



Let me entertain you

Party planner to the stars Lyndy Redding is a big name on the gourmet circuit thanks to her innovative company Absolute Taste. Here, she talks to Haute Cuisine about food, family and fame

INTERVIEW: SARAH HAMILTON-WALKER PHOTOS: TYSON SADLO HAIR & MAKE-UP: BETH ALDERSON

Lyndy Redding knows just about everyone. As co-founder of leading catering firm Absolute Taste, which creates contemporary, stylish food, she has catered for David and Victoria Beckham, Gordon Ramsay and his wife Tana – Lyndy is Gordon's business partner and is also involved with him in the Tante Marie cookery school.

She also lays on racy spreads for Formula 1 aces Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button. "I started with the help of Ron Dennis from McLaren and with his help I think we have the passion to be the best," Lyndy explains. "We care so much and want to approach each party in its own way and try to be as creative as possible yet keeping the focus on the food. So many places get away with mediocre food – ours is delicious."

Here, the talented mum of one talks exclusively to *Haute Cuisine* at her home in London about mixing work with motherhood and catering to an exclusive clientele – but why she'll never be a celebrity chef. Best of all, she reveals the recipe for success for anyone wanting to turn their dinner party into a night to remember.

Where does your love of food come from?

"My mother was a fab cook who loved food and I used to help her in the kitchen, standing on a stool with one of those little plastic aprons on. We used to make quite adventurous food – brandy snap twirls filled with cream, a lemon cheesecake, which I can still remember how to make (I think my mother made up the recipe), and chocolate truffles and peppermint creams. Mostly fun recipes so we could lick the bowl."

Where do you get your inspiration?

"I am inspired every day and from all my travels. I am always coming back to my chefs with sketches and my thoughts from being out for

dinner. I am very lucky as I have travelled so much with Formula 1 and have had the chance to eat in some of the best restaurants in the world, as well as some great places on the streets in Malaysia and Singapore. I also have loads of cookery books from Australia and the States – the Aussie ones are my favourites; I think they just get something right out there.

"I don't think there is a minute in the day when I am not thinking of creating something – even since having a baby I am now wondering about baby food. I am not only conscious of the food but the way it is presented and the general atmosphere for different parties."

'WE WORKED WITH THE BECKHAMS ON THEIR WORLD CUP PARTY. THEY WERE BOTH SO LOVELY AND REALLY FRIENDLY'

How have things changed for you since your son Joshua was born in June?

"I haven't had children till now as I couldn't see how I could carry on with Absolute Taste and have a baby as well.

"I now feel the business is strong enough to cope with me having Josh – although saying that, I was emailing on my Blackberry as I was going to hospital and have been having meetings pretty much since he was born!

"Life is changing and the overriding love for him is just gorgeous but in a way it has made me even more determined for Absolute Taste to be the most successful company as I want him to be proud."

How hands-on do you remain with Absolute Taste, especially now that you are a mum?

"I do miss not being in the kitchen and sometimes I regret this as I love cooking. But with the fun of the business now and growing it like we are, it is so exciting that my role has changed. As far as being a first-time mummy, it is nerve-racking as I am in the early stages – I think it's going to be a juggling act as I want to be with Josh as much as I can. But obviously my first baby was Absolute Taste so I won't be leaving this behind. I employ 300 staff now which

The Beckhams, Gordon and Tana Ramsay, Lewis Hamilton, Jenson Button... just some of the big names Lyndy (pictured with family pet, Truffle) has worked with. "I like a demanding client – it keeps us on our toes," she tells us



means I do have the people to keep it running. And I have a fantastic management team who feel like my family. I just want the clients to be happy and everyone to love and remember the food."

How did you become involved with Tante Marie cookery school?

"I did my training for a Cordon Bleu Diploma at Tante Marie and became a director for the previous owners after bumping into them at an event where they recognised a Tante Marie recipe. Then the opportunity came up to buy the school so I asked Gordon Ramsay if he would like to be involved and he jumped at it.

"We also run an Absolute Taste scholarship, which offers the chance to someone with passion who couldn't afford to go to Tante Marie otherwise.

"I can't impress enough that a year doing the diploma stands you in the best position for a fabulous career in hospitality in any area, restaurants (like Gordon) outside catering (like me) and anywhere else where food is involved. We have fab contacts all over the world and can pretty much guarantee a job at the end of the course – it beats three years at university that leaves you coming out with a huge student loan. I have certainly never looked back."

How is it that the business has expanded into such diverse areas?

