



CINDY BURCH

THE DOVES NEST RESTAURANT

Nestled in its charming town square, Waxahachie boasts a heavenly Texan haven known as The Doves Nest, where guests rendezvous by the hundreds each day to experience an eclectic mix of gifts, home furnishings, antiques, and a wildly popular restaurant owned by entrepreneurs Cindy Burch and her husband, Andrew. With over 20 years in the business, they have plenty of experience in what it takes to succeed. Housed in an historic hardware store building, Cindy works her magic in buying and merchandising for the store while also running a successful catering business. Her award-winning cookbook, titled, "The Doves Nest Restaurant: New American Recipes From A Historic Texas Town" (The Doves Nest Restaurant, 1996), is now in its fifth printing.



I've been told most entrepreneurs have to pay their dues, fail a few times, and learn from their mistakes in order to succeed. I guess that makes me an entrepreneur. As with any challenges in life, most people are afraid to fail. They worry constantly about not meeting expectations, making a mistake, or trying something new. Because of this, many never get started on the path toward reaching their goals, and thus assure themselves of the very thing they are afraid of ... failure.

I started out in the fashion business, opening my own clothing store straight out of college. Unfortunately, failure came quickly for me. The 1980s boom went bust soon after I opened an upscale boutique in Dallas, Texas. When my country club clientele stopped buying pricey European sportswear, I found myself bankrupt at age 26. Looking back, I should not have spent as much money finishing out a leased space, but rather held onto it for capital. As soon as the economy tanked I should've diversified and brought in lower-priced clothing, appealing to a broader clientele. But it was too late for would've, should've, could've excuses. I was broke, so I went to work for Neiman Marcus for a couple of years.

Although my first hard knock was painful, my next try at business is what brought me where I am today. My mom was a well-known artist in Texas, and she asked me to help her open an art gallery and gift shop in the historic town square of Waxahachie, about 30 miles south of Dallas. Having just come off a failed business, and still paying off debt, we cautiously opened with borrowed antiques, her original artwork, and a few gift lines. On opening day our first customer seemed to appear out of nowhere, wearing a simple lavender dress with a single strand of pearls around her neck, and a beautiful head of white hair. She was looking at my mom's art, all of which has a hidden scripture and a white dove within it, and she said, "The Lord is in your work and He has brought you here." My mother asked her how she could know such a thing. The angelic-looking woman answered: "It doesn't matter; I just needed to tell you." As quickly as she appeared, she was gone, and we never saw her again. From that day on, I have never doubted where we were meant to be.



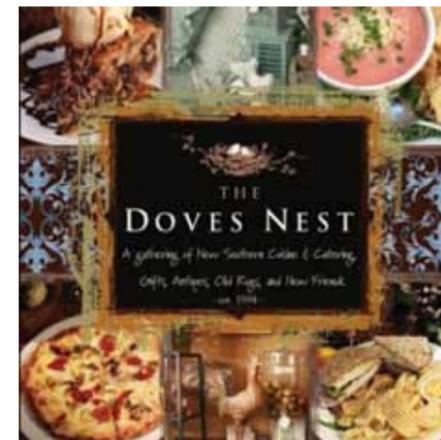


I continued helping my mom grow the business, and decided to add a small café in the back of the store. With just a few tables, I did most of the cooking myself, quickly realizing the food business was not for the faint of heart. We had a tiny kitchen with household appliances and I quietly began preparing lunch each day for hungry tourists and townsfolk. To our delight we found our 30 seats were filled with customers who loved our food, and many more waiting to be seated. It seemed I was spending all my time in the kitchen, and our little business was beginning to take off. Within months my husband quit his full-time job to take over the financial end of things while I began preparing as much food as possible each morning with a sweet little lady who would tirelessly appear to bake homemade pies, cakes, and cobblers. We wondered at times if we had taken on too much of a task, but every month got easier, and the joy we brought to our satisfied customers made it all seem worthwhile.

