

## **Starting from scratch: The birth of a small business: Coming down to the wire** **By Tiffany Kjos**

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Day two of a four-day series

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Vandals hit the Chantilly Tea Room and Gift Boutique, under construction off North Oracle Road, and kitchen equipment fails. Still, the staff holds a successful pre-opening tea.

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It's been three months since builders poured the slab for the new Chantilly Tea Room and Gift Boutique, and the 3,000-square-foot structure is nearing completion.

The specially built windows are installed, the inside is primed a soft eggshell color, and workers are leveling the land off North Oracle Road where the parking lot and driveway will sit.

And, ah, the details: rounded corners. A curved stairway. Ceiling medallions that surround the chandeliers. Next up: installation of light fixtures, the final coats of paint, concrete coloring, landscaping and riprapping, installation of wood flooring and carpeting.

Now that it is becoming a reality, owner Tamara Read has big decisions to make - many of them at the last minute.

Read is opening a small business - something about 98 percent of all Tucson firms are - and is determined to be among the 46 percent of U.S. companies that survive four years. Just 2 1/2 months before the scheduled opening date, she decides to change the name of the enterprise.

Its original name, "Vintage Expressions," is too bulky, too much of a tongue-twister. So she'll use that as the company's legal name and call her business Chantilly Tea Room and Gift Boutique.

"I'd seen this name months and months ago on a road sign and I thought, 'That would be such a great name for a tearoom,' " Read says.

One drawback: She has spent the last week calling vendors - there are close to 100 of them - to notify them of the name change.

She also had to delay deliveries a couple of weeks because although the building is still on schedule, it's pushing up against the drop-dead deadline.

Vendors will be delivering frames, lamps, pillows, china, silver, silk flowers and gift boxes, bags and baskets. The inventory will arrive just after the first week in August and keep coming all that month.

It's finally reality.

But reality isn't always pretty.

Read learns that one Saturday morning while driving past the construction site, 5185 N. Genematas Drive, with her dad on the way to Home Depot.

"Dad, there's something wrong with the windows," she tells her father, Bruce Read.

There is nothing amiss, he assures her - it is just glare from the early morning sun. Read insists they stop, and they discover someone has broken several windows and shattered every pane on a custom-made, multipaned French door.

It's Aug. 24, 2002 - almost a month to the day before the tearoom's scheduled opening date.

Glass shards are scattered throughout the building, and when people walk on them they make tiny indentations in the formerly pristine wood laminate flooring. Large and small bits of glass are sprinkled all over the antique furniture.

It could have been worse though, a shaken Read says.

"I don't know what scared them off. They could have hit every single window," she says.

The breakage attracts the attention of neighbors, who drive by slowly and even back up to look at the damage.

The tearoom's builder, Tom Alfonso, arrives with his teen-age son.

"Bad karma, huh?" he jokes.

"You were the first call I made," Read tells him.

"You got to start getting out of that habit," he says. They both know: She should have called the police first.

While theft at job sites is common - and is something this project already has experienced - Alfonso says he's never had a project vandalized in 22 years of working in Tucson. A laser security system had been scheduled to be installed weeks earlier. But that had to wait until phone lines were connected, which happened to be the day before the vandalism - and a month behind schedule. When he arrives to install the system, Michael Epperson of Epperson Security Professionals surveys the damage sadly.

"How loud can you make it?" Read asks him.

"One hundred and ten decibels is the most they can do," he tells her.

"You'll be able to hear it all the way to River."

Last-minute glitches

The broken windows are all custom-made and must be reordered. To Read's relief, they are replaced just days before the grand opening. But the hot water dispenser, a pricey "extra" Read ordered so she wouldn't have to worry about heating water for the tearoom's staple - tea - is on the fritz.

And the industrial-size refrigerator's temperature regulator isn't working properly, spoiling several hundred dollars' worth of food. These are two of the biggest glitches Read faces just days before the grand opening, when 72 members of the Red Hat Society - a group of older women who wear purple outfits topped with red hats - are set to descend on the tearoom.

Three days before the grand opening, Read's staff assembles for a "training tea," a dry run to which they've invited family and friends. Read, dressed down in a green T-shirt, black slacks and white Keds, sits down with chef consultant James Botwright, who explains how she should order food from vendors using numerical codes. Appearing a bit dazed, she heads upstairs to her office to put in the order.

The tables are set with fresh flowers, intentionally mismatched silver and fragile teacups. There's nonstop activity, with workers sweeping the floor, folding napkins and making sure no detail is overlooked. In the midst of it all an addled Read stands in a doorway, her hands over her eyes, and asks herself, "What was I going to do?"

"What tea should we try?" Read asks the kitchen.

Dishwasher Priscilla Sprague suggests ginger peach.

Read uncaps it and takes a whiff.

"Umm. Fruity. Musky. We'll give it a whirl," she says. Suddenly, she's in her element.

The kitchen shifts into high gear. Tearoom assistant Ann Marie DeBenedetti fills three-part serving dishes with preserves and Devonshire cream and awaits lemon curd, which is chilling. Cook Mary Lamb cuts crusts off white and wheat bread and makes dainty finger sandwiches.

Read dashes about, telling the chef to add vanilla to a recipe and directing DeBenedetti on which spatula to use.

In the dining area, guests chat contentedly and sip tea as Read introduces herself to each table.

"This is a training tea," she tells her first guests, "so some of it is not quite right."

And it's not. There are six tables, but Read prepares only four three-tiered serving trays.

One tier holds a plateful of meticulously arranged finger sandwiches. Another bears scones. On a third rests raspberry-pecan crumbles - which look like tiny tarts - and miniature chocolate eclairs.

"Do you have any of those tomato sandwiches left?" she asks Lamb.

Before she replies, the chef walks by and Read asks him, "Did you add vanilla? Add a touch of vanilla."

It's 4:07 p.m. and Read realizes she needs to prepare two more three-tiers. The guests have been seated a good half-hour, with no food in sight.

Read rushes to prepare the remaining food, then steps back to have a look.

"These are not right," Read says

Though Read isn't satisfied with them - she is picky about presentation, and all the three-tiers just don't meet her standards - the servers take out the food anyway.

The din in the restaurant rises and falls as guests sip tea, bite into scones and chat. They're good-natured; this is a training tea, after all, and they are nonpaying guests and friends.

It's been a whirlwind, but it's over. The next time Read prepares food for guests, they'll be paying customers.