"We've expanded because we have been asked to by our clients. We started doing parties, then we were approached to have a café at the Design Centre at London's Chelsea Harbour and felt it fitted with our brand; Absolute Taste Inflight evolved as so many of our clients had private planes and wanted our food on board. Then came Harvey Nichols – it's a dream of mine to be in my fave store – and Quintessentially Soho at House of St Barnabas in London – a not-for-profit members' club that was meant to be a pop-up thing but which is still going strong. Mercedes-Benz World – we know them well and it's local to McLaren. Now we are actively looking at future projects as I have the team to take the company forward and we just

love the way so many of the areas all match up.

"A lot of the ideas for expansion have come from my business partners. The latest of these is opening up a facility in Geneva where we will be operating a kitchen for our Inflight business as well as being available for local events – a big, exciting adventure."

Has the party scene been affected by the economic downturn?

"Yes, the corporate parties have reduced dramatically. We are lucky as we have a lot of clients who have a product to sell so this is still happening. It has changed, though, and we have had to adjust our approach accordingly. The 'big money, no problem' attitude has gone but this just means we need to be more creative and clever to make the details show and prove it is not entirely necessary to throw a lot of money at a party."

'KEEP THINGS INNOVATIVE BUT SIMPLE AND WITH THE BEST FOOD AND DRINKS. LITTLE DETAILS MAKE IT FUN'

What is the most popular party theme – and the oddest – you've been asked to cater for?

"Some of the old styles are the best and as long as you are creative these can be amazing. We have just done a fabulous *Moulin Rouge* party, with a

vintage feel, which I love, as well as a raunchy feel, which is always fun.

"There are some other odd requests that I couldn't possibly repeat – even after many years I still get shocked."

What's your idea of the perfect party?

"I am always keen that the perfect party be designed specifically for the person hosting it, keeping things innovative but simple and with the best food and drinks of the best quality. Little details that make it fun are great and these don't need to be expensive."

What's your favourite type of food and ideal way to relax?

"I am quite fussy on food, I don't see any point of eating something that doesn't taste great and of a certain quality. Probably my ideal ▶

'I'M NOT ONLY THINKING ABOUT THE FOOD, BUT THE WAY IT IS PRESENTED AND THE ATMOSPHERE FOR DIFFERENT PARTIES'



An effortlessly elegant table (top left) is one of Lyndy's trademarks. "Give your place settings drama by layering plates," advises the star caterer. Little details that make it fun are great and don't need to be expensive."

Since having baby Josh, Lyndy has become an expert at juggling motherhood with running her multimillion-pound catering business. "I was emailing on my Blackberry as I was going to hospital and have been having meetings pretty much since he was born," she says



'I DON'T THINK THERE IS A MINUTE IN THE DAY WHEN I AM NOT THINKING OF CREATING SOMETHING – SINCE HAVING A BABY I AM NOW WONDERING ABOUT BABY FOOD...'

ENTERTAINING MADE EASY: LYNDY'S TOP TIPS

● **Send an invitation** so your guests can see you are going to make an effort. Use a formal, thick card; or handmade with rustic paper and wrapping paper stuck like a patchwork on the back and the details written on the front with a flowing fountain pen.

● **Buy what you can to ease the pressure** Ready-made dips and rustic crudités before dinner are good as you don't have to pass them around and people will feel comfortable helping themselves. Everybody loves cheese straws. And various nuts, spicy or honey-coated, can be made beforehand and be put out for guests.

● **Keep the menu simple** Plan a cold starter and pudding so these can be done before your guests arrive. The starter could be a lovely mulled wine poached pear with a local blue cheese and salad and then pop the vinaigrette on at the last minute. Pudding could

be a black forest gâteau made with chocolate brownie and built in a stack with thick cream and a berry compote – looks funky and can be done before and you don't have to make a thing.

● **Don't invite too many people as this will get stressful** Six to ten people max for dinner, 20 to 30 for cocktails. And always invite two or more great friends to help with conversation when you are busy or just to help clear the table.

● **Make sure you're comfortable** Wear something sexy, so you feel great – but make sure your shoes are comfy!

● **Have some fun things for later if your party is going to run on** Big vases of different chocolates are always a hit or little bacon sandwiches go down well. A cheese board could be put out later,

too. Also have some games ready. ● **Keep the table simple** This will be more cost effective – try as many nightlights as possible with some large

candles arranged down the middle.

● **Organise a variety of vases full of different flowers** One type of flower per vase will look striking and contemporary. Bunches of herbs also look fun mixed with nightlights. Or just keep it simple and use sprayed twigs.

● **Give place settings some drama** Use a placemat or large plate as a base then layer plates to create height. Use a pretty plate for pudding and a plain one for the main course; individual slate plates for a cheese course and pretty photo frames for a fun starter.

● **Warm drinks for the winter are fun** Try a hot toddy, Winter Pimm's or a lovely warm spiced blackberry, apple and redcurrant drink with cinnamon and laced with vodka.

