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Letter from **KELLY HIGGINSON**
Chief Operating Officer, Restaurants Canada





This issue of *MENU* is special to me, and to all of us who have chosen careers in the hospitality industry. February is Black History Month, and International Women's Day is just around the corner. So much has been achieved, but there is so much still to be done. Not only in February, not only on March 8th, but every single day.

The 2021 McKinsey Report calls out the facts that, in general, women are overworked and underrecognized in their workplaces; that women more often lead employee well-being and DE&I initiatives at work; that women leaders are switching jobs at the highest rates we've ever seen—much higher rates than men in similar positions. They also reference the "broken rung" at the first step up to management that needs to be addressed before we can get anywhere near parity. Women remain significantly unrepresented in leadership and as all companies are struggling with the "Great Breakup" our own industry is also grappling with an extraordinary labour crisis. This looks like a perfect opportunity for us to take stock and learn from those making an impact and disrupting the status quo.

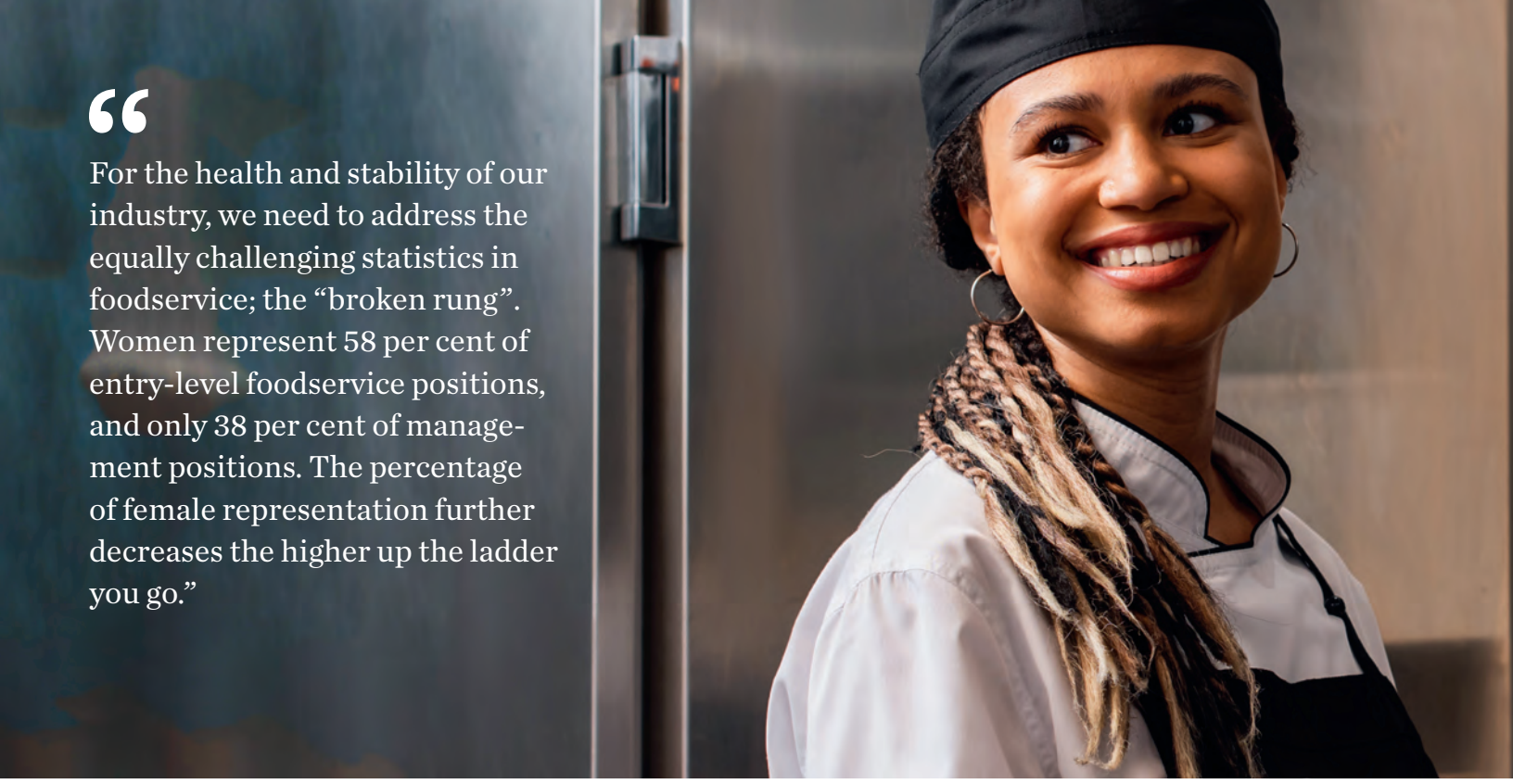
The report also suggests that, in many cases, this focus on work culture and community is still perceived as "elective", even as studies proving the direct, positive impact of these efforts on holistic business goals and employee retention and satisfaction continue to stack up. These and similar initiatives are still not counted among core leadership KPIs during many performance reviews.

We all have moments and poignant opportunities in our professional lives that change us. One of mine was a dinner in one of New York's most renowned restaurants. At a time when women were relegated to serving in the lounge while the men served in the dining room, we had a different experience. An incredibly strong, intelligent and educated female sommelier served us in the dining room with all these female servers in beautiful buttoned, starched shirts. That simple experience touched me emotionally and changed the course of my career. Another important moment for me was when I got my first raise. When I thanked my boss, he told me never to say "thank you". He meant that I shouldn't praise someone for giving me something I've rightfully earned. That stuck with me as women are often socialized to build their self esteem on a foundation of recognition from others, not on their own accomplishments or sense of self. In my mid-thirties, I learned to embrace being myself at work. When I made that change, when I allowed myself to be vulnerable, empathetic and express my ambition (something that seemed like a dirty word for women 20 years ago) it felt like a huge risk, but curiously, that is when I really started to succeed.

Since these events (and many others that followed), I've been more aware of the structures, processes and systems that define—yet silently limit—the necessary evolution of our industry. I've learned not only to look outward, but inward. Self-reflection is so valuable in leadership and, for whatever reason, women are often better at that. Through self-reflection and training, we recognize important strengths and weaknesses. Unconscious bias training helped me recognize that I too was guilty of it. And, if I have unconscious bias—even with all of my passion for women in leadership—it's only further proof to me of the benefit of looking inward to move forward with momentum.

Personally, I want to stop opening the newspaper and seeing that just 5 per cent of CEOs on the TSX are women. According to TSX analysis data, "26 per cent of TSX-listed companies have 30 per cent or more women on their executive teams, but almost an equal percentage—27 per cent, have zero women on executive teams". Work needs to be done to move those companies from zero women on executive management teams (EMTs) to at least 30 per cent. Why 30 per cent? Per the 2021 McKinsey Report, while the ultimate goal is parity, 30 per cent women on boards and EMTs is an aspirational goal set by groups like The 30% Club. Past Chair of the 30% Club Global, Brenda Trenowden explains, "It's been proven that in any under-represented group it's very hard to be heard until you get to 30 per cent and the group becomes normalized."

For the health and stability of our industry, we need to address the equally challenging statistics in foodservice; the "broken rung".



> “For the health and stability of our industry, we need to address the equally challenging statistics in foodservice; the “broken rung”. Women represent 58 per cent of entry-level foodservice positions, and only 38 per cent of management positions. The percentage of female representation further decreases the higher up the ladder you go.”

Women represent 58 per cent of entry-level foodservice positions, and only 38 per cent of management positions. The percentage of female representation further decreases the higher up the ladder you go. We need to have more parity and representation. Publicly traded companies need to represent the demographics of the society we live in—that is just smart business. This isn’t going to be a quick or easy fix; we’re nowhere near where we need to be as an industry and as a society. We need to create environments that provide space for women to be leaders and that accommodate a leadership style that may look and feel a little different than what has been socially and culturally ingrained. We need to recognize that psychological health and safety is as important as the physical.

As the restaurant industry faces unprecedented labour challenges, emotional intelligence—a “female” trait often dismissed as a “soft skill”—will prove to be a difference-maker for operators. Employees who feel disconnected do not contribute to their potential. People want to feel a sense of purpose and engagement in their work. They need to feel good, and they need to feel safe in their workplace. If they get what I call that “yucky feeling” in their stomachs, they will move on.

This issue of *MENU* features important conversations with a diverse group of entrepreneurs, chefs and change makers from all corners of Canada’s hospitality and foodservice industry. While the scope and focus of their experience is unique, they share a common self-awareness, intelligence and sense of responsibility for bringing positive, progressive disruption to the hierarchical structure of the industry they all believe in and have given their lives to. They have all asked themselves, “If not me, then who?”.

Julie Denton, Chief People Officer at Recipe Unlimited, shares her insights on employee engagement, diversity, equity and inclusion and unconscious bias training. I’m drawn to the work she has done. It raises the bar for our industry and for society. Meeru Dhalwala and Jasmine Baker reflect on leadership and motherhood as hospitality professionals and the processes we need to build to better support women in the industry. Chef Eva Chin shares how self-reflection has helped her master her craft and herself. Janice Bartley, founder and executive director of Foodpreneur Lab talks about the incubator-accelerator’s model for Black F&B innovation and entrepreneurship.

Ryan Hinkson encourages businesses and brands to engage Black talent all year long—not just in February. We learn about celebrated chef and Garland Culinary Competition host Philman George’s personal and professional journey to becoming Canada’s first Black corporate chef at High Liner Foods.

And so, so much more.

This year’s RC Show, Heart & Hustle, will take place April 10-12 in Toronto. We’ve worked with partners to change the game, prioritizing women and under-represented talent on the stages and in competitions. We’ve had the largest number of competition entries for the Garland Culinary Competition and the highest percentage of female applicants (over 20 per cent) ever. We still have a long way to go.

The RC Show theme, programming and experience reflect and support the people, ideas and innovations (like those in this issue) that are transforming our industry for the better.

Hospitality comes from the heart—from the tables of celebrated chefs to the Colonel’s buckets to the mom-and-pop roti shop on the corner. It’s about sharing a family recipe, your skill and food culture to feed communities.

Hustle is the sound and soul of the industry we love, and what drives us to shape its evolution. We are willing to work smart, but not harder. Been there, done that. We are invigorated and inspired by the true spirit of hospitality and devoted to keeping our doors open for family, friends and food. Forever.

I hope you enjoy this issue of *MENU* and look forward to seeing you at RC Show 2023.



Kelly Higginson
Chief Operating Officer
Restaurants Canada

Winter 2023
Volume 8 Number 1

Restaurants Canada

The voice of foodservice | La voix des services alimentaires

Do you have comments or a story for us? If so, please email menueditor@restaurantscanada.org.

