

# Merriedibles Create Gourmet Food With A Flair

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 — In the two years since its beginning, Merriedibles Gourmet Foods and Catering, owned by Mary Putman, has become recognized as a unique catering service in the area, serving from two to 500 persons.

Putman is without doubt a genius with foods, shunning written recipes, yet guided by her own keen palate in adding herbs, spices, and seasonings as she cooks. "I like playing in the kitchen and being creative," she said. "I don't follow recipes from other sources, but just for ideas, because I have this mental block about following recipes," she said. "In the cooking end there's no recipe at all."

The Pittsburgh native, who attended college at the University of California at Berkeley prior to her career as a professional chef, says she saw a need for a gourmet caterer in the area. "It was a new concept for this area," she said, "but not in the city. People now have access to a professional chef," she added, "they can have in their home the type of cuisine normally found in a four-star restaurant."

Ingredients for the exotic dishes made by Merriedibles are of exceptional quality. Artificial foods and flavorings will never find a home among the many imported products shelved in the Merriedibles' immaculate stainless steel kitchens.

Yes, the foods are more expensive, so expect a greater outlay of cash for Merriedibles Catering. But Putman says "I want people to know it's because of the ingredients, not because I go to the Bahamas each year."

Putman says straight-away that Merriedibles is not for everyone. "We tend to stay away from what is considered standard fare," she says. If a potential customer wants just a ham and potatoes type of menu, a recommendation may follow to contact a more appropriate caterer.

She is determined to be focused on the sector of society she wants to serve. It isn't easy to recommend that a customer look elsewhere without risking being labeled as a snob, but it's necessary. Doing otherwise would ultimately be unfair to both parties and a waste of time.

A cursory glance over the pages listing both hot and cold hors

d'oeuvres, light buffet, luncheon and seated dinner party menus, reveals lavish seafood dishes. The exotic menus include chicken, veal, cornish game hens, pork loin, beef and lamb. Fresh vegetables build fabulous Merriedibles salads.

The lavish dessert page taunts the chocolate lover with items like a white chocolate cheese cake with bittersweet sauce. Or, how about chocolate mocha mousse tart, chocolate hazelnut truffle torte or milk chocolate peanut turtle tart? The list continues to feature caramel, gingerbreads, raspberries, blueberries, pumpkin and other desserts.

Despite her flair with foods and a growing roster of regular clients, Putman says she loves to eat pizza. When someone cooks for her or takes her out, she says she's thrilled. Even if they only give her a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, she finds the gesture very special. By the day's end she said, she is tired of tasting different foods.

For about 10 years Putman worked as an executive chef, overseeing food preparations in some fine restaurants. In Stahlstown it was at The Brass Duck. The Cafe Nola in Philadelphia specialized in Cajun or Creole cooking, but at Philadelphia's Copa II, she said the specialty was Caribbean cuisine. At Mancuso's in Palm Springs, Cal., it was northern Italian cuisine.

One of her early catering adventures say Putman and her staff serving at the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh. The theme was "Night On The Nile," so the Merriedibles team served exotic Egyptian dishes they had prepared, after intense study and research on the part of their employer.

Something most people don't realize is how a full-fledged catering service operates. Putman, whose hair is a mass of short black curls, with white wisps over one brow, says that most folks will probably use a caterer once during their life and that's for a wedding reception. They don't understand the flexibility, she said. A caterer is for any occasion, be it simple or grand.

"Sometimes we just deliver the food because the hostess has her own staff," said Putman. But Merriedibles handles formal sit-down dinner parties, if desired, from the preparation, to serving, to clean-up. "Basically, all you have to do



Mary Putman, left, owner and operator of Merriedibles, Champion, along with her number one baker, Shirley Ohler, display some fabulous desserts that are ready for commercial sale.

is take your shower and get ready," she says.

Some hostesses buy the total Merriedibles serving package because it allows them to devote all their attention to their guests. Others don't want to be bothered with the mess of cleaning up later.

Three or four consultations with the hostess ensure the success of her party. They have discussed at length the chosen menu in which Putman allows no repetition. "When you work with food a lot," she said, "you have a real feel for it." So every dish on the menu will complement its fellows in texture, flavor, and color.

