

bank loan for their first take-out food shop, Word of Mouth, which still thrives, some 20 years later.

After the partnership dissolved, Weinberg opened Carolina, a much-missed restaurant featuring urbane versions of the barbecued meats, corn dishes, and subtle shellfish creations of the Lowcountry. Five years later, exhausted by the grueling intensity of restaurant work and battling a severe recession, she returned to her first love—prepared food and catering—and is flourishing at Good & Plenty To Go, a temptingly fragrant food shop with a small sidewalk café close to Manhattan's Theater District.

"There's pressure in this too," she says, "but it's less intense than at a restaurant, because once you prepare the food it stays made. It also takes a smaller investment to get started, and your time is more flexible. I have a great staff, and I only work weekends for extraspecial parties." Weinberg's customers include stars of the publishing and fashion worlds, although small private dinners, a neighborhood couple taking out two portions of bourbon-basted baked ham and vegetable chili, or a child buying a peanut butter cookie get the same careful attention.

Before her career in food, Weinberg was interested in dance, married while in college, and went to Oklahoma, where her husband was studying. She started cooking because that was the only way they could eat on a student's budget and became so good at it that friends were always wangling dinner invitations.

After a divorce, she traveled in Europe and Morocco, then returned to New York, where before working in several restaurants she went into hospital administration. It was there Weinberg met Finch, who shared her love of cooking, and they began to bake and cater parties for doctors, several of whom became backers.

With success assured, her main problem is finding time: first, to exercise, as an antidote to the constant tasting, and then to rest enough to enable her to even consider a social life.

SUSAN GAGE 49, caterer, Washington, DC

Now meet the woman who has it all: a flourishing catering business along the party-minded Beltway, a 26-year marriage to a gastroenterologist, a daughter of 17, and a son of 21.

A little less than ten years ago, Susan Gage, then a very good self-taught cook, catered her first party—a wedding for a

friend's daughter. She cooked for 125 guests in her home kitchen, charging \$3 a person. Now in a 6,000-square-foot headquarters in Oxon Hill, Maryland, just 20 minutes from downtown Washington, DC (traffic cooperating), she oversees 40 full-time employees, plus dozens of temps, and grosses \$3.5 million a year. Although she constantly searches for new recipes that reflect current food trends, she rarely cooks anymore, relying on her staff to master new dishes and even to send dinner to her home, just five minutes away.

Organization and discipline apparently are the twin rules Gage lives by. She is an abstemious taster who eats little meat, and in a week full of 16-hour days, jogs 30 miles. Catering for four years from her home, she saved enough money to lease and equip a small portion of the present plant without taking a loan and is adamant about not drawing her family into the business, although her husband developed her accounting system. She herself charts all phases of every catering job, listing garnishes and utensils for each dish.

Whether preparing a week of lunches for a corporate meeting, a small, private, home birthday party, or a cookout on the White House lawn (she leaves a care package of leftovers for the President, as for other clients), Gage serves fresh, light, contemporary food of the sort she grew up with in Oregon and, later, in California. Her specialties include Caesar salad with crunchy Parmesan-glazed *tules*, crabcakes with corn salad, Southwest pizza, Peking duck crepes, fire shrimp marinated in cilantro and serrano chilis, and, for brunches, "basil cheese strata," a scrumptious Italianate baked bread pudding, layered with eggs, cheese, and basil-scented tomato sauce.

And even diet-conscious diners opt for pastry chef Mike Williams's desserts: crème brûlée, chocolate madeleines, frothy lemon meringue tarts, and edible cookie placecards. He and Nancy Coudon, who runs the kitchen, are both regarded as indispensable. Even so, Gage goes to 98 percent of the parties, taking only one two-week vacation each year. In addition to food and help, she supplies all china, silver, furniture, and linens, which she rents to clients. "That's where the real profit is," she says.

Gage credits good luck and timing for her combined personal and career success. "I began my business very slowly, working at home when my children were half-grown," she says. "But really, you have to be lucky. I married at twenty-three and just got a good one!" □

Attention control freaks.



Put the powerful cleaning of Comet exactly where you need it most.

**Comet Liquid Gel
Cleaner With Bleach.**



**When others can't cut it,
Comet can.**