

## With a Staff of Hungry Artists, the Great Performances Catering Service Dishes Up Productions Good Enough to Eat

By Michelle Green

The seven arts and serving six-course meals aren't always a winning combination. So learned flamenco dancer Janet Lee and photographer Liz Neumark in the '70s when they moonlighted as waitresses to help support their careers. Long hours, low pay, unsympathetic employers and inflexible schedules made it all but impossible for the two to commune with their muses.

But now Lee and Neumark have proved that hors d'oeuvres and chefs d'oeuvre can indeed be compatible. **Great Performances**, their five-year-old Manhattan catering and party-planning service, has put to work hundreds of (almost) starving artists, dancers, singers, actors, musicians, painters, writers and photographers. Great Performances, as the waiters and waitresses are called, may arrange their schedules to accommodate their artistic pursuits. They are also eligible for two \$1,000 scholarships that GP, which will gross about \$750,000 this year, awards annually. "The scholarships are part of our commitment to artists," Neumark explains. "Someday we want to have an arts foundation and an acting company of our own."

Meanwhile, the enterprising proprietors are busy seeing that their GPs are properly proffering Brie and bonhomie to high-profile clients such as Perry Ellis, Ralph Lauren, Nora Ephron and Mario Thomas. Neumark, 28, and Lee, 36, oversee about 80 affairs a week. Guests at their productions (anything from a \$150 English breakfast-in-bed for two to a \$35,000 sit-down dinner for 400) are often unaware that behind the puff pastry is a Meryl Streep-in-the-making. "Our people don't perform at parties," says Neumark. "Waiting is a full-time job."

To train their staff properly, the owners conduct seminars on service in the sprawling, fragrant SoHo loft that is their headquarters. Both women draw on skills handed down from their mothers. Thelma Peterson is an accomplished hostess in Amboy, Minn., Janet's hometown. Deborah Neumark is known for stylish soirees in her apartment, where Liz was raised, overlooking Central Park.

Their daughters have discovered that the family legacy is an art form and have put their other pursuits on hold. Neumark, a Barnard College urban studies major who became hooked on photography in 1977, now limits herself to snapping her chef's creations. And her partner, who studied music at Minnesota's Macalester College and dreamed of becoming a concert pianist until she grew enamored of flamenco, now dances only at discos.

Still, the women, both single, are afforded occasional glimpses into the world of show business. They hoist trays now and then, and delight in spotting famous faces at their fetes. Janet (whose performers have passed the crudité to Diane Keaton, Barbra Streisand, Matt Dillon and Robert De Niro) remembers the night Warren Beatty squelched a too-attentive female GP with a haughty: "Don't be like all the others!" And Liz recalls the time she opened a walk-in refrigerator and found that Carly Simon and John Belushi had sought it out for a cool private conversation. "I just grabbed the birthday cake I'd come after and said, 'Don't mind me.'" Janet laughs. "And they didn't."

