



# *Success Story*

## **PRESS OFFICE**

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### **A Southern Affair Leads to Southern Temptations**

*Southern Temptations*

*Ramona Laird*

**Birmingham, AL** - In 2000, Ramona Laird decided to open a small catering service from her home, A Southern Affair LLC. Business began to flourish, so Ramona worked with the Small Business Development Center at Troy University on developing a business plan. She attended training courses and one-to-one counseling sessions.

In June 2004, Ramona decided she needed to expand, so she opened Southern Temptations restaurant. It is truly a family affair because Ramona says that she couldn't have done it without a ton of help from husband, Bob and daughter, Shea.

By design, Southern Temptations is not your typical restaurant experience. It is a reservation only, fine dining establishment serving high teas, lunch and (on special occasions) dinner. They also cater weddings and special events. They offer over 50 loose-leaf teas as well as an ever changing, but always authentic, southern tea menu. A recent lunch serving included chicken popovers, fried okra salad in a bed of butter lettuce with their red wine Dijon dressing, and fresh baked scones and muffins with almond chantilly cream.

Other than their diverse tea selections, their specialty is handmade dessert selections ranging from strawberry blush to meringue swans to handmade candies. For special occasions, they serve puff pastry creations made to scale (for example, horse and carriage pastry reflecting those used by the bride and groom).

You won't find Southern Temptations by accident. They are located in eastern Houston County, Alabama, approximately eight miles from the Ross Clark Circle in Dothan. They are eight miles from the Georgia state line and eighteen miles from the Florida state line. Surrounded by tall slim oak trees, their setting is a rural one that takes visitors back to a slower pace and place in time.

Southern Temptations is a 5,000 square foot tea cottage that Ramona designed. It was built in part by Ramona's husband, Bob. The grounds are carefully manicured and the building is traditionally southern with a big white friendly front porch. There are four tearooms, a gift shop, an upstairs conference room, and a beautiful garden and

gazebo area with porcelain antique furniture, tapestry covered tables, and beautiful Royal Albert china.

“We like to think of ourselves as a little fancy and a lot of fun,” says Ramona. Upon entry, she will invite guests to select from a large hat collection in order to truly complete the traditional southern tea atmosphere.

In essence, Southern Temptations is special because it is truly unique. There is nothing like it in the area and few like it anywhere. Their offerings are delicious and distinct. The atmosphere is authentic, yet still unusual. The location is off the beaten path and their personable family is the essence of Southern Temptations.

Somewhat surprisingly, their customers are diverse. They are homemakers, teachers, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, retirees, authors, and travelers. They also hold events for businesses, civic groups, and special family occasions. Many of their customers are just looking to do something different and have found Southern Temptations a welcome respite from the run-of-the-mill, chain restaurant dining experience. While the vast majority of their customers come from the surrounding areas, they also draw a number of visitors from all over the country.

The Southern Temptations staff is small in size, but big in heart. In addition to Ramona, they have several hard-working employees who do a little bit of everything. Each employee helps with setting tables, preparing foods, setting up lunch and tea trays, serving, cleaning, and dish washing. Ramona does most of the cooking and, as she says it, “a little too much of everything else.” Bob is a helicopter flight instructor and Vietnam veteran who works two jobs, yet manages to help prepare foods and keep the grounds.

Ramona spent four years gathering research for the project. She attended the ten-week NxLevel Business Planning Series offered through the Small Business Development Center at Troy University. The business planning series was made possible through a Defense Economic Transition Assistance grant provided by the U.S. Small Business Administration. Ramona stated, “From the knowledge I gained from this course I was able to write my business plan. I believe everyone who is thinking about starting a business should attend this course. I was taught how to obtain the information needed to successfully run Southern Temptations. The instructors were knowledgeable in what I needed to know and our guest speakers were very informative. I would never have been able to complete my business plan without the NxLevel course.” After completing the course, Ramona obtained an SBA loan through a local bank, began Southern Temptations and the rest is history.

Ramona has faced her share of problems over the last few years just as all new business owners do; however, she has come through it all with flying colors. “Looking back at the last two years, I have learned a lot about owning and operating a business of this nature. I am looking forward to the future as Southern Temptations continues to grow and reach its fullest potential,” says Ramona.

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