

Small BUSINESS

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MOTHER'S BISTRO & BAR

Over the past couple years, Mother's Bistro & Bar has carved out an enviable reputation in the crowded Portland dining scene. The restaurant has won awards and, more important, crowds of loyal customers. Business Journal reporter Shelly Strom caught up with co-owner Lisa Schroeder to find out the recipe for restaurant success.

BUSINESS PAST

Why this location: I had been searching for the right location for Mother's for over eight months when I found out that the Irish Bank wanted to sell. Because it is always less expensive to open up a restaurant in a location previously occupied by a restaurant (the buildout costs are significantly less), I jumped at the opportunity. I loved the historical feel of the space, the corner location, the big windows and the peripheral downtown location. It was a bit nerve-racking, however, because at least four restaurants had failed in the very same space.

Reason for startup: Back in 1992, while I was still products and licensing manager for Weight Watchers International, I dreamed of opening a restaurant called "Mother's," where people could go and get mother's cook-

ing from around the world. I had been a working mother for eight years while doing catering on the side and realized that when I wanted take-out food I could find Chinese, Mexican, Italian, Thai, etc., but when I wanted familiar mother food, there was nothing. I then spent the next eight years working toward that goal—went to cooking school, worked in four-star restaurants in New York and France, and was a working chef for two years.

Best business plan advice: Work and rework the numbers.

Be realistic with projections. Truly and honestly look at the worst as well as the best-case scenarios.

Worst business plan advice: Some people questioned the downtown loca-

DOSSIER: Lisa Schroeder

tion for home-cooked food. (In fact, the person most opposed to the location was a professor in the business department at PSU, who is also a friend.)

Some felt that the type of food we do belongs in a "neighborhood" and not the city. They argued that people are more apt to venture downtown for steaks and special-occasion dining, but not for really good "homey" food.

Smartest networking move: From a career standpoint (and I believe this applies to any career), the smartest networking move was to go to

the best school I could, even though I had about \$100 in my pocket when I began. When choosing a cooking school, I researched them all and concluded that The Culinary Institute of

America was one of the best cooking schools in the world. I knew that the relationships developed while at school would carry me through the rest of my career—and I was right. From a business standpoint, the smartest networking was not a "move" at all—it just so happens that my "significant other" and partner, Rob Sample, probably knows more people than the mayor, so it was helpful to establishing our initial customer base.

Main source of startup help: Once again, my significant other, Rob Sample. He was the one person who unconditionally believed in me and the concept. He gave me the seed money I needed to buy the Irish Bank so that the SBA would be willing to lend me the rest of the money I needed to fund the startup.

Biggest setback: Because I needed the SBA money to fund improvements, purchase inventory and equipment, I was at their mercy. I ended up getting caught in the bureaucratic red tape of the approval process, spending a few nail-biting months just waiting for the money so I could complete the construction in order to open.

What set you back on track:

Mother's Bistro & Bar

■ **Owners:** Lisa Schroeder and Rob Sample

■ **What we do:** Mother's is a restaurant and full-service bar that offers slow-cooked, home-inspired meals.

■ **Location:** 409 S.W. Second Ave., Portland. 503-464-1122.

Dossier: Preserving Mom's culinary contribution

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Getting the money. The minute I got the check, we worked nonstop until opening two weeks later.

BUSINESS PRESENT

Customer base: At lunch, local business people and sometimes "ladies who lunch." At dinner, young, old, families and singles. When writing my business plan, I kept trying to narrow my vision of who my market was, but felt that I could appeal to many age groups—older people who craved the food of their youth but had neither the time or energy to cook it, and younger people who never had a chance to taste some of these dishes. I was right. On any given day or night, one might find three gen-

erations sitting next to each other and enjoying every bite.

Greatest profit: I am adamant about offering the best food at an affordable price. I profit by not trying to make too much profit. I do not want to appeal to the privileged few; I want a restaurant where people can eat frequently without breaking the bank.

Most important lesson learned: Hire experienced, seasoned individuals. Don't expect to open a business and hit the ground running with people who don't have extensive experience at what they are hired to do.

Best advice ignored: Doubts about opening up in downtown Portland

Most influential business book: Other people's business plans (although

people tell me I should read "The E Myth").

What works: Great food made with love at a fair price served by caring people.

What needs work: I need to learn to be more patient.

VISION

How big you'll get: My goal is to preserve our collective mothers' cooking for posterity. It's not just about a restaurant—it's about something much bigger—our culinary history. I am therefore talking with a publisher about a cookbook, and am trying to find the time to work on a cooking show. In addition, I have many ideas for different types of restaurants that I believe

Portland desperately needs, but there will be only one Mother's Bistro and Bar in Portland (I wouldn't mind an East Coast Mother's, however, so I have an excuse to go back to New York).

Where you'll relocate: I would only relocate to a space with equal charm but a kitchen three times as big.

Who'll design your restaurant: Probably the same people who helped me with Mother's—Brett at Black Dog Furniture and Lisa & Peter at Neo Design Studios.

How you'll balance personal philosophy with business: I love food. I love to cook it, I love to touch it, I love to smell it, and, of course, I love to eat it. I believe that food speaks to all of us in some way. We all have memories around food—whether it's a particular smell, the warm feeling of family gathered around the holiday table, or the way things used to taste before the concept of "convenience" foods emerged. My personal mission is to bring back those memories and honor those who nurtured us and provided us with these memories—our mothers. That's why I go out into the dining room at Mother's. Some may think I go around to "schmooze," but nothing could be farther from the truth. I go out into my dining room to make sure everyone is happy. If they are not, I want to know about it so I can do something about it. If someone tells me that something I have made reminds them of their mother's or grandmother's, my day is made.

APPETIZERS

Most yearned-for customer: The one who appreciates the love with which we cook our food, the price at which we offer it and who doesn't feel the need to pull out the calculator when dividing the check amongst friends.

Favorite web site: www.winespectator.com

Favorite Portland neighborhood: Southeast because they have a lot of attitude about not having a lot of attitude.

Most admired local businessperson: Richard Singer, because he's obviously not just about making money. His unique vision has kept Northwest 23rd almost chain and cookie-cutter store-free and a destination street for any visitor to Portland.

What you offer that no one else could/would: I take all my cooking experience and knowledge and apply it to home-cooked dishes. Because so many new restaurants are doing "nouvelle" versions of comfort classics, most people have forgotten (or don't even know) what the real thing tastes like anymore. What people get here at Mother's is the quintessential version of these classics—home-cooking like most mothers never made. Our pot roast is a 24-hour process, started the day before by roasting the veal bones for the stock. We dare to serve our mashed potatoes "plain," knowing that boiling them whole and then baking them in the oven makes them the yummiest they can possibly be—simple, yet perfect. As one customer put it, "You make it just like it's supposed to be."

The Business Journal wants to find out about the other small businesses that make Portland a dynamic place to do business. Please contact Dan McMillan, managing news editor, at 503-219-3418 or via e-mail at dmcmillan@bizjournals.com to find out how to get a business featured in Small Business Dossier. □

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