

HOW I...

Scored catering gigs with big tech firms

BARTLETT'S CAMPUS RESTAURANTS FEED WORKERS AT XILINX, MAXIM, MORE



VICKI THOMPSON

Epicurean Group CEO Mary Clarke Bartlett built her business and her brand by delivering organic food from local farmers – before it was cool.

For Mary Clarke Bartlett, fusing her dual passions of business and food came naturally.

Bartlett, CEO of Los Altos-based Epicurean Group, started the organic food company in 2003 with an eye on the region's many tech companies full of hungry engineers.

Here is her story:

Eating organic wasn't fashionable when I started my green-certified food contracting company, Epicurean Group, a decade ago.

People scratched their heads when I made my initial pitch. Organic food from local farmers sounded expensive and impractical.

This year, as the company celebrates its 10th anniversary, the Silicon Valley food market is drastically different and business is booming.

Since I founded Epicurean in 2003, the company established a niche by targeting the region's tech companies. We customize menus for each client and use

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Company: Epicurean Group
Headquarters: Los Altos
Founded: 2003
Number of employees: 450
Website: <http://epicurean-group.com>

only organic, locally sourced ingredients.

Epicurean, which employs about 450 people, now operates more than 35 restaurants in the offices of area clients such as Xilinx and Maxim Integrated.

Those numbers only came after enduring a slow start.

I decided to start my own company after taking a Stanford business course, where I realized the autonomy over company values that comes with being your own boss. I also previously studied culinary arts, so starting my own food company was a natural fit.

From the beginning, I knew that I wanted to work directly with local farmers to make sure our food starts with the best ingredients possible. This also helps with our

core value of true cost accounting, meaning no hidden fees and low overhead.

Food served by Epicurean is not treated with chemicals, and we minimize the fat, salt and sugar customers find dominating dishes at many restaurants. The difference in quality – from the nutrients included to the texture of the food – is huge.

Though organic food wasn't often discussed when I launched Epicurean, national ad campaigns about rising obesity have since helped put healthy eating on the radar of consumers. Still, education about the benefits of healthy eating remains an important part of what we do.

Word of mouth now propels company growth, which is 25–30 percent annually. We get invited to submit proposals for other major potential clients, and that has brought in contracts with Stanford University and Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, to name a few.

When we aren't operating in-house cafes for clients, Epicurean also does catering for executive

events. This strategy provides another revenue stream while raising the company's profile and generating new leads on longer-term partnerships.

To make sure we have enough food to meet new demand, Epicurean has established long-lasting relationships with many suppliers. Most of our farmers are located in Marin County, and Epicurean prides itself on paying them quickly to keep their own operations running. I also monitor cafe staffing carefully and provide employee benefits that keep new workers coming in.

Early on, we all learned the art of feeding the masses.

Epicurean routinely caters huge events like commencements or Father's Day lunches at Stanford, which can mean feeding 10,000–14,000 people in a day. Once you've got that under your belt, feeding a cafe full of software engineers at local tech companies is much less daunting.

– As told to Lauren Hepler,
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