

# Takeout artists

Offices opt for grab-and-go cafes that cater to changing workplace

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Alissa Leinonen's first restaurant was 400 square feet with four tables and a staff of three owners, including her.

"We'd flip a coin to see who washed dishes," she said. "I was pretty sure we wouldn't make it through a year."

They survived by adding box lunches and catering. The business outgrew the restaurant and became Gourmondo Catering, which now has 50 fulltime employees, 20 part-timers and projected sales of close to \$5 million this year.

More importantly, it has polished a potentially game-changing concept in corporate dining, one that CEO Leinonen expects will lead to \$10 million in sales within three years.

"There's a huge market for what we're doing," she said. "Every city has a need for it."

What Gourmondo does is operate cafes in office buildings that prepare everything daily from scratch at a commissary kitchen, much of it packaged to "grab and go." Customers get better food than at typical business-area delis and teriyaki joints, and quicker service than at full-kitchen corporate restaurants. Both Gourmondo and its landlords profit from the arrangement.

Martin Selig, whose company owns 27 Seattle office buildings, was impressed enough with Leinonen's "gourmet convenience" approach that he is paying for the construction of a Gourmondo café in his 645 Elliott building — as well as waiving rent.

He estimates the 2,000 square-foot-café, with seats for about 45, will cost him \$500,000. Its planned opening date is Oct. 28.

"I know it's going to be a home run," Selig said, "otherwise we wouldn't have done it."

## Catching the trend

What Gourmondo is doing with corporate and now office-building cafes fits a trend.

As noted by Tom MacDermott, president of the New Hampshire-based consulting firm Clarion Group, businesses have been tightening their food service operations since the Great



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PREP: Alissa Leinonen, owner of Gourmondo Catering, oversees construction of her new cafe in a building owned by Martin Selig right, aided last week by sprinkler installer Keith Haney, of Columbia Fire. The cafe will open soon in Selig's 645 Elliott Avenue building in Seattle's Interbay area. At left is a selection of Gourmondo fare, including a cheese tray, salads and upscale sandwiches.

Recession started. At the same time, many companies are replacing cubicles with more flexible office configurations.

"Where does the traditional dining center fit in? It may not, at least not everywhere," MacDermott wrote this month in Food Management.com. He cited examples of cafes that are more like coffee houses with takeout sandwiches, salads and snacks that are fresh and nutritious.

"The scaled-down café fits neatly into another increasingly important corporate imperative, encouraging wellness among employees," MacDermott wrote.

The days when office workers sat down for full-course meals for lunch are fading, he added, making up less than 20 percent of sales in a typical office dining center.

What today's employees — and employers — want instead is a tasty, healthy and portable meal close at hand. In Seattle, where Martin Selig Real Estate owns more than 4 million square feet of commercial space, brokers have told the company that leasing space is more difficult when buildings lack food service,

especially when the immediate area is underserved.

That's the case at 645 and 635 Elliott Avenue W., Selig properties located between downtown and Interbay, both built in 2010 and seeking tenants.

Enter Gourmondo's Leinonen. At 43, she's a mother of five with a business degree from the University of Washington and restaurant experience going back to her teens. Selig met her 20 years ago, when she was a hostess at Sostanza, a restaurant near his home in Madison Park.

Selig knew that Gourmondo had become a successful operator of corporate cafes for Russell Investments and Amazon.com. He reached out to Leinonen last summer, asking if she would create a café to help him gain tenants. She agreed, she said, because she knew Selig wanted something beyond a corner deli.

"A lot of the cafes you see are done with a certain level of food and service. They're not as good as this will be," Selig said.

It also will be open to the public. That's a first for Gourmondo, which has operated six corporate cafes with varying success.

## Slicing costs

The first three were for Group Health Cooperative in 2006. By then Gourmondo had been doing its food prep and packaging for five years in a South Park warehouse. Group Health, however, wanted a full-service kitchen at each café, adding extra costs for Gourmondo.

"It was more overhead than we could handle," Leinonen said. "But it was a huge learning experience. It gave us an opportunity to focus on corporate dining in a way we were better suited for."

That meant eliminating the full-service kitchens, an arrangement that allowed the company to put more emphasis on food quality because its other costs were lower. It also meant more options aimed at workers with little time to eat. Gourmondo installed that streamlined café concept downtown in 2010, on the 17th floor of the Russell Investments Center. Operating just three hours a day and only for Russell employees, the café averaged \$1,800 in daily sales.

Next came an offer from Amazon to operate cafes in two of the online giant's South Lake Union buildings. Those opened in 2012.

The café at 645 Elliott will be a bit plusher, with décor eventually to include a mural by Selig's artist wife Catherine Mayer. To extend sales past the lunch hour, the café will offer beer and wine in the afternoon, with simple nibbles such as cheese and charcuterie plates.

Food will include dining-in options, such as panini and soups, but most of it will be Gourmondo's packaged to-go line — more than 40 items costing \$5.95 to \$8.95, made daily and using local products such as La Panier breads, The Confectional cheesecakes and Salumi charcuterie.

The advantage to Selig goes beyond luring tenants. Compared to the usual corporate café arrangement that involves a bigger footprint and monthly management fees to operators such as Bon Appetit Management or Sodexo, this deal saves him money in the long term.

For Gourmondo, cafes have given the company a second wind. Sales grew slowly from 2006 to 2011, from \$2 million to \$2.5 million. Roughly half of the growth she forecasts now — quadrupling that 2011 figure — will come from Leinonen's three cafes and the boosts they bring to her catering business.

Leinonen believes her concept could go further.

"Where corporate dining gets hung up is in thinking they can compete with nearby restaurants. It's an enormous expense for everybody," she said. "Our model is different."