

BUSINESS PEOPLE

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

DemocratandChronicle.com

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2008



WILL YURMAN staff photographer

Tim Murray, left, helps his brother, Kevin, box up an order of lunches on Friday at Casual Tastes while Kevin's wife, Christina, also pitches in at far right. Kevin Murray says he has plans for expanding the business, started in 1994.

Still cooking after 10 years Area catering company is ready for next level

MICHAEL WENTZEL | STAFF WRITER

When Melanĳe Gallagher plans a party or a lunch for brokers, she turns to Kevin Murray and his catering company, Casual Tastes.

"He's very helpful," said Gallagher, business development manager at Premium Mortgage Corp. in Brighton and a Casual Tastes client for about two years. "If I want something that's different, he'll go beyond the menu. He has good prices. He's exceedingly dependable. And his food is to-die-for good."

Customers like Premium Mortgage have helped Murray and his Rochester-based company survive for 10 years in a highly competitive business. And Murray is confident about the future.

"I'm looking to expand and take the catering service to the next level," he said.

Murray, who is 47, has been involved in cooking and catering for more than 20 years. He closed his first business, Classic Catering, after eight

years. He moved to California, where he worked for the late singer Sonny Bono, arranging parties at his Palm Springs restaurant. After returning to the Rochester area, he launched Casual Tastes in 1994.

Murray describes himself as the "chief cook and bottle washer" at Casual Tastes. He books the jobs. He works on the cooking line, putting meals together. He has two full-time employees but hires more people to match the size of a job.

"I'm slicing and dicing while I'm on the telephone," Murray said.

Casual Tastes has grown in 10 years, Murray said, but it has not been a decade without problems. In 1998, a fire destroyed the original company kitchen and office in Spencerport. And the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks cooled business.

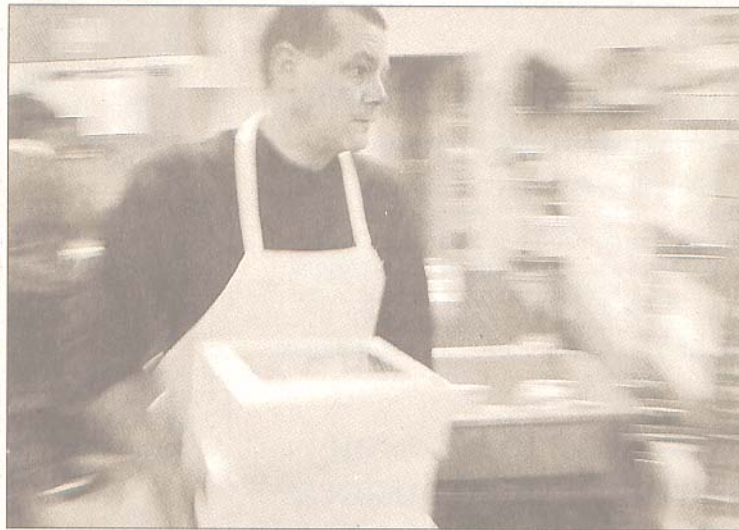


Kevin Murray

"We've hit some rough spots," said Murray. "The spider-web effect of the 9/11 tragedy hit everything. I've seen companies downsize and close. We're a corporate caterer, so that business has leveled off dramatically since 2001."

After the fire, Casual Tastes relocated from Spencerport to Maple Street in Rochester. To fill the void

CATERING, PAGE 9D



WILL YURMAN staff photographer

Tim Murray hustles as he helps with an order of 300 lunches. Corporate catering customers are the mainstay at Casual Tastes.

Catering

FROM PAGE 10D

created by corporate downturns, Murray sought jobs with schools and training centers.

"Even though some have downsized, companies have to keep training their people if they want to grow," he said.

"This is a crazy, fickle business. Days go by when you don't have anything. But you can't panic. You have to keep adding to your clientele. You have to be able to fly by the seat of your pants."

The company's Web site — www.casualtastes.com — has helped boost business, Murray said. The site has a calculator that allows a customer to get an estimate for an order online. Murray follows up with a call and a contract.

"As the corporate and private sector become more computer savvy, everybody wants information fast," he said. "It's the

same with catering. People also get a better idea of how their choices fit their budget. The Web site is my equivalent of cold calling for business."

Casual Tastes and its Web site present menus but they are flexible.

"I learned a lesson early in this business: People don't want to be held to a menu," Murray said. "I let people design their own. If people say the estimated price doesn't fit their budget, we find a way."

While the catering business has erratic and demanding hours, Murray is thinking of expanding. He is looking into a retail shop where people wanting lunch or giving a last-minute party could pick up prepared food.

Casual Tastes does cater weddings, but Murray prefers corporate and educational jobs.

"There's less emotion. You just bring the food and do your job and be professional," Murray said. □

MWENTZEL@DemocratandChronicle.com