● **Have an interesting non-alcoholic choice** for those who are driving or don't want to drink. A warm spiced berry drink shows you have made an effort.

scenario is in front of the TV with a selection of my favourite cheeses, cold meats and rustic veg – my husband and I do this whenever we can with a yummy bottle of wine and some rubbish telly."

With all the big names and events that you cater for, you could easily be another 'celebrity chef' yet you remain very grounded...

"I will never be a 'celebrity chef'. At Absolute Taste it's a team effort. It has not been a conscious effort not to be in the spotlight, it's just something I would not want as the focus needs to be on the company, not me. Absolute Taste is far more interesting."

If you had one piece of advice for newcomers to the industry, what would it be?

"Everyone watches the pennies nowadays and with the 'money no object parties' disappearing, we need to do regular events throughout the year. This also applies to the restaurant world – being full on Thursday, Friday and Saturday is not enough, it needs to be every day. So ensure your business plan is rock solid and be careful of the rent that you are going to pay."

Of all the famous people you've catered for, who has most impressed you? And are you ever fazed by the demands of your celebrity clients?

"We worked on the World Cup party four years ago for David and Victoria Beckham – they were both so lovely and really friendly to the staff. David shook the hands of all the chefs, which meant the world to

them. We also work with Gordon Ramsay a lot and he and Tana are so much fun. Gordon is a giggle and my guys think he is awesome.

"We worked with Bentleys Catering on Chelsea and England football star John Terry's wedding. He and Toni were so kind to the staff that they just wanted to make the day even more perfect for them. And Lewis Hamilton and Jenson Button – we look after these guys each weekend in the F1 season and they are fab; they love their food and respect my guys for doing their job.

"I am not fazed at all about the celebs – we have met so many in our time. I actually quite like a demanding client as it keeps us on our toes and when they are exact about what they want then it is a challenge to make them happy. I think that is what we love and keeps us all excited about what we do." **HC**

● Lyndy set up Absolute Taste in 1997 and has since branched out into Absolute Taste Inflight, Cafés by Absolute Taste and Gordon Ramsay by Absolute Taste. For more about Lyndy and Absolute Taste, visit absolutetaste.com.

● Turn the page for some of Lyndy's festive food and drink ideas that will turn any occasion into a real celebration...

Haute Cuisine goes digital...

See Lyndy in action at our exclusive shoot on *Haute Cuisine's* digital edition which goes live on 15 November. Visit hellomagazine.com/haute cuisine



Blackcurrant fizz

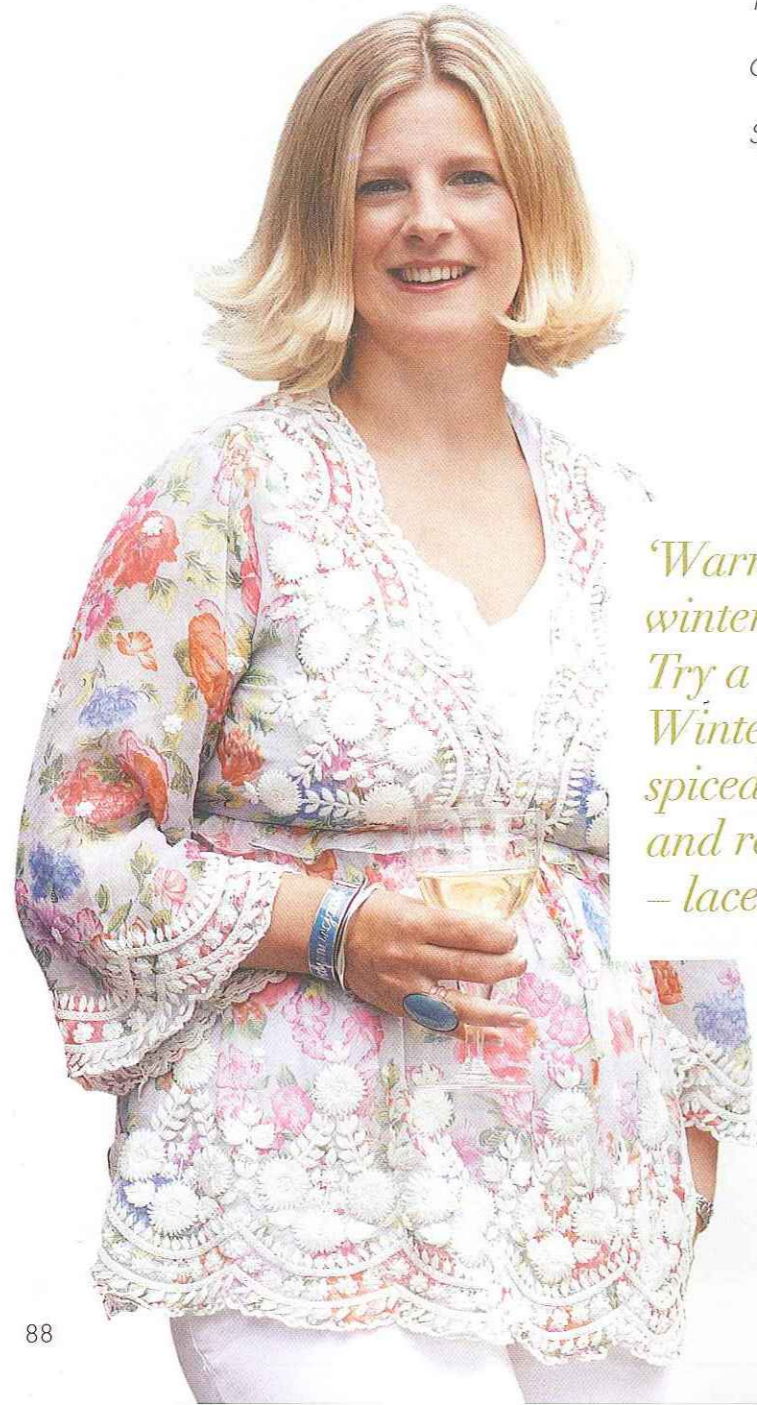
'A lovely, festive drop. You can use champagne flutes or coupes for this – opt for glasses that have an interesting shape – these can be picked up quite cheaply just for your party'

