

At work: Catering with a conscience

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LINCOLNVILLE — They came. They saw. They wore monochrome black interrupted only by the white rectangles of over-sized nametags. They sent Blackberry messages from one corner of the globe to another, or from one row of the Camden Opera House to another. They swapped ideas, dangerous ideas. They ate...and ate.

The 550-strong attendees of the Pop!Tech 2006 conference — “Dangerous Ideas” — were treated last week to the catering expertise of Stacey Glassman and Swan’s Way Catering of Lincolnville.

Glassman has been catering in the Midcoast and beyond for a quarter of a century. Her prowess and near-surgical precision in turning any venue — from the Camden Opera House to the village green to the Owls Head Transportation Museum to a freshly mowed hay field — into a world-class kitchen and stage of gastronomic delight is well documented.

Some say Glassman and her crews recreate Broadway for every event — paying careful attention to everything from lighting to decorations to food. Others say Martha Stewart doesn’t hold a, err, finger bowl to Glassman.

Her abilities were thrown into overdrive for Pop!Tech, a four-day conference based in Camden that wrapped up at the Owl’s Head Transportation Museum with a gala dinner on Oct. 21.

An annual October conference in its tenth year, Pop!Tech has a visible influence on Camden each year. Restaurants and inns fill to capacity and people walking along Main Street bring along more hand-held electric communication gadgets than can be seen on the same street in a month’s time any other week of the year. Strong coffee is always at a premium — and closing times swell past the norm — during the annual fall migration of urban dwellers to the Midcoast.

For Swan’s Way, Pop!Tech means 400 staff-hours of prep time and another 300-staff hours of event time. It equates to jobs for no fewer than 50 Midcoast residents and goods purchased from no fewer than two-dozen local vendors.

In addition to Glassman, four keep the Lincolnville ovens of Swan’s Way hot in advance of special events. Becky Neves, kitchen manager; Lisa Cummings, office manager “and much more,” according to Glassman; Lee Schuessler, who shares head chef position with Neves; and, Chris Barstow, head baker, round out the staff that works at the Swan’s Way kitchen.

Over the years Glassman has built a dedicated staff that shares her vision for excellence, flair and environmental sensitivity. Cummings has learned organic gardening to improve the herb and cutting gardens at Swan’s Way. College students return year after year and decorators, like Kalla Buchholz, return to lend artistic talents to displays.

Then, there is Pam Mountain.

“She realized the power was out in Lincolnville and showed up at 2 a.m. Saturday — 2.5 hours earlier than normal — to start baking because she knew with no power the convection ovens and mixers would not be working and all the muffins, croissants, and other morning pastries would not be ready in time,” Glassman said.



Stacey Glassman, owner of Swan’s Way Catering, looks over the steamed dumpling display.

Mountain is but one example of the commitment to successful events that is pervasive among Swan’s Way staffers. So, too, is tireless attention to detail.

“The list might say ‘prep squash,’” Glassman said of preparing to feed more than 500 people. “But when that’s 300 pounds of organic squash that needs to be cut, roasted and pureed before an event, the time adds up.”

All of that organic, local produce — which accounted for 90 percent of the produce consumed by Pop!Tech attendees — means business for local farmers.

“It’s basic trickle down,” Glassman said, adding that some vendors grow exotic varieties especially for Swan’s Way. Orders for standing events like Pop!Tech are sent to local growers months in advance — it’s the only way to ensure fresh, local, and unusual vegetables and flowers.

If organic isn’t available, then Swan’s Way next looks to other local farmers or stores.

A partial listing of Swan’s Way’s shopping list looks like this: French & Brawn, Dilly Dally Farm, Peacemeal Farm, Part n Parcel Farm, Mainly Apples, Hope Orchards, Endless Summer Flower Farm Good Tern Coop, Fresh off the Farm, Camden Bagel Café, Atlantic Bakery, Pain de Famille, Silver Moon Creamery, Appleton Creamery, Nova Foods, Bowden Egg Farm, John’s Ice Cream, Season’s Downeast, Jess’s Market and Move’n On.

Environmentally progressive business practices is not a dangerous idea to Glassman; she has catered with a conscience long before it became fashionable. By design, Glassman’s shopping lists are marked by local farms and locally owned purveyors. She has composted spoils, recycled barbecue ash, purchased napkins made of recycled fibers and, more recently, committed to purchasing electricity from Interfaith Power and Light, which supports sustainable energy sources. Used fryer oil goes to the Chewonki Foundation, where it becomes bio-diesel fuel.

Her attentiveness to low-impact business practices made catering for the General Electric-



Dishes are laid out with garnish, awaiting hors d’oeuvres.

sponsored Pop!Tech social de rigueur.

GE wanted to sponsor a social at Pop!Tech 2006. It was dubbed as a networking event on the afternoon of Oct 20 and was to be in keeping with GE’s eco-magination initiative. “The event is to engage conference attendees in a thoughtful social atmosphere that considers the environment. Lighting will be provided by using GE compact fluorescent lightbulbs and all materials used for the event will be recyclable, biodegradable or made organically. Locally and organically produced food and beverages will be served,” according to Pop!Tech’s Tom LeVine.

The event was held on the Camden Village Green. The search for biodegradable tents revealed that none would withstand rain and that a tarp would have to be purchased if the skies should darken Friday. It was more environmentally friendly to use an existing tent than buy a plant-derived tent that would have to be shielded by plastic in inclement weather, Glassman reasoned.

As fate would have it, rain fell throughout the social. Glassman was unfazed: Yet again she

was able to meet the host’s needs and high expectations in the inexact environmental reality of hosting an outdoor event in Maine.

Glassman has catered Pop!Tech since 2000. She’s adapted to the needs of the attendees and always receives high marks on exit surveys, according to LeVine.

“She gets great reviews in our surveys and I think she did a particularly good job this year,” LeVine said. “She’s integrated more healthy food every year. You still have to put out the brownies and the cookies, but it’s a nice reflection on her being in touch with the audience and the audience getting more flexible.”

Of Pop!Tech, Glassman said, “They’re fascinating people with wonderful ideas, and all I’m worried about is if there is there are enough blueberry muffins.”

Yet her commitment to being eco-friendly and the unparalleled food created at her hand is not lost on the attendees year after year, LeVine said.

Pop!Tech is the last large event for Swan’s Way for 2006; after catering dozens of weddings and other special events throughout the summer — some at remote destinations — the winter is a quiet time to make menus, meet brides and grooms, and write orders for the upcoming year. There are wedding menus to plan and seed catalogs to pour over for exotic vegetables.

“Somebody once described it as performance art because you start in and there is nothing and when you need there is nothing but yet you’ve created this whole event,” Glassman said of her work. “Within 10 hours it’s gone from nothing to nothing, but meanwhile you’ve just fed 450 people.”

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