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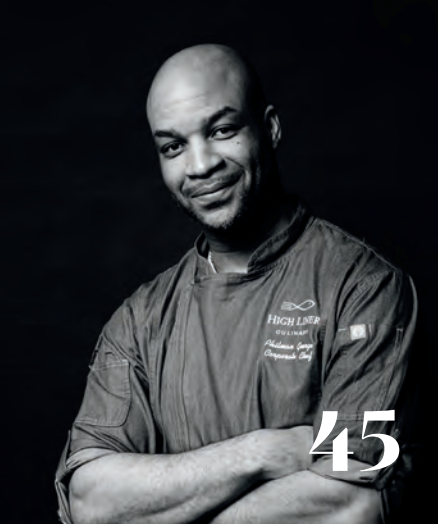
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MENU

THE PASS



RC Show Restaurants Canada
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APRIL 10-12, 2023

RC Show roars back in April with big ideas from industry leaders and disruptive thinkers, expertly-curated pavilions, incredible networking events, amped up competitions, and three action-packed days you don't want to miss.

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JOINT HOSPITALITY EXCISE DUTY FREEZE REQUEST INITIATIVE

At the end of January, Restaurants Canada worked with Beer Canada, Wine Growers of Canada and Spirits Canada to send a formal request for deferral of the scheduled 6.3 per cent increase to federal beverage alcohol excise duties.

The letter, addressed to Chrystia Freeland, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, was sent on behalf of the broader hospitality sector and contained strong arguments highlighting ongoing economic vulnerability due to the effects of COVID-19, escalating inflation and rising interest rates on sector financial recovery and prosperity.

Arguing that a thriving hospitality industry is critical to local economies across Canada, the note emphasized the total contribution of the hospitality industry and requested the Government of Canada take a "do no harm" approach and freeze federal excise duties at their current rates.

Follow the story on restaurantscanada.org.

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RC ON DEMAND: SINGLE-USE PLASTICS WEBINAR

An Overview of the Single-use Plastics Prohibition Regulations with Environment & Climate Change Canada

With the Canadian Government's Single-use Plastics Prohibition underway, and the ban on the sale of certain single-use plastics starting in December 2023, Environment and Climate Change Canada joined Restaurants Canada to discuss tactics to enable businesses to move away from the use and distribution of single-use plastic takeaway items such as straws, eating utensils, shopping bags and polystyrene foam and black plastic foodservice ware like containers, cups, plates, bowls and boxes.

- Learn the fine details of the Single-use Plastics Prohibition Regulations, including the targeted items and implementation timelines
- Get a sense of how the prohibition will impact you
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- Discuss approaches to selecting alternatives, with a focus on reuse options

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IT'S BLACK HISTORY MONTH.

SO... WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE REST OF THE YEAR?



BY RYAN HINKSON,
FOOD CULTURALIST
@EATFAMOUS

PHOTOS BY
DON BURRELL/DEGREY

For many content creators, partnering with large brands is the goal. Aside from the prestige and larger paycheques, it's a sign you have made it—that the brand you built for yourself has been deemed worthy and valuable enough to allow you to work with some recognized brands and companies.

But what if those highly coveted partnerships only seem to pop up during a very specific time? Say like, in February for Black History Month. This is the reality for many Black content creators, chefs and business owners who are some of the most influential, creative and skilled folks in the hospitality industry. Frequently hired, highly sought-after and highlighted for 28 days of the year, but severely underused or forced to fight for the same attention for the remaining 11 months. Whether it's a Black food blogger being asked to visit a buzzworthy restaurant, a Black chef being called into a Fortune 500 company to cook for a Black History Month initiative, or a Black-owned restaurant making a "Top 10



Restaurants to Try This February" list on a litany of websites, IG accounts and magazines, the disparity between how often these professionals are called upon for their expertise during Black History Month versus the rest of the year can be staggering.

February is Black History Month, and we should celebrate Black history and recognize the contributions and the legacies of those who came before us. And, highlighting and hiring Black contributors to this industry in February is important. It's important because, as is the case in many other industries, Black creatives generally earn less and receive less exposure than their peers.

I run an Instagram account called EatFamous, with over 250,000 followers. I'm also an influencer, a content creator, event host, panelist and podcast contributor (usually on food), I make TV appearances to talk about, you guessed it, food. I've worked with brands like McDonald's, the Toronto Raptors, Google, the NFL, AMEX, the LCBO and many more. During the summer of 2020, I lost over 20,000 followers in a matter of weeks after voicing my support for the protests that followed the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. A clear message was sent by a large portion of my follower base about how they felt about me sharing my beliefs on my account. Some insisted that it was not personal; they were just there for the food. Was I angry? Yes. Was I surprised? No. Would I do things differently? Definitely not. Still, a significant loss of followers can severely affect a creative's ability to book jobs.

Ironically, in February of 2021 I was busier than ever. Due in part, I'm sure, to the social upheaval after the Floyd and Taylor murders and the fact that it was Black History Month. My inbox was full of requests to work with me. Many of my Black friends and industry acquaintances were getting calls for work and appearances. While financially it was a great time, the last thing any Black creative wants to feel is that they're a victim of "tokenism", a checkmark on a diversity, equity and inclusion mandate, or that a prospective partner's embracing of their talents is simply performative. After the calls slowed down through March and April, how could we believe otherwise? Tokenism in our industry is a topic that is very important to me—so much so that it birthed a podcast I will be launching in collaboration with Quell and Azalea Hart called *More Than*, because Black history, Truth & Reconciliation, Asian Heritage Month, Pride and similar celebrations are more than the days, weeks or months noted on a calendar. They are infinitely important topics that cannot be neatly packaged into a time frame or presentation.

Organically formed partnerships based on genuine admiration, with the intention of developing lasting relationships, should be the premise upon which any collaboration is

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Meaningful Engagement

Black food industry creatives share tips for restaurants and other businesses on how to build long-term, meaningful relationships.

La-toya Fagan | Owner & Executive Chef, Twist Catering

"Companies can have more authentic relationships with Black chefs and creators by allowing them to put bids in for events at their venues. A lot of companies and venues allow certain companies to have monopolies. After Black History Month, we are still chefs and creators. We are still providing the same exceptional services. Our services appeal to the masses as well and we are still niche enough to provide to the marginalized."

Tony Bradshaw | Owner, Street Bites

"I am always excited to be of service to whomever chooses my business. Especially in a market as competitive as Toronto, it's my job to provide the best food, to be of service and to create an incredible experience. That way, when there's a craving, a need, or even if a friend asks for a recommendation, my products and my business are top of mind."

Eden Hagos | Founder, Black Foodie

"First have more Black people on your team to begin with. It's time for brands to see the value in working with Black food creators all year long. We shape the culture and set trends and we eat all year long! I think it's time brands recognize the opportunities that exist when you tap into the creative our community has."

Bashir Munye | Chef, Culinary Professor & Food Advocate

"Black folks are not interested in empty gestures and symbolism. Keep your statues, basketball courts, tokenistic holidays, and the Neo Liberal discourse around inclusivity. What we want is economic justice, Black food sovereignty and judicial support for freedom and liberation.

"What have you done for me lately...?"

built. How can we tell the difference between an authentic partnership and a perfunctory action? Well, we may not be able to truly know what is in someone's heart or mind, but there are some tips on how to foster the purest partnerships possible.

Think long term. For starters, how long will this relationship last? Sure, if your organization is looking to highlight Black History Month, then of course the expectation for that specific campaign or event to occur and end in February is realistic. But does the entirety of the relationship only span those 28 magical days? Has there been any thought given to how this can be a true partnership and how you can develop an actual relationship? It makes sense for all parties involved to forge a long-term relationship because they yield better results, allow growth and resonate as more authentic to your audience, internal team, or customers.

Appreciate, don't appropriate. I've heard countless stories of restaurants and various other institutions wanting to celebrate Black History Month by adding culturally relevant foods to their menus, but not employing Black chefs to develop the recipes or have any input on the menu. Involving individuals who identify directly with the highlighted foods or initiatives not only legitimizes the gesture, but also properly respects the cuisine and culture. Another way to avoid appropriation is to do your research and not only offer the meal, but include a history of the food along with its cultural significance. Do not be afraid to reach out to experts outside your organization if there is no one who can accurately speak to it internally.

Take an honest look within. Do you have Black staff on your team? Does your organization foster and maintain actual relationships with members of the Black community outside of the workplace? Does your restaurant or brand attract Black customers? Often, taking an honest look at our internal landscape and closest relationships can be great indicators of work we may need to do to broaden connections with other people and cultures. If you are actively engaging with and attracting communities of colour, then meaningful exchanges with them must take place throughout the year and outside recognized moments of celebration.



EatFamous

I'm Ryan Hinkson and I eat a lot of food. Why? Because it's my job. And it's a really cool job. I'm a Food Culturalist. My guess is that you've probably never heard the term "Food Culturalist" before— there aren't a lot of people who do what I do. I highlight the changes in food culture and the people behind those changes.

quell.

Ryan Hinkson is a member of the Quell talent roster of diverse chefs, certified drink experts and health, lifestyle and food content creators. We're ready. Let's make real change together.
www.quellnow.com

Restaurants Canada

RC Show

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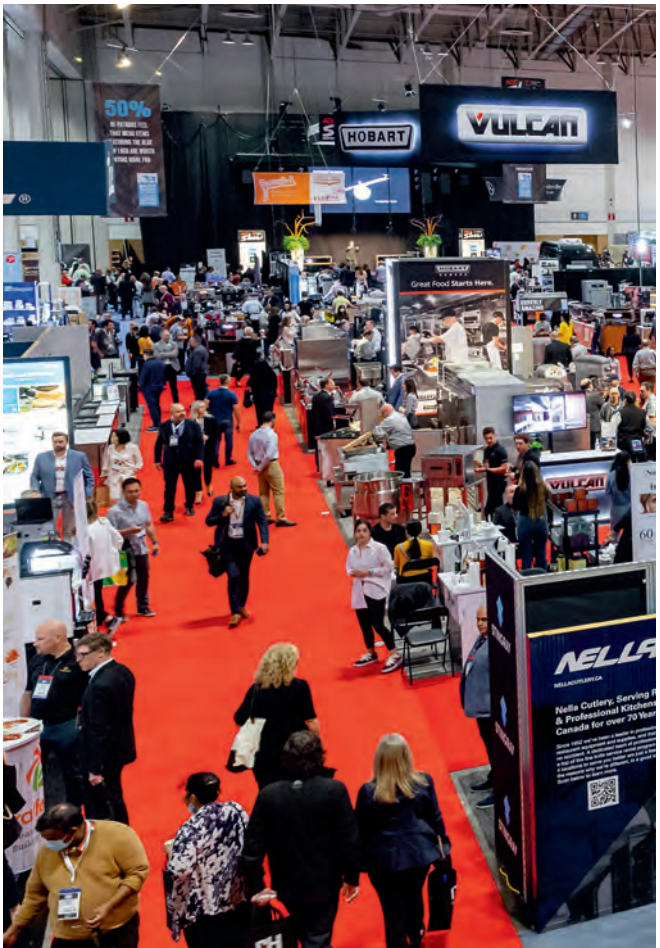
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Hospitality luminary Will Guidara on "Unreasonable Hospitality" and why it's important to create a hospitality-first culture and see it through. Lessons on how the art of hospitality can retain great talent, attract new talent and bring back raving customers—all of which will increase your profit margins.

