

AUSTIN'S setting the standard in **EVENT CATERING**

It was as clear as black and white when the huge billboard went up in front of the partially constructed Telstra Clear Pacific Events Centre at Manukau that Austin's Food Design Events had something to shout about. The company name was there for everyone to see that it had been selected as exclusive caterers for the centre. Austin's general manager Chris Blackman and Design and Logistics manager Andrew Billingham (Bill) took time away from their busy schedule to speak to **CYNTHIA DALY**.



The Great Hall (Auckland Town Hall banqueting)



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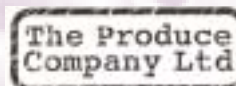
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In April 2005 the Telstra Clear Pacific Events Centre will open at Manukau with a gala evening planned and catered for by Austin's Food Design Events. The evening will not only showcase these new facilities but it will also be another opportunity for Austin's to showcase its first-class capabilities as one of the country's leading caterers.

Judging by Austin's event and food design at the recent opening of the revamped Auckland Convention Centre at The Edge, this catering company is determined to lift the standard of a food service which appears, in their eyes, to have outgrown its description - 'Catering'.

For everyone at Austin's the exclusive catering contracts for both these prestigious centres has been an endorsement that the company is providing what people want in a catered function/event.

The background

In the six years since Austin's changed ownership it has matured, gradually re-positioning itself in the foreground of catering in the greater Auckland area.

Chris Blackman, general manager of Austin's Food Design Events, explains the background of Austin's.

"Austin's was the concept of Scott Ashton in the early 1980s and after many years of creating spectacular events he sold to the Company Catering Company. Maggie Weatherhead, our current owner and director, bought Austin's in October 1998."

At that time Austin's was the flagship of four catering businesses operating from the Mt Eden base. Predominately they were all servicing their own niche market, although there was some in-house competition for business and eventually it became more cost effective and practical to dissolve the other companies and focus on building the Austin's brand.

Blackman, and Andrew Billingham manager of Design and Logistics, were already part of the Austin's team when Maggie Weatherhead arrived with a fresh attitude, working with staff on a day to day basis to lift sales. This has brought the company to where it is now in size, trade and representation.

"In those days Austin's didn't have such a strong name or reputation in the marketplace so there was a lot of shopping around we found. Now we find people come straight to us. In this business reputation is based on



Pear ice cream

your performance on a daily basis. It takes a long time to build people's trust and it doesn't take very long to lose it. So you have to be on top of your game every day, every function. Because regardless of if you've got one function or several functions on the same day, the client at that one function only knows about their job. They don't know what you did yesterday or what you are planning to do tomorrow. They don't know what else you've got going on around town. They are only interested in their own event and for good reason. So we have to make sure that if you are working at that event you're only interested in that one event as well. And that's how we've built our reputation," says Blackman.

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Event Catering

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Being approachable, flexible and helpful to customers has also been important to Austin's reputation.

"Rather than not being flexible, we say to our customers 'what would you like? We'll do it in the best possible way we can but you tell us what you would like?' and that's the way we've met the market."

Austin's today

Austin's employs approximately 30 fulltime staff, as well as casual workers, temporary chefs and temporary waiting staff, who go straight to the site and help with the event. The fulltime staff work from Austin's base at Mt Eden, which houses the production kitchen, warehouse and offices.

Heading the chef brigade is Head chef Arnault Vallee who began his training in the classical art of French cuisine in Paris with the revered chef Emile Tingaud. Upon completing his apprenticeship he moved to London where he honed his skills under the auspicious gaze of Albert Roux, of the Roux brothers. He then worked at the world renowned Ritz Hotel on the Strand for a number of years gaining culinary knowledge and expertise which he now relies upon to lead Austin's brigade of talented chefs.

The administration team includes operations manager Viktor Tulicic formerly a young politician in Croatia, Viktor immigrated to Auckland in 1997, after travelling for some years, and opened a restaurant in Lorne Street. Tulicic joined Austin's in 2000, and promotes open communication and attention to detail as the key to operational success.