In 1994, my mom retired and my husband and I bought the original hardware store building one block away. It had become one of the first antique mall concepts in the area. We inherited over 40 antique dealers with the deal, mixing in our gift items and renovating one side for The Doves Nest Restaurant. The move expanded our dining room to feed well over 100 people each day. Leasing space to so many dealers brought in enough income to not only pay our mortgage, but also cover our utilities and insurance as well. Eventually I made it out of the kitchen on a daily basis and replaced myself with a full-time chef and crew, while adding a catering business to the mix. Over the years I have expanded the gift store and now have just six spaces I lease out to talented artists, antique dealers, and clothing designer Brandi Harper with Spellbound Collection. The store is full of our own private label candle and food lines as well as gift, bath and body, home furnishings, and gourmet foods.

STEPS TO OPENING A SUCCESSFUL RESTAURANT

- Think long and hard. You will need patience, perseverance, and a sense of humor to handle the stress. The restaurant business can seem glamorous, but is actually hard work and endlessly time consuming.
- Have a concept and stay true to it. Know your niche. Research the market, and then research it again.
- If you aren't going to be your own chef, at least have a good knowledge of food and cooking.
- Don't buy all of your kitchen equipment brand new. There are huge savings in rebuilt ovens and other used equipment like pots and pans. Leasing certain equipment like dishwashers and ice makers is also a good option.
- Taste everything that leaves the kitchen, making sure your recipes are being followed and your food tastes great. Quality is everything if you want return business. I'm constantly amazed at how many restaurants serve mediocre food.
- Spend time working on a menu that sets you apart from your competition.
- Make sure your kitchen staff and wait staff check every plate that goes out. Quality and presentation is everything.
- Remember, you can't please everyone, but you must always try to please your target market.
- Be hands-on and know your customers. Patrons like to be recognized and will show their loyalty if the owner takes the time to make them feel special.
- Train your staff to make sure their tables are happy with their meal. If something is wrong and can be fixed before the customer leaves, you have a better chance they will return.
- If you are a chef/owner, make sure you have someone running the dining room you can trust and understands your vision. Many chefs open a restaurant without the knowledge of how the front of the house works.
- Watch your food costs. Expenses can make or break you. You need to try and keep food costs at 30%, with labor and overhead at 30%, and hopefully you will gross 30%.



I had dabbled in catering for years, but finally having a commercial kitchen launched us into an aspect of our business that grew to make up 20% of our sales. I work with the clients and help design the menu and every detail that goes into making an event a beautiful and delicious affair. We are known for going above and beyond to make everything we do special. Many caterers just deliver the food and walk away. The Doves Nest uses hammered copper chafing dishes, top of the line platters, baskets, and fresh greenery to make our presentation the best it can be. We have catered grand weddings for over 500 guests, political fundraisers for congressmen and governors, and many a corporate event.

In 1996 I wrote a cookbook that won the Readers Digest Award for the best self-published cookbook in America. We published it ourselves and it has been the most profitable endeavor we have taken on, selling over 30,000 copies, and is now in its fifth printing.

Almost 20 years later we are truly blessed to have not only built a business that has grown to be a major anchor in our beautiful historic town but also serves as our home, as we live in a loft above that we share with our Rottweiler, Elsa. It hasn't always been easy and there were many times we weren't sure if we would make it. As a business owner you sacrifice a lot of your personal life, especially in the service business. However, tenacity, hard work, loyal employees, and customers who appreciate what we offer makes it a rewarding effort.

Entrepreneurship is about more than just starting a business; it's about having the attitude and the drive to succeed. You will likely have to pay your dues, fail a few times, and learn from your lessons ... I certainly did. The key, however, is to have faith in what you are doing, learn from your mistakes, and never give up on your dream. If you are meant to do something, you will always have signs encouraging you along the way. ■

Where Women Cook would like to thank Cindy Burch for her involvement in our spring issue. To learn more, visit thedovesnestrestaurant.com.