

## **Starting from scratch: The birth of a small business: With success comes stre** **By Tiffany Kjos**

Source: *ARIZONA DAILY STAR* Tuesday, September 23, 2003

Day three of a four-day series

////

The new tearoom is a hit, but holiday teas strain the staff - and owner Tamara Read's nerves.

////

It's a sunny day in late September 2002 when Tamara Read opens the Chantilly Tea Room and Gift Boutique, a project that's been in her head for several years and under construction for several months. She is determined to beat the odds, to avoid being one of the nearly 60 percent of small businesses that fail within their first four years. Her first guests are dozens of "Red Hatters" - a group of mostly over-50 women who go on outings dressed in purple outfits and red hats. As they file in, their attire a colorful complement to the Victorian decor, their comments fill the two-story mauve building.

"Look at the little lampshade with the feathers."

"This is what this town needs."

"This is really a tearoom. It really is."

One guest gives Read, dressed in a brown pantsuit with a teacup and teapot pin, her own pink hat - pink because at 33, tradition says Read is not not old enough to wear red.

Her parents, Bruce and Vicki Read, are on hand. State Sen. Toni Hellon shows up for the ribbon-cutting ceremony. But not all the Red Hatters, who have reservations, have arrived at the tearoom, 5185 N. Genematas Drive.

Read has waited more than 20 years for this day, ever since she fell in love with the idea of a tearoom when she had tea at New York's Plaza hotel.

She wants everything to be perfect.

"Some of the groups are late," she frets.

"We're going to do it whether they're late or not," says her father.

Bruce Read, who owns a business management firm, is intensely involved in the operation, signing for a UPS delivery and later ringing a bell to usher guests and workers outside for an opening ceremony.

But the younger Read is the one in charge.

"Thank you so much for coming," she tells the assembled guests. "This is our first official duchess afternoon tea."

She named the tea after the seventh duchess of Bedford, who is said

to have started the tradition of afternoon tea.

Finally, it's time. Read tells the servers to bring out the traditional three-tiered serving dishes filled with sweet and savory treats.

"Just keep them coming," she says.

A customer tells Read it would be nice if there were music. Read thanks her, choosing not to point out that the guests' loud chatter has obliterated the piped-in classical music.

Guests drink tea, eat scones and treats with gusto, chat animatedly - then seem to all want to leave at once. More than a dozen line up in the tearoom's gift shop to pay, creating a backlog at the register.

In the kitchen, Read compliments her staff before a second group of Red Hatters arrives.

"You guys did an amazing job of getting things out," she says, rubbing her temples.

"Tamara, your break is over with. You've got a number of women here," her father says as new guests arrive.

It's harried in the kitchen, but the jovial guests are enjoying themselves. Read retains her composure in the tearoom but shows her stress to staffers.

"A few minutes ago I was a grumpy owner," Read says. "The door wasn't shut and I said, 'Shut the door!' "

She'll have to work on that.

Turning away business

Two and a half weeks later, Read has extended lunch to 3 p.m. and is overwhelmed by the number of people who want to dine, sit and soak up the tearoom's atmosphere.

She has to turn away walk-ins.

"We're pretty much booked every day, and that frustrates people," Read says.

She's working seven days a week from 6 a.m. to at least 8 p.m., cooking, serving, busing tables, placing orders for food, planning for the next day.

She is surprised how much she enjoys the management side of the business - ordering food, keeping inventory stocked, organizing.

Her dad comes in every day, and her mom, Vicki, helps out as often as her job allows. Chantilly already has regulars, and reservations are coming in for special holiday teas scheduled for three Saturdays in December.

The tearoom also is drawing children's parties, birthdays, groups of elderly ladies from assisted-living centers, and businesswomen taking their clients to lunch.

The pace is unrelenting. After two months, the tearoom has four servers - double the number Read expected to have. Complicating matters, Read is fighting the last vestiges of valley fever.

One day in November, the tearoom has its busiest day ever, serving 168 people - far more than the usual 90 or so.

"We were missing a server. It was crazy. And of course I was sick. I could barely stand up," she says. "I was having to make stuff that we ran out of, cooking things, monitoring things to make sure things were getting out, and I would go upstairs and lie down and was fighting a fever - I broke it that afternoon."

At the breaking point

Read strives to maintain a calm, cool dining area. The kitchen is another matter. It's small for having so many people - a dishwasher, kitchen assistants, cooks, the chef, Read - buzzing around. It gets hot. During busy times, workers sometimes joke with one another, but they often toil almost in silence because they're working so hard to get food out quickly.

Almost everything is made from scratch, from scones to soups to curried turkey salad.

Many of the offerings can't be created ahead of time. The simplest recipe - strawberry fool, a topping for scones - takes about 45 minutes to make.

The fragile sandwiches quickly go stale if left out in the open air. So after they are carefully arranged on each three-tier platter, they're covered with a paper towel and spritzed with a water bottle to keep them moist.

There's lots of potential for disaster: What if the bread gets soggy? What if the cream refuses to whip? What if someone drops a teapot? Only occasionally does the stress get the best of Read. At one holiday tea, the first sitting goes well. At the second sitting, though, the staff is less organized, and some three-tiers go out missing items such as a certain kind of sweet or sandwich.

"We have a menu," Read reprimands the staff. "These people are expecting certain things."

Later, employees grouse about the dressing-down, some saying they're just miffed enough to skip Read's holiday party. Meanwhile, Read sits in the back room, regretting what happened and worrying she's offended her father, whom she snapped at when he insisted on trying to accommodate a caller whose reservation had not been recorded in the book.

"Dad," Read says when he pokes his head in to ask a question. "I am so sorry I snapped at you."

Read has been a boss before, but never an owner, and there's a difference: Sometimes, she has no one to turn to but herself.