



GOURMET'S SAFARI TO SUCCESS

MAEVE O'MEARA DESCRIBES HER MULTI-STRANDED CAREER AS A TRANSLATION SERVICE FOR TASTEBUDS. ALSO A MOTHER OF YOUNG CHILDREN, THIS DYNAMIC ENTREPRENEUR TELLS **CAMILLE HOWARD** HOW MAINTAINING A WORK-LIFE BALANCE IS CRUCIAL TO HER DEFINITION OF SUCCESS

ON HER DESK THERE IS A CARD WITH "BALANCE" WRITTEN ON IT. THAT'S easier said than done when you have three young children and a thriving business, especially one that is actually two businesses linked to previous successful career strands. Maeve O'Meara could be a joyless workaholic, but she wouldn't define that as success and her sense of humour and fun would never allow it. So, she isn't.

O'Meara is director of Gourmet Safaris, a business made from taking people on food adventures. The former current affairs journalist and television foodie has had to balance not only her business and family but also stints on SBS's *Good Food Guide* and Seven's *Better Homes and Gardens*. And she is co-author of several books. Yep, O'Meara sure knows how it feels to be stretched, and the importance of balance. And after leaving *Better Homes* last year, she's a lot closer to achieving it.

It was while taking fellow mums from her mother's group out for a dining experience in a town most of the women hadn't heard of, to eat Lebanese food they could barely pronounce, that the idea for Gourmet Safaris was born. The premise was ingeniously simple: take tour groups to restaurants to get them to try the fine fare Sydney has to offer. What impressed O'Meara was the joy of discovery she witnessed on her friends' faces and the pride on the restaurant owner's. "It crept up on me as a mad idea, and in the years since I've learnt to listen to that little voice that says 'wouldn't it be funny if...'

"I guess I got the idea that people like to have their hands held, particularly with new cuisines." She thought she could come up with a way to teach people how to put things together, and to take a bit of the fear out of trying something new. There's more to it than leading tour groups to the door; diners get to learn a lot about what they're eating. "I guess I'm a translation service for your tastebuds!"

Starting out with eight different banquet dinners, O'Meara and her safari group would effectively take over a restaurant and the chef would take the group through the flavours and how they were put together.

After a small story appeared in a Sydney newspaper, the phone didn't stop ringing and O'Meara has never looked back. That was eight years ago and the business and O'Meara's extracurricular activities have evolved. Gone are the days when she'd push the pram up to the local post office to empty the post-box. "On a good day it was stuffed with letters and I would feel like the most successful businesswoman, and if there was nothing there I'd be absolutely crushed."

ON SAFARI

Although still home-based, she now employs a manager and most of the orders come over the phone, so the daily trips to the post office are all but behind her. The style of service changed, too, as Gourmet Safaris—which is booked out months in advance—moved from offering banquet dinners to tours of regions of Sydney, exploring cuisine through shops, restaurants and vibrant 'characters'.

"In the days when supermarkets rule and the smaller family businesses that have brought food culture from across the world are struggling, it's great to see there are places that have done well. In that eight years the world has changed—10 years ago you'd have to explain what Turkish bread was.

"I've been lucky in doing this at a time when the food evolution is quite dynamic in Australia; and lucky that people have welcomed me into their lives and families and businesses, and that those business people want to show what they do."



> Plans to expand the business further are in the back of her mind, but O'Meara's keen to grow the local arm of it first. Though not a control freak, she says, she wants every tour to be perfect, which means she would have to do more frequent travel. And while her children are still young, that's not on the immediate horizon.

As well as food safaris to Vietnam and the Greek islands, the first women-only Gorgeous Safari took place in Vietnam, to encourage overworked and stressed women to get back a bit of inner balance. "Gourmet Safaris gives people food inspiration and understanding and joy from other worlds; Gorgeous Safaris puts women 'back together' and you come out feeling good."

From this first trip, she felt inspired to do more, to Thailand and Shanghai, and as soon as the schedule will allow it, there'll be trips to research setting this up. "There's no way I'd do that without knowing that everything was going to be absolutely seamless—so I probably do have a perfectionist streak, but it has to be a perfect experience." This will mean a few trips to check out proposed facilities and restaurants, and to sample the shopping—for research purposes, naturally.

NEW SYNERGY

Since its inception Gourmet Safaris has been the top priority in her business life, but there have been many other roles. Firstly, through SBS's *Food Lover's Guide*, the travel for which inspired a lot of business ideas, then *Better Homes and Gardens*. The latest SBS show, *Food Safaris*, is produced by O'Meara's new production company, Kismet Productions, and draws directly from Gourmet Safaris. "Now, probably more than any time in the last eight years, there's a synergy in all this. The profile that came from *Better Homes* has helped, the SBS profile has been wonderful and the connections through SBS and Gourmet Safaris are interwoven."

This synergy is important, particularly because it's an experience-based business that relies a lot on word-of-mouth and repeat patronage. Many customers buy gift certificates for friends and family members, she says, and these new customers end up bringing more of their friends to the business—in fact, there's around 30 percent return patronage.