THE TREND REPORT
from Restaurants Canada, CGA, IPSOS, NPD & Technomics
The latest data and insights on consumer trends, high-growth restaurant formats, sustainability, food and beverage opportunities and how to respond to consumers' number one ask: value.

MENTAL HEALTH IN HOSPITALITY
KRIS HALL | The Burnt Chef Project
Kris shares new resources and tools to support the eradication of mental health stigma within the hospitality industry.

SUSTAINABILITY & SINGLE-USE PLASTICS
EMILY ROBINSON, Guelph University
+ LEAF CANADA
Learn about back-of-house strategies and sourcing solutions for reducing single-use plastics.

FOODPRENEURIALISM
CHEFS IMRUN TEXEIRA & WALLACE WONG
+ JANICE BARTLEY OF FOODPRENEUR LAB
Self-employed chefs Imrun Texeira and Wallace Wong get together with Janice Bartley of Foodpreneur Lab to share stories and tips on how emerging talent can thrive as food entrepreneurs.

BAR & BEV GURUS
CHRISTINA VEIRA & EVELYN CHICK
Christina and Evelyn share insider tips on understanding and optimizing increasing demand for healthier/NoLo, local flavours and classic cocktail trends and creating effective bar promotions while managing supply chain challenges.

STATE OF THE INDUSTRY
RESTAURANTS CANADA
RC Show 2023 opens with Restaurants Canada's state of the industry, outlining the economic status and identifying the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for the foodservice industry.

SMART MARKETING PANEL
VICTOR PLANGE (Too Good To Go),
CHUCK ORTIZ (Back of House Creative Studio) & **DRE PAO**
Insights on how to (re)connect with your local customer base through social media and smart marketing.

GROWTH SERIES
A special in-Show content series to help operators and food brands get retail ready, access distribution, commercialize their products and market for success and export.

RESTAURANT LEADERSHIP PANELS
Leaders share their experiences on curated panels providing the full range of industry perspectives and outlooks from fine dining and full-service to fast casual and QSR.

BEER, WINE & SPIRIT INDUSTRY LEADERSHIP PANELS
National leaders share insights on upcoming trends, inflation challenges, product quality and sector ethics.



WATCH TOP TALENT COMPETE LIVE FOR TOP HONOURS & PRIZES

- Garland Canada Culinary Competition ($10,000 grand prize)
- Beyond the Rail Cocktail Competition ($5,000 grand prize)
- John Bil Oyster Shucking Competition
- National Barista Championship Qualifiers



+ NEW IN 2023

The first-ever **RC Show Pizza Competition**, **Food Truck Twisted Cuisine Chef Competition** ($5,000 grand prize) and **National Selections for the Bocuse d'Or and World Pastry Cup competitions**



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- ✔ **Breakfast With Champions**
- ✔ **Opening Night Reception**
- ✔ **Industry Night Out**

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The voice of foodservice | La voix des services alimentaires



RECIPE UNLIMITED CORP. has over 1,200 corporate, franchise and joint venture operations across five countries and has been a major force in Canadian foodservice for almost 140 years. Their brand portfolio includes Swiss Chalet, Harvey's, New York Fries, The Keg, Montana's BBQ & Bar, Kelseys, The Pickle Barrel, The Burger's Priest and many, many more. You don't realize that much scale and influence without incubating a profit-minded culture; however, Recipe has taken a bold, new approach to managing the quality and profitability of their brands. They have fully integrated their corporate and social strategies, placing their bets on people, planet and food, and it's paying off.

Julie Denton is one of the central architects of the plans and policies elevating the influence and opportunity spectrum for Recipe employees. Her business-minded approach is enriched by her rich, multi-sector consulting and industry experiences in fintech, the public sector and global mining. She brings strong bottom-line strategy and systems-thinking housed in her belief in people, the hospitality industry and doing the right thing.

We met with Julie to learn more about Recipe's journey so far, and to collect and share some of the key learnings, insights and ideas that can help Canadian operators turn today's challenges into future opportunities.

IN CONVERSATION WITH

JULIE DENTON

CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER, RECIPE UNLIMITED CORPORATION & RESTAURANTS CANADA BOARD MEMBER

MM You joined Recipe Unlimited, your first leadership role in the hospitality industry, in January 2019. What experiences helped prepare you for the role and what were your initial thoughts on the jobs to be done?

One of the benefits of having been in different industries is that you get to bring in tidbits from sectors that have evolved differently and are a little bit further down the path. My experience coming into the restaurant sector was that, for such a people oriented business, we actually didn't have great people practices. This business is all about hospitality, and all about people—that energy and passion that hospitality people bring. And yet, I don't think we were at the front end of people processes and practices.

Viewing the industry through a talent lens, and particularly through diversity, equity and inclusion, has been important for me. Our industry is a significant employer of women and new Canadians, so the fact that we weren't more intentional around our DE&I efforts was perhaps a little bit surprising.

MM How have those initial observations informed your talent, talent management and career progression strategies at Recipe?

We are big. One of the benefits of Recipe is that you can start as a garnishee at Harvey's and you become a training manager at one of our full-service brands with a phenomenal career progression. Mobility and movement are particularly important for us, but first, we had to put the systems in place to identify, grow, develop and nurture talent, and pull people up through the system.

If I think about my own lens and my own career, I've spent a lot of time on organizational effectiveness, talent management and talent practices. Bringing those learnings into this sector and applying them—whether it was paternity leave or maternity leave or other core policies and practices that we didn't have in place. For example, we needed virtual training and development programs that could accommodate people from all time zones all the way to mentorship programs to expose teammates to other colleagues with different work experiences they could learn from.

Viewing the industry through a talent lens and particularly through diversity, equity, and inclusion, has been important for me. Our industry is a significant employer of women and new Canadians. The fact that we weren't more intentional around our DE&I efforts was perhaps a little bit surprising.

There were just so many good examples from other industries we just didn't see in ours. I've got lots of colleagues at other competitive organizations where they're doing great things, but at Recipe, we recognized we had a lot to do.

MM Were you brought on to create and implement these strategies and programs at Recipe?

Yes. Our CEO, Frank Hennessey, is a people person with a clear vision. When he came back to the organization after having departed for a time, it looked a little different than when he left. He really felt that, as a hospitality organization, people needed to be more at the forefront than they were. When you have a CEO with a clear vision for that it makes the rest a lot easier. When I came in, my focus was on standing up what we call Recipe University, making sure we had a targeted training program and more engaging training tools in the field for restaurant team mates. We launched a number of programs and a gamification app to do training and we've got over 40,000 learners on that application now.

Multi-faceted training was a big part of our CEO's vision; however, he wanted a business person to be accountable for people. I am a business person, not an HR person, and my team will be the first to tell you that. We're focused on understanding and optimizing the ways we find and recognize great talent, deliver a positive employee onboarding experience and bring people up through the organization. We ask ourselves, "How do we offer something that's compelling to people?", "How do we recognize and reward them?", "How do we make sure that they've got benefits that meet their needs and they feel good about?". We introduced health and wellness benefits, which were particularly important during the pandemic, but it was developed more through a business-driven people lens than a traditional HR lens.

MM Recipe publicly releases a very business-minded and transparent CSR report that sets out strategic business targets and defines success metrics while being surprisingly frank about identifying gaps, particularly around DE&I goals. What is the objective of the report and how is it developed?

One of the core values at Recipe is "Do the right thing.", and we really believe that. Ironically, we launched our values in January of 2020 without knowing what was going to happen just six weeks later.

When we talk about our values of celebrating people, passion and curiosity, owning it and doing the right thing—all of those things are so instrumental to our CSR program. It's thorough, data-backed and robust. We've got an incredibly talented business lead in our strategic sourcing team, Gina da Costa, who leads that along with support from myself and Peter Vale. We have cross-func-

tional stewardship at the top, right up to our CEO and our executive steering committee. Our large brand leaders, our CEO, and CFO all participate at the governance level, from our chief development officers to our brand leads. Incredibly talented, passionate, curious individuals who want to do the right thing participate in our working team. Each functional group came with their ideas around what they wanted to do and what they thought we should achieve. We then put those ideas through a filter to figure out what we can get at and the effort and resourcing required to achieve it. We also hired an individual to project manage the process and really hold us accountable for what we said we're going to do.

One of the core working philosophies from our CEO and our team was transparency. We met with our auditors, independent rating agencies and one of our bankers to ask what our investors and the public are looking for and what they expect. What are our peers and our competitors doing? Who is doing it well? We did a lot of due diligence up front to agree on the right metrics and methods to hold ourselves accountable.

We've got large suppliers like Sysco and Maple Leaf that are a little bit further down the journey, so we wanted to learn from them as well. It started with governance and making sure that, right from the top, we were all aligned on what we wanted to do. I think the core value, "Do the right thing." really drove us, along with a commitment to transparency and data. It's one thing to put out a marketing piece, and quite another to be able to defend the data integrity down to the individual store. We also met with our governance committee regularly. Our board care deeply. Now that we've gone private, our new board still wants CSR updates because it's become part of our DNA now. Our working group meets weekly, so it's not something that people are doing off the sides of their desks.

MM What was the catalyst behind the organizational decision to prioritize the people strategy and undertake such a huge project? Was it driven by philosophy, economics or both?

At the time and still today, you couldn't pick up a paper without reading about plastics, reading about Davos, reading about what was going on in the world. We started looking at the amount of plastic we were generating—whether that was plastic bags, lids or straws. Our view was that we just had to take a stance; we needed to draw a line do better, so we asked what we could do better—what was in our realm of influence?

We started with a press release that stated, "We're eliminating plastic straws by this date." We just drew a line in the sand and that forced a sense of urgency to fix it and do better. It started, and then it snowballed. Don't get me wrong—it wasn't easy. We had a packaging team and a strategic sourcing team working behind the scenes on SKU after SKU. We've now converted approximately 300 SKUs to more sustainable alternatives in order to achieve our sustainable packaging goals. The sheer magnitude, the vendor engagement and involvement needed to transition that many SKUs was staggering.

We're also focusing on more sustainable sourcing efforts and commitments around seafood and beef and chicken, remain committed to supporting the humane treatment of animals. But it really started with plastic straws and that rippled into our strategic framework of People, Planet and Food.

MM These are large-scale changes. What impact have they had on culture and operations? What's the sense of the effect this work has had from the enterprise down to the store level?

