

Fifteen years ago, Larry Levy merged onto the foodservice highway and started Baltimore-based Biddlestreet Catering. A recent expansion into larger headquarters, a constantly-changing menu and participation in industry associations have been the driving forces behind the firm's success.

TURNING  
ONTO

# BIDDLESTREET

## One Catering Firm's Route to Success



BY MAUREEN PACINO

**Top Right Photo:** Many of Biddlestreet's clients request fresh fruit and vegetables to give attendees a healthy food option.

**Bottom Right Photo:** At a wedding for vegan (vegetarians who do not eat animal products) clients, Biddlestreet devised a menu without meat, fish, or animal products.



**L**arry Levy grew up in his father's restaurant business, and naturally, when it was time for him to pick his own profession, he chose to stay far away from foodservice. In fact, Levy tried everything from real estate to advertising to get foodservice off his mind, but there was no escape—it was in his blood.

When his father fell ill, Levy took over for four years, but returned to real estate once he had sold the business.

One day, Levy was in the middle of a routine settlement between a real estate buyer and a seller when the two clients began arguing over money. Levy surprised them and himself when he offered to settle the argument by purchasing the business—which was a food service operation—himself.

Levy never expected both clients to step aside and let him take over, just as he never expected to be back in the restaurant business. But he was now the owner of a restaurant called Casey's.

Under these less-than-grand circumstances, Levy began what is now a burgeoning Baltimore-based business that evolved into Biddlestreet Catering, named after its first street address.

Since his days selling upscale quiches and sandwiches at Casey's, Levy has navigated his company through such business moves as taking over a 285-seat cafeteria to branching out into college foodservice. "At one time, I had five operations at once," Levy recalls, adding that, despite his early objections to it, he always knew he'd come back to foodservice in some capacity.

### MOVING ON UP

Ironically, a recent move into a 14,000-square-foot commissary brought Levy's focus back to real estate. Six months ago, Levy relocated the company to an historic district right off one of the city's main highways. "I had been preparing for this move for a long time, buying equipment and going to auctions," says Levy. "Somehow space gets very small and you don't realize what you collected. I used to have three storage lockers around the city. It was a shock to see how much I'd accumulated."

The new facility has enhanced Biddlestreet's professional image and has given Levy the opportunity to incorporate a variety of in-house selling techniques. Levy says prospective clients walk in the door and feel comfortable hiring him. "When you see the building dynamics, you realize this is an impressive company."

Levy also plans to take advantage of the building's central location when company picnic season comes around. Motorists on the highway won't be able to miss the tent he plans to erect on the roof with a sign reading, "It's Picnic Time." Says Levy, "We'll create the illusion of something cooking and have a chef walking around. Every day, when traffic backs up, everyone will look over and see the building. I think it'll really pique interest."

### MENU MUTATION

When Levy isn't marketing to victims of traffic jams, he's building on the food philosophy that he used when launching Biddlestreet. The com-

pany offers a unique menu and myriad alternatives to the average fare.

The presence of the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland makes seafood popular fare at local events. Biddlestreet is known for its seafood feast, complete with steamed shrimp, cracked crab claws, and oyster and clam bars.

But Biddlestreet chefs deviate from the norm when they can. Blue crab is in great supply in the area, and at seafood events, Biddlestreet chefs prepare it by submerging it alive in ice-cold water for a few minutes, then steaming it. "Crabs are supposed to be cooked alive," says Levy. "If they're not, they have a different taste. We know here in Maryland."

Maryland also knows that Biddlestreet doesn't only cater seafood banquets. In recent years, the company has earned a reputation for alternative menu items, namely foods low in fat and cholesterol.

After surviving a heart attack in 1992, Levy has spent the last three years making Biddlestreet's menu more health-conscious. It's not for every customer, but Levy likes giving the client the option. "Lots of our events have a few heart-healthy items," Levy says. "I really believe, as time goes on, more people will realize that diseases and illnesses are caused by what we put in our bodies. Food plays a role."

These beliefs are enforced by Biddlestreet's participation in HeartFest, a community event where attendees can try low cholesterol foods prepared by local foodservice professionals. "We give out a heart-healthy menu and a high-fat/low-fat conversion guide, along with foolproof techniques to lighten favorite recipes," says Levy.

Participating in HeartFest has also been healthy for Biddlestreet's business. Recently, a woman who had seen Biddlestreet at the event called, wanting the firm to cater her wedding. "She said, 'My father's a surgeon and he says we have to use you because you serve great, healthy food,'" Levy remembers, adding, "You never know when these things are going to pay off."

Since this experience, Biddlestreet has catered two weddings for vegan (vegetarians who do not eat animal products) clients. Without using meat, seafood or dairy products, chefs prepared a menu that got rave reviews. Ground String Bean and Walnut Paté and a barrage of fresh fruit and vegetables were among the appetizer items. The main course was Zucchini Roulade and Wheat Linguini with Barley Mushroom Meatballs.

"It's hard to come up with a creative menu for a vegan wedding, but we were the one catering company really happy to try it," recalls Levy. "The general response to these clients [from other caterers] was, 'Oh my God, I can't do that!'"

## ACTIVE DUTY

Levy keeps up with the catering industry by staying involved in various associations, most actively the National Caterers Association (NCA) and the Maryland chapter of the National Restaurant Association (NRA).

As one of nine regional NCA directors nationwide, Levy regards NCA as very important to Biddlestreet. "NCA is caterers helping other caterers, and that's it," Levy explains. "No one makes money or gets a salary."

Levy is also vice president of the Maryland NRA chapter, an organization that is confronting current catering issues, such as changing the state law to allow caterers to have liquor licenses and devising a way to legitimize catering businesses.

Levy is particularly concerned about the latter. If the efforts of the NRA are fruitful, all established caterers will operate with an identification number. An invalid business won't have one. "Legitimate caterers have the right insurances and a health department-approved facility that they're cooking out of. They are aware of temperatures and how to transport things," Levy says. "It's tough for someone who's paying taxes and getting visited by the health department every year to compete on a bid with someone working out of their house."

As for the future, Levy thinks the increase in catering companies will force industry veterans to streamline their services in order to survive. Competition is everywhere, he says, including hotels going off-premise. "We now have a situation where the dollars are getting tight," Levy adds. "Off-premise caterers are going to have to tighten their focus and narrow their businesses down to corporate or social catering."

As the century turns, Levy contends that the battles of doing business will force caterers to arm themselves in creative ways. As he continues to compete, after 15 years Levy's in the final rounds with an almost-perfect win-loss record. It seems the only fight he's ever lost was the one to stay away from foodservice.

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## BIDDLESTREET IN BRIEF

**History:** Fifteen years ago, Biddlestreet Catering began as a gourmet restaurant and evolved into a catering business. The company recently moved into a 14,000-square-foot commissary, and is considering entering the rental market.

**Locations:** Two. The company also handles cafeteria service at the Maryland Institute of the Arts.

**Number of Full Time Employees:** 26

**Key Personnel:** Larry Levy, president; Terry Drossin, social catering director; Lee Lynch, business manager; Arlene Lynch, kitchen manager; Larry Coleman, marketing manager

**Client Breakdown:** 55 percent corporate, 45 percent social  
**Popular Menu Items:** Sun-Dried Tomato Cheese Torte; Heart-Healthy Grilled Peking Vegetable Roll; Salmon Mushroom Crepe; variety of seafood items

**Affiliations:** National Caterers Association; National Restaurant Association

**Operating Philosophies:** "You're only as good as your last event," says Levy. "Cutting back portions does the client a disservice. We'll take the budget, make it work and the client will be proud of it."