

Catered to Perfection



Beaufort's Best Caterer Celebrates Two Decades

By Mark Shaffer

In my nine-plus years as part of the *Lowcountry Weekly* family I've shared more than a few culinary adventures with **Debbi Covington**. Beaufort's best caterer has lent her exceptional palate, eye for detail and considerable wit to many a Moveable Feast and Burger Beat. And she's always game for another, which makes my job easier.

Over the years I've come to know some things about my colleague and friend. She is fiercely loyal and naturally driven. She probably would not call herself an artist, but look at her last cookbook and tell me otherwise. She loves her cats, husband Vince, a good party and a fine bourbon. Not necessarily in that order.

And when she's not catering big weddings and grand soirees, composing her column or hammering away at another cookbook, she can occasionally be coaxed out for a cocktail and some shop talk. On the occasion of her 20th anniversary in the catering business we met in the lounge at Breakwater Restaurant & Bar to look back on a storied career that almost didn't happen . . .

Mark Shaffer: looking back on twenty years in catering, what springs to mind?

Debbi Covington: How fast time has gone by. 20 years has flown by and I have the notebooks full of menus to prove it. I don't know how many weddings I've done. I have no idea how many parties I've done. None at all.

MS: Care to "guesstimate" how many weddings?

DC: Oh, gosh. No idea. It varies per year. I figure roughly 200 maybe?

MS: I'm calling that a lowball figure.

(Laughter)

DC: Well, yeah.

MS: This isn't initially what you started out to do.

DC: Oh, no! Although I always loved to cook. My mother was a home economics teacher and she was a church hostess when she was pregnant with me and after that she quit work to be a stay at home mom. There was always cooking going on.

But no, my degree's in Business Administration. My background is marketing and advertising design. In North Carolina, I worked in personnel management, hiring and firing people for a temp agency and I worked for newspapers and magazines selling advertising. But when I got to Beaufort there weren't any opportunities like that.

MS: And what brought you to Beaufort?

DC: When Vince and I got married. Vince's dad owned Broad River Seafood. That's what brought Vince to Beaufort. He didn't grow up here either. He got a job working on Morgan Island with the monkeys and was making pretty good money. So, I went to Budget Print to run off my resume and David hired me on the spot. I worked there for 5 or 6 months and met everybody in the whole town. Back then not everyone had their own copiers and that place was hopping all the time. I got to know everybody. Beaufort was a lot smaller 20 years ago.





MS: So, where's the catering connection?

DC: I started working at First Presbyterian Church and I'd been there about 5 years, which was a good job for me because I was doing the accounting, the bulletins, and laying out the newsletter. I got a

chance to try everything as a kind of jack of all trades, and I learned a lot.

And Betty Waskiewicz, who's the queen mother of First Presbyterian - no one would dispute me on that - was turning 70. She and her husband were also celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. My minister wanted to plan a reception for them and I offered to do the food. He gave me this little tiny amount of money and I did the food and [another couple] asked if I would cater something for a financial group that met at their home. And that was it. I've been busy ever since.

MS: And you celebrated your 20th year in the business by revisiting your first client.

DC: I just catered Betty's 90th birthday party. I actually cooked in her kitchen this time which she never would've allowed back then. It was fun and a real honor because it all kind of came full circle. I love her.

MS: Did that come with a surreal sense of déjà vu?

DC: Not so much because she doesn't look any different. I'm the one who got older.

(Laughs) It was fun. Every time I've been to Betty's house, she's cooked and I've been a guest. This time she was out of her kitchen and my staff and I took over and did everything. And I promised I'd do her 100th birthday for free.

(Laughs) She'll be here. I have no doubt.

MS: It's all about having good people around you and your husband Vince has been part of that.

DC: Vince *was* my employee in the beginning - my only non-paid employee and my bartender. It was just the two of us because we were both still working full time and catering part time. And Vince had another side job, too. So, between the two of us we were working all the time.

MS: An old tale here in Beaufort.

DC: Right. And we did that for a long time and then - gosh, what happened? I've had different people help out now and then but I never had anyone help me cook. I do all the cooking. I do have some people on site who help me put things together. I have a team working with me now that I'm in love with. They're dependable and they're fun. We have a good time. We've been together about 3 years and I hope that lasts.

MS: When did you realize this had the possibility of turning into a career?



DC: I never thought of ever leaving the church, I loved that job so much. But then my minister left and there were changes and it wasn't the same environment anymore and it seemed like a good time to move on. This was way before the economy tanked and I could afford to take the chance. I was slammed the moment I decided to

leave. I'm not sure I'd venture out now in this economy. Luckily, I got out there at just the right time to build up my business and I published my first book soon after.



MS: How did that happen?

DC: Betty. She had a book called "Strictly for Boys." She wanted to teach her sons how to cook. She's reprinted it a zillion times. I have my original autographed copy from 1992. She introduced me to a publishing company. They came down from Tennessee and we met and worked it out. My former minister's wife ended up doing the illustrations. You can still find that one used on Amazon for about \$100.

