

BEHIND THE MENU

Left to right: Robin, Marcia and Jeffrey Selden



The Seldens

Marcia, Robin and Jeffrey Selden
of Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning

by Bill Squier

You must be doing something right entertaining-wise when the folks who work for Martha Stewart call you looking for ideas!

But, Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning, a family-run business located in Stamford, was such a hit at Stewart's last bridal market party that it was probably inevitable that they'd be asked to contribute to a wedding issue of her eponymous magazine. If that wasn't enough of a coup d'etat, around the same time the Seldens learned that they'd been named as a finalist for the 2013 Achievement in Catering Excellence (ACE) Award – an international competition that an-

nually spotlights noteworthy caterers from America and abroad. And Marcia Selden Catering and Events is one of only five businesses from the Eastern U.S. in the running for top honors.

"It's like the Oscars of catering!" says Robin Selden, Marcia's daughter and co-owner of the business. "It was an unbelievable honor just to be nominated!" The Seldens won't know the outcome of the awards until they are announced at the Catersource Conference and Trade Show held at the Mirage Hotel in Las Vegas on March 10th. However, just as the Golden Globes are seen as a predictor of who wins the Academy Awards, let's hope the fact that they recently landed

The Knot website's Best of Weddings Award for the second year in a row is an omen of good things to come!

Not bad for a catering operation that began in a tiny Pepperidge kitchen a little over three decades ago and grew into a multi-million dollar company.

These days Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning is housed in a sleek, modern suite of offices on Research Drive in Glenbrook where a staff of 21, headed by Marcia, Robin and her brother Jeffrey, meet with clients and create everything needed to provide the food and ambiance for all manner of special occasions. Their signature approach to entertaining

Behind the Menu is a regular column of Stamford Plus magazine, written by Bill Squier, where we introduce you to the people who make Stamford such a wonderful place to enjoy food! For inquiries and suggestions email us at behindthemenu@canaiden.com.

ON SPREAD: CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

is to devise an event that is one-of-a-kind, whether it's a wedding, a memorial service, a baby naming or a dinner party. "It should not only be unique, but personalized," Robin Selden emphasizes. "We're passionate about our clients' visions. We care about every party equally – as if it's our own!"

"Our clients push us," Robin feels. "We're in that special place in the United States where we have billionaire hedge fund managers and the New York City elite, and also regular people, like me, who don't have the funds to do whatever they want. But, they travel all over the world, they've seen everything, and they want something no one has ever seen before." Fortunately, there are two generations of the family on the premises to make sure that happens!

Robin points out that the Seldens have entertaining in their genes. "My mother's mother, Edilia, was a wild party woman from Havana who loved to cook and entertain all the time," she says. "She was the oldest child in a family that didn't really have any money. But, she had incredible beauty. So, she won the title of Miss Cuba. Her prize was to come to New York, where she got a modeling contract." Soon, Edilia's face was not only smiling down from a billboard advertising Palmolive soap in Times Square, but from a Broadway stage where she worked as a dancer in the Zeigfeld Fol-

lies. That's where she caught the eye of Robin's grandfather, Jack, who fell madly in love with her, proposed and then whisked her away to Brooklyn.

But, Robin says that her grandmother's vivacious nature also had a very formal side. "If we went to visit her as kids and ordered a pizza, she would put crystal, china and linens on the table and the pizza would come out on a plate," she notes. "Mom really learned from that."

At first, however, Marcia Selden chose to study design so that she could fashion jewelry that she sold to upscale Manhattan retailers, like Bonwit Teller and Bergdorf Goodman. When that business started to slow down, Robin says that her mother shifted her creativity to food. "She was always an entrepreneur," she emphasizes. "So, she created a beautiful brochure that looked like a giant submarine sandwich! Then, she and her friend, Elaine, went to the fire stations in Stamford to pedal their three-foot or six-foot subs!"

The Seldens had moved to Connecticut from Brooklyn when Robin was kindergarten age. And while the kids were working their way through the Stamford public school system – Robin at Cloonan and Westhill; and Jeffrey at Riverbank Elementary, Cloonan and a science and technology cluster program at Rippowam – Marcia's reputation as a cook began to spread.

"When I was eleven, somebody asked her to



cater a wedding," Robin recalls. "She said, 'Okay.' We said, 'Mom, you don't know anything about catering.' And she said, 'I'll figure it out.' She made Chicken Cordon Bleu, rice pilaf and a green salad. And, afterward, she said, 'I like this!' That kicked off the business, all through word-of-mouth."

