MCMPS

TV PRESENTER, AUTHOR AND ENTREPRENEUR MAEVE O'MEARA'S BUSINESS GOURMET SAFARIS KNOWS WHAT IT TAKES TO SUCCEED IN A NICHE - HER OWN BUSINESS THRIVES BY SHOWCASING THE BEST OF AUSTRALIA'S SPECIALIST FOOD BUSINESSES.

aeve O'Meara never planned to go into business, but her girlfriends convinced her to give it a go.

"The idea came about from my mothers' group who had heard me talking about different restaurants on the radio," says the popular host of SBS' Food Safari, and founder of food tourism business Gourmet Safaris. "They said take us to that Lebanese place you're always talking about. I thought they could find their way there, but it was in a suburb they were not familiar with, so I took them from the white bread suburbs to the flatbread suburbs."

"It was so much fun! They ate things they had never tried before."

13 years later, Gourmet Safaris operates around Australia and even conducts overseas Safaris, leading the niche for aourmet tourism.

The experience has exposed O'Meara to many specialty food companies that excel

in a niche and she now feels it's no accident that so many succeed.

"I find it interesting that at a time when the tentacles of supermarkets stretch further, small family food businesses that are often of a particular nationality are absolutely thriving," she says.

One secret of those businesses that thrive in the shadow of the supermarkets, she feels, is that they don't compromise.

"The local Vietnamese noodle shop that has not dumbed down any flavours will do well," she says. "I know of Thai places that pack in the sugar and the coconut milk. That's not Thai food. Then I look at Sujet Saenkham at [Sydney's] Spice I Am restaurant who cooks authentically and seems to open another new restaurant each year."

Niche food businesses, she adds, have the advantage of often being family businesses. "Labour costs are massive and it helps to have family working."

Family businesses in the food industry are also adaptable. Another Sydney food institution O'Meara's Safaris visit is The Nut Roaster, a store opened by Lebanese migrant Ghassan (Jimmy) Afiouny in 1980. Afiouny's children are involved in the business and have even innovated with new products, including a nut-based muesli that is winning business well beyond the store's traditional customer base.

Another O'Meara favourite, Baalbek Bakery, has also seen a second generation innovate, in this case with a sandwich loaf adaption of Lebanese bread.

"The kids who have grown up in quite a different circumstance, even though they have spent time in the business, are now proudly saying that business has doubled with their ideas," she says.

She's also keen on another Sydney business, Abu Ahmad Butchery, which has



"I FIND IT INTERESTING THAT AT A TIME WHEN THE TENTACLES OF SUPERMARKETS STRETCH FURTHER. SMALL FAMILY FOOD BUSINESSES THAT ARE OFTEN OF A PARTICULAR NATIONALITY ARE ABSOLUTELY THRIVING."

created Hallal versions of salami and other smallgoods and won clients including an international airline.

O'Meara's own speciality is guiding curious visitors to these vendors, and she says her business is possible because she sets out to be "a bridge between two worlds." Australia, she feels, was ripe for such an enterprise as our national palate matures and becomes more curious. Serving the niche well has meant finding the right

people who not only know the subject matter but lend the Safaris a certain authenticity.

"I have been very lucky with the guides I have been able to recruit. In most cases they come from the area we explore."

O'Meara is happy in her niche. "It's nice to have come up with something that makes people happy," she says, It's also nice to be living her passion, and her pride is evident as she signs off from our interview with a joyous finale: "Bring on the spice, I say!"

A TASTE OF HARMONY

Maeve O'Meara is an ambassador for A Taste of Harmony, an event celebrating diversity in the workplace by encouraging businesses to stage a lunch at which employees bring in a dish that represents their cultural background, or cook a dish from a culture they have never tried before.

"Sharing the food from your culture is a really special sharing," O'Meara says. "I think it could be more than one day, but at least having one day helps us to realise the value of diversity."

A Taste of Harmony takes place from March 19 to 25.

To register your business, visit www.tasteofharmony.org.au.