

STYLE *pieces*

This caterer provides the life of the party for the upscale

By Hunter Drohojowska

For more than 30 years, the rich, the prominent and the powerful have hired Milton Williams to be the life of their parties. The black caterer with the unlisted phone number is surrounded by mystique and prestige. When Fred and Marcia Weisman divorced, Williams' service was an asset that went to Fred, so Marcia now hires others to do her parties. Among Williams' other clients are Polly Bergen, Mitzl Gaynor, Freddie Fields, Henry Mancini and the Norton Simons.

Williams, 55, says the snobbery that people attribute to him is unfounded. "That thing about the unlisted number," he says. "When I started out, I looked at the references other caterers had — Fontainebleu cooking school, that sort of thing — and since I had none, I just gave up the idea of putting myself in the phone book."

One is inclined to believe him. He is an affable sort, with a cook's round tummy and a broad, kindly face. His ranch-style home in the Hollywood Hills is the opposite of pretentious — cozy as a cafe with warm, dark wood furniture and scattered examples of his collection of Steuben glass.

When Williams is not catering such events as a \$750,000 art deco style wedding at a film studio, his hobby is charity. "I round up old clothes from people, my clients, and take them down to Skid Row, to young people and families. I feel as good about helping people as somebody else does about making their handicap in golf."

Williams, the youngest of three children, was raised on the East Side of Los Angeles. He became fascinated by cooking when his mother catered dinners for eight. "She was always very meticulous about things," he says. "To keep me from getting underfoot, she used to give me something to do, like a piece of dough to knead."

As he grew up, Williams read about parties and stars in the society columns and lingered over pictures in cookbooks. At 21, his own catering talents were discovered when he was studying business management at UCLA and working part-time for Sybil Hartfield.

Hartfield's friends, Edgar G. Robinson and the Max Factors, began asking him to cater on weekends. Soon he had to quit school to keep up with his commitments to cater parties. Now he has a staff of 22.

"You're only as good as your last party," he says. "Each time, you have to capture your audience."

Williams' trademark is theatricality, tastefully done. "I like to take an event from the beginning to the end, from the



Milton Williams has an unlisted phone number, but his catering business — a favorite of the Southern California elite — has been more than brisk for 30 years.

invitations to the last detail," he says. "For me, entertaining in a restaurant or hotel is like an ice-cold shower. There is nothing of you in that."

Williams recently arranged a party that Mrs. Theodore E. Cummings held for the Ambassador to the Vatican William Wilson. The 84 guests began the meal with individual tins of fresh Beluga caviar and vodka, finished with champagne and meringues filled with lemon mousse and topped with fresh raspberry puree. The dinner was in the garden, lit by hundreds of candles. Linda Hopkins provided the entertainment.

"Mrs. Cummings is the Pearl Mesta of Los Angeles," says Williams, who decorated the Cummings' home in Vienna when Ted Cummings served as ambassador there. "I seek a fineness and she is a woman of great taste, great style. Often the same people are at the same parties, so you have to be careful, yet reach such a fine pitch, like a wonderful flute. You want to hit that one note each time. It's not how much money you spend, but the right guest list and combination of other elements."

Williams will admit that money helps. He estimates that a sit-down dinner for 50 may be done by him for \$33 to \$35 per person. A cocktail party ranges from \$18 to \$22 per guest. Quickly, he adds, "But you don't have to have all of me. You can have part of me." The budget-conscious ask Williams to do one or two dishes, hire a couple of his people to tend bar or serve and do the rest themselves. "And consultations are free," he says.

Williams may be the caterer of status, but he doesn't want his label worn visibly. "We always stay in the back, in the kitchen. So many times

people in the catering business tend to stand out front and you don't know if it is their party or the hosts'. We blend ourselves in like household help who have been there for years. I think that has a better ring."

Early last year, Williams made a stab at bringing his cooking to more than private clients by opening a restaurant — BLB — in the Rodeo Collection. It lasted only six months. "People would see Fendi and Nina Ricci outside the Rodeo Collection and thought whatever was inside too rich for their blood. It was a bad location."

So Williams returned to catering, with an occasional foray into interior design. His greatest frustration is selling hostesses on new and unconventional dishes. "Like boned duck and wild rice in a casserole. The hostess will say, 'I like duck, but what if my guests don't?' I have to sell them on ethnic dishes. I like using a conversation piece in a menu."

Williams describes himself as a religious man, a lifelong member of the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church, one who enjoys helping people as a way of life. He often donates his services for charity benefits. "Wherever there's a need, that's where you must aid," he says.

He is involved with missionaries, the End World Hunger movement and has established the Milton F. Williams Scholarship Fund, which provides financial aid to needy college-bound students.

"My hobby is helping people," he says. "Going down to Skid Row with blankets and pillows or whatever. Helping young kids. That's a rewarding day. You can't board things for yourself and be truly happy. I couldn't."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly for the Herald.

FOOD

Chris Guller/Herald photographer