



Photo by Brian F. Summers

Toronto-based
consultant Diane
Chiasson, FCSI,
pioneers the field
of visual food
merchandising

creating a feast for the eyes

by Liz Campbell

What do you do when your training includes interior design, haute cuisine, fine art, marketing and promotion, travel and tourism, business, and merchandising? And how do you put to use an eye for innovation, a sense of fun, extraordinary business acumen, and a passion for life, all of which are evident in everything you do? You probably do what Diane Chiasson, FCSI, did – create a career which embodies all these. Indeed, she took it a step further and created a field that didn't exist before – visual food merchandising for the foodservice and restaurant sector.

According to Chiasson, foodservice merchandising is both an art and a science, based on an in-depth understanding of consumer behavior. Her consultations cover every aspect of the operation: design, layout, merchandising, display, product development, lighting, customer service, and sales. And Chiasson's attention to detail has become legendary among her clientele, which include some of the biggest names in the industry. As a small sample, Campbell's, Heinz, Days Inn, Harvard University, Holiday Inn, Virginia Tech, the island of St. Lucia, Illy Caffe, and Oakville Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, might give you an idea of the breadth of projects she has tackled successfully. She is often asked to speak at conferences.

Chiasson grew up in an entrepreneurial family. Her father owned a restaurant, her mother a bakery. "We were always taught to ask – how can I make money?" she says and adds with a laugh. "Mom always had jams and pickles on the counter. You could say I was doing visual marketing from the age of three." Her working life has spanned such diverse positions as working with the General Delega-

tion of the Government of Quebec, in Paris; working with the Montreal Olympics; travel writing for Meetings Canada, a publication directed at the meetings and convention market; and running her own retail venture (two gift stores and 17 gift basket operations) in New Brunswick, Canada. And in between, the perennially curious and irrepressibly enthusiastic Chiasson took literally dozens of courses. She studied cooking (both haute cuisine and ethnic cooking) at George Brown College in Toronto. At Cornell University, she earned certificates in food and retail merchandising. At the Ontario College of Art she has taken virtually every art course on the curriculum. At Ryerson University she studied interior design. She learned about chocolate and candy packaging and window display at the Ecole de Formation in France. And she has taken courses in graphic design, packaging, marketing and business practice.

“My friends say it would have been cheaper to visit a shrink, but I have always pushed myself to learn and I realize now I was doing exactly what I should do,” she says. “Once I had all this background, I had to ask myself - what do you really want to do? I looked around and realized that no one was specializing in foodservice merchandising.” So she created Chiasson Consulting Inc. From the outset, her creative energy has attracted clients from both the U.S. and Canada. And one contract led to another as word spread.

Chiasson has worked for 18 years as a consultant to Mövenpick, a highly successful chain of 14 restaurants and 10 outlets in Canada and the U.S. She was responsible for creating the inaugural Marché Mövenpick, a collection of market tables or stations where daily specials are prepared and cooked to order, à la minute. The company has expanded this concept into supermarkets in Canada with great success. At her suggestion, Mövenpick added a fresh juice bar to one of their Toronto locations in 1991, adding another \$1.3 million in sales in its first year of operation. Juice bars can be found in most of their locations today.

Another sample of her talents might be illustrated by the experience of the Illinois Masonic Medical Center in Chicago who asked Chiasson to help revitalize their cafeteria. She addressed everything: lighting, colors, even the menu. She even incorporated a take-out program and new name – Chic-a-go. “We did add a few things to the menu but mostly we changed the environment. We added visuals, and the lighting is bright and sunny,” she says. “Customers thought the whole menu had changed. And the spirit of the employees went way up. Everyone is happy and positive since the change.” Barbara Lorsch, Director of Food and Nutrition Services describes the outcome as “extraordinary,” adding in her letter to Chiasson, “Our daily sales increased 15 percent in the first month and still seem to be on the rise ... Thank you for helping us achieve our objectives in a relatively short time period and limited budget. Our team learned a great deal working with you that we can utilize in other areas of our



A market table at Marché Mövenpick in Boston.



