

RIGHT. Tracy Hamilton, a professional caterer, leases the kitchen at the old Edible Arts building on U.S. 220. Her knives are lined up on a magnetic strip over the sink.

BOTTOM RIGHT. Sixty croissants with smoked turkey, apple and brie will be served at a gathering hosted by a client.

BELOW. Sesame chicken wrapped in snow pea pods with a dip made with Fresh Squeezed IPA beer and other ingredients were served to guests at a Blue Ridge Land Conservancy event in October.



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WORD OF MOUTH

The caterer and protégé of one of Roanoke's best-known cooks doesn't need fancy advertising or marketing campaigns — party hosts who know good food know Tracy Hamilton.

It's a Friday afternoon and Tracy Hamilton steps into the former Foodies kitchen on Franklin Road. She pulls a black apron from the clothes dryer, flips her long, dark hair into a loose bun, then slips on her food-safe gloves.

She's got an easy gig today — just 60 turkey-apple-brie croissants and 60 bacon knots — but she'll give it her all as she always does, thinking hard about what will please her partygoers and how to serve it so it looks special.

Hamilton got her first taste of catering when, as a teen, she was asked to help at a Center in the Square event. The elegance, the rush, the be-



TOP. Tracy Hamilton, caterer, chats with brother-in-law Tom Dunkenberger and his college friend, Kelly McCormick, who was visiting from Northern California. Dunkenberger and wife Whitney hosted the party for the board of the Blue Ridge Land Conservancy at their South Roanoke home.

ABOVE. Tracy Hamilton's bacon knots coated in brown sugar are ready to serve at an event hosted by one of her regular clients.

hind-the-scenes nature of it spoke to her. And she vowed: "When I grow up, I want to be a caterer."

By her 20s, she was on her way when she dialed Roanoke's most revered caterer, Lib Wilhelm, and asked, afraid to hear the answer, could Wilhelm use a little help?

Wilhelm, who has since died, embraced her and Hamilton's business partner at the time, Jim Schaal, and the three of them joined forces.

"I always say she was the brains and I was the legs," Hamilton remembers. "I learned a lot from Lib."

And really, the rest is history. If you've been to a South Roanoke wedding or bar mitzvah, a SoRo graduation shindig, a garden club to-do, a downtown office get-together, a North Cross fundraiser, you've likely sampled Hamilton's culinary creations.

Over her 25 years as a caterer, Hamilton has pulled off a lunch for 450 followed by a cocktail party for 350 in the same day. She's assembled a passel of favorite servers she depends on. Though always running late and with a voicemail that will no longer receive new messages, Hamilton has earned the respect of colleagues and a devoted following.

She's the kind of caterer that works the wedding for a bride and is called again when the bride's sister marries and yet again for the wedding of that sister's best friend.

This is all despite having no business cards or website, no professional Facebook page or Instagram account showcasing her latest masterpiece. She has no menu for folks to choose from when they sit down to plan their event. Clients simply ask her to make what they tasted at the last party she catered, the one their friend threw.

"I've got a good clientele that I enjoy catering to that fits my style here," Hamilton explains.

In short, Tracy Hamilton is the caterer you'll wish you hired as you entertain this holiday season.

"She brings everything and displays it beautifully," says Emily Schmedtje, who has booked Hamilton for some 20 dinner parties over the last 18 years. "She's just a delight."

JOB IS NO PICNIC

What does it mean to be a caterer?

It means working while everyone else is partying. It's 18-hour days, on your feet, going nonstop.

To cater is to think not only of what flavors complement each other, but also how the dish looks on a silver platter or in a dark room lit by a disco ball. It means asking: Can this food be eaten in one bite, while a guest is holding a drink and not sitting at a table? Will it still taste good after hours in a fridge and half the night on a table?

"The reason I like croissants is they hold up well and they're easy to bite into," Hamilton says while spreading dozens of croissants with dill mayonnaise and slices of green apple. "I love French bread, but it's too hard to eat."

To cater is to calculate. "A cocktail party is 12 bites. I want 6 items for grazing on the table and a couple of passing items. If there are 350 people, that's 4,000 bites," she says.

It's a life of hurry up and wait. Of working weekends. Of having to get everything right on your clients' biggest days.

Hamilton remembers an outdoor wedding at a remote location outside Charlottesville. "There was a tent set up the night before; a bear got into it. They brought in a generator and a port-a-potty and gallons and gallons of water. An event like that? You can't forget anything."

To succeed as a caterer means being OK with not knowing exactly what you're walking into.

"I have to shift and juke and jive," she says. "Whatever happens, it doesn't matter. I'm still supposed to produce, I've just got to figure out how."

