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From Silicon Valley to Farmer's Market

BY AMY PALANJIAN

The transition from vice president of marketing at a software firm to running three restaurants isn't a typical career path, but it's proved to be a fruitful one for Laurie Thomas. Lured into software by an opportunity to manage people, she found that an introduction to the restaurant industry led to a new career.

Ms. Thomas earned an undergraduate degree from Stanford University in industrial engineering and later, after earning an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School, she moved to Silicon Valley and worked her way up the ranks of several software companies, including Fulltime Software and Successfactors.com.

She'd always wanted to do work that allowed her to teach other people, and at each software firm she built on that responsibility. In her eight-year career, she became a turnaround specialist—repackaging and relaunching failing companies. But, she says, “the traditional marketing aspect of my job wasn't exciting.”

It was 1995 when the door to her second-act career opened. A friend introduced Ms. Thomas to Reed Hearon, a chef who was arranging funding for the soon-to-be-launched San Francisco restaurant Rose Pistola, operated by Mr. Hearon's Nice Ventures. As she got to know Mr. Hearon, she knew she wanted to be involved and invested \$200,000. Over the next three years, she invested in two more of Mr. Hearon's restaurants.

Then, when Mr. Hearon asked her to help sort out some financial challenges the restaurants faced in 2001, Ms. Thomas realized that she was using the base of skills she'd developed in software—evaluating business plans, marketing and managing



Taste of Change

Laurie Thomas offers this advice for transitioning into a new career:

■ **Learn to delegate**

I run the business to teach other people how to do things on their own. This is the only way that we can manage to do (everything).

■ **Keep up on the regulations**

Worker welfare laws change so often. I need to make sure that we can anticipate and implement the rules.

■ **Stick with what you are good at**

I will never be a chef or a wine director. My job is to hire and coach people for the job and solve problems.

Photograph by Christy Scherrer

people—in an area that she had grown to love. “The closer I got to the restaurants, the more I realized it was a perfect fit,” she says. She purchased the company and became its CEO and owner the following year.

Ms. Thomas, 42, says she has tried to create a different kind of work environment than what's typically experienced in restaurants, even though it's costlier. “I don't believe in an 80-hour workweek, so we carry two extra managers on staff so that we can target 40 hours a week for each employee,” she says. She also sets financial targets that she shares with her staff, and pays out bonuses when the company meets its goals “so that the people actually making the business a success are sharing in the profit.” Nice Ventures now has three restaurants and a booth at a popular farmer's market.

There is a downside to this approach. “At the end of the day,

I'm responsible for the well-being of my staff,” she says. That means she makes payroll even if—as happened after Sept. 11, 2001—she has to write checks from her personal account.

The current economic environment has been tough, says Ms. Thomas. “People are cutting back on dining out, and ingredients are steadily increasing in cost,” she says. “We're trying to run things as tightly as possible, but we have had to pass some price increases.”

Still, Ms. Thomas says her personality is well-suited to the restaurant industry. In both careers, she has relied on her personal and operational management skills, as well as her ability to coach her staff.

Ms. Thomas earns less than if she'd stayed in a software firm, but she has an equity stake. The love of the job keeps her going, she says: “On any given day, I could do 10 different things, which keeps me interested.”