botanical Garden, Pier 60 and at The Lighthouse at Chelsea Piers in Manhattan. In 2006, Kirsch opened at Stage 6 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard and last year opened at LIFE, a new venue in Westchester. The company has won numerous awards and is Zagat's top-rated caterer.

Inspired by such icons as Julia Child, Lidia Bastianich, Daniel Boulud—she says she never watches television food shows and dismisses them as surreal. ("It's like watching an action movie, a sit com," she says. "They're running around. There's fire, there's this, there's that. And in the end they are judged. The whole thing is hysterical. It's not real. Who ever cooks that way?") She has been listed in *Crain's New York's 100 Most Influential Women in Business* and has authored several cookbooks, including *The Bride and Groom's First Cookbook* (Doubleday, 1996; \$25) and *Invitation to Dinner* (Broadway, 1998; \$29.95). Kirsch firmly believes success comes from the ideal of perfection and she has taught that goal to what she calls her extended family of hundreds of employees.

In March, Kirsch was inducted into the Westchester County Women's Hall of Fame. At the awards luncheon she told the audience, "Without a doubt, I am certain the cooking gene occupies the entire map of my DNA."

KIRSCH SPEAKS EXPRESSIVELY in a low voice with a slight Brooklyn accent and certain memories of her rich career spark an affable laugh. Her

slender physique and short brown hair adds to her lofty stature. Hers is a quiet, unswerving intention. Catering wasn't the career trajectory Kirsch had in mind as a mother of four living in Chappaqua. She knew only that she loved to cook, especially for her friends and neighbors. "I always had little dinner parties for six," says Kirsch. "Once I made a crown roast of lamb and stuffed it with wild rice and pineapple. That was just fun for me."

Kirsch found herself asking her butcher for gravy recipes, reading *Gourmet* magazine and *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. She started giving cooking lessons in her home at no charge, later realizing she wanted more training. In 1966 she went to the Culinary Institute of America, then based in New Haven, Connecticut. She was the only woman student and an easy target of discrimination. Shunning the derogatory label "girlie" from an instructor who didn't like women in his CIA kitchen, Kirsch checked out and found a more tolerant Swiss pastry chef. The following summer she attended the Cordon Bleu in Paris.

"Chefs had distain for women in the kitchen," Kirsch says. "They were in the men's place. When you're in business, you naturally have competition, and when you had women coming in, it was even more threatening."

Kirsch's persistence edged the culinary door open for women. "Women started going into business quite recently in the history of the world and of the country. There was no welcome sign. No one said 'Hi! How are you?'"

After getting certificates from both the CIA and the Cordon Bleu, Kirsch made the leap from giving cooking lessons in her Chappaqua home to opening a storefront where she not only taught cooking, but also sold cookware and offered some "take-out." Days after she opened, Pepsico headquarters in Katonah ordered a catered lunch for 500. (Up until then, Kirsch had only