The life of a caterer is boom and bust. In 2008, caterer Jim Schaal had four venues he was filling when the economy went belly up and the corporate clients he was serving stopped budgeting for breakfast buffets and swanky Christmas parties.

"The wedding business is the business to be in now," he says. "You hope and pray people are going to continue to call you."

Catering is chasing down must-have ingredients. Hamilton has had fingerling potatoes shipped overnight from California when she couldn't get them in town.

Can this food be eaten in one bite, while a guest is holding a drink and not sitting at a table? Will it still taste good after hours in a fridge and half the night on a table?



TOP. Hamilton, who caters a function for the Blue Ridge Land Conservancy, says she has to be prepared for anything she encounters. "I have to shift and juke and jive. Whatever happens, it doesn't matter. I'm still supposed to produce, I've just got to figure out how," she says.

LEFT. Hamilton and helpers set out trays of appetizers for a gathering in October. The caterer often is assisted by her son, Reynolds. "He loves setting up parties," Hamilton says.



BOTTOM. Rob Arrington with Tracy Hamilton Catering carries a basket of food to the tent set up for Blue Ridge Land Conservancy's garden party in October. It was held at the South Roanoke home of Whittney Dunkenberger, Hamilton's sister, and her husband, Tom.

BELOW. Chocolate cupcakes with the Black Butte Porter beer from Deschutes added to the batter were part of the fare at the Dunkenberger's party.

It's ordering glassware and tableclothes and chairs, figuring out forks and candles and hot plates and toothpicks.

It's also thinking about how people gather in a venue. Will they block a door or crowd a table? "If it's not going to work, I'm going to move it," Hamilton says. "Flow is important."

Catering means changing with people's tastes. "I'm very aware of trying to make sure there's enough gluten-free, vegan, vegetarian," she says. "I try to hit all the categories."

And it means shifting between two very different worlds, that of bartender and server and that of host and guest.

"I worked for Ms. Wilhelm," says Joseph Sims, who at 80 has been bartending special events for more than 50 years. He started as a waiter at Roanoke Country Club and served at Alexander's and for other area caterers. "As far as anyone I've worked with, Tracy is the best. She knows how to do it and she knows how to treat her workers."

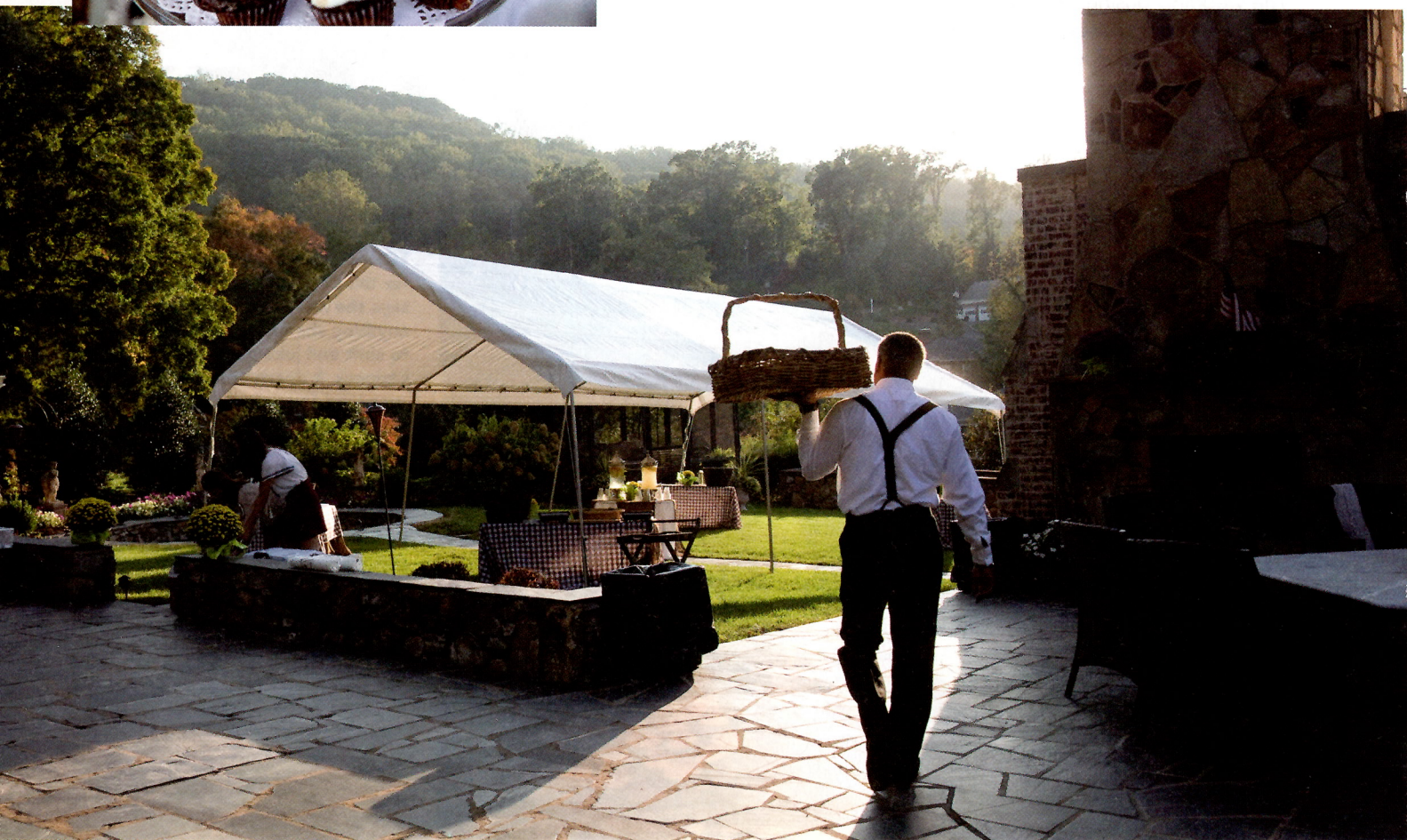
For most of us, all this would be too much, too hard, too stressful. For Hamilton, there's nothing else she'd rather do. Tennis might be a close second; she loves the sport and plays several times a week.