For the first decade it was all-hands-on-deck as the kids and their dad pitched in to help on weekends and, later, when they were home visiting from college. "My mother would

ON THIS PAGE: A visual feast of the succulent creations of Marcia Selden's crew. It's even better when you taste it! We, at Camaden, know from experience - the party for the fifth year anniversary of Stamford Plus magazine in 2010 was catered by Marcia Selden Catering and Event Planning.



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say, 'Can you do me a favor? Go to Stew Leonard's. I need 200 chicken breasts,' Robin recalls. "I would march through Stew's with a big shopping cart, people would be staring and I'd say, 'My family loves chicken!' Along the way, Robin and Jeffrey learned about the catering business from the bottom up, by doing everything from washing dishes to bussing tables. "And that's still how we train our staff today," Robin notes. "Everyone can do everything."

Jeffrey took to the family business right away. "He was so turned on by it, that he went to hotel school," Robin says. In fact, he was accepted into Boston University's School of Food and Hotel Administration by writing his college entrance essay about surviving a dessert disaster. "My mother was famous for making extraordinary Baked Alaska," Robin explains. So, Marcia was hired to make a three-tiered, four-foot-tall Baked Alaska wedding cake. Unfortunately, the ice cream had crystallized by the time she added the meringue to the sides of the cake. So, it began dripping off en route to the reception. "She was so embarrassed that she made my dad deliver it," Robin laughs. "They whipped new meringue, torched it

and wheeled it off the dance floor as it was melting. Thankfully, we haven't had a lot of those disasters!"

After graduating from college, Jeffrey Selden worked his way up through the food and beverage industry at many of New York's toniest hotels, including the St. Regis, The Pierre and The New York Palace, where he was put in charge of the design, development and management of the two star Michelin honored restaurant Gilt. And he gained a reputation for being one of the city's go-to people for planning lavish weddings and fundraisers. One of the most memorable events was a gala to celebrate America's living Presidents and First Ladies where the Bushs, Jimmy Carter, the Clintons, the Fords, Lady Bird Johnson, Richard Nixon and the Reagans were all in attendance.

Robin decided to go a different route. "I was into design," she explains. "So, I went to Syracuse University to major in advertising. When I finished school, I worked for Ralph Lauren. But, I had a chip on my shoulder and thought I knew everything. I'd think, 'Why are they sending me across town to get sneakers for a model? The receptionist is sick and I have to answer the phones?!' I wanted to be designing advertising for magazines! So, I realized that it wasn't for me."

Robin Selden officially joined her mother as a partner in the business in 1997. And Jeffrey came on board in 2011. "When I started, it was mom, myself and one other person in the kitchen," Robin remembers. "We were catering parties for 700 people out of her house and doing everything." As the company grew, the family dynamics remained the same.

"It's extremely difficult to separate family and business," Robin admits. "And, to this day, we have our moments. We have our own ideas and there are generational differences. But, it's really special. My mother touches everything. I completely respect her and I'm so proud of what she's done to build this business. Ultimately, she's my best friend."

During their busiest time of the year, Robin reports that the company handles as many as thirty parties a week and they are set up to handle many more if needed. "Every party

Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning
65 Research Drive
Stamford CT 06906
203.353.8000

brings some kind of a challenge," she says. "Someone will come to us, for example and say, 'I'm vegan. My friends aren't. But, I want them to eat a vegan dinner at my house. I need you to make it so unique and special that they won't even realize it.' I can't wait for challenges like that! Bring it on!"

"You eat with your eyes," Robin continues. "So everything has to be appealing. It's creating a show. Creating an ambiance and a feeling from the moment the guest walks through the door. Down to what our staff wears! If it's a formal black tie event, they'll be in black tie. For a more casual event with a color theme, we'll order ties, or a polo shirt or an apron that match."

As busy as they are, the Seldens always seem to find the time to assist our area's charitable and non-profit organizations. "We're so proud of living in Stamford and Fairfield County that we're passionate about giving back," Robin emphasizes. She lists a number of groups that she's particularly excited about, including the community-based theater, Curtain Call, Inc., and Pink Aid, a non-profit in Westport that support services like babysitting, grocery delivery and rides to and from treatment to women diagnosed with breast cancer. "The Bartlett Arboretum is another really special place to me," Robin adds. "I'm really proud of what we've done. We've turned their annual gala into one where the Jersey Boys performed and we were turning guests away! This year is an anniversary and we're going to do it again."

But, first let's hope that Robin and the rest of the family find time for a little rest and relaxation at the Catersource conference in Las Vegas. Of course, the Seldens' idea of a vacation includes offering to teach four courses to its more than 10,000 attendees! "We're doing one on The Dynamics of a Family Business," says Robin, with a laugh. "Which is a total trip!" ■