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Cooking up team spirit Employees learn how to pull together — in the kitchen

By **Joan Tupponce**
for Virginia Business
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A bewildered look flashed across the face of a MeadWestvaco employee as he slipped on his apron in the expansive kitchen at Mise En Place, a cooking school in downtown Richmond. In seconds, his co-workers filed into the kitchen — some excited, some apprehensive.

" I want to be the tester."

" Where's the salmon team?"

" Do the shrimp need to be drained?"

The banter drew laughter from the school's owner and chef, Christine Wansleben. She oversees corporate team-building events, which account for about half of Mise En Place's business.

Across Virginia, corporations are sending employees to the kitchen. Apparently, there's more to tossing a salad or whipping up a molten lava cake than meets the eye: there's team interaction, strategizing, time management and the ability to pull together for a common cause — in this case a tasty plate of cilantro shrimp cakes.

During MeadWestvaco's recent outing, Wansleben supervised 16 mid-level managers (11 men, five women) from the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico, who were taking part in their company's Leadership One program. The managers were divided into four groups, with each one responsible for preparing a dish on a pre-approved menu. The choices: the shrimp cakes, spicy black bean soup, bacon-wrapped salmon and espresso brownies with cinnamon and whipped cream.

" Everybody likes food," says Wansleben. "This type of event is an option for corporations looking for something different." MeadWestvaco had tried a variety of team-building events before discovering cooking classes. "We did some car racing in Atlanta," says training sponsor Lynn Miller. "Then we took them to cooking school, and that was the best for team building."

Events out of the office remove groups from the normal work environment and allow Miller to mix things up. "[It helps them understand] that we are one company/one vision," she says. Costs for the team-building events at Mise En Place can range from \$50 to \$65 per person.

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The growing popularity of culinary team-building inspired a Virginia Beach restaurant and conference center to add a program. "We've had events for everyone from managers to executives," says Executive Chef Anthony Loos of The Founders Inn's Swan Terrace restaurant in Virginia Beach. "Our smallest group numbered 15. Our largest had 120 people. That's controlled chaos at its best."

Unlike *Mise En Place's* approach where employees are divided into work stations with a specific menu, Loos follows the less structured "Iron Chef" route. The team-building event is a surprise to participants who believe they are attending a catered dinner at The Founders Inn. "I walk into the reception wearing my white chef's hat and banging a metal spoon against a sauté pan," says Loos. "When I have their attention, I say, 'Welcome to my world.'"

The newly appointed chefs follow Loos into the catering kitchen. "Some are apprehensive about the unknown," he confides. "For the most part, everyone is psyched up. We try to make it fun by making it interactive. It soon becomes a competition."

Participants divide into groups, donning chef's hats and aprons. Each group creates a dish for the evening's buffet dinner, choosing ingredients from a grocery table filled with 250 items. They have one hour to complete their dish. "They don't have recipes," says Loos. "That's the beauty of it. They have to use items on the grocery table."

The tight time constraint forces team members to rely on their creativity and time-management skills. "They have to see what others are doing so they know what to do," Loos says. "That forces them to interact with other teams. Then they have to decide when and how they are cooking their dish."

The culinary creations sometimes surprise the seasoned chef. "If there's one thing I've appreciated the most, it's how simple the food has been," says Loos. "They don't mess with sauces and different components. In my day-to-day life I try to think of the next best way to cook chicken, for example. I forget that keeping it simple stupid (KISS) may [lead to] the best chicken."

Even though it becomes a competition of sorts, the exercise helps team members appreciate each person's contribution. "They come out as one," says Loos.

While cooking, participants tend to get lost in the moment. "They talk about food and restaurants," says Wansleben. "They rarely talk about work. They shut off their BlackBerries. Often they are surprised at how good their food is."

Culinary team-building has proven so effective that it's even showing up at corporate retreats. At Keswick Hall resort near Charlottesville, a culinary event is frequently used as an ice-breaker for corporate groups. "It's non-threatening," says Anthony McHale, the resort's general manager. "They lighten up, because they are taken out of the business environment."

At other times, food is combined with team-building to break up a long day of meetings. At Keswick, employee teams crank out gnocchi, a potato-filled Italian pasta. "You'll find them all covered in flour," says McHale. "Most of them have a whale of a time. Many have never been in a commercial kitchen before."

For employees who really enjoy cooking, some places such as *Mise En Place* are teaming up with tour operators to offer gourmet getaways. Maybe for the office's next outing, you can talk your boss into a culinary and wine tour of Tuscany.

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