

• At the opening of the David Jones department store in the Sydney suburb of Burwood last year, managing director Mark McInnes had no doubt who was the main attraction.

Donna Hay was demonstrating a recipe to a crowd of about 300 people on the shop floor. Determined not to miss a moment, one woman – arms laden with shopping – turned to McInnes and asked if he worked there. Learning that he did, she dispatched the boss to fetch some carry bags.

By 11am on that Saturday last May, no one could squeeze through the throng of Hay's admirers. After all, she could show them how to work miracles with finely shaved fennel, mozzarella and basil oil, simple recipes with fresh ingredients that would endear them to their friends.

McInnes knew his place. "She has such a connection with ordinary mums and families. I said, 'Sure thing, ma'am, no problems at all'."

Hay's popularity is a reflection of what she has achieved in publishing and retailing in Australia - and around the world.

Originally a food stylist for The Australian Women's Weekly, then food editor of the

local version of Marie Claire, she introduced a new style of food photography: simple dishes photographed close-up on white plates. It was a look that combined the aspirational (a showy ingredient or a chef-like presentation) and the practical (recipes are quick and easy). It fitted with the zeitgeist of the 1990s and 2000s of "nesting", food fads and celebrity chefs.

The Donna Hay "look" became influential worldwide and catapulted her from employee to a brand in her own right. She went on to launch her eponymous magazine in 2001 and has published 16 cookbooks that have sold 3.3 million copies in seven languages.

Hay also licenses a range of products in Australia and the United Kingdom. The Donna Hay empire will not disclose its revenue, but publisher HarperCollins says she is its most important author and makes up 10 per cent of its Australian sales.

"Donna's extraordinary," restaurateur and author Bill Granger says. "People in Australia don't realise how influential Donna has been."

Her success was enough to interest Rupert Murdoch, who signed her magazine to his News Ltd stable for an undisclosed sum. Previously, the market was split between

DAVID JONES PUTS HER NAME TO NOUGAT AND NEWS LTD TOES THE LINE ON HER MAGAZINE DEMANDS. THIS FOOD GURU HAS SERIOUS CLOUT. REPORT: JEFFREY HUTTON

publications such as Vogue Entertaining + Travel, Gourmet Traveller and several supermarket magazines.

Sensing her star power, David Jones agreed to develop tablecloths, serving bowls, even nougat for her in 2004 if she would lend them her name. Neither party would discuss how much the licensing agreement is worth. "We spotted Donna Hay early on in her career," McInnes says. "Donna is real, she's talented, and she's insanely creative."

Her secret, Hay says, is "extreme attention to detail". At her Surry Hills studio in Sydney close to the News Ltd offices – she attempts the finishing touches on a beehive-shaped cake before a photo shoot for a collection of recipes for children.

The cake is set on a piano stool and rotated slowly for Hay, who has emerged into the test kitchen from her office dressed stunningly - if incongruously - in black: jacket, kneelength skirt, fishnet stockings and heels.

She swirls thick ropes of the honey-coloured icing like an upside-down Mr Whippy cone, starting from the base, while half a dozen kitchen, photography and art staffers gather to watch the miniature feat of engineering. "There's too much air," Hay frowns. "We need to redo the recipe."

The test kitchen and dedicated food studio are rare in a publishing world ever mindful of costs. They are testament to Hay's pull at News Ltd. That's because the Donna Hay brand sells.

Targeted at women aged between 25 and 54, the bimonthly Donna Hay Magazine rose in circulation during the 12 months to December by 13 per cent, to more than 90,000, according to Audit Bureau of Circulation figures. Readership rose 7 per cent in the year to March 2008 from the previous 12-month period to 347,000, according to Roy Morgan research.

Average monthly sales in the six months to December 2007 of Donna Hay Magazine's nearest rival Delicious, also published by News Magazines (a division of News Ltd), climbed 5 per cent to 125,300 a month compared with the same period a year earlier.

