

Long road to the kitchen

Friends' plea brought Shirley Lang to career in catering

BY ERIC AKIS, TIMES COLONIST OCTOBER 20, 2010

Shirley Lang presents a plate of appetizers.

She was a hairdresser, then a talent agent, before becoming a caterer.

Photograph by: Debra Brash, timescolonist.com

In caterer Shirley Lang's world, everyone is equal. Whether it's a young couple throwing the best wedding party they can afford, or the richest person in town looking to dazzle her guests, they'll both receive fine service and quality food.

That practice has earned Lang's catering company, Kitchens of Distinction, many glowing testimonials. If they were made into a book, it would be thick, and so would a tome about Lang's life.

"I'm a Prairie girl. I was born in Weyburn [Sask.], but was raised in Alberta on a big farm [near Coronation]," Lang says. "My mom and dad were always in the field. My grandmother taught me how to cook. She also taught me about gardening, harvesting and preserving."

Lang says she started cooking when she was eight, and as she grew up, one of her tasks was to prepare large meals for the 10 farmhands. Lang says her mother Evelyn was also a great cook, and the dishes prepared on the farm were diverse, from Ukrainian to Chinese to simple meat and potatoes.

Although Lang was at home in the kitchen, she would not cook professionally until after long, successful careers in two other fields.

"I became a hairdresser, and when I was 19, I moved to Toronto and I opened up a hair salon. I did that for about 20 years and eventually opened up four salons and a talent

agency," Lang says. "I worked in the entertainment industry and I focused on the [talent's] whole image."

In her biography, Lang writes she acquired the respect and support of some famous people, such as Alan Thicke, Liona Boyd, Marianne Faithfull and Colin James.

Grand parties were part of her busy entertainment industry life and she enjoyed hosting them. Her talents in the kitchen and her interest in Toronto's diverse ethnic cuisine did not go unnoticed.

"One of things I did to build my business was to have dinners. I would invite clients, these big stars, who were used to really good food everywhere they'd go, but they kept coming to my home, so they must have enjoyed the food," Lang says.

After her marriage ended, Lang and her daughter, Brittony, moved to Vancouver in 1995.

Lang's family has roots in the Cree nation and she has embraced her heritage. While in Toronto, she was active in that city's aboriginal community, volunteering for a number of causes, including being president of First Nations School of Toronto.

That trend continued in Vancouver, when her work dramatically changed from styling hair to being hired as a bail and probation supervisor for the Native Courtworkers and Counselling Association of B.C. With no prior experience, she took on the task of writing pre-sentence reports for aboriginal offenders and developed a much-lauded model that considered all aspects of the offender's background.

She followed the same career path when she moved to Nanaimo, and then Victoria.

Cooking became a therapeutic pastime. "To balance the negative world of aboriginal justice was to cook and have positive people around me.

"I would have theme dinners. I really like using spices and unique flavours," Lang says.

At one dinner, a very impressed guest asked her if she would cater a party for his wife's birthday. She was reluctant, having never catered professionally, but she nervously agreed and the food was a hit. Lang's career as a caterer was born; it started as a partnership with talented chef Stephen House, who later sold his share of the business to Lang.

In 2004, she registered her company name, Kitchens of Distinction Private Catering.

She decided on that name when thinking of how she felt in a client's kitchen. Each one was distinct, and so were the culinary experiences she created in them.

Lang's business has grown steadily, solely by word of mouth. She has catered all sorts of gatherings, including elegant multi-course meals for just a few, a couples' romantic aphrodisiac dinner at a restaurant, a special party for the homecoming of HMCS Malahat and an event for several hundred people at Victoria Native Friendship Centre.

On Lang's website, kitchensofdistinction.ca, you'll see her menus are globally inspired and she also specializes in aboriginal cuisine with contemporary flair. Her menu items include juniper roast bison with blueberry glaze, salmon with blood orange and rosemary, wild rice and corn fritters and bannock short cake with fresh berries.

Lang credits the success of her business to her loyal and hard-working staff.

"You can never achieve success by yourself; you to have work with others and acknowledge how important there are," she says.

Lang was raised with traditional aboriginal teachings and they have influenced the frame of mind she and her staff display at events.

"My grandmother said to never cook when I'm upset or have a heavy heart. The energy you put into making the food is meant to come out when people eat it," Lang says.

"Whenever we do an event, large or small, we have a little powwow, talk about things and make sure we're all on the same page and feeling good."

Judging by that thick book of customer testimonials, Lang and her staff must be equally conscious of putting plenty of positive energy into the dishes they create and serve.

Kitchens of Distinction private catering can be reached at 250-858-7777 or kitchensofdistinction.ca.

eakis@timescolonist.com

Eric Akis is the author of the recently published *Everyone Can Cook Slow Cooker Meals*. His columns appear in the Life section Wednesday and Sunday.

SHIRLEY LANG'S MOROCCAN TURKEY WRAPS

Makes: 12 wraps

2 Tbsp olive oil

1 lb. ground turkey

1/2 tsp salt

1/2 tsp freshly ground black pepper

1 small red onion, or 1 large shallot, chopped

1 garlic clove, chopped

1/2 cup dried cranberries or 1/2 cup chopped dried apricots

1/4 cup sliced or chopped almonds

1/2 cup apple juice or grape juice

1 Tbsp ground cinnamon

1 tsp ground coriander

1 tsp ground cumin

1/4 tsp ground allspice

1/4 tsp ground nutmeg

n crushed chili flakes or chili powder to taste

2 Tbsp chopped fresh cilantro

1 cup cooked rice

1 (19 oz.) can black beans, drained and rinsed

n coconut milk to taste (about 1/2 cup), if needed

12 (10-inch) tortilla wrappers

use optional fillings such as lettuce, spinach, cucumber, shredded carrots or bell pepper slices

Place the olive oil in a large frying pan set over medium heat. Add the turkey, salt, pepper, onion and garlic. Cook the turkey, stirring occasionally to break up the meat, until cooked through. Stir in the cranberries or dried apricots, almonds, and apple or grape juice.

Add the cinnamon, coriander, cumin, allspice, nutmeg and chili flakes or chili powder. Let simmer for about 6 minutes to marry the flavours.

Take off the stove, and stir in the cilantro, rice and canned beans. If you find the filling too dry, mix in some coconut milk, to taste, to moisten it.

Set the tortillas on a large work surface. Divide and make a row of the filling down the centre of each tortilla. If desired, top the turkey mixture with some of the optional fillings listed. Fold the sides of each tortilla partially over the filling and then roll into a tight cylinder. Cut each wrap in half width-wise and enjoy.

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