Every function is probably impacted a little bit differently, and some of those are real tangible, positive benefits. When you talk about things like pay equity and things that touch people at their core, those are easier to explain. I think of employee resource groups for women and LGBTQ2S+, those are very much employee engagement tactics under our People pillar. These initiatives touch people at an emotional level. They're felt, and we do hear that people really enjoy being part of them. Employees enjoy being able to have an influence on creating policies or events or new activities.

We also have to be aware of incremental costs. If you move away from a plastic lid, there may be incremental dollars, so transparency and getting people onside to do the right thing sometimes requires a little bit more conversation, support and influence. Franchisees have embraced the changes around water and energy because those are also cost-saving measures. Some of the things we've introduced are not only the right thing to do, but also have some immediate payback in a world where costs are increasing. If we can show them positive financial benefits at the same time as doing the right thing, that makes it a little bit easier to sell.



The incredible team behind our Recipe Mentorship Program, our DEI team, and our DEI employee resource groups.



Our LGBTQ2S+ Employee Resource Group hosted a Pride party for our teammates to recognize and celebrate the significance of Pride month. Our team partnered with Toronto's 519 for the occasion, a non-profit dedicated to the advocacy for inclusion of LGBTQ2S+ communities.

To engage frontline staff, our brands make our corporate strategy relatable to their individual brand teams. Harvey's and New York Fries are great examples of that. They've driven their partnerships with Tree Canada right down to the store level, collaborating together to complete employee engagement activities such as tree planting across Canada. Plastic toys have been replaced with Harvey's Grow a Plant compostable activity pots, so they've taken that right down to the front line. Harvey's and New York Fries have also moved to paper packaging using certified sustainable sources. They are also using this as a catalyst for more conversation, resolving to do a better job with recycling. It started with moving the needle, being trusted to have a conversation, and grew to teammates wanting to share ideas to help us continue to do better.

Depending on the brand and depending on the stakeholder group, I would say they've embraced the changes differently. At the point of talent attraction, people connect with our values. The number of people who have read the CSR report is amazing. It's really rewarding when that comes up in an interview and they say, "You know, I read that and I was really touched by that". It is also great for us to see that we are engaging people who share a common set of values.

MM You have rightly earned a lot of respect for your work on strategic People programs and initiatives alongside the executive team at Recipe. What has that journey looked like, and where would you like to go from here?

One of our brand standards is better awareness around diversity, equity and inclusion. We make training and educational content available to franchisees and their teams that we've seen them embrace. It's something that cascades throughout the brand and all the teams. We did some mandatory training early in our DE&I journey for all general managers and franchisees, and every year we've added to the curriculum. Now, they have the option to self-select, but they choose to take it because they've found it really informative and engaging, and we're using local, not-for-profit partners to do it. It's a great way to engage not-for-profit associations and build relevant training material.

On the People side, we use education and offer training around unconscious bias for frontline managers and employees through our digital platform. We call it, "RU Game", as in "Recipe University Game", and we push out content around key topics and dates like Black History Month or Lunar New Year. It's very DE&I-oriented and contains significant unconscious bias training for staff across our brands.

We've taken a holistic view of the business—through the lens of People, Planet and Food—and we're very careful about pulling any one lever at any time. At no point do we want to impact franchisee profitability; full stop. That can't happen for them. That can't happen for any part of the company. So, we're committed to doing good, and we achieve it by balancing our initiatives. We have a very talented strategic sourcing team, and we have the size to purchase at scale. All of this adds incremental value and provides great employee engagement opportunities. And ideally, if there's great engagement and great training, there's less turnover. We take a balanced view that extends value across the entire company.

MM Recipe is a very large organization. Based on your experience and insights, are there any approaches and tactics you feel can help support any Canadian restaurant operation?

First, I think we really, really need to look at how we interact with our teammates and use a more teammate-friendly lens. It's about how you make the right introduction to the right talent at the right time for the right role. We got caught up in a "warm body in a seat" mentality. It was, "We've got a vacancy—let's go!". If you hire incorrectly right at the start, that causes a world of issues in your restaurant—wrong personality, wrong fit, wrong skill set, wrong core value set—and that can be really toxic.

Investing in hiring the right teammate and in delivering the right teammate experience from attraction to hire and making sure you have a compelling total offering is critical. That offering has to include benefits, it has to include some flexibility, it has to include the ability to choose your schedule and choose your shifts so that it works for people. During the pandemic, many industries had the benefit of naturally accommodating flexibility and hybrid work. That doesn't work as well in our industry, but there are tasks like scheduling and some of those back-of-house activities that do work in a hybrid world. Why can't managers do that off site in the convenience of their home around different work hours and perform guest-facing activities during restaurant hours?

It's about trying to think about how restaurant work could get done a little differently to accommodate a little bit more flex for this

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industry. That will help people stay. It's always easier to keep than to find new, so the flexibility and choice around schedule and pay—how and when people get paid, the frequency and the method—are important. There are many different providers and options available now from electronic tipping on cards, weekly pay or other methods. We've introduced just-in-time pay so, as soon as someone has worked their shift, they can get paid for it. Having that optionality for teammates and thinking about how, at each touchpoint, we can make it better makes a difference.

In looking at career development, we need to understand employee aspirations, know what they want to learn, and how they can grow in the restaurant. Can they do rotations and try different roles? Can they get involved in local marketing initiatives in the community? We've got so many in-house photographers now right at our fingertips, if we think of them that way. They could be ambassadors. Recognize an employee for taking a great picture and repost it. That's far more engaging than having an external company come out and take a picture of your food. We can leverage talent in more creative ways to let them grow and really do what they want to do.

MM Of course, it's difficult to measure success due to the volatility over the past few years, but what's your sense how these efforts and intiatives are working so far?

We track turnover and retention across all categories of roles, and we've got very low turnover in our manager group. If you have active and engaged managers, that experience cascades down to frontline teammates. Of course, there are markets that are trickier than others, where we still have pressure when someone across the street is offering 50 cents more. I don't know that we're ever going to completely move away from the Almighty Dollar as a deciding factor. Our hope is that all of those other benefits are far more compelling—that the ability to choose your shifts or the ability to learn and develop through Recipe University training platforms provides real career growth, engagement and stickiness. We also did a lot of compensation benchmarking, increasing the salary bands for our roles and launched profit-sharing and other new programs to drive more personal accountability with personal metrics, not just financial. Especially during COVID, we wanted the stores to feel like those bonuses were achievable, because it wasn't all financial.

We'll have a better sense of how we're doing in the next 60 days, when we can compare to last year at this time, when we were closed in many places across Ontario. We're just starting to get to the point where we'll finally have that 12 months of consistent information that feels a little bit more normal. That's when we'll really be able to start to prove out everything we've done.

MM From a 10,000-foot view, Recipe seems to have made big investments and some significant bets on the future. Do you feel all operators should be looking at finding ways to adopt similar future-proofing strategies and initiatives to avoid missing the moment?

> **The demographic mix of your team should be driven by the market in which you're operating. It's about making sure that your team reflects your local community and that success is backed by spectrum workplace policies and DE&I and unconscious bias training.**

Absolutely, and baby steps are better than no steps, right? Moving a number of things forward at the same time can be difficult, but you do need to do it with the end goal in mind: What kind of organization do you want to have? What is the employee experience you want to offer? I think operators really need to define that if they want employees that stay with them through thick and thin. Listening to what your employees want further improves your chances of keeping your core team together. Things like RSPs and longer-term retention strategies are great, but if you hire a lot of students, you might consider a monthly health and wellness benefit they can put toward their gym membership or running shoes. These tools align differently with different demographics, so having a clear understanding of your desired mix of teammates and lining up your programs against that makes sure the investment resonates and works.

Operators should meet with their employees, and directly ask what they want. If you spend the time to ask them and really understand, maybe they won't leave just because they have to work Saturday. You can figure out a different answer to Saturday. Internally, we found that too often people just aren't having those conversations to truly understand the intrinsic motivation of their teammates, and that that's the starting point.

MM Where do you feel operators should start? How should they think about and approach the intentional design and development of their team?

I think, we first need to recognize where our operations are located and the unique demographics of the market or markets. You want to make sure your team is reflective of the chemistry and the dynamic tapestry that is around you. Start there, and then understand the skill sets that you need and want for your team. I think a big part of the conversation for many Canadian operators right now is international workers.

If I wear my Restaurants Canada board hat for a moment, I'd say that was a big push in a lot of the engagement strategies recently, and the time to hire, time to fill roles and the amount of bureaucracy around finding that talent and bringing it in is a lot for operators to take on.



In support of a Toronto shelter, our Women's ERG spent some time packing custom kits to help local women and children who use the shelter as a safe haven. These kits are customized to include everything from clothing and toys to baby supplies and toiletries.

In general, operators want stability in the back of house and they can handle a little bit more flexibility in the other parts of the operation. Getting to that stable core may involve a complement of immigration and international foreign workers augmented by full-timers or long-term staff.

For us, recruiting within local markets is particularly important due to that chemistry that comes from local establishments resourcing folks who live locally. We really encourage that. We want our operators to be present in their restaurants so they really understand the demographics of the customers they're servicing.

Training around unconscious bias is important. We also encourage gender-neutral role planning to make sure that all talent, regardless of gender, can be successful in those roles. We ask managers to consider whether onboarding and training materials should be translated into different languages based on their market to make team member transactions more approachable and ultimately more successful. When you're trying to onboard a teammate and you're asking for sensitive information—like SIN and bank account numbers—translating that material into an employee's life language makes it a little less intimidating. We've found this to be particularly important.

The demographic mix of your team should be driven by the market in which you're operating. It's about making sure that your team reflects your local community and that success is backed by spectrum workplace policies and DE&I and unconscious bias training.

MM How do you measure your DE&I and training success?

Data is important. We start learning more about our teammates from the time of hire. For legacy employees, that process began during the launch of our performance management tool. The same time employees input their goals and objectives is a natural time for them to share a little bit more information about themselves. We let them know we would like to know more about them because we are trying to make sure that policies, processes and training are on the mark and address their needs. Sharing information is optional and we align with demographic data, descriptors and terms of reference from the Canadian census as people would commonly see and understand them.

MM What advice would you share with all operators to help manage the labour shortage and build a more engaged workforce?

I believe that whether you're a small operator or large, mentorship is one of the things we're going to have to really encourage. It's an important adjunct to retention in hospitality.

Laying a path for individuals to see themselves at the next career stage is particularly important. It's one of the pivotal things that we pushed on this year in our work on DE&I and CSR. It touches a lot of people. Whether you're a general manager in a restaurant, a territory manager or in accounts payable or admin, the ability to partner with somebody based on your career aspirations really changes the dynamic. And we do put a DE&I lens on that, so if you want to have a female mentor or be partnered with someone who shares your culture because you have a common journey and want to have a shared experience with them, we will accommodate. We ask mentors to identify their "superpower" to understand what they feel they do really well and could impart to others. Mentors also have the opportunity to request a DE&I match. Because these are personal and private conversations, we want employees to feel comfortable really opening up and want the mentorship experience to be engaging for both participants.

