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Key to Good Management Is in the Kitchen

By EVE TAHMINCIOGLU

THOMAS CORCORAN, chief executive of **FelCor Lodging Trust**, has trouble turning off his obsession for cooking, even when he is traveling on business.

A trip to New York in the mid-1990's, to raise capital for the company's initial public offering, also became a culinary mission when he met a Romanian limousine driver who described in mouth-watering detail the specialties of Transylvania.

Mr. Corcoran persuaded the chauffeur, Ian Onchoiu, to fly to FelCor's headquarters in Irving, Tex., to prepare a meal for his employees.

"He was fascinating," Mr. Corcoran said of Mr. Onchoiu, who held the staff of 60 people spellbound with tales of Dracula and tantalized their palates with herring salad, a sausage known as mititei, stuffed cabbage with polenta, Romanian sour soup and pancakes with preserves.

FelCor is a real estate investment trust with 183 properties from Embassy Suites to Holiday Inns. In running the company, Mr. Corcoran makes no apologies for forcing his passion for cooking on his subordinates. When job candidates are interviewed, they are told that cooking is part of the company's culture and that "if you're not comfortable with it maybe this isn't the place you want to work."

Albert Vicere, a management professor at the Smeal College of Business Administration at Pennsylvania State University, said some chief executives have outside interests that they cannot turn off when they come to the office. Such a melding of hobbies and work, he said, "sends a message that the C.E.O. is not just presiding over the company but that he's passionate about work and the people that work for him."

For Michael D. Capellas, the chief executive of Compaq Computer, the passion is rock 'n' roll. Mr. Capellas is known for blasting music from a boom box in his office.

For Robert Pamplin Jr., the chief of the privately held textile maker R. B. Pamplin, it is Asian and American Indian artifacts. An annual company retreat includes a tour of the collection at his farm in Oregon.



Thomas Corcoran, chief of FelCor Lodging Trust, cooking at the headquarters of the company, where food is more than nourishment

At FelCor, Mr. Corcoran's fervor for food makes some people nervous. Last June, when Richard O'Brien was considering the job of chief financial officer, he balked at the requirement that he help cook monthly gourmet lunches from time to time. "Cooking is not my thing," Mr. O'Brien said. Even so, he accepted the position.

The gastronomic endeavor started when FelCor moved to its present site in 1996. The building was equipped with a professional kitchen, so Mr. Corcoran started preparing weekly lunches for the staff, which then numbered 35 people. As his schedule became more hectic, he began delegating the responsibility to underlings.

Now, once a month, he selects a cooking team, chooses a theme, prepares a menu and sends it to the team in an e-mail message by 7 a.m. the day of the lunch. Teams have to track down recipes, usually on the Internet.

Sometimes he throws them a curve. Once he wrote a menu in French and the team had to translate it. Another time, he ordered a vegetable dish that called for Isle of Mull cheese, which is made in Scotland and hard to find in the United States. The team used brie instead but found an Isle of Mull cheese producer in Scotland, phoned her during the luncheon and asked her to talk about the cheese on the speaker phone.

Mr. Corcoran was delighted with the team's initiative. "I wanted to see how they'd react in a challenging situation," he said.

Indeed, while Outward Bound trips and rope mazes remain the hardy perennials of management seminars, cooking has also made its way into the repertory. Dianne Durkin, president of the Loyalty Factor, a consulting firm in New Castle, N.H., for example, has held culinary team-building workshops for five corporations since last July.

Mr. Corcoran's passion for cooking is rooted in his childhood in Clay Center, Kan., where he watched his mother cook big family meals.

Today, his home kitchen is equipped with granite counter tops, a Viking Range stove with vented hood, two ovens, six gas burners, a built-in grill, a Sub-Zero refrigerator and freezer and two Sub-Zero drawer refrigerators in the island next to the vegetable sink. He often invites business associates to his home for dinner. At least once a year, he prepares a lavish meal for FelCor's 10 directors and sometimes invites their spouses. He puts on an apron and usually asks one or two of his top managers to pitch in. The last such dinner included veal shoulder, Caesar salad, corn soufflé, blueberry corn muffins and asparagus cooked with olive oil and soy sauce.

Mr. Corcoran has started other culinary initiatives, too. He brought together chefs from the restaurants in FelCor hotels across the country to produce a cookbook, published last year, called "Cooking the FelCor Way." Many of his recipes appear in the book, including "Evelyn's Hash Brown Deluxe Casserole," his mother's specialty.

In the office, employees are encouraged to cook, and the aroma of cookies and other treats often wafts through the cubicles.

All this focus on food does have a negative side. "Almost everyone at the company started gaining weight," said Monica Hildebrand, FelCor's vice president for marketing and communications.

Last August, the company started a Weight Watchers program.

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