"I love catering," she says in her soft-spoken lilt. "The jobs that scare me, I really love. I like the adrenaline. I like things to be interesting. I like to figure it out."

SIGNATURE SERVINGS

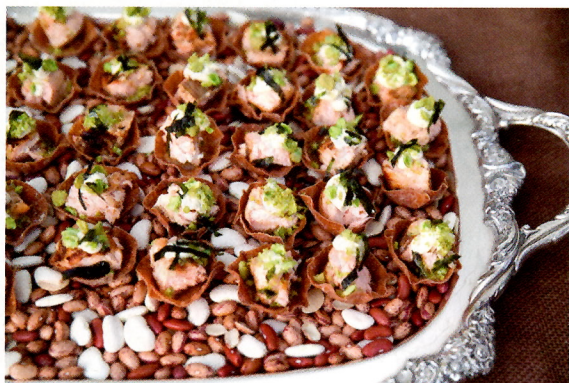
Every caterer has dishes they're known for.

These are Hamilton's: Pimiento cheese and Smithfield ham sandwiches, crab cakes served on slider buns, shrimp and grits, fried green tomatoes, shucked oysters. Perhaps her most requested hors d'oeuvre is a slice of chicken marinated in an Asian sauce, dredged in black and white sesame seeds, then wrapped in a snow pea pod and served on a toothpick.



BELOW. Wonton Salad, an appetizer made from a recipe from Deschutes, is embellished by Tracy Hamilton Catering for a party at the home of her sister, Whitney Dunkenberger and husband Tom.

BOTTOM. Hamilton offer samples of Fresh Squeezed Deschutes beer to Pam Ogden (left) and Sissy Logan during an event for the Blue Ridge Land Conservancy.



"You have to make it look pretty," she says. "But it's got to taste good, too."

She doesn't do cakes, or many desserts at all. In fact, cocktail food might be her forte. "I like the individual, intricate, bite-sized foods," she explains. "I'm very labor-intensive."

But it's never over-the-top. Her taste on the plate is as understated as her everyday style — little black dress, simple sandals, gold rope necklace and matching bracelet.

Hamilton spent six years working with Wilhelm before she stopped catering in 1999 when her son, Reynolds, was born. He was diagnosed with a chromosomal disorder. A few years after, she and her husband, Skip, had a daughter, Whittney.

Hamilton largely stayed home when her children were small, but she took jobs here and there, just a couple of events a year, for clients she wanted to keep.

Then, as her kids grew, so did her time in the kitchen. In 2015, she sublet the space that Edible Arts had vacated; she was ready to pick up where she'd left off.

"It's passion," says fellow caterer Schaal, describing what sets Hamilton apart from the growing field of area caterers. "She's not doing it to put money in her pocket. She's doing it because she loves it."

These days, Hamilton garners another layer of enjoyment from her work as she watches her son take his first steps into her world.

He's been taking courses in high school and helping out at her events.

"He loves serving at parties," she says. "It'll be one in the morning and he's still smiling."

Back at her rented kitchen, Hamilton glances at her scratched and dented iPhone. She apologizes, loads her appetizers in her white SUV, and pulls out onto Franklin Road.

She is late again, yes. But also, just getting started. ▲

