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Prue Leith

Founder of Leith's

The first time Prue Leith decided to start up her own catering business it survived only a few weeks. 'I had this idea that I could feed actors in their dressing rooms between the matinee and the evening show', she says. 'I called it Matinee Collations. But I didn't realise that most actors don't like to eat between shows. They prefer to walk in the park or go to the pub. Then I would arrive with the few orders I'd got, only to find that the play had folded and no one was there. It was hopeless.' Happily her second attempt at starting a business worked rather better. Indeed she eventually sold the catering company, restaurant and cooking school she had created for a sum believed to be £10 million.

Brought up in South Africa, Leith had little interest in cooking as a child because all the food her family ate at home was prepared by their cook. Indeed her first three choices of career were to teach people to ride horses, to become an actress like her mother, or to be a theatre designer. She went to university to study drama and literature but it was not a success and she dropped out in the



second year. She says: 'I just kept changing my mind about what I wanted to do. My father was pretty despairing.'

It was not until she went to Paris at the age of 21 to learn French while working as an au pair that she realised she wanted to create good food for a living. She says: 'The woman I worked for would go to one shop to buy croissants, another to buy baguettes and a third to buy gateaux. I thought she was crazy. It had never occurred to me there was such a thing as the best shop for croissants. It was like scales falling from my eyes.'

Sadly just as she had discovered her vocation, her father died. Leith says: 'I think he thought it was just another one of my mad ideas. I would have really liked him to know I finally stopped flapping around.'

She secured a place on the advanced Cordon Bleu course in London by pretending she had already worked in the kitchens of a restaurant. She admits: 'I was entirely economical with the truth. I knew nothing about cooking.' However

she managed to pass the course and got a job cooking for a firm of solicitors, where she determinedly worked her way through the *Cordon Bleu Cookery Book* page by page until one of them begged her to stop. She says: 'Round about August I hit the chicken chapter, so we had chicken every day. I had no idea about menu planning.'

The job led to more work catering for weddings and despite the failure of Matinee Collations Leith soon felt brave enough to start up a new catering company, Leith's Good Food. But she still did not have much idea how to run a business. Before she could afford to run a car she transported everything by Underground and once left a box of live lobsters on the train. Neither were her attempts to hire an employee too successful. She says: 'There wasn't enough work for both of us so we played tennis during the day and in the evening I went out to work to pay her wages. It was a disaster.'

Despite the chaotic debut the business thrived, and seven years later Leith opened her restaurant, Leith's, in Notting Hill, west London, with £30,000, of which a third was borrowed from her mother. From the start she adopted a businesslike approach, hiring a chef rather than doing the cooking herself. She says: 'I realised early on that I am not the best cook in the world. But I am very good at hiring good people and creating the right atmosphere for them to do their best.'

She also opened a cookery school nearby after realising that she was paying her staff to teach them to cook the way she wanted – and it would make a lot more sense to get people to pay her instead. It was so successful that within a few years it had to move to a bigger building because so many students wanted to take the course.

Not everything Leith touched turned to gold. Her decision to sell the businesses in 1995 was partly because of the

failure of her Serpentine restaurant in the middle of Kensington Gardens. It ran up losses of £300,000. 'I was overconfident and did not do enough research,' she says. 'I was convinced that if you gave people a wonderful glass of Chablis and a plate of smoked salmon, they would just flock in. And they did if it was a sunny day, but when it rained nobody came. We lost a lot of money and it shook my confidence.'

Leith happily admits to enjoying making money: 'I used to think that the whole point of being a cook was the satisfaction of making perfect food. Then when I became more of a businesswoman I realised there was just as much satisfaction in a perfect profit and loss account. I got a real buzz of pleasure if I looked at the month's figures and had made a lot of money.'

Selling her business did not lighten her workload, however. Leith had always combined her main career with outside interests and has sat on the boards of British Rail,

Fact File

Date of birth: 18 February 1940

Marital status: widowed with two children

Highest level of education achieved: university (but did not complete course)

Qualifications: First in Matriculation (equivalent to A level); Advanced Cordon Bleu Certificate

Interests: tennis, fishing, walking, collecting old china

Personal philosophy: 'Don't spend time with anyone you don't like.'

Safeway, the Halifax Bank, Woolworths, Whitbread and some smaller companies, as well as chairing the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce and other charities. 'Retirement' meant an opportunity to further use her business skills for the not-for-profit sector.

Over the years she has been a founder of several successful charities such as Focus on Food, which teaches children to cook as part of the school curriculum; the British Food Trust, which promotes healthy food and pioneered qualifications for chefs; The Hoxton Apprentice, a restaurant in Hackney training the homeless and disadvantaged for the catering industry; and Three 3s, an education company successfully turning round failing state schools.

Today her main job is Chairman of the School Food Trust, the government quango charged with making sure food in schools is healthy and that more children eat it. Her part-time posts include a non-executive directorship at Orient Express Ltd and her fourth novel, *The Choral Society*, has been published by Quercus.

Now 69, Leith says: 'I just can't resist doing things. If I am interested in something then I always want to get involved. I have to avoid village committees because I know I'd find myself saying "Oh I'll do that, I'll do that."'