

Management training meets the kitchen

Bruce Clarke *Bruce Clarke is a freelance writer. email: clarkebruce69@gmail.com*

Forget obstacle courses and convoluted role playing games – the way of the future for management team-building lies squarely in the kitchen.

When David Ploenges, human resource manager for Moonee Valley Racing Club, was asked to develop the agenda for a management planning weekend, he was challenged by his CEO to come up with something different. After discussions with the team at Glen Erin Vineyard Retreat at Lancefield, Victoria, the concept of the Cook-off Challenge was born.

“Our CEO likes to inject a sense of fun into our strategic planning sessions, and we saw the cook-off as an ideal way to deliver something outside the normal team bonding zone,” explained Ploenges.

Participants were divided into three teams, and given an extensive list of ingredients to choose from. The challenge: to create the best possible dish for a communal morning tea. Teams were given full access to Glen Erin’s extensive kitchen facilities, and supervised by resident chef, Nigel Stainwall.

“It was the first time we’d done anything like that here, but we thought it was a great idea and were keen to give it a try,” said Stainwall.

As well as being a lot of fun for aspiring Jamies and Gordons, the exercise had the desired team-building outcomes. “Those in our group who had the best cooking skills weren’t necessarily the most senior managers in the group,” said Ploenges. “It gave those people an opportunity to come to the fore and take charge.”

Those not directly involved in the cooking process were able to play a role, either in preparing the food, or in helping with the final presentation.

The response from participants was universally positive. “I really enjoyed the opportunity to cook in a proper commercial kitchen,” said one of the budding chefs. Another participant was amazed at the previously hidden culinary talents of some of the group members.

Competition between the teams was fierce, with frantic whispering within groups interspersed with some friendly “white-line-fever” banter across the kitchen.

At the end of the allotted 45-minute cooking time, the groups presented their creations for final judging by chef Stainwall: a rich bread and butter pudding with custard; a stack of spicy Thai corn fritters with sweet chilli sauce; and the ultimate winner, a deliciously moist chocolate soufflé served with double cream and a berry sauce.



Chef Nigel Stainwall and the Moonee Valley Racing Club management team

“I was really impressed by the standard of the dishes the teams came up with. The guys were enthusiastic and deservedly proud of their efforts,” said Stainwall.

For Ploenges, the cook-off was a raging success. “It was interesting to see the different approaches adopted by the teams, and the contrasting dishes they prepared,” he said. “But by far the best part of the exercise was the interaction it generated between the teams.”

For the staff from Moonee Valley, the last remaining challenge is to persuade the winning chef to part with his secret chocolate soufflé recipe. ■

Fun in the kitchen catching on

A group of chefs is now offering team-building workshops for corporate groups in kitchens in Sydney and Melbourne. The Cheeky Food Group held two events in May at the Carlton Brewhouse to get things off the ground in Melbourne. Leona Watson, owner of Cheeky Food Group says, “People just find cooking a really easy and fun way to bond with others. It is excellent for team-building as the concept of interactive cooking creates a leveller of all positions within a company as well as bringing staff together to have fun.”



Chef Nigel Stainwall from Glen Erin Vineyard Retreat, Lancefield, Victoria



Participant Grant Tarrant prepares his famous chocolate soufflé

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