Little has been spent on advertising over the years, relying instead on editorial to help drive customers to the business, and she recognises the huge benefit of her television and radio profile. If she didn't have these extra roles, O'Meara admits the business would be vastly different. And since starting Kismet Productions with Toufic Charabati to produce *Food Safaris*, being able to focus solely on one arm of her business life is some time away. But this balance between roles—that are closely linked—also helps keep her mental balance.

Although moving the business from home is part of that future growth, at this stage having it run from the home helps maintain her balance between work and home life. This balance is important to O'Meara, and she implores all business owners to work hard to achieve theirs. "I don't think you are going to be effective [in business] unless you are balanced in some way."

For O'Meara, that balance comes from simple things such as coming home after a hectic day and jumping on the trampoline with the children—"there's a lot of the child in me"—and she always tries to keep Friday afternoons free to spend with them making pizzas.

Because she gets so much joy from her business, O'Meara admits she is able to find balance more effectively, but there are other ways she keeps her sanity in tact. It helps to have family nearby to help with the kids when she is tied up with the business. She also exercises every day, and her positive outlook and sense of fun, which comes through the minute you start talking with her, makes a difference, too. "Having something within you that equals



On Safari: Maeve O'Meara (centre) translating for tastebuds during a Portuguese safari.

a sense of humour," she says, helps her realise that work is just that, and this helps put things into perspective.

And, surprisingly, cooking still gives her much pleasure, and she doesn't need to 'switch off' from her foodie role when she shuts the computer down every day. "It is such a relaxation," she says. "It's different sorts of cooking, really. There's cooking for the kids, which is regular and they think I'm the best cook in the world. And I love cooking for friends; friends are very good for levelling you and bringing you back into yourself."

Another important part of her balance involves giving back to the community. As well as the various charities she supports, O'Meara was recently asked to become an ambassador for charity, Oz Harvest, started by her friend, Ronni Kahn. Set up by Kahn in 2004, Oz Harvest arranges to pick up leftover food and deliver it to charity organisations feeding the homeless and destitute. From fine dining to fast food, volunteers deliver leftover meals from restaurant and function centres, reducing waste and filling a need in the community.

Being asked to participate was an honour for O'Meara, who says the opportunity to be involved in such a worthwhile cause means a lot.

PASSION & STRUCTURE

Running a business based on passion takes away much of the 'work' aspect of it—at least until the kids are in bed and she catches up on a few emails. Then she'll unwind with a deep bath and a good book.

Without a business background, surrounding herself with people who help with that side of things, particularly Suzy Brien, the operations manager, keeps the business running smoothly. "I'm good at ideas and making things happen; she's good at the systems that give a structure to that."

And 16 regular guides of different nationalities are a major resource, as they are at the coalface of the tours. Because the

business is experience-based, it's crucial that her staff are able to pass on the joy and love of food and food culture. And because these guides are part of the culture/s she is trying to make more accessible to her customers, they bring more to the role than O'Meara could, including family stories and history. "Everybody who works for me is paid well," she says. "It is a business built on passion and generosity and I'd like to think this is what's going to keep us going, rather than projections and spreadsheets."

"Some other people have occasionally tried to do what we do, but some of the businesses just don't want them." O'Meara says this is largely because of the relationships she has fostered with the businesses she visits, including regular follow-ups, to maintain these good relationships.

This professional life is a far cry from the newspaper and television current affairs roles of early years, but being a food lover—fostered by the many trips made on the job—helped make the transition from current affairs to food and beyond. "Having kids made the move from passion to day job."

Making the switch, she says, has been quite gradual. "Whatever circle you're in, it always gets a bit comfortable, and so the idea of doing something quite radically different is scary. But I think having children crystallised my thinking that life is about having fun and doing what you absolutely love. And, having children didn't work with the 10-hour day work ethic of current affairs. So the change was almost inevitable."

In the long term, O'Meara wants to spend more time developing Gourmet Safaris, particularly the overseas trips, "but including family in that". She still recalls the 'mother's guilt' she experienced when her oldest child was a toddler and, at a food writers event, screamed at her: "I don't want you to be a food writer, I just want you to be my mother". She nearly gave it up, but both O'Meara and son are glad she didn't. "He said recently, 'Mum, we're so proud of you; it would have been terrible if you'd given it up.' And I nearly did."

"I'm at a really good place right now. I've got two businesses that I absolutely love, that have started from nothing and give me joy in fostering them further." ●

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

1. **Listen to your customers** Find out what they love and don't like, think about it, and act on it if necessary.
2. **Don't be greedy** Thinking that the price should be \$X because it looks good on paper and finding that people simply won't go for it, is a waste of time.
3. **Be charming at all times** especially with difficult people.
4. **Listen to that 'what if' voice.** Give new ideas a try; listen to your instincts.
5. **Accentuate the positive.**