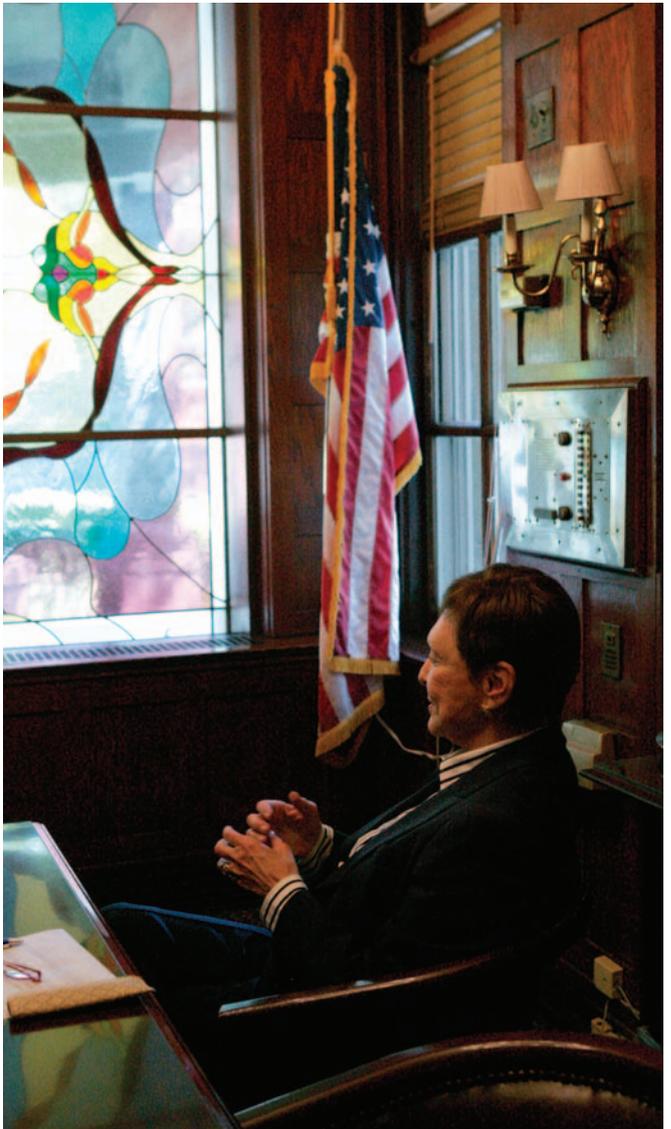
Tappan Hill Mansion

catered a party of 90.) “The business grew like topsy,” Kirsch recalls. The luncheon was a success and Pepsico booked her for more elegant dinners, some honoring high-profile executives as well as Hollywood icons. Over the years, Kirsch has catered dinners for Presidents Reagan and Ford, Prince Charles, the King of Morocco and the Queen of Thailand.

A few years after opening the storefront, Kirsch’s husband, Bob, sold his uniform business, shifted gears and applied his keen business acumen to Kirsch’s growing company. As partners, they later moved to a larger space in Bedford Hills—a 6,000-square-foot commissary with a 3,000-square-foot kitchen and the rest for storage and offices. Kirsch recalls worrying about keeping food fresh

the way, happened once. Sammy got hysterical laughing—Emily got hysterical crying.”

Though the company’s services were in demand, Kirsch realized some parties wouldn’t be cost effective and had to be turned down. (A party she didn’t do—a wedding for a prominent New York businessman—turned out to be a



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overnight, which forced her out on several nocturnal sojourns. “I would be up all night worrying if the freezers would go off,” she says. “I would get in my car at two o’clock in the morning and drive over to see if everything was okay. I installed alarms, but they would go off when the temperature dropped—I’d go over only to see that everything was good. It was a trip in the middle of the night I did so many times.”

By then, the company’s reputation for high-end service coupled with gourmet cuisine put them in demand, and the staff of 12 interacted with military precision. In fact, Kirsch stresses, catering is like running the army—there is no tolerance for error. “You have to be precise,” she says, “you cannot make a mistake. You can’t say, ‘Sorry I ruined your wedding,’ or bar mitzvah or confirmation. It’s something you can’t do over—you don’t have a second chance.” At an event for 2,500 people attending several different parties, for example, she devised a color-coded timetable so everyone knew what dishes went to what parties. “This was to make sure that Emily got her wedding cake and not Sammy’s bar mitzvah cake,” she told the audience at the Westchester Women’s Hall of Fame luncheon. “Which, by

good call: The on-site event on hilly ground in an affluent area would have been difficult to serve, even in good weather. It rained, of course, and Kirsch learned later that the event was disastrous.) Still, there are lessons to be learned. “You think about the rainy days, not about the sunny days,” she advises. “Sunny days are a piece of easy work—you plan for the rainy days, if the site is feasible. There’s so much you need to know strategically when you do a party. Is there enough power to plug in several coffee makers? Is there garbage pickup the day after the party? (When your client calls you the next morning and tells you the garbage is still out on the street, that’s a no-no.) Is the sewage system efficient and adequate?”

