

Gay and Lesbian Times Article

Feature : In the pink: local businesses bank on GLBT dollars

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Custom Cuisine

A decade ago, when Vonnie Coover-Stone's mother, Ruth, who'd long been retired, decided she would also take a break from cooking, Coover-Stone found her a personal chef.

The arrangement allowed life to go on as usual for Coover-Stone's family, which had always enjoyed Sunday dinners together.

As it happened, it also paved the way for Coover-Stone, then a nurse, to embark on a new career as a personal chef.

"I, personally, was at a professional crossroad. My son was still quite young, and I had taken a year off to go back to school to get my master's [in business]. During that year he did not have to go to before- and after-care at school, so he was much less stressed and more relaxed. We decided that I should not go back into a highly demanding, time-intensive job," Coover-Stone says, recalling how the idea to open her own personal chef service began to form.

"I had taken over doing the bigger dinner parties in our family and thought that combining my love of cooking and my health care background would give me a good foundation for a personal chef service," Coover says, adding that she then took a course through what is now the American Personal Chefs Association.



Coover-Stone's health care experience has, over time, become the key to creating a niche in a market where there are many different types of personal chefs. Although 40 percent of her clients are busy professionals, whom she reaches via the Greater San Diego Business Association, which enables her to reach the lucrative GLBT market, 60 percent of her clients are senior citizens with special needs diets. Specialties include meals for diabetics, people with heart problems and gluten-free diets for people with grain allergies. Coover-Stone customizes meals to clients' tastes and dietary needs, and specializes in reduced or low sodium and reduced/low fat meals. But she doesn't do dinner parties or cater. "I cook everyday meals for people," she says.

But while her target market is now clearly defined, growing the business took time. "When I first started 10 years ago, hardly anyone knew what a personal chef was. Today most people are at least familiar with the concept. Most people now realize this is not just for the rich and famous," she says, noting that today she has "two drawers full" of clients. "I can count but the number changes. Some people order on a very regular basis, some whenever they run low (which can depend on how much they are home or away). I usually cook for four to seven customers in a week."

Two years ago, Coover-Stone committed to sharing a commercial kitchen in Kearny Mesa. Now, she leaves her home office each morning, perhaps picks up some groceries at the health-food stores she frequents, and is at the kitchen by 9 a.m. to begin cooking and packaging meals.

Gingered broccoli, orange glazed acorn squash, poached salmon, santa fe chicken, chicken fennel and butternut soup – Coover-Stone's menu offers more than 200 dishes – all low-fat, low-salt and unprocessed, served with portion control in mind.

Clients can select entrées and side dishes from Custom Cuisine's extensive Web site, which is organized by food type.

Coover-Stone packs them in insulated coolers and delivers them in containers suitable for freezer, fridge and microwave. She also provides "dual-ovenable" containers for items that must be baked, such as fish.

A kitchen assistant she hired last year helps her, while a once-weekly administrative assistant takes care of shopping lists, labels, food-handling information, keeping the customer data base current and book keeping, Coover-Stone says, explaining how she has grown the business.

Her son has grown too – now a third-year college student, Coover-Stone counts him as one of her most valuable investments.

And the family still eats Sunday dinner together each week – although Coover-Stone admits she doesn't always do the cooking.

"I need a personal chef too," she laughs.