Sales manager Cyril Brace, Blackman and Bill make up the administration team under Maggie's directorship.

Maggie's open management style and personal approach has enabled Austin's to develop and retain a strong and dynamic team whose talents combine to create a progressive company.

With the growth in business Blackman says: "We're getting to the stage that we are outgrowing this building to a certain extent. The main thing that holds us here is the location - it's a fantastic location for us. It's so central,

close to The Edge, close to the CBD where we do a lot of our work and in our trade where everything is taken from here to the event and back again every time you do something, its important that you're close at hand."

Austin's clientele

Examples of Austin's diversity include putting on a simple barbecue for Carter Holt Harvey at Around the Bays for last six years. And, in contrast, Austin's plan and cater for a special gala evening for the Q.E.II cruise ship when it comes in to port.

"We've been lucky enough to do that gala evening for them once already and we've been asked to do it again. The Q.E.II service obviously is exceptional and they expect to treat their guests in the same manner when they are in port. They want people who can meet or exceed their own standards."

The first gala evening was held at the Ti Papa Equestrian Centre at Clevedon where the facility is a dirt floored horse arena that Austin's needed to transform into a formal dining environment.

"The beauty of that spot is it is a huge open space blank canvas that you can do whatever you like with and also it's out in the country. You've got the horses there. They've got a fantastic stables you walk through to get into the building and so for people that don't come from a New Zealand environment it's a very different environment for them to see and it works well," says Blackman.

"We bring in the kiwi experience for them. They have the Maori dancers, the native flora and fauna and we take that theme through into the table centres as well. They have a band and huge dance floors, because they love their ballroom dancing. And last time they all received a commemorative rimu plate, which was laser engraved with the details of the Q.E.II experience. We have agreed to host the same event at the Telstra Clear Pacific Events Centre when they next berth in Auckland," says Bill.

At the Auckland Convention Centre at The Edge Austin's caters for corporate clients as well as hosting for the opera and theatre productions.

"Emirates are a good example," says Blackman. "As you know Emirates launched in New Zealand recently. When they came into New Zealand they looked for a caterer who could handle all of their launch parties and we did a number of things for them including a formal dinner for 500 people in the Civic Theatre. They took out all the theatre seats and put in a flat floor, which meant they had the grandeur of that building and all that comes with it. We did a five-course dinner for them that night. We went out to the Airport to one of the VIP lounges and did the press arrival of the first plane arriving. We had about four events for that and since then that has led to a good relationship with Emirates and they continue to use us wherever they need an event organised."

"We recently did the press launch of Emirates supporting Team New Zealand where we organised a lunch for 180 people when they named the team," says Bill.

In the last America's Cup, Austin's were the preferred suppliers of all catering to Team New Zealand and their sponsors.

"SAP were was a major sponsor so we had all of their work related to the America's Cup. They alone had about 30 events during the course of the Cup including a luxury yacht. We went out onboard the yacht everyday to do all the catering. Our Team New Zealand contract led to a huge series of events for us. We had approaches from other syndicates but we decided we would focus on Team New Zealand and we said to Team New Zealand up-front that we would not work with any of their competitors during the cup. One of the main reasons we decided to do that was the fact that at the end of the Cup all of the people that were involved with Team New Zealand would still be in New Zealand. The companies were New Zealand based and we were reinforcing or enhancing



Orange Cake

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our reputation or our relationship with those companies for the future as well."

Meeting the market

One recent series of events was with New Zealand based travel company Kintetsu, who acted as event organiser for their client Miki Corporation, a health and beauty products company. Miki Corporation brought 1600 Japanese women to Auckland.

"Initially the problem was trying to find somewhere to have a gala dinner for 1600 people. During the daytime they had a seminar for 1600 people and that proved a bit difficult at the time for the venues around."

In the end the conference was broken down into four consecutive events with a day in between each.

"So we did 400 one night then a break, then 400 then a break and so on so we had to produce four identical events. There were strict protocols including service techniques and timings, which we had to work very closely with but it was a complete success," says Bill.

