



Features

I served Clinton with a dessert as the first course

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BY ANDY BARKER

THE call to Lena Bjorck's, 37, catering company was different to the usual booking. For a start it came from America. More specifically, Washington DC. Would she, asked the caller, be able to handle a party of 40, including President Clinton?

The President was in town for a conference at the American Ambassador's residence at Winfield House in Regent's Park, central London. Without a single reference or piece of equipment to her name, Lena was in the running for the Clinton gig through the high praise of a former colleague.

The next thing she knew, she was faxing The White House, but it wasn't until she was interviewed in person and could deploy her powers of persuasion that she won the job.

'I needed to convince them that I was going to deliver though I had nothing to show as business. I had to rely on them taking a bet on me as a person and my word – and I believe, in all services, it is the people that make the product.'

All the President's men, and women, were convinced. Afterwards, she received a letter saying it was the best food they had ever had on a trip abroad.

But Bjorck recalls the party with a little less enthusiasm. 'It was a complete shambles by my standards,' she says.

'All I could afford were the cheapest coffee cups off the Ikea sale-shelf, and my coffee pot even had a broken lid.'

Luckily the Clinton party did not pick up on this, but Miss Bjorck is not a big believer in luck. She puts her success down to meticulous attention to detail and an 'instinctive' knowledge of what works.

Taking a huge risk, she broke with convention completely and served dessert as her first course.

A multi-tiered sponge, topped with almonds and caramel – the Swedish 'Toscakaka' – greeted the guests on arrival and clearly went down a treat.

But Lena is more critical when she looks back on that fateful day: 'I served very simple food as I was not a great cook, but I only used the best ingredients.'

'When I'm speaking to a client,' she says, 'I know instantly what I'm going to serve them. I can smell what they should be eating or drinking. With food things just come naturally to me.

'I know that without the customers I don't have a job, so if a guest requests an alternative to the menu I will do anything I can to get it for them.'

She expects this stop-at-nothing attitude from all of her staff and cites it as one of the ways in which her operation remains a cut above the rest.

Lena came to England when Sweden joined the European Union in 1994, against the wishes of her mother, who wanted her to stay at home and get a 'proper' job