

# OPENHOUSE

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## FOODSERVICE

The national monthly news magazine serving the people in the foodservice and accommodation industries

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## XMAS UNDER CONTROL

**CDS Gourmet help  
you get organised**

**Catering for crowds**  
How to wow clients and cut costs

**Equip yourself**  
Essential tools and technology

Maureen de Groot and daughter Yolanda use their in-depth knowledge of the Australian dining scene to help corporates and hospitality professionals alike.



# The reluctant cyber gourmet

**Maureen de Groot, founder of De Groots Lifestyle Media and managing editor of leading Australian website, [www.bestrestaurants.com.au](http://www.bestrestaurants.com.au), happily admits she's "no tech-head". Far from seeing this as a hindrance however, the personable media, PR and hospitality guru reckons it's a bonus.**

"A lot of websites are run by young IT people who don't want people ringing them," she says. "But coming from a hospitality background, and being a bit older, I'm used to dealing with people face-to-face. We encourage clients to give us a call at any time to discuss their requirements."

Best Restaurants features profiles of close to 2000 restaurants nationwide. Targeted at the corporate, hospitality and tourist markets, it showcases mid and upscale restaurants as opposed to 'cheap eats' and takeaways. Restaurants pay an annual subscription fee of \$900 to be included on the site and, for that, they get their own page featuring a professionally-written profile, which they are free to add to and update as they wish, and are able to contact De Groots with any marketing queries. The site's success (it was included

in Hitwise's list of Australia's top ten websites in 2004, 2007 and 2008 and attracts close to 450,000 unique views a month) is as much a surprise to Maureen as anyone. She kicked off her career as an assistant to the food and beverage manager at Sydney's Menzies Hotel before heading overseas, where she worked in a sales and marketing capacity for hotels including the Westin International in Canada and the Mandarin Hotel in Hong Kong. She eventually returned to Sydney, where she set up a corporate travel agency with her husband but ended up losing both shortly after the sharemarket crash.

Deciding she needed a fresh start, Maureen bought Top Ten Dining Magazine in 1995 and set up the website a year later after friends and colleagues convinced her the business world of the future would largely be a cyber one.

"I'm not a tech-head at all but I knew I needed to give people what they wanted and the internet seemed to be the way forward," she says.

These days, the service is used by Australian and overseas-based corporates and hospitality professionals looking for advice on where to host clients or events. The service is well-respected, she says,

because it's comprehensive and constantly updated rather than a simple directory. As each restaurant featured on the site has been visited by one of the company's reviewers, the team is able to clearly discuss the features of each.

Maureen says many restaurants around Australia are using the site as an effective marketing tool. A listing greatly increases their chances of being picked up by internet search engines, such as Google, and exposes them to a world of potential customers, both corporate and private.

According to Maureen, the restaurants that reap the most benefits from the site are those that update their pages regularly. Notifying customers of changes to the menu and special events and promotions, for example, piques their interest and ensures their expectations are met.

She relays the tale of a restaurateur who contacted her recently because his newly-opened restaurant was worryingly quiet on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings.

"He wanted to introduce the restaurant to locals, but didn't know how to go about it," she says. "I suggested he post a note on the site

advertising a special paella-and-sangria deal for \$20 on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. The place filled up immediately."

De Groot says the restaurants that attract the most attention are those advertising creative or unusual special deals. She cites a Melbourne restaurant offering rides on a horse-drawn carriage through a nearby park as part of a special dinner deal as a particularly successful promotion.

As the owner of a relatively small family business, Maureen says she can completely identify with restaurateurs and chefs who think they lack the time and the money to maintain a website or page – especially in these tough economic times.

"Everyone's feeling the pinch at the moment. I know of lots of restaurateurs who are having to put their whole families to work just to stay afloat. They're working such long hours, the business takes over their lives. They don't have the budget to pay someone to create and maintain a website for them or the time to do it themselves."

However, Maureen believes restaurateurs who set aside just half an hour a month to post a notice about a special event or promotion will see benefits.

"If you have good photos [of the restaurant and food], up-to-date info and something special to offer, you will see benefits," she says.

Despite insisting she's less than technically-minded, de Groot certainly knows online media and is constantly experimenting with new technology to see if and how it can improve the business.

Her latest project is filming short video clips of restaurants for inclusion on the site (it helps she has a daughter in the film industry). The site is also set to launch a booking engine that will enable people to make restaurant bookings in real time from anywhere in the world as well as a food and wine events calendar.

De Groots also publishes three related sites: [www.bestvenues.com.au](http://www.bestvenues.com.au), which her daughter Yolanda looks after, [www.bestgiftcertificates.com.au](http://www.bestgiftcertificates.com.au); and [www.bestclubs.com.au](http://www.bestclubs.com.au).

Natural-born tech-head or not, Maureen is definitely a convert.

"Exposure on the internet is probably the most important marketing tool a restaurant can have," she says. ☐