MM How are you and your team feeling about the road ahead for the hospitality industry?

The challenges of COVID and beyond have made our industry a little less desirable.

Collectively, we need to restore that desirability to our industry. It's fun. It's about passion. You learn so much here. You'll never learn more about guest experience and customer satisfaction, but we need to renew that passion.

Things like mentorship programs take the focus off the day-to-day and open up a bigger picture. Showing that you can come and stay and have meaningful career progression, longevity and stability in this industry is something that's been taken from us over the last few years. Anything we can do together to add more stickiness and respect for this industry and the people in it will be good and pay off for all of us.

RECIPE
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FOOD FOR FEMALES?

WHY PERSONALIZATION MATTERS

In their latest trend report, **NOURISH** looks at the ways personalization of food based on sex could be beneficial to bottom lines. **JO-ANN MCARTHUR, CO-FOUNDER** of Nourish talks with ***MENU*** about how and why retailers should consider offering female-targeted products.





MM Tell us a little about the trend report.

Our first report was published seven years ago. Since we work across the food ecosystem, we have a lot of our own research, and we also do research for clients. We started putting out our trend report as a gift back to the industry, because we are uniquely positioned to connect dots based on the work that we do, the trends we see and the clients we work with. We also have the past trend reports up on our website.

MM Your report covers a lot of different trends but, in particular, the section titled *This One's For the Ladies* mentions how "Female food is a missed opportunity we can no longer overlook." Why focus on sex?

If you look at the market, there's an unaddressed market of over half the population. Females don't have the same hormonal cycles or life stages that males do. We crave and need different things at different times of the month and at different points of our lives. Females are not smaller males. The industry caters to people who are "gluten-free" even though one per cent of the population are truly gluten-free. There are all these customized, personalized ways of eating whether it's keto or vegetarian or halal, but there's nothing that really caters to females.

MM Are there other industries that look at sex?

The wellness industry has been doing it for years. There are different vitamins based on gender, and even on ages. It just recognizes males and females are different.

MM Why is there an opportunity in food to look at female-based offerings?

There's a concept of food as medicine and the idea of the functional role of food. People want to get their nutrients from food, not from supplements. Looking at sex is a different spin on eating to optimize mental and physical performance. Food as fuel for performance.

MM How can operators personalize their menus or offerings?

Well, there's existing facial recognition software that identifies sex and you are presented with a different menu. Maybe a female will get a veggie burger or salad versus a regular burger. But realistically, you can think of the way we can customize smoothies, bowls or salads by adding functional ingredients and calling them out in a different way. The requirements in pregnancy, menstruation, menopause are different.

Some brands position their products based on different need states—maybe it's "Chill" or "Wake"—and understanding what your customer needs or wants from a different position. Maybe you have a product already that is rich in nutrients that can already support females' needs if it's marketed differently.

MM Can you give me examples of how this could look on a menu?

For instance, if someone is menstruating, they have certain cravings and could you support that by offering different ingredients. Hospitality is about this idea of personalized, bespoke experiences, why not on the menu or through loyalty programs that know you? Many retailers know when you're pregnant and start sending you offers related to being pregnant and having a baby. But on a menu, when you're pregnant, you eat differently—no alcohol, reduced caffeine. What if you had a special menu or special food items? Many restaurants have a kid's menu—expand that idea. What I want as a woman on a given day changes, like any customer, really.

Ultimately what we must recognize is that this generation of females celebrates all of the different life stages. They're able to talk about it, share experiences and communicate about what they need and feel—differently than our grandmothers did. The question is, how can you support that?

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For more information about Nourish's Trend Report visit: www.nourish.marketing

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Rachel Adjei & The Abibiman Project





RACHEL ADJEI IS THE FORCE BEHIND THE ABIBIMAN PROJECT, *a Toronto food concept that celebrates diverse cultures and cuisines from the African continent and Black diaspora. Her weekly pop-up dinner series and line of specialty food products elevate authentic regional African flavours and dishes through food education and experiences while giving back to her community.*

Born and raised in Toronto's Rexdale neighbourhood, food was always central to Rachel's tight-knit family life. She entered culinary studies at George Brown, but soon left for Quebec and then moved on to France to work. "Those were very formative experiences", she acknowledges. "I was independent and self-driven, and those experiences were explicit in showing me how representation was lacking in the food industry. I experienced a lot of discrimination, and it was very challenging being a young Black woman working in that field, especially in small towns. When I returned to Toronto, my confidence in my culinary skills had dwindled significantly."

Rachel stayed in the industry, finishing school while seeking out entry-level kitchen roles, opting to work her way up. She trained in East and Southeast Asian cuisine until workplace barriers and the intensity of the job convinced her to return to school to study pastry. "I fell in love with the delicate aspects and beauty of the pastry industry but during the pandemic, I lost my job. I found work in a butcher shop and helped out friends in their pastry shop. They offered me space to get my first pop-ups off the ground and, in the summer of 2020 when people were protesting and speaking up for Black people's rights to be heard and seen, I wanted to use my skill set to make change. There's a group called Afri-Can FoodBasket that provides Black folks with culturally appropriate food. They focus on food justice farming, and at that time, they were making culturally appropriate emergency food baskets for people in the Black community. I started my pop-up to support that and, during the first year of what would become The Abibiman Project, I donated all profits to that organization."

Rachel started small, selling Ghanaian peanut soup and Kenyan-style curry as well as crafting desserts featuring African ingredients. "That was my way of expressing my identity through my food," she says. "It allowed me to

combine my training with my traditional foods and introduce people to what African cooking has to offer while using that food experience to tell the stories of the people it belongs to." Through her food, Rachel found a way to have important, if sometimes uncomfortable, conversations about why African food isn't seen or celebrated within the culinary industry and why Black voices are silenced in the food industry, even though they helped build it. "African food is generally considered "less than"—ethnic food is considered "less than", and those populations often end up being the only champions of that cuisine," she shares. "We have less access to our ingredients at an affordable cost, so we have to make substitutions and that takes away from the presence the food could have. The ingredients are not accessible and therefore not palatable for the general public, who have little or no exposure to those flavours. When you place French food and food from Mali side by side, most people will have no experience with the food from Mali, so they make the unfortunate assumption that the less familiar food is "no good" or unhealthy or too spicy—these preconceived notions make it very challenging for Black food to be seen. It is reduced to catch-alls like jerk chicken and jollof rice."

As her pop-ups continued to build an audience around the city, demand for Rachel's spice blends, coffees, pastries and chocolate bars grew. "All of my products are developed from the traditional African ingredients or





recipes, with my own twist. They make African food more accessible while hopefully increasing awareness and popularity so that more Black chefs like me can create African foods and still be successful."

The Abibiman Project's pop-ups take place weekly and are designed to reconnect or introduce people to traditional African flavours. The dinners serve a broad customer base comprised of immigrants of African descent as well as curious foodies from all backgrounds. "My pop-ups are intimate experiences serving 15-20 people each week," Rachel says. "Last November, we started a new series with an evolving menu that provides guests with a broader background for each African region. We're currently doing the Swahili Coast, rotating dishes from Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique and the Comoros Islands so that people can try seafood dishes, for example, from the different areas within that larger region and understand the similarities and the differences."

These differences and details are important to Rachel and central to The Abibiman Project's offering. "I would like for the hospitality industry to be more supportive of African food, but with respect for where it comes from and made in the most authentic way possible," she says. "I want the industry to expect and welcome African food portrayed by African chefs who have the experience and knowledge or others who have done the work to thoroughly educate themselves so the representation of the food isn't skewed to the Western palate. It's not as challenging as it seems—there are so many Black people working in kitchens who could be those credible sources."

Many guests are "regulars" who return as the menu evolves. As word of mouth grows, reservations can be tough to come by, but Rachel is focused on growing her business and her social impact. "I want to reach as many audiences as possible while supporting local Black farmers, Black food sovereignty initiatives and continuing to work with and support Afri-Can FoodBasket. Eventually, I want to offer cooking classes for low-income youth and connect with local communities to educate people on the value of our foods. There's a demographic purchasing our product who have the luxury of purchasing our product, but there's also a demographic who are unable to access our product, yet still deserve to be connected to food in that way. Connecting with cultural foods provides a sense of dignity. I want to be in a position where I can support smart, talented Black folks who haven't been given opportunities and have experienced discrimination in other settings."

Rachel's business relies on the speed and security of the Interac e-transfer platform to collect customer payments. She was approached to partner with the company as part of their commitment to small business and community investment. "Interac really doesn't have anything to gain, it's a choice they're actively making to support entrepreneurs and small business," she says. "That's rare for large corporations. They've invited us to participate in further opportunities—it's not a one-and-done."

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AT FOODPRENEUR LAB, IT'S ALL ABOUT THE COLLAB

JANICE BARTLEY IS FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FOODPRENEUR LAB, a Toronto-based non-profit with a mandate to develop and support emerging and established food entrepreneurs in Black and under-represented communities. A Black woman and entrepreneur herself, she is experienced, focused and articulate —the kind of leader you instantly admire and want to learn from.

She is also the kind of leader who knows exactly what she wants: opportunities in and access to Canada's food system for Black food entrepreneurs, and the partnerships to accelerate and scale their businesses.

Foodpreneur Lab welcomes 50 participants each year, for a nine-month project. The application window opens each February and closes March 1st, with this year's new project group starting on their Foodpreneur Lab Path April 3rd.

Part of Foodpreneur Lab's focus is to create access for food entrepreneurs to the food ecosystem. Their mandate encompasses owner-operated culinary businesses as well as F&B product development and launch. They also provide support to help entrepreneurs access wholesalers to secure consistent supply and favourable pricing and specialized equipment. Bartley notes that processors often get stalled at the point they begin to achieve scale and need to introduce efficiencies to maintain and grow their momentum. "Small processors are evolving, and new pieces of equipment are required," Bartley explains. "Equipment is often needed to reach that next level. For example, I know someone who was trying to launch and it took her five years just to get a piece of machinery she needed that chopped coconuts—not the exterior, but the interior. That delay prevented her from scaling up because the time and labour spent chopping is so intensive."

Foodpreneur Lab's role begins with growing awareness of the market that exists within the Black diaspora, and that there is further market potential as these businesses grow and evolve, opening community storefronts, exploring retail distribution or building plants and factories. Bartley points out that the emerging community of Black food entrepreneurs seek opportunities to advance their products and services in support of the diaspora marketplace, but crucially, they're



The Foodpreneur Lab Team: *[Left to right]*
Jr Developer Felicia Guy-Lynch
Regional Expansion Manager Calla Lee
Executive Director Janice Bartley
Project Manager Marie Fitrion

Not pictured:
Program Director Paula Cooper;
Photo courtesy of Chantelle Jessica Arnaiz

looking for opportunities to collaborate to seize the full potential of their business concept. "These entrepreneurs are accessing these markets for the first time. As a community, we can't do it on our own, and food is not a stand-alone. We all need to cross-pollinate in various ways. Maybe you have underutilized space—how can we partner with you to maximize that space while minimizing the overhead cost? This is one of the many barriers that underserved communities face when they're looking to get their products to market."