"She's the consumate stylist," Delicious editor Trudi Jenkins says. "She takes simple, achievable food and makes it look gorgeous. That's her skill."

Hay's first book with HarperCollins, Off The Shelf, published in 2001, has sold 265,000 copies in Australia and New Zealand, where the average print run for non-fiction is about 10,000. The book has sold 433,000 copies in English worldwide. Hay's next book with HarperCollins, No Time to Cook, is scheduled

DONNA HAY

AGE: 38 **LIVES:** Sydney

WORKING LIFE:

Hay started out as a freelance food writer and stylist at the age of 19. By 25, she was food editor for the Australian edition of Marie Claire magazine. Her bimonthly Donna Hay Magazine, which has a readership of about 347,000 in Australia, is the topselling international food magazine in Barnes & Noble bookstores as well as Borders in the United States, where circulation

jumped 17 per cent during the six months to December last year.

KEY TO SUCCESS:

Hay credits her success to "extreme attention to detail", although that minute control has cost her staff and friends.

INSPIRATION:

Hay says her publications tap an inner need in people to look after themselves and others. "Cooking is about nurturing and caring," she says. "There's something very basic about cooking and looking after yourself."

for publication in October, with an initial print run of 80,000 copies.

Hay is also planning branded gift sets for David Jones and the luxury food distributor Simon Johnson. She aims to build on the success of her "couture cupcake" baking set, designed for United Kingdom supermarket chain Sainsbury's at Christmas, that included stitched cupcake papers and chocolate buttons.

A television show is also in the works, and premium tableware maker Royal Doulton this month agreed to participate in the homewares brand.

For News Ltd, having Donna Hay next door concocting recipes has other benefits. Two months ago, News Ltd chairman and chief executive John Hartigan asked Hay to make dinner for eight visiting board members. The

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TRUDI JENKINS, EDITOR, DELICIOUS

guests included Westpac Banking Corporation chief executive Gail Kelly, Qantas executive manager John Borghetti, NRMA chief executive Tony Stuart and David Jones's McInnes.

The meal included twice-cooked chicken simmered in broth, tossed in rice flour then deep fried and served with lemon. After their individual cheese plates, Hay roped all guests except Kelly into a soufflé-making competition. The winner? Oantas's Borghetti.

"I took my heels off and I was right in there with them. McInnes was rubbish," Hay joked.

There have been bumps along the way. In the early years, the marathon hours and Hay's tight control burned out staff. Turnover was high. Hay developed a reputation as a control freak and she lost friends. "She worked incredibly long hours and there was the expectation that everyone else would," says Lucy Tumanow-West, who was a copy editor with Hay and is now deputy editor of Practical Parenting, published monthly by Pacific Magazines.

Hay had trouble co-ordinating creative direction among the team and folding in differing views when they arose. "Everyone thinks they are on the same page but then they realise they are reading different books." Tumanow-West says. "They were heady times."

Hay insists that she has developed a nurturing environment in which staff members can offer recipe and photography ideas.

After having two children, Hay works shorter hours, getting home to take over from the nanny by 6pm. No one needs to stay in the office after six and staff are entitled to "mental health" days. "The office is set up for creative people," she says. "If you're tired, you're miserable."

Animosity among creative team members can quickly develop if there is a perception that the star is taking credit for someone else's work, Granger says. Hay may also come in for special flak because she is a woman who knows what she wants. "Donna Hay's work has a look and feel and you know it's Donna Hay," he says. "That's because Donna is over it all. She hasn't achieved her position by letting her opinion go unheard."

Back in the studio, photographers prepare the beehive cake on a light-green surface. One artist is carefully reflecting light onto the creation while another fixes two toy bees with long flexible metal pins at odd angles so that they appear to hover.

"If you don't have extreme attention to detail, who are you going to blame if the recipe doesn't work?" Hay asks. "If it wasn't called Donna Hay [Magazine], there would be fewer decisions for me to fall on my sword for." BRW