The fresh fruit bar at Marché Mövenpick in Toronto.



Photo by Brian F. Summers

Diane Chiasson, FCSI, selects a fresh herb from her garden.

operation.”

In fact, Chiasson seems able to quickly assess the weaknesses in a business and find ways to create more excitement around their foodservice operations. Finances are often a concern with such operators and Chiasson seems able to transform foodservice facilities within tight budgetary constraints. “So many hospitals or universities or corporate cafeterias have old kitchens, old dining rooms and no money,” she says. “I saw a need for redesigning and remerchandising at low cost – we use and re-use. It ends up looking like brand new and sales go way up.” People often ask where she gets her inspiration, and where she finds the things she uses to transform these locations. But Chiasson has contacts all over the world and buys from Germany, Portugal, U.S. and anywhere she can find interesting and unique items. “If I could tell you the number of miles I walk

whenever I visit any city, checking out all the retail concepts, foodservice outlets and art galleries," she says. "That way I'm on top of what's happening and what I can get anywhere."

An integral part of her consulting practice is her work with staff and she has developed a training manual which operators have found invaluable. "It's like a foodservice bible," says Chiasson. "It helps them understand the particularities of using real food to make the customers salivate before they even sit down – we use everything from displays to lighting and dishes, everything." When Campbell's asked her to help them develop a soup merchandising program, she brought her unique blend of pragmatism and excitement to the project. "They told me, 'We have always made soup, but we didn't know how to sell soup until we got your program'. No one does what we do," she says.

In fact, Chiasson is frequently asked where one could go to learn to do what she does. The answer is that such a course doesn't exist but the irrepressible Chiasson is about to rectify that. She decided it was time to actually create a program to teach what she does. She purchased a townhouse in Toronto that is currently being renovated. The almost completed, semi-professional kitchen features several ovens, a wine storage area as well as wine cooler, and even holding bins for hot foods. Outside, she is growing more than 100 fresh herbs. And upstairs, she has created a number of comfortable



A display at
Casino
Niagara in
Canada.



A retail
display at
Marché
Mövenpick
in Boston.

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We Care for Indoor Air





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Diane Chlason and Creative Business Director Arwynn Davey review past projects in the company library.

bedrooms. She plans to hold seminars on visual food merchandising here, offering accommodation to visitors who want to come to Toronto to learn about what she is doing.

Downstairs, her staff of eight, cut to four during the summer months, work on current projects. "We're always a little hyper here," she laughs. "In fact, I had to take the colorful prints off the walls and put softer ones up. They were making us even more hyper!" Being 'hyper' goes with the job she says. For example, when they were finishing the addition of the retail complex they created at Casino Niagara, they worked all night adding the finishing touches after the painters and builders were done. "Ours is the last job," she says. "We have to wait until the construction is finished and we always seem to be working all night to get ready for the opening the next day." But the smiles make it worthwhile, she adds, "It's like the sun moving across the sky, the smiles grow because they can hardly believe the changes that happen. That's our reward." 🌍

This is the third in a series of profiles on FCSI members. Please share your thoughts and comments about the articles with David Drain at david@fcsi.org.

some of the projects:

- **Harvard University Dining Services:** assessment, evaluation and recommendation of their foodservice and retail operations
- **Villanova University:** development of an employee visual merchandising corporate training seminar to all senior management foodservice staff
- **Holiday Inn:** redesigned and merchandised restaurant areas and implemented a visual merchandising training program
- **Mrs. Fields Cookies:** completion of a visual merchandising and marketing concept
- **Freson Market:** concept development and design direction, food and retail merchandising program, menu and recipe concept and development for the 14-store chain supermarket based in Western Canada
- **Fairmont Hotels & Resorts:** development of an employee visual merchandising and corporate training manual for all the Fairmont Hotel locations including Delta Hotels and Canadian Pacific Hotels and Resorts