

Food purveyor caters to customers' sense of sight

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Since October 2003, when Mark Kramer doubled the size of Susan Lawrence Gourmet Foods in Chappaqua, business at the store has exploded and the demand for his company's catering services has gone up as well.

"I did honestly believe we'd grow into the space in a few years," said Kramer, who founded the business with his late sister, Susan Lawrence, in the mid-1980s. "I wasn't expecting this."

The 1,000-square-foot space at 26 North Greeley Ave., which includes a bakery and take-out food service, was haphazardly organized and

often cramped, which discouraged customers from entering, he said. When a next-door business moved out, Kramer took over that space as well and redesigned the store.

Revenues climbed "overnight" when the expanded store reopened, Kramer said. In 2004, revenues from the store doubled over the previous year and catering increased by more than 40 percent. About one-third of the store's revenues come from the store and another two-thirds from catering, he said.

Susan Lawrence Gourmet

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Foods has long been a popular catering service and food store. In 2003, it was named best caterer in the county by Westchester Magazine.

The catering service serves groups as small as a handful or as large as many hundreds of guests, including weddings and fund-raisers. It will not only serve food but also provide decoration and even set up outside tents. The company doesn't have its own dining space, but it can arrange space at various locations.

The business has created menus and catered events for The New York Times, Donald Trump, the French Embassy in Washington, Hermes of Paris, Historic Hudson Valley, the Jewish Museum in New York City and the Hudson River Museum.

The store expansion and refurbishing was not only important to increasing its own revenues, he said — the location is where many of the catering customers were first introduced to Susan Lawrence's food.

One customer of the store, Susan Kroeger, became a catering customer that way. After becoming a frequent visitor of the store, she hired the company for a Christmas party and for a surprise birthday party for her husband. She still stops by frequently because she works nearby.

"It's sort of become the highlight of my day at the office," she said. "Every day it's different. He keeps trying new things. I think that's part of the fun."

Almost all of the other catering business is from repeat customers, referrals or guests at previous functions. The business does almost no advertising, Kramer said.

GOOD LOOKING

Kramer enjoys creating an atmosphere through creative interior design — something he does in the catering side of the business with estate urns, English ivy topiaries and verdigris baskets to give some spaces the feel of a traditional English garden. Food is often served on antique copper rather than more typical silver trays.

For the store, he wanted a warm, inviting atmosphere and enough space to lengthen customers' lines of sight so that they could see more of the store's products. That helps food sales, he said, because "everything in our cases is just screaming for attention."

The new store has a copper ceiling, hand-painted walls in warm colors to coordinate with the ceiling and terra cotta floor. Kramer even poured money into making the bathroom look impressive to customers. A full-time "housekeeper" is on the staff "to make sure everything looks perfect at all times," Kramer said.

"At the holidays, we actually had a red carpet rolled out onto the sidewalk and had people outside greeting the guests as they came to pick up their holiday orders," he said. "People really need quality service and really appreciate it."

Striving for perfection to create an

STRATEGIES FOR S.U.C.C.E.S.S

SUSAN LAWRENCE GOURMET FOODS

What advice would you give to those who want to succeed in business?

"Push beyond what they think are their human limits. That itself will create its own rewards."

If you had to start your company over again, what would you change?

"I now trust my instincts because I feel I can see a mistake coming before it happens."

What's the biggest mistake you've made in running the business?

"Something as simple as being just outside the kitchen and subliminally thinking, 'Is something burning?' and then you say, 'Oh no, the guys are in the kitchen, and if something is wrong, they'll notice it.' I'd always kick myself when a red flag went up for assuming someone was going to notice it. Now if I have a hunch that something is going on, I deal with it and usually we can avoid something happening."

What do you do to unwind?

"I go to sleep. In the last couple of years I have rarely taken one day off. I work seven days a week, 12 to 18 hours a day. ...I do like to go to art museums, concerts, really any kind of cultural activity."



extremely high quality of product and service is a large element of Kramer's business thinking. He has all of his staff read "Lessons in Service from Charlie Trotter" by Ed Lawler. Trotter is a Chicago chef. The book, Kramer said, "explains developing a culture of a work environment where everyone appreciates the drive and commitment to perfection."

The company has 25 full-time employees, almost all of them in the store, and another 50 who work part time, almost all on the catering side of the business.

Kramer, who calls himself "executive chef, creative director and proprietor" of the company, enjoys working in the kitchen more than anywhere else, but he gets involved in all aspects of the company and helps organize all catering events.

"I still micromanage every single detail of the business," he said, "right down to every design of every cake, and then the introduction of new items and how our kitchen staff is trained to make them."

THE STORE

Pastry is one of the strengths of Susan Lawrence, which is known for its cakes and pies, Kramer said. But grilled chicken and grilled salmon dishes are also becoming more popular.

Food items are changed daily, Kramer said, so customers can be intrigued by something new. Some people stop by in the morning for coffee and a bite to eat, others for lunch and others for dinner. Some come in more than once a day.

The store also sells gift items and a line of jams, sauces and other food packaged under

the Susan Lawrence Gourmet Foods label. Gift items are also sold in the store. Kramer has designed a line of copper gift items that are now in production and will be sold under the "Mark Kramer Vintage Collection" label. The items will be test-marketed in the store starting in a few weeks, then Kramer hopes to sell them elsewhere.

"When you walk into Susan Lawrence you see things that are completely unique — that you won't see in other gourmet food stores," Kramer said. "My criticism of many gourmet food stores, including many in New York City, is they all carry the same things — they all carry the same baked goods that are produced in some factory somewhere, and the gift items are things you see everywhere."

FOOD AND MUSIC

Kramer and his sister grew up in Rye, where their mother encouraged a love of good food and music. He went on to study music at Northwestern University in Chicago, where he received a doctorate in music history.

Music remains a big part of his life. Kramer is a founder and the current artistic director of Ars Antiqua, an ensemble of musicians who play 17th- and 18th-century music on period instruments.

But cooking had a bigger pull in his life.

"While I was writing my dissertation, I would sneak off to the kitchen, and I literally would cook my way through Julia Child's 'The Art of French Cooking.'"

He interviewed for a job as a pastry chef for Foodstuffs, a gourmet food company in Chicago, and was interviewed by one of the

store's owners, Carole Segal, who also owned and founded the Crate & Barrel chain of stores with her husband, Gordon.

Kramer brought a French torte and said: "This is what I can do. I'm not even going to give you my resume because it's all academic." She hired me on the spot."

In the mid-1980s, Kramer came back East to join his sister, who had founded Susan Lawrence Gourmet Foods in 1982 in Pleasantville. In 1984, the business was moved to Chappaqua. Lawrence later married and changed her name to Susan Baker.

Both siblings were "creative forces" in the business, and they split the catering jobs between them, but his sister was the public face of the company, Kramer said. When she died of complications from a kidney stone two years ago, many customers wondered whether the store would survive, Kramer said.

When he isn't working in his business or with Ars Antiqua, Kramer is planning a series of cookbooks and books about cooking. He also expects to restart a cooking class he teaches as part of a continuing education program at Horace Greeley High School.

For the business's future, Kramer said, he just wants to keep doing more of the same.

"A lot of people ask me now about the possibility of franchises," he said. "As intriguing as that might sound, the reality of it is I am so integral to every aspect of this company that it's hard to imagine trying to reproduce this anywhere else. So I think that we'll just keep growing and continuing to get better, especially in the details in the level of perfectionism that I'm trying to achieve."