Teamwork is necessary to master the details of catering management, Kirsch notes. Party managers visit properties to see if the layout is workable; the party has to be designed,

rentals have to be ordered, delivered and unloaded. Then there is the appliance list: Are there enough coffee makers? Enough freezer units on site? In the kitchen, overseeing the cook staff and the prep work is integral. "All our prep work is done here [Tappan Hill] or at our other venues, then we finish cooking on the party premises," says Kirsch. "For instance, we blanch vegetables here and then finish them at the party, dressed with, say, herbed butter, or something that will make the vegetables talk to you. Everything is strategy and timing."

In 1980, Kirsch's middle son, Jim, joined the business, bringing to it a marketing edge that would soon make his mother a household name. After years of off-site catering, in 1989 the company took out a long-term lease on Tappan Hill, a 1916 historic mansion in Tarrytown that was a former restaurant. The stone building brandishing stained-glass windows was rundown and in dire need of restoration. Jim Kirsch says the family literally "bet the farm" for the millions needed to renovate and set up at Tappan Hill. "My parents invested every penny they had, sold their stocks, borrowed money from banks, friends and family until they launched Tappan Hill. My dad is a classic entrepreneur, a believer. If he can visualize it, he believes it's going to happen."

The move to Tappan Hill was only one prong of the marketing strategy; the other was advertising, big time.

"There was a commitment to something no one in this industry was doing at the time and still really doesn't do today," Jim Kirsch says. "We did four full-page color ads for Tappan Hill in *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*. It said '45 minutes from Broadway and worlds apart.' [It

was] *the* place to have weddings, corporate events, banquets. It was a six-figure marketing campaign and it launched Abigail Kirsch Catering Relationships." In under a decade, Kirsch expanded the company to operate out of five New York City locations, in an average year serving 400,000 meals at more than 1,500 catered events, both on- and off-site.

Naturally, the lore surrounding such a successful company is spiked with stories, funny and serious, fact and fiction. Kirsch recounts how she and her staff flew down to the polo fields in West Palm Beach, Florida, to cater a 500-person lunch for Prince Charles—a true story. "We finished serving the hors d'oeuvres and then closed down the outside bars. As we usually do, we threw out all the half-used containers of juice. When Prince Charles arrived, he didn't want to eat—he just wanted orange juice! And where was the orange juice? In the garbage. We had to quick-squeeze some Florida oranges for the prince. I wanted him to eat this incredible lunch—but what does he want? *Orange juice!*"

KIRSCH EVENTUALLY stepped down from the day-to-day management of the company ("The most difficult part of my culinary career, but the smartest thing I've ever done," she says), placing it in the hands of her son and a young CIA grad named Allison Awerbach, who, Kirsch says, is "the driving creative force in the business."

Kirsch now channels more of her energy into advocating for youth aspiring to enter the culinary profession, some-

Zucchini Provençal

Ingredients

- 3 zucchinis, preferably straight and thin (1- to 1½ inches in diameter)
- 2 tablespoons fruity olive oil
- ½ pound ripe heirloom or vine tomatoes, seeded, ½-inch dice
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- ¼ cup arugula, washed and chiffonade in thin julienne
- 1 cup fresh ricotta cheese or soft goat cheese
- ¼ cup olive tapenade
- 1 tablespoons fresh basil, chiffonade in thin julienne
- salt and cracked black pepper to taste

Garnish (optional): 6 red and 6 yellow grape or teardrop tomatoes

Yield: 20 hors d'oeuvres

Method

Preheat oven to 350°F.