Kintetsu wanted all New Zealand food for the events. There was no cultural food requirement but the look of the food on the plate was quite specific.

Blackman says this event was two years in the planning, meeting with representatives from Miki Corporation who flew in from Japan five or six times prior to the event in order to get the events exactly how they wanted them.

"The dinner was the highlight to the end of

the tour for these ladies and they went away with great thoughts of New Zealand. That's how much positive feed back from the organisers we've got. Kintetsu appreciated the effort we put in and so we've built a relationship with them now, that when future groups come through they'll come knocking on our door again which is what it's all about."

In dealing with overseas clients arranging a conference or event in New Zealand, Blackman says Austin's always strives to promote this country's food and wine.

"One of the things we always push for is that they are coming to here for the New Zealand experience, let's focus on New Zealand cuisine and on New Zealand wines and showcase what we have to offer."

The Auckland Convention Centre at The Edge

Austin's, due to its performance and working relationship with The Edge over the past six years, became exclusive caterers for The Auckland Convention Centre at The Edge just over 12 months ago. On August 2, Prime Minister, The Rt Hon Helen Clark and Mayor of Auckland, Hon John Banks, officially opened The Auckland Convention Centre at The Edge, with Austin's creating stylish, mouth-watering food stalls to follow.

Blackman says the \$7 million upgrade has enabled areas within the centre to be redesigned into a more practical venue that is still architecturally very appealing, and now fitted out with a fresh modern look.

Austin's assisted with the redesign of the kitchen, giving ideas to maximise the use of the space.

"Any chef will tell you that the kitchen has

to be set up for the menu and the quantity of food they're producing. In a restaurant that's fairly standard, where as in a catering environment or events centre environment, one day it's a conference, another day it's a formal dinner, the next day it's a canapé party. The numbers fluctuate so you've got to have a flexible kitchen facility which The Edge was very open towards. They initially came to us and said 'we need to do some work in the kitchen, how would you like us to do it?' Being involved in that process from the beginning was excellent," says Bill.

Originally the kitchen had a central island and extraction which Austin's asked to be removed and placed around the edges. This then gave them a clear central area to wheel in benches, additional ovens and move things to the side giving more room to lay out additional equipment as required.

"For conferences we need bench space so we can lay out all platters and get morning tea, lunches and afternoon teas ready. Because if you are operating on three or four levels and there's three buffets on each level, and there's 2000 delegates, that's quite a numerous amount of platters to lay out. Whereas with a formal dinner, a lot of the prep work is done at our base and then taken in refrigerated trucks to the venue where it is cooked and assembled for service. So the space we need really is service lines with waiting staff to come through and pick up the plates and move out into the room. By having the front open area it means that we've got more space to work with," says Bill.

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Event Catering



Scallop entrée

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This process eliminates the need for cramming the space with prep equipment, leaving plenty of room for the cooking to be done on site.

"We were part of the original meeting with the consultants and the architect. The architect asked us to explain the kitchen flow and requirements to him and he then went away and drew

things up around that concept, which I think was an excellent approach to it," says Blackman.

Austin's next large conference to cater for at the Auckland Conference Centre at The Edge will be the International Bar Association gathering for 2000 delegates in mid October.

Telstra Clear Events Centre

Austin's has been given the same consultation opportunity for the kitchen at the Telstra Clear Pacific Events Centre, where Wildfire Design has prepared a plan for the kitchen and servery.

Blackman says the appeal of the Telstra Clear Pacific Events Centre is that it has been designed as a very multi purpose venue suitable for sporting events, conferences, theatre, banqueting and exhibitions. It has the capacity to cater for 1500 for dinner or up to 3000 for a sporting event.

"Telstra Clear is a very clever design. It is set up in such a way that if you go there to a banquet you'll think it is a banqueting venue. If you go there for a sporting event, you'll think it's a sporting venue. That's just one of the things that will stand it apart."

Austin's has entered into a long-term agreement with the Telstra Clear Pacific Events Centre and sees it as a very exciting step in the company's ongoing development.

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