If Merriedibles' staff is serving, then Putman is given a prior tour of the house by the hostess. They will discuss layout of rooms, silverware, and china, well in advance of the party.

"We do some real personalized service," said Putman whose objective is to satisfy her customer.

Public relations are as much a part of Putman's work as planning and actually cooking. A new customer who is planning a party needs to feel comfortable. Often she is nervous, afraid of a glitch or that her guests will be disappointed.

The elite society in one area community has hostesses who are strongly competitive with their dinner parties. In fact they are thus judged. But Putman says confidently, "There's rarely an instance where I'm thrown."

A comprehensive file for each client keeps Putman organized. She saves any comments for future reference so when she again serves them, she already knows their likes and dislikes.

With clean, expressive jaw lines and brown eyes that sparkle with intelligence and humor, Putman admits unabashedly, to a habit of regularly murmuring to herself. Doing so helps her to concentrate on the job at hand, even if her staff is listening.

"Some people think our food is strange," grins Putman, adding that she's never prepared a meatloaf or fried chicken in her life and never deep-fat fries any foods. Nevertheless, she enjoys going to her parents' home at least once a week for her mom's homecooking.

"We target people with disposable income," said Putman. "We're not for everybody in terms of food or expense. It's tricky to explain that to a new customer," he said.



Merriedibles owner, Mary Putman, is at her desk in the catering shop at the Country Commons, Champion.

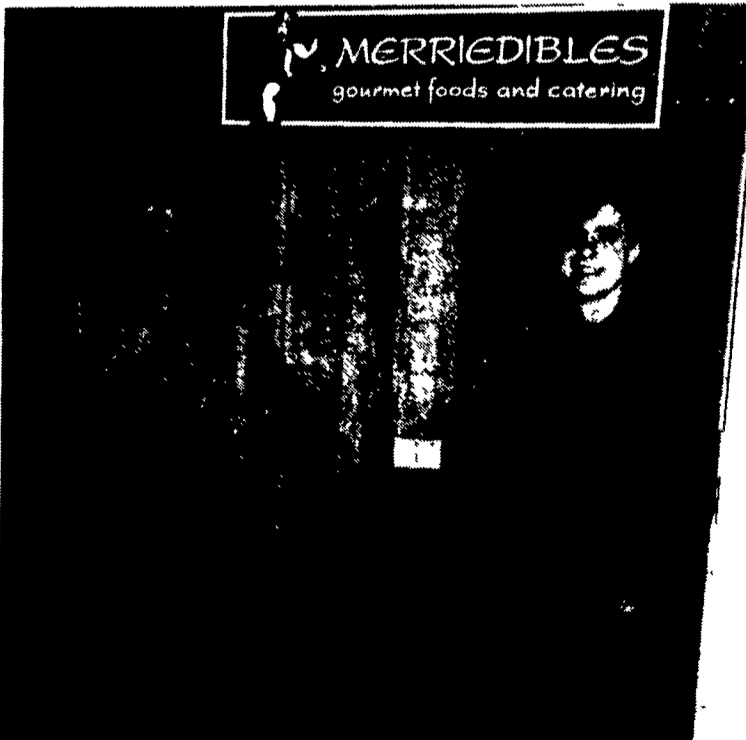
Merriedibles is also a regular supplier of baked goods and desserts to a number of area restaurants and markets.

Additionally, Merriedibles offers professional and personal consulting services for all food service needs, holiday gifts and certificates, gourmet picnic baskets, culinary classes, entrees to go, fine pastries and exceptional desserts.

So, while wild mushroom crostini or smoked salmon tartare with eye blinis aren't the fare for every appetite, these are the things that

set Merriedibles apart and that contributed to a 1992 business growth rate of 50 percent over the previous year.

Putman thinks she can survive for a while before computerizing the business, perhaps another year. And if she ever decides to give out a recipe (it's unheard of at Merriedibles), it will only be in the cookbook that an editor friend is begging her to create. It's not a bad life for the girl who debated whether or not she should attend law school after she had majored in journalism and political science in college.



Although she didn't make the Merriedibles' outside sign, owner Mary Putman did design it. The year-round caterer offers only the finest gourmet foods.

# Homestead Notes