

Starting from scratch: The birth of a small business: Her hard work pays off **By Tiffany Kjos**

Source: *ARIZONA DAILY STAR* Wednesday, September 24, 2003

Day four of a four-day series

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Customers love the tearoom - but popularity comes with a price.

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She's made it.

Tamara Read, who built Chantilly Tea Room and Gift Boutique from the ground up, has beaten the odds. She'll celebrate her business's first anniversary Saturday with a special "garden hat tea."

Read's venture is a clear success: She has expanded its hours and regularly has to turn away customers without reservations. Her tearoom, at 5185 N. Genematas Drive, is not going to be among the 25 percent of restaurants that fail in the first 12 months.

The year has changed Read, 33. She exhibited a newfound self-assuredness in late spring while proudly showing a guest the waterfall and flowers she says get far more care than her plants at home.

Her father, who has backed her on the venture since well before it opened, comes out to discuss an issue. She disagrees with him - and doesn't back down, as she might have several months ago.

She knows what she wants - and that might just be another tearoom. She's considering a second location, despite her father's advice not to consider such things until her first anniversary.

She has little time for mulling. Her days fly by at breakneck speed.

Lunchtimes are brisk, and items in the gift shop sell so quickly that she barely has time to order new ones.

"If they drink the tea, they want to buy the tea. They want to buy the strainers," she says. "Everything I use, they want to buy."

Read expected to have five employees after her first six months.

Instead, she has eight servers and a total of 22 employees.

She continues to refine procedures, but it's difficult because the tearoom is so busy.

"Every day it's just like an onslaught," she says. "The days that we're kind of quiet we get a little bit done, but not enough to make that much of a marked difference. But we're slowly, surely getting things done."

The ambience is not quite what Read was striving for during the lunch hour, when the building resonates with customers' voices.

And breakage is a bit of a problem. The tearoom uses pretty, fragile

china cups and saucers Read collected for years before opening the business.

"I was crying about one. It was one of my favorites - blue, gorgeous," Read says. "The person who broke it was afraid to tell me."

Getting tough, speaking up

Read still works seven days a week. Although she runs a restaurant, she is wafer-thin and often forgets to eat - despite the small refrigerator and microwave near her office.

She and the staff have developed systems to stem the chaos. For example, the "now" system - as in, "Tamara, I have a question - now" - alerts Read that an employee needs her immediate attention.

"We have a smoother way of running things," says server Debra Burke, who has worked at the tearoom almost since the beginning.

"The holiday teas, those were intense."

The intensity is proof of the tearoom's success - and the very thing that weighs on Read and her busy staff.

"Some days you just sort of get overwhelmed," Read says. "There are so many pans boiling at the same time that you have to get one done before you can pop to another one. Or do them all at once."

Read has an easy rapport with staffers, but she's had to be tough.

A year ago, she spoke so softly that it was difficult to hear her. She has learned to speak up.

When kitchen staff couldn't agree which radio station to play, she took away the radio. Workers are allowed to listen to personal stereos with headphones until 11 a.m.

"Out of everything, it's the radio that causes conflict," Read says with wonder.

It's not the only conflict. A couple of weeks ago Read met with the tight-knit but occasionally gossipy staff to discuss the difference between venting and attacking.

"They're hard-working and they get along," she says. "Everyone has tiffs in families, but we work with everybody and we talk about them."

A typical Saturday

Earlier this month, as Chantilly's first anniversary approaches, Read spends a typical Saturday: She straightens her office and installs new shelves in the gift shop. She solves a problem, whips up a batch of scones and chats with customers.

First, she heads for the kitchen, where she tucks her hair into a green baseball cap and dons an apron. She confers with the chef about the scones she's about to make, then turns to the dishwasher: "OK - not so many suds - good. Good job."

Hostess Traci Grabb opens the swinging door that separates the tearoom from the kitchen and hands Read a cake for a special event.

Read skims a notebook full of recipes. Then she returns to the scones:

"Am I using one egg or two?" she asks chef Amy Edelen. She takes off her rings, washes her hands and mixes the ingredients by hand. After they're in the oven, she removes her apron and cap, and zips through the restaurant and gift shop, heading upstairs to her office.

"I'm just going to check on the cost of that," she tells the hostess about a gift item a customer is inquiring about. Back downstairs - and back in her cap and apron - she refills a teapot and checks the temperature of individual quiches reheating in the oven.

"All right. Amy, they're hot enough. Let's take 'em out," she says, pulling the tray from the oven. Standing on end, it would be about half her height.

As cook Ellen Fenster applies a bandage and tape to a fresh burn, she and Read compare the scars they bear from pulling baking trays out of the hot oven.

A second location?

Despite the physical, mental and emotional cost of running the tearoom, Read still remembers why she got into the business - even though she has yet to draw a paycheck. It's something that's stuck with her since she had tea at the famed Plaza hotel in New York City as a little girl.

"It just caught me and I just fell in love with it," she says. "We have a lot of little girls who come here and I think, for them, it's the same thing."

The idea of that second location pops up again.

"In the back of your mind you're thinking, 'OK, I can do another one.' Maybe on the other side of town," she says. "My dad and I smile at each other and we start laughing and say, 'Don't even go there for a while.'"