MS: That was 2005. In 2012 you published a totally different kind of book - *Celebrate Everything*.

DC: Totally different book.

MS: Did that reflect the confidence you'd built up on the job over the intervening years? It's a big, bold, ambitious book.

DC: It's a big heavy, splashy book. I don't know. If I had to do it over again, there are things I would change. I didn't really mean to do a coffee table book, which is what it turned out to be. The recipes are great. But when I buy a cookbook I really want a book I can cook from. That one is more for looking at the pictures. [Photographer] Paul Nurnburg did a great job. The photography's gorgeous.



MS: Well, you're fond of saying, "We eat with our eyes first."

DC: And we do, we do. It was a good experience and I still have a few of those left.

MS: We'll come back to cookbooks. I was just wondering if you can recall your first big job? The curtain's about to go up and there's no turning back.

DC: I do remember my first big job but I don't remember my first wedding. Is that old age?

(Laughs)

MS: It was more likely the fear of screwing up some poor bride's big day.

DC: Maybe. My first big job was at the Arsenal. I was hired by the owners of the Beaufort Inn at the time who were hosting this thing. It was around Halloween and there was a guy dressed up like a gargoyle - he was all green - and he actually climbed up and squatted on the top of the arsenal the whole night. I'd been cooking forever and had all this food. It was very elaborate. And everyone cared more about drinking than eating.

MS: As is often the case. I can't recall the last time you weren't voted Beaufort's Best Caterer by various local media.



DC: That's always nice. It means somebody took the time to vote. And I appreciate that and am very grateful.

MS: Do you see yourself occupying some sort of niche?

DC: Well, I don't fry anything. I try and make sure everything is good without frying.

MS: Is that ever an issue with customers? A lot of people come to the South

looking for a southern fried experience: fried chicken, fried shrimp, fried green tomatoes.

DC: Oh, yeah! They want fried shrimp and I say, "Do you really want your wedding to smell like shrimp being fried?" The answer is no, they don't. Nobody wants their wedding to smell like a grease fire. We can do 5,000 other things with shrimp. It works out and they have something different and at the end of the night people are coming up to me and saying, "That's the best food I've ever had at a wedding. I've never had this before."

MS: And perhaps some, unlike most of us, will remember the food at their own wedding?

DC: I don't know about that. (Laughs) I take it back. The photographers never shoot the food at weddings, but I do. I carry my camera in my pocket.

MS: Any moments stand out in your memory? Amusing anecdotes, perhaps?

DC: Oh, yeah. I recently catered a wedding where I met [former Speaker of the U.S. House] John Boehner. I grew up in North Carolina where we grew tobacco and everybody smoked. I have never been at a wedding with so many smokers since I left my hometown. 80 percent at least. Smoking and eating. Nice man, by the way.

I catered a wedding out at The Oaks plantation once and there was this cute little boy in a seersucker suit and shorts who kept getting away from his dad. I walked by to replace the shrimp and he had pulled down his shorts and was going to the bathroom right next to the buffet. (Laughter)

MS: Not the kind of fountain you want next to the shrimp.

DC: He probably didn't know any better. And another time there was a similar instance with an adult. He definitely knew better.

(Laughs)

MS: Untold stories of the catering business.

DC: At least the kid hadn't had anything to drink. I've done some over-the-top weddings.

MS: Some marriages that didn't last much longer than the reception.

DC: A few. I love second weddings. By then nobody wants food hanging from trees or whatever. They want normal food and want everybody to have a good time. And they're easy to deal with. Those are fun. With weddings people remember if the food was good, the bride was pretty, the alcohol flowed and if the band was decent.

MS: Not long after you'd established your business you started writing for this publication.

DC: I had to beg [Publisher] Jeff Evans. He was like, I don't know about recipes. I had a half a page and little tiny picture. Slowly I got a little more space and started to add photos and more than a dozen years later I have never missed an issue.

MS: What does being the Everyday Gourmet do for the business?

DC: People know who I am and that's a good thing. They know me by my face rather than just my name. And it's just changed to Everyday Celebrations . . .

MS: Wait, I must've missed an editorial meeting.

DC: (Laughs) No, it was an executive decision: me admitting that "Celebrate" has stuck and I might as well embrace it. People walk up to me and go, "Celebrate!" So, that's it. I've been branded. People follow me around in the grocery store and ask me where things are. It's flattering but sometimes I just want to put on a hoodie and say, "Don't judge me just because I'm buying



Stouffer's to feed my husband!" Which I do. Poor Vince. He's lucky to get fed.

Debbi Covington is currently hard at work on her 3rd cookbook, which she promises will fit in most kitchens. It is due in March, 2018.

Find Debbi online at www.CateringByDebbiCovington.com