Like so many female leaders, Bartley's vision for Foodpreneur Lab addresses real-world problems she had personally experienced. "I continuously walked into rooms where I was the only person of colour and that was a little bit daunting. It's not that you question whether you should be in the room, but you question the value you're going to bring. I don't care how strong you think you are; it's human nature. Over time, I realized I did have value, but first I had to overcome not having other peers who looked like me in the room. That in itself was an experience, but I wouldn't allow it to take away from what I needed. And, over those three decades, I was really able to see the significance and importance of not only networking, but of building partnerships. That's where longevity is bred. I looked at successful organizations and the partnerships they had in place, and I realized having that foundation was intrinsic to the success of any business."



Scale Pathway participant Eartha Lowe of Richer Earth and Foodpreneur Lab Project Manager Marie Fitrion on location shooting a video as part of the FPL program. Richer Earth products include Lowe's dressings and ketchup.

> As you get older, you start to ask yourself, "What's my purpose?" I noticed that men tend to use the word "legacy," but women want to give back in ways of purpose.

As Bartley moved through her career, she realized that the talents and skills she had were not benefiting or being shared with underserved communities. "As you get older, you start to ask yourself, "What's my purpose?", she recalls. "I noticed that men tend to use the word "legacy", but women want to give back in ways of purpose. I thought it was time for me to go back to community and take those same talents and plant the seeds to build something sustainable. I had the opportunity to do that when the Black Ecosystem Fund was launched and the request was put out for proposals in



Start Pathway participants Ken Benjamin of Lignum Honey, which produces Jamaican honey and Blue Mountain Coffee, with Robinson Sauces owner Robert Robinson, maker of fruit-based BBQ sauces & dry rubs at Foodpreneur Lab's Path celebration, Continuum.

December of 2020. For me, that was a pivotal event because the Government of Canada finally recognized that in order to grow entrepreneurship, you have to support entrepreneurship with funding dollars. The fact that we had not been collecting statistical data on underserved communities, specifically Black communities was really unfortunate, but now we're rectifying that. We pay taxes, we contribute to the economy. It's now been recognized that those funding dollars are important to build those foundational bases and create opportunities that we've never had access to. The statement or idea is that it's not that we can't perform, it's that we've had few opportunities to compete and perform. This was not only a phenomenal opportunity for me, it was also integral to stack the building blocks so that five or 10 years later, we could offer Black entrepreneurs, and especially youth, a plethora of new opportunities they might never have considered."

While Foodpreneur Lab is an incubator-accelerator for emerging food business, it has many intentional, unique qualities that address the specific needs and strengths of the entrepreneurial community it serves. Bartley's prior business experience had also exposed her to similar organizations where she had observed pitfalls and gaps she was careful to avoid. "I didn't want to design and create a duplicate of something that already existed," she acknowledges. "Even prior to being involved in accelerators and hubs, I believed we come from an archaic educational system, where people come in, you educate them and then you send them out. Unfortunately life doesn't work that way. Entrepreneurship is continuing education, end of story. It doesn't stop, you have to learn. You have to be agile and it's through experiences that you are taught these successes and failures—and more failures than successes, I might add. The failures play a significant role. They teach you creative thinking, and that's how you become a visionary."

Like many leaders, Bartley felt she didn't fit within the traditional model. "I didn't fit in traditional academics. It wasn't for me, and I quickly picked up on that. I thought, "Okay, if I was going to be an entrepreneur, what would I want? How would I make it differently?" I want to respect our lived experiences and that is what's missing in traditional incubators. They're not reflective of diverse communities and we hear it time and time again. "I had a product, and they didn't understand it," or "I was the only Black person and I was not confident enough to communicate my culture in that room." I don't care if you're five years old, or you're 55 years old, if I put you in a room and there's nobody else like you in that room, you're going to do one of two things: you're going to be super shiny or false because you're not used to being in that environment, or you're going to withdraw."

Another aspect Bartley acknowledges is the need for entrepreneurs to educate the room on the context of their product, before they even get into its unique attributes or value. "Food is medicine, especially in the Black diaspora," she explains. "Food has medicinal value for us, and so there needs to be an educational aspect to the innovation to bring these food products to the mainstream market," says Bartley. "Everybody wants something natural. I don't care if you want to look like younger, have shinier hair or longer nails— we're all chasing that ghost, okay? We're seeing an increased awareness of natural and healthy foods. Well, hello… that's kind of our wheelhouse. That conversation is where the connection starts. For example, we use moss for arthritis, to regulate blood pressure and the list goes on. But if we put it in a bottle and put it out into the market, it can start that education and communication. That's when we start to exchange ideas and then others can share back from their own culture. That's how relationships start. That is so important, because it's such a part of our identity—from yams to cassava to root vegetables to grains. I think what we're trying to explain or provide to our food entrepreneurs is a sense of pride in the opportunity to showcase what we are and the strength of what the community's about. And so, that dismissiveness will disappear over time. That's the intention and the hope."

With these insights and her own experiences in mind, Bartley set out to create an alternative, supportive enterprise that took lived experience and cultural perspectives into account within their model and participant experience. "The emotional element was very important because, within our community, trust is not easily given, it's earned. That trust comes in baby steps. But once you have it, they will travel the entire route with you. So, we proved we were a safe place, encouraged questions and made

> Entrepreneurship is continuing education, end of story. It doesn't stop, you have to learn.



Start Pathway participant Patrice McCreath of Patreats unveiling her first batch of Infus'd Fruit, a sweet alcohol-infused condiment similar to minced meat, made while working with Foodpreneur Lab.

ourselves available. We prove that our team is here, and we will move heaven and earth to support you. For some, entrepreneurship may have sounded glamorous but, when they get in, they realize, it isn't for them. That's par for the course. But, people fall usually fall out for one of two main reasons: they're either not sure of their idea or they're not ready. We work hard to eliminate the barriers other organizations may not address or even consider."

Foodpreneur Lab doesn't offer "programs", instead, entrepreneurs begin on a "pathway", taking the view that entrepreneurship is not academic, but experiential. "We really try and stay away from that because it's a deterrent," Bartley notes. "The minute some people think it's academic, they shut down based on their school experience."

The Start Path is designed for foodpreneurs with an idea they haven't yet launched or monetized. It focuses on delivering fundamental knowledge and improvement to transform ideas into market-ready prototypes. The Scale path addresses the needs of those further down the path. These participants already have a product in the marketplace and are ready to commericialize, scale or diversify.

Traditionally, most incubator-accelerators will do nine or 16 weeks, and they won't maintain their advisors and efforts to monitor or address what's happening in the new business for the long-term, Bartley points out, "An entrepreneur may not encounter that pain point until three or six months down the road. The beautiful thing about what we're doing is that when that challenge happens, our entrepreneurs still have access to Foodpreneur Lab advisors. We're invested in the whole journey."

Foodpreneur Lab is laser-focused on breaking down barriers to allow their entrepreneurs to fully access and participate in the food sector. For that to happen, Barley believes entrepreneurs first need to be heard and seen. "We want to have collaborations with wholesalers. There's a demand, and we are a resource. For any food business to succeed, regardless of colour or creed, there has to be the intention to collaborate, otherwise it won't survive. We have a food insecurity issue, right now, that spans all income levels. If we're talking about food insecurity, food sovereignty, then we really have to step back and look at the food ecosystem, dismantle the pieces that aren't working—and trust me, some of them are not working—and look at how we can innovate to rejig the system to thrive. For everyone."

What Foodpreneur Lab wants most from the industry is access, followed by collaboration. "Collaboration is integral for growth throughout all platforms, but especially in the food space," Bartley asserts. "I personally acknowledge I cannot do this on my own. It has to be an industry partnership. And I've been saying this for over a decade and so finally, you know, organizations like Restaurants Canada are listening; they're hearing. That's huge for me. I have been waiting for you guys for 10 years, okay?"

> Collaboration is integral for growth throughout all platforms, but especially in the food space.

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RC Show Restaurants Canada
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Hear from **Janice Bartley** on the **Speaker Stage** at RC Show 2023 for **the Foodpreneurialism panel**. with chefs **Imrun Texeira** and **Wallace Wong**. Scan and learn more:

The Next Generation: Sharing Stories of Heart & Hustle

The future of the industry is bright.

This year's RC Show theme, "Heart & Hustle" brings together what industry veterans and apprentices already know–hospitality comes from the heart. It's about sharing your family recipes, your culture, your skills and feeding communities. The hustle is the sound and soul that drives every person in the industry to work smart, to devote a lifetime of early hours and late nights to keep doors open.

Three women share personal stories of the moment they fell in love with the industry, a time the industry broke their hearts and their hopes for the future of hospitality.



Meet Dacyion Reid

First job:
KFC Jamaica Team Member

I was born in May Pen, Clarendon Jamaica. I fell in love with food at the tender age of seven, but ventured into other waters such as business management and social work. After over 13 years, I finally answered my true calling and passion for food! In September of 2018 I made the decision to attend culinary school to hone my skills and enrolled in the School of Hospitality, Recreation and Tourism in the culinary management program at Humber College. I graduated with honours at the top of my class. With many early childhood memories and experiences with food, I have a strong foundation and continue to learn and grow as a chef. I specialize in gourmet, healthy home cooking, meal planning, recipe developing, food styling and food photography. I express my love for food in the meals I have created by fusing my Jamaican culture with other cuisines. I'm motivated by my kids, fellow chefs and goals I want to achieve.

MM Tell us about the moment you fell in love with the industry.

I've always been in love with the industry; however, it took a long time for me to finally accept what had been in front me the entire time. I've always had this passion for food, cooking and creativity and feeding hungry tummies while satisfying people's palates. It wasn't until life dealt me some harsh cards when I made the ultimate decision to walk in faith and follow my heart and dream.

MM Tell us about a time when the industry broke your heart.

I haven't been in the industry that long or on that side of the industry, therefore my experiences have been different. However, I've heard stories from friends who have been in the industry many years before me who have been dealt dirty. There have been betrayals, biases, heartbreaks, broken relationships and discrimination.

MM What would you like to see changed in the industry?

What I would like to see changed in the industry is equality across the board. Female chefs being treated equally for their talents and contributions to the team and not being treated with bias, being devalued, underpaid and not missing opportunities because of their sexual orientation.

MM Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

In the next 10 years I see myself as a woman who continues to break barriers and overcome challenges. I see the expansion of my company,

Dacy's Gourmet Kitchen, a dine-in restaurant and one-stop-shop catering company. Writing cookbooks and hosting cooking classes. Doing corporate catering for all events. I'll continue to learn more about the business and the knowledge and network connections that will equip me to be a better entrepreneur and not just a chef.

