

guest**chef**



hot chilli man

for Chef Victor Pisapia, the key to good food — and corporate team-building — is having fun, says **YLLA WRIGHT**

For the then young, American born chef Victor Pisapia, it was one catering job he'd never forget. With eight mobile gas ovens set up in the lane behind legendary New York nightclub Studio 54 and dozens of staff standing around, he waited helplessly for the guest of honour Farrah Fawcett to arrive. "At Studio 54 they didn't care if you were the biggest movie star in the world" recalls Victor. "If you had a private party you still had to be out by 11pm, when the club opened.

"Unfortunately, Farrah didn't show up until 9:45pm, so at 11pm we still had a whole table full of cakes and tortes in the middle of the dance floor. Right at that moment, management dropped the theatre curtains that divided up the club right on top of the table, so everything went flying up in the air. I've never seen anything like it—there was cake everywhere, waiters scattering for the doors, and all hell breaking loose..."

Twenty years later, with a career that's seen him owning seven restaurants and a nightclub, working with farmers to develop the Australian chilli industry, leading gourmet food safaris overseas and, most recently, setting up a small catering company "with a difference", the memory still makes him laugh. It's a fun story and for this flamboyant former New Yorker, fun always deserves a mention.

"Ask me what makes me choose a certain theme for one of my restaurants and I have to say the phrase 'serious fun'," admits Victor, who moved to Sydney in 1992. "I say 'serious' because you have to be a professional, make the food taste good and present it well — and that only happens if you know the business. And 'fun' because the cultures and cuisines I'm attracted to are the gregarious ones, such as Brazilian and Mexican."

Not that Mexican food is really appreciated here in Australia, maintains Victor. Good restaurants are hard to find and those that do exist tend to "dumb down" their food. Even at the Rattlesnake Grill, the renowned Santa Fe-inspired restaurant in Sydney's Neutral Bay that Victor ran for eight years (now reopen under new management), non-authentic Tex-Mex dishes such as nachos dominated the menu. "I didn't want them on it, but that's what people associate with Mexican food — and want. As a business person I couldn't take them off the menu," he says.

"The connection between knowing and understanding a culture and respecting its food is vital. Australians understand Mediterranean and Asian cuisines, but when it comes to Mexican food they probably never will because there just aren't any Mexicans here."

It's a point that Victor, who recently co-founded the Cheeky Food Group, a company specialising in teaching corporate teams and dinner party guests how to cook, tries to get across to all his students. "When I teach I always do it from a cultural point of view. For example, if people don't know where chillies come from, then they don't bond with them in the same way," he says. "The best thing you can do to learn about food is to travel and just absorb as much of the culture as you can."

It's the ability of food to bring people together, however, that's the driving force behind the Cheeky Food Group itself. The brainchild of Victor and two friends, Leona Watson and Wanitha Tanasingam, the group offers a more friendly alternative to the paint-balling and abseiling courses that many corporate bosses have been sending staff on in recent years to build trust and team spirit.

"Most workers feel intimidated and unhappy if they're made to go kayaking, but people have been bonding over food for thousands of years," says Victor. "Of course, there are still some people who don't want to get involved, but 95 per cent are



PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BRAD GERHARD**



ROASTED VEGETABLE QUESADILLA WITH LIME CREMA

Serves 406 as a snack
Prep time 20 minutes
Cooking time 1 hour 30 minutes

1 small garlic bulb
60ml (1/4 cup) extra virgin olive oil
6 medium roma tomatoes, halved lengthways
1 sweet potato, peeled and sliced into 16 thin slices
4 large flour tortillas
160g cheddar cheese, grated
2 tablespoons butter, melted

Lime Crema

80ml (1/3 cup) sour cream
2 tablespoons lime juice, or to taste

enthusiastic and pull together even with people they don't get along with at work. Cooking together breaks down the pressure."

Quick to point out that the Cheeky Food team don't consider themselves psychologists (they'll bring in a professional if a client wants to go to that depth), Victor believes the program's success lies in the fact that it is, once again, all about having fun.

"Another thing we do is hold dinner parties where we run hands-on cooking classes for guests, so they cook their own entree or something along those lines" adds Victor. "One group was having such a good time, getting drunk an feeding me drinks, that in the end I had to say, 'I can't cook like this'. And they were like, 'Never mind, we'll order a pizza!'"

With themes for both corporate and private classes ranging from cuisines such as Asian, Greek and Moroccan to specific dishes such as paella, the options are endless (they've even done a singles night).

"I guess it's another way of making catering a bit different", says Victor. "It also allows me to communicate with people through teaching. After all this time, I love that"

Cheeky Food Group, 21/66 Wrights Rd, Drummoyne, NSW, phone (02) 9181 3614 or 0412 190 252, www.cheekyfoodgroup.com.

Preheat oven to 200°C. slice off top of garlic bulb, drizzle with 1 tablespoon olive oil and wrap in foil. Roast for 40 minutes until soft. Set aside.

Lay tomatoes and sweet potato cut-side up on a baking tray, drizzle with remaining oil and season with salt. Roast at 160°C for 20 minutes. Remove sweet potato. Continue roasting tomatoes for another 10-20 minutes until semi-dried.

To make each tortilla, spread half of 1 side with 1 clove roasted garlic, 3 slices tomato and 4 slices sweet potato, then sprinkle with cheddar cheese. Fold over and press lightly. Brush top with melted butter, turn over and brush other side. Cook in a heated non-stick frying pan for 3-5 minutes until golden brown. Slice into 3-4 wedges. Keep warm until all tortillas are cooked. Serve with Lime Crema.

To make Lime Crema, blend sour cream and lime juice together.

Chef's notes

- Garlic, tomatoes and sweet potato can easily be roasted ahead of time. Sweet potato can also be microwaved for 1-3 minutes.
- Other great quesadilla fillings to try are Asian duck with spring onion and goat's milk cheese; smoked salmon, cream cheese and dill; chorizo and goat's milk cheese; roasted chicken, eggplant and capsicum with mozzarella, and prawns with coriander pesto. 