Pour the crème de cassis into a champagne glass and top with chilled champagne or prosecco. Decorate with a sprig of blackcurrants and serve immediately.

MAKES 1

INGREDIENTS

- 1 tbsp/15ml crème de cassis
- Chilled champagne or prosecco
- Sprig of fresh blackcurrants



'Warm drinks for the winter are also fun. Try a hot toddy, Winter Pimm's or a spiced blackberry, apple and redcurrant drink – laced with vodka!'





Peking duck pancakes

'Tasty little bites that are fresh, full of flavour and just the thing for getting your party off to a flying start. Serve them on pretty photo frames and they'll be a real talking point. And, best of all, they can be made in advance, giving you plenty of time to relax'

Cook the duck according to the packet instructions until dark and crispy. Leave to cool a little then shred into chunky pieces. Toss in 100ml/4fl oz of the hoisin sauce.

Fill a bowl or deep tray (big enough to take the pancakes) with tepid water and immerse the pancakes one by one for 1-2 minutes until they have softened then lift on to a clean board or work surface.

Place a line of mint leaves towards

the bottom half of each pancake, across the diameter, followed by the dressed duck, cucumber, spring onion and radish. Carefully roll the rice paper over the fillings, being mindful to wrap as tightly as possible to avoid the filling falling out but not so tight as to split the pancake.

Slice into 4-6 pieces and serve with the extra hoisin sauce to dip and a flourish of pea shoots to garnish.

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

600g/1½lb Peking crispy duck
(now sold at most supermarkets)
4-8 Vietnamese rice paper
pancakes depending on size
(some are 15cm/6in some are
23cm/10in)
200ml/7fl oz hoisin sauce
20 fresh mint leaves
½ cucumber, peeled and shredded
into long strips
3 spring onions, trimmed and
shredded into long strips
Handful of radishes, trimmed and
shredded into julienne
Handful of pea shoots, to garnish
Extra hoisin sauce, to serve



'Ready-made dips and crudités before dinner are good as you don't have to pass them around and people will feel comfortable helping themselves'

Black forest gâteau

'These moreish bites of ready-made brownie, cream and fruit couldn't be easier to make. For a pudding that will leave guests impressed and finish your celebration on a high note, top with lashings of chocolate shavings – I've used dark chocolate, but you could use white chocolate, too, for a festive feel'

Using a 10cm/4in pastry cutter, cut out 8

slices of chocolate brownie or cake. Whip the cream until you have soft peaks and sift in the icing sugar then fold through

and spoon into a piping bag.

Build the gâteaux straight onto the

serving plates. Place a blob of compôte onto the centre of each plate to secure the brownie base. Build them up with a layer of compôte and cream then the berries. Repeat, pressing slightly to secure. Decorate with the chocolate shavings and fruit.

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

1 large piece of brownie or chocolate sponge cake
250ml/9fl oz double or whipping cream
2 tbsp icing sugar
250g/9oz fresh cherries and blackberries, cut in half and stones removed, plus extra to decorate
Blackberry compôte
Dark chocolate shavings



'Keep your menu simple. Cold starters and puddings are best. These gâteaux look funky and can be done before your guests arrive – you don't have to make a thing'