What would you say to other women who are looking at entering the hospitality industry?

I would say that there is more than enough room for you to enter and make your mark. Most importantly, always be yourself. Don't try to fit into the box. Keep learning, believing and inspiring yourself and others. Always ask questions and don't shy away from opportunities for improvement, personal growth and development. We are women. We are unstoppable. We create even when it seems impossible to create.

dacysgourmet_kitchen

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www.dacyion.com



Meet Melanie Cameron

First job:
Kitchen Prep & Banquet/Buffet Server

I always knew that I wanted to go to culinary school or do something related to restaurants because I have always dreamed of opening my own French-inspired café. Against the odds, I became the first-generation post-secondary student in both my immediate and extended families. I completed the hospitality management, hotel and restaurant (co-op) program at Niagara College and graduated in 2007. I am currently enrolled in Centennial College's baking and pastry arts management program.

Throughout my childhood, I watched and learned from my French-Canadian grand-maman and my Dutch-English grandmother. I learned how to cook, bake, garden, can and preserve. I wish I had had more time with my grandmothers to learn all they knew and carry on the traditions that had been passed through generations.

Tell us about the moment you fell in love with the industry.

I remember being 8-10 years old, reading through my grandmothers' old cookbooks and thinking I was a rockstar when I would successfully recreate a dish from the cookbooks. I observed my grandmothers with tremendous curiosity throughout my childhood. Then, when I started working in kitchens—mostly peeling vegetables, washing produce, serving banquet/buffet-style, and cleaning—I found a true passion. I built on the passion through my high school years by taking all the cooking classes I could. I would go on to carry that passion through my professional choices, and further enhance it with my college education.

Tell us about a time when the industry broke your heart.

Over the years, I have been disheartened by the amount of waste in the food industry and have often questioned why it could not be donated or re-purposed in a more strategic manner. There are so many people all around us who experience and suffer from food insecurity that I can't help but envision plans for a brighter future with less waste and more sustainable options. My heart breaks every time I see a local small or family-owned foodservice business close its doors and we experienced tremendous heartbreak with this issue with the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Even businesses that had been around for several decades were left with no choice but to close their doors for the last time.

What would you like to see changed in the industry?

It is well known that the food industry is one of those fields that has been predominantly male dominated for a long time. I think the gears are shifting in that respect and more women/females have risen and continue to come out of the woodwork—quite successfully. I would like to continue seeing more women in the food industry and most of all owning and operating foodservice establishments.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

In 10 years, I see myself operating my very own café/bakeshop (bistro). I will be growing my own vegetables, berries and herbs for use in my bakeshop and my own home. I will have partnerships with other local entrepreneurs to source ingredients that I cannot produce myself. I will also be spearheading the venture I am currently working on developing, that will provide food and basic needs provisions to those in need in our communities.

I hope to also establish partnerships with schools to bring safe, healthy and local food into their cafeterias and breakfast programs because I firmly believe that no child should ever go without a meal and/or question where their next meal is coming from. I will also be looking for ways to establish or collaborate with other efforts to build community gardens where people can come and learn, plant, tend to and acquire fresh food to help sustain their nourishment.


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What would you say to other women who are looking at entering the hospitality industry?

Be strong and be fierce! Learn with every opportunity you get! Do not give up! No matter how hard it gets, no matter how much you question your own resolve, no matter the fear and doubt—keep going. Let the negativity of others be the fuel for your passion. You sometimes will have to fight for what you want, and what you believe in, and you will need to advocate for yourself and your success.

Stand true to what you believe in and do not let anyone stand in your way. Respect the hierarchy when it comes to learning and absorb what others teach you along the way. Do not be afraid to ask questions or admit that you don't know something. In every challenge, every struggle, and every mistake there is a valuable lesson to be learned!

mel.cameron.35
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melanie Cameron



Meet Geraldine Artillaga

First job:
Television and Live Events Producer

I have an undergraduate degree from the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines in Communication Arts and I spent over 20 years working as a TV and live events producer which I loved. But the pandemic caused television production and live events to stop, and with it my livelihood. In 2021, I took the opportunity to relocate to Canada to enrol in Conestoga College's culinary management program to pursue my passion for food and cooking. It has been both scary and exciting to start the pursuit of a new career while simultaneously relocating to another country.

Tell us about the moment you fell in love with the industry.

As a chef, there's always opportunity to grow and learn and it's something one never stops doing. During the program, I find Inspiration is everywhere, every corner, every relationship, every country you have visited, every moment. The program has really shaped how I look at food and its beautiful and integral relationship with all aspects of our lives.

Tell us about a time when the industry broke your heart.

I don't recall ever having my heart broken by the business as I have been fortunate and blessed to work with and be mentored by my wonderful college Professors Chef Philippe Saraiva, Chef Brian Abbott, Chef Allen, Chef Sean Duffy, Chef Eric Nieves, Chef Amede Lamarche and Chef Brad Lomanto and happy classmates. But coworkers and students have shared with me the difficult circumstances they have encountered. Many restaurants closed during the pandemic, and many chefs and people in the industry switched jobs. There is a scarcity now of chefs and people to work in restaurants. Chefs and people who spent years honing their craft and dedicating their time to the industry now quitting their jobs or leaving the industry is heartbreaking.

What would you like to see changed in the industry?

"Equality in the kitchen" still doesn't get much financing or attention and is generally not a topic of discussion in the industry. I would love to contribute to the greater presence of women in the commercial culinary industry. Not only in the commercial kitchen creating incredible dishes, but also having a significant contribution in all areas of the business and making decisions that have an impact on how the industry is run.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Owning a café where I am engaged with my customers has always been my ideal business. It doesn't have to be big, but it must be peaceful and cozy and create a memorable experience for my clients. I want to create a space where I can be myself, since it reflects my values in how I connect with others and allows me to express myself through food.

What would you say to other women who are looking at entering the hospitality industry?

Age is simply a number! At the age of 43, I changed course in my career to pursue this passion. We all have the courage within us to pursue our dreams. Women have long fought for equality in all aspects of their lives. It is definitely true that this broad push toward equality has had an effect on the professional kitchen. Strong female chefs and restaurateurs have shown the world what we are capable of and I am excited to see what the next generation of female chefs accomplishes.

Ultimately, If you have a strong passion, if you have a strong work ethic, if you listen, if you're willing to adapt and learn, you can make something incredible happen.

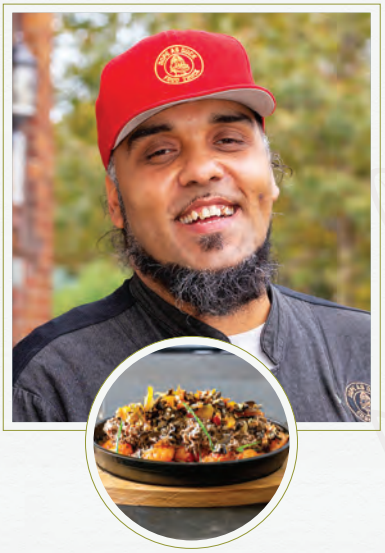
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CHEF MEERU DHALWALA

&

JASMINE BAKER

in conversation on entrepreneurship and hospitality in the midst of motherhood



Meeru Dhalwala, Executive Chef, cookbook author and co-owner of Vij's restaurant, blew into the world of Vancouver hospitality following a career in Washington DC with international non-profit organizations where she worked on human rights and economic development projects. She recently started My Bambiri, an organic baby food company, where she just finished a successful trial of an income-based pricing model designed to make quality, organic baby food available and more affordable for mothers and their babies.



Jasmine Baker is a recipe developer, culinary curator and entertaining expert who has worked across all aspects of the Toronto restaurant scene. Having recently moved to Prince Edward County and welcomed twin boys, she is the curator of the Garland Culinary Competition at RC Show 2023, recognized for her work in making space for equal representation of female and underrepresented talent on the Canadian culinary stage.

We brought Meeru and Jasmine together to share their experiences and perspectives on the joys and challenges they've faced over long hospitality careers, the role of women in the sector, and what it takes to stay connected and true to themselves while juggling the joys and pressures of motherhood as leaders and entrepreneurs.



Jasmine Baker: *So, my family all worked in the industry—in fact, my mom and my dad's siblings all worked at the same venue—and so, I grew up in the business. At a young age I told my mom I wanted to be a chef and she was horrified. She said, "Do anything else. Just don't work in the restaurant industry.", but I was always drawn to food and I observed people doing what they loved and bringing people together. I think that was part of what drew me to it."*



Meeru Dhalwala: *Yeah...I'm the opposite. The restaurant industry never even entered my mind as a possible career. It could have been Mars as far as I was concerned. I barely even knew how to use a knife. I mean, I could use a knife to roughly chop up onions to make the chickpea curry that Mom had taught me to make, but cooking wasn't really a part of my life until the age of 30. I loved my career in economics. I loved my career working for international non-profits in Washington DC. I didn't even want to leave DC, but the winds of life just kind of blew me to Vancouver. I entered Vij's and within two years I was a mother. I taught myself how to cook and how to be a mom at the same time. It was all just happening —I was surfing a wave. I turned out to be a really awesome surfer.*

JB: *You were so young, and you took everything on at once! We had our babies very late in life; it took us 11 years to get pregnant.*

Over the years, my doctors kept saying, "You have to slow down...you have to slow down!" I always thought I was slowing down, but truthfully, when I look back at it, I wasn't. It was hard to explain to my employers that I was going to have to go and do cycle monitoring every morning. That I was going to be late for work probably 90 per cent of the time. And so there were many cycles that I just didn't continue with because I felt like I was letting my team down or that I couldn't keep making that excuse. It was difficult to ask for space from my team and my employers. Later, when I was working for myself, I kept feeling guilty

"I made a very important decision, and I told Vikram that if I did it, no matter what, we were getting paid equally. I don't care if I'm only working five hours and you're working 12—my brain input is going to be equivalent. And, if we're going to have babies and all that goes with that, you and I will have equal say and equal pay for the rest of our lives as partners. And he agreed. We are maintaining that to this day."

~ Meeru Dhalwala

about creating that extra space for myself. So, in some ways the pandemic has been a big blessing for us. We were finally able to slow down and have our babies. I mean, it wasn't like we chose this route, but I run an event company and my husband was a hospitality recruiter, so our businesses came to a screeching halt in 2020. My husband is in his 50s and I'm in my late 40s and we have two tiny humans to look after.

I always thought that, when it finally happened, I would stop working. We'd worked so hard and for so long to have these children that I didn't want to miss a thing. Now that I'm here, I've reached a clearer understanding of how I want to show up for my kids, and how I want them to see me. I want to be there for everything, but I also want them to see me having other interests, having passions. I'm a mom, but I'm also a woman, a businesswoman and a driven entrepreneur. I want them to see all those things and I want them to learn that women can be all of those things.