1. Wash zucchini and cut into 1½-inch rounds. With a small melon baller, scoop out the center pulp of each round, leaving a ½-inch border on the inner sides and bottom of the squash rounds.
2. Place zucchini hollowed side down on a cookie sheet lightly brushed with olive oil. Season with salt and pepper. Bake 7 to 10 minutes in 350°F oven until lightly softened. Remove from oven and set aside to cool.

3. In a small sauté pan, heat the olive oil over medium heat and add the tomatoes. Cook until heated throughout.
4. Add balsamic vinegar. Simmer 2 to 3 minutes until liquid has reduced but the tomatoes should still hold their shape. Remove from heat.
5. Allow to cool, then stir in the arugula. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Presentation

1. Turn cooled zucchini cups face up. Place 1 teaspoon of the tomato mixture in the bottom of the cup.
2. Spoon ½ teaspoon of ricotta atop the tomatoes.
3. Top the ricotta mixture with ¼ teaspoon of tapenade.

Note: You can complete the hors d'oeuvres to step 3 up to 3 hours in advance and refrigerate.

4. Before serving, allow cups to come up to room temperature (or warm lightly in a low oven 2 to 3 minutes). Garnish the top with basil.
5. Cut the 6 red and 6 yellow tomatoes in half lengthwise. Line the tomatoes along the sides of a square serving platter, alternating colors.
6. Turn the platter so it is diagonal to you. Line up the finished zucchini cups on the platter in straight rows.

—Abigail Kirsch
Abigail Kirsch Catering Relationships

thing she had been involved with for decades. She established the Abigail Kirsch Scholarship for students enrolled in Westchester Community College's Foods and Nutrition program; she sponsors an extern program with the CIA and opens the Tappan Hill kitchen to students from Westchester Community College, Monroe College and from BOCES (Boards of Cooperative Educational Services) Culinary Vocational Program in Yorktown. Many young students from a wide range of backgrounds and learning styles have blossomed in the Tappan Hill kitchen.

Interns and externs are exposed to every job in the kitchen, from how a dish should taste to what the

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presentation should look like, Kirsch explains. "We don't just teach them how to chop carrots and put them on the line. We involve them in the whole procedure until they can go out and work a party."

"Some have stayed with us and some have started their own catering business," Awerbach adds, noting that the tried-and-true catering practices at the company give young professionals a solid foundation and confidence to pursue the business.

Kirsch, meanwhile, looked beyond the lavish dinners, elaborate entrees and elegant settings. "We saw people having these magnificent weddings while there are so many people who were hungry and couldn't afford anything like this," she says. "We connected with Meals on Wheels—now, after huge parties, they collect the food that is okay, like untouched cheese platters."

Kirsch started AK Cares, a program encouraging company associates to participate in community service, helping groups such as Food Bank, Back to School Clothes for Kids, Bikes for Kids, the Child Care Council, Breast Cancer Walk, the Children's Aid Society and an annual blood drive. "It sounds trite now, but 'giving back'

wasn't trite in the late 1970s," Kirsch says. "There were thousands of kids right here in Westchester getting on the school bus without breakfast. That was a wake up call. We got involved with Food Bank, even though it's not a 'sexy' cause. Unfortunately, people still believe that no one in Westchester could go hungry."

That growing numbers of women have cracked the glass ceiling in the culinary profession is gratifying for Kirsch. Eighteen years ago, she embraced *Les Dames*



d'Escoffier International, an exclusive organization of women in the culinary professions, and she served as president for the New York chapter. Currently she chairs *Les Dames'* Scholarship Committee, which offers the Abigail Kirsch Scholarship for women in the metropolitan area studying cooking, women Kirsch calls "today's upcoming stars of the business." She has been a Trustee of the Culinary Institute of America since 1987, burying the misnomer "girlie" forever.

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Abigail Kirsch Catering Relationships
Tappan Hill House
81 Highland Ave., Tarrytown
(914) 631-3030
www.abigailkirsch.com

more recipes on next page