



Event planners Char Mason of Char Mason & Associates, right, and Cookie Coleman of Cookie Coleman Co., shown Tuesday in the lobby of the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul. The two were in charge of staging the museum's 100th anniversary gala in September.

Their parties shake things up

Two solo planners discover they're a dream team when it comes to organizing knockout events.

BY NICOLE GARRISON-SPRENGER
Pioneer Press

It sounds like something you'd see on an episode of Iron Chef.

The signature ingredient: rare Lakota squash grown from 130-year-old seeds.

The contenders: three master chefs from Wildside Catering.

The judges: the 750 people who attended The Science Museum of Minnesota's 100th anniversary gala in September. "It wasn't your average sit-through-a-silent-auction-have-a-lad-dinner-listen-to-a-band event," said Char Mason, one of the masterminds behind the gala. "We pushed the envelope."

The "we" in this case is Mason and her partner Cookie Coleman, owners of separate event planning businesses — Char Mason & Associates and Cookie Coleman Co. — who for the last two years have teamed up for such high-profile events as the SPAM Museum Jam, Mayor Chris Coleman's inauguration and Minnesota Public Radio's headquarters expansion party.

While each woman did well on her own — in their best years, Mason made about \$90,000 in revenue and Coleman brought in about \$110,000 — they've been able to attract bigger projects and bigger budgets as a team.

Last year, the two entrepreneurs



Above: Table spread at the Science Museum of Minnesota's 100th anniversary gala held in September. Below: Squash chesecake served in a martini glass - one of several squash-infused items on the menu at the SciParty.

grossed \$351,000. Not only are two heads better than one in a creative sense, but two rainmakers can make a big difference in terms of new business.

"Working events can be so incredibly taxing," Coleman said. "You're so exhausted when the event is over, and this is the period when you need to be marketing and getting geared up and start the next event."

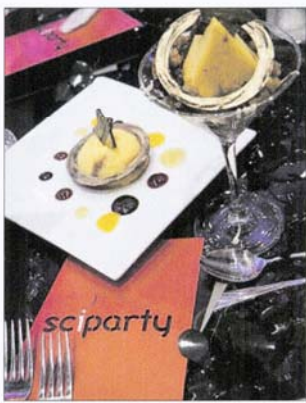
As a team, Coleman and Mason help each other do just that.

The duo hopes to double revenue in 2008, though they admit that will be hard as the string of capital campaigns and anniversaries that has kept business flowing in recent years appears to be dying down a bit. That's why they're looking harder at the corporate world.

"We'd like corporate work to be a higher percentage of our business," Mason said. "But not to the point where we will turn down any nonprofit business, because they've been our bread and butter."

Both Mason and Coleman have worked with corporations in the past, but worry a bit that their long resume of nonprofit clients might pigeonhole them. "Because of our backgrounds we get a certain kind of business," Coleman said.

The two have worked on so many big events that they know all the pitfalls. For example, one volatile committee



member can change the energy of the whole group, Coleman said, so the organizers make it a point to get to know the whole team, rather than relying on a single contact. They originally got together in 2004, when a representative of public relations firm Fleishman-Hillard called each of

them and asked if they'd be interested in working on Horne's SPAM Museum Jam.

"We weren't even in business together at the time, and they hired us as a team," Mason said. By then, Mason and Coleman's paths had already crossed multiple times. Both

had worked at International Market Square and as independent contractors on the Grand Excursion of 2004. That project brought together communities near the upper Mississippi River to recreate the Grand Excursion of 1854 that celebrated America's first railroad connection to the Mississippi River.

The day of the meeting with Horne, Coleman and Mason each showed up wearing a chartreuse suede jacket, slacks and a blouse — a total fluke, Mason said.

Though alike in many ways, the two women have very different strengths.

Before starting her own business, Mason worked as the executive director of the Grand Avenue Business Association. She also directed marketing and events for the International Market Square in Minneapolis.

"Char is very detail oriented and is an excellent communications person," Coleman said. "She crosses all the i's and dots all the t's in a way that I can't."

Coleman, who is also a band leader and singer, has the edge when it comes to entertainment. She has been the booking agent for SBO Productions and marketing director for Rupert's Nightclub. She's booked big-name entertainers like Miles Davis, the Smothers Brothers, 10,000 Maniacs and Prince.

But they have the same philosophy about events: You have to shake things up.

"People are jaded," Mason said. "They've been to a million events and you can't just do the same thing."

That innovative spirit was particularly important for the Science Museum, said Kathy Wilson, vice president of external relations for the St. Paul-based institution.

"Lots of organizations do galas on a regular basis," Wilson said. "The Science Museum hasn't been one of them. ... We thought of it as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

In addition to the squash-themed menu, which included squash chesecake served in a martini glass and a pea greens and micro greens salad with fried squash, the party featured a chainsaw juggling act that served as a lesson in physics.

Said Wilson: "One of my board members, who goes to 10 to 12 of these events a year, said it was the best he'd ever been to."

Nicole Garrison-Sprenger can be reached at ngarrison@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-3368.

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Sunday, February 10, 2008

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COMPANY SPECS

Name: Char Mason & Associates, Cookie Coleman Co.

Business: Event planning

Locations: St. Paul and Minneapolis

Web sites: www.charmason.com, www.cocompany.com

Founded: Mason started her company in 1999, and Coleman started hers in 1992; they started working together in 2005.

Owners: Char Mason and Cookie Coleman

Employees: Two; they rely on a network of contractors.

2007 revenue: \$351,000

Competitors: Metro Connections, Event Lab

Challenge ahead: Doing more business in the corporate world