Meeru, your children are much older and I'm just in awe—how does it feel to be at that place, that evolution of motherhood?

MD: *We're at very different ends of it. My kids are now 26 and 23, but it was a very exciting time. I'd never had so much love at once in my life. I had just discovered this love of using my hands and figuring out different, concoctions with spices and different ingredients, this love of this man I had just married all the way across not only the country but from DC to Vancouver, and then the babies. It was a lot; it was sometimes hard and I would cry, but at the same time it was just such a full moment. I thought, "Hold on a second—you can't complain." I do look at my position and my place in this world because of my previous job.*

We had two active projects in Rwanda April 1994 when the genocide happened, and our entire local staff was massacred. We had projects in Malawi on AIDS awareness and prevention and actually, when I met Vikram, my choice was either, "Okay, I'm going to go to Uganda and work in the AIDS awareness and prevention office in Kampala or I'm going to fall in love and move today. I actually had a very distinct choice between career or love, so for me, everything I do is based on thinking about my place in this world and how that determines who I am as a woman. I have that double thing where people ask me if I consider myself a person of colour or a woman first? I consider myself both, of course, but at my core, I consider myself a woman first.

I considered Vij's like my adopted baby. It was six weeks old when I entered Vikram's life. It was still serving Arabic. Like, I don't even know what he was serving... I didn't even have a work permit and I said to Vikram, "Hold on, I can do this". My Masters degree was in Third World economic development, so I thought, "How do we take this little 14-seater restaurant with ripped up carpet making five bucks a day and lift it? I made a very important decision, and I told Vikram that if I did it, no matter what, we were getting paid equally. I don't care if I'm only working five hours and you're working 12—my brain input is going to be equivalent. And, if we're going to have babies and all that goes with that, you and I will have equal say and equal pay for the rest of our lives as partners. And he agreed. We are maintaining that to this day.

JB: *It's like you could see the challenges of the competing roles of wife, mother and career person when you made that "contract" in the early days.*

MD: *Well, the dynamic of a husband and wife working together in the same restaurants, Vij's and Rangoli—it was very hard for us, eventually, to not bring it home. Vikram and I split up after 17 years of marriage and I see that as a big success. I do. We had 15 awesome years. And we did the same thing, Jasmine, we would sneak in an hour here and there for coffee and we wouldn't get our own private time until 10:30 at night. But one thing is, it wasn't me, and it wasn't just Vikram. It's very much a man's world here, in Vancouver, at least, right? And we had a little bit of a different dynamic because my experience is not in the restaurant business. I didn't understand the personalities. I was like, "Vikram, you're really going to get so f****** bent out of whack over a slab of meat when you've got people in Uganda dying of AIDS...*

"Later, when I was working for myself, I kept feeling guilty about creating that extra space for myself. So, in some ways the pandemic has been a big blessing for us. We were finally able to slow down and have our babies."

~ Jasmine Baker

really? I had that righteousness in me, so it was a real adjustment. The food waste in our industry and all the European trained chefs who are so focused on all the wrong things. I was like, really? You want your food to be based on such an uptight, white male kitchen?

It was a gift for me at the same time. When I saw the chauvinism that was out there in the 90s, I realized that was not my job; I was not going to do that. I created my own world and that was something. I don't want to say Vikram, gave it to me. It wasn't like he was my boss, and he gave it to me. It was something that I took, and I created. As a team we decided that Vikram would go out into the world and be the passionate face of Vij's, because that's what he loves. I wanted to work and create in my private space. And so, we agreed that inside the four walls was mine, and outside the four walls was his. That's how it worked for us for such a long time.

And then I had the thought, as an immigrant now, I watched my mother's experience. She was lonely, she became an alcoholic, she couldn't speak any English. When we left India in 1969, my mother was a classical singer on the radio; my mom was a sitar player—an artist in India. We came to America and suddenly I'm an ESL kid when there is no such thing as ESL. Where you are Black or you are white—there was no in-between. There was no community. Dad went out to work, I started kindergarten, my sister was born in America, but I watched my mother...and I think that was my first lesson in being a woman and feminism.

After I trained myself and I got the Vij's menu going, I said, "Alright. Meeru, you have finally found your venue to create the change, to create this community, to create what you

"I watched my mother's experience. She was lonely, she became an alcoholic, she couldn't speak any English. When we left India in 1969, my mother was a classical singer on the radio; my mom was a sitar player—an artist in India [...] I think that was my first lesson in being a woman and feminism."

~ Meeru Dhalwala

want—your world to be for fellow women and for people. It's a shared stage. I don't wish to push somebody off. I'm not in a bashing, right? I want to share. I mean Jasmine, we really love our husbands—well, he's my ex—but we're just saying, "Hey, we're coming up with you, alright?"

JB: *Yes, yes.*

MD: *And so, that's how I started hiring back then. I hired women who reminded me of who my mother was back in 1969, when she was 26 or 27 years old. I found myself time traveling to hire women I thought, "Hey, I started off as a dishwasher at Vij's". So, we trained. Now, all of us in the kitchen at Vij's start as dishwashers. We train and share each other's jobs. We don't compete. Everybody knows how to do everything so that when you need to take time off to go on family vacations with your kids, when your kid is home sick, you're not worried. You don't worry someone is going to take your job or you'll get demoted. None of that. It's such a team, and that's why we thrive.*

JB: *I love that. I really wish that you were around when I was managing. This conversation is so important and it can inspire people everywhere to do the same. Are you having this conversation with other operators who could maybe do some of the same work or could follow your hiring and team building practices to create teams that are supportive of family balance?*

MD: *I don't know. I do speak to Shira Blustein a lot. She owns The Acorn and The Arbor restaurants—she's not a chef in the kitchen. She's as strong as I am. She doesn't cave. I think for Vij's, I had such a mission of hiring women who don't speak English—new immigrant women who just need to stand someplace to shine. Shanik, the Seattle restaurant, was all refugees from Eritrea and Ethiopia, and we were semi-finalists for the James Beard. Best new restaurant in the United States. It was refugee women and new immigrant women from India cooking. I know that Andrea Carlson at Burdock & Co. also has a very strong female team in her kitchen, so the shift is happening.*

JB: *Incredible. A good friend of mine is the owner, operator and chef of a successful Toronto restaurant that just celebrated 20 years. She often refers to her restaurant as her "baby" and she has shared very openly that she's had a difficult time deciding if she could have a family because the industry just doesn't support women having a career and family. There isn't enough support out there. I know they're making some strides in New York, with daycares that operate in off-hours for hospitality workers. But locally, how do you care for young children and work in a restaurant if the childcare hours don't match your restaurant hours? It's an interesting challenge for all of us.*

We need to see more women elevated. We need to see more women sharing the stage. I work mainly in culinary events, curating and producing. Vikram has actually been on some of our stages, and it was actually at one of the events that he did for us that a female chef pointed out to me afterwards that the male chefs were getting more money to do the exact same work the female chefs were. At the time, we said it was about marketability and these male chefs had larger audiences on Instagram. She looked at me and she said, "Well, how are we ever going to change that if you're not going to give us the same kind of opportunities that you're giving them? And I said, "You're right."

I had thought I was a champion of women. When I started this, it was only men on those culinary stages. To have even one female chef on the stage was a big deal. So, I thought, "Okay, I'm going to make sure there's just as many women as men on those stages, but for a while I was paying those men two and three times what I was paying those women. Honestly Meeru, I was ashamed. It completely shattered me. I couldn't believe how ignorant I had been. How I was part of the problem.

At that point, I just decided to change things up and we started working with our clients and saying, "Listen, we have to create opportunities for women. The women have to be able to earn just as much money, and the marketing is on us. We can't be just relying on the chefs who have hundreds of thousands of followers. We have to be able to make these opportunities, make it fair and make them work, and pay everybody the same. We started doing that.

At the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, one of our bigger events, we have 45 chefs over the course of 10 weeks doing cooking classes for people of all ages. In order to make equal pay for everybody work, it meant that some of those better-known chefs couldn't make as much as they might expect or usually receive. It used to be that some people were making $2,000, while others were making just $500 and still others were doing it for free. To make space and make it fair, everybody needed to make the same money, and everybody needed to be paid. Thankfully, when I told them what we were doing and why, a lot of the top earning male chefs were totally game.

We're trying to create opportunities for those new, underrepresented chefs who are looking to break into the market and become known for their craft, and for females—everybody—to make the same amount of money. Once we explain it to them, a lot of the brands we work with are happy to do it—they just didn't know. I used to think that it would be so hard to get everybody to buy into this, but I just had to have the right conversation and be willing to have it.

MD: *I don't want to lose this—you said you were part of the problem, but what you did was turn that problem into a process. You didn't allow it to stay a problem, right? When you identified the problem, you didn't just quietly or safely contribute to it and keep*

that problem going because it suited you. You turned it into a process that gets something done to make change.

JB: *Thank you for that.*

MD: *And I'm guilty in another way. When I got into the restaurant industry in the early 90s, I wasn't a trained chef—I hadn't had an onion thrown at my head by some European chef. I didn't do my apprenticeship. I stayed in the kitchen and I stayed quiet. Even though I was so confident with Vikram, and I stood my ground and knew my worth in the restaurant, outside the restaurant Vikram makes more money than I do.*

It started with the first cookbook. I wrote all three cookbooks—Vikram knows, it's not like he's hiding it. I love doing it and I put my heart and soul into it. It was the publisher who refused to put my name first on the first cookbook. It was not Vikram, it was not me. The publisher said it wouldn't sell if we put my name first.

JB: *Wow...*

MD: *The publisher said they were sorry, but it won't sell if we put Meeru's name first. We're sorry, but that's the reality of it. People don't know your name. Vikram is the one that pulls in the sales. I let it go because I wanted the book to sell. The first book won Cuisine Canada's Gold for Cookbook of the Year. Vikram's name is first on this key cookbook.*

When the second book was done, as the first had won Gold, I had proven I could write cookbooks. This time, the publisher said yes, they would put my name first. But the first cookbook is considered Vikram's cookbook. We did the second and we did the third book— we identified the problem and turned it into a process as well, right? And I don't want it to seem like it really hurt my feelings after the fact, because it didn't. Everyone is a little guilty. I mean, who elevated the celebrity chefs? All of us did.

JB: *Yes! Looking back, I started off in culinary school probably around the same time you were starting in the industry. I was one of maybe a dozen females in the chef training program. There were a lot of angry, old-school chefs, and none of them took us seriously. When I went out into the industry, it became very clear, very quickly, that I could be a prep cook, maybe be garde manger, but I was not going any further than that —at least not at the rate that I wanted to.*

I moved into front-of-house management because I knew I was ambitious and I wanted to move up quickly. I managed restaurants for years and then I got into events. Events was where I felt like I could actually get back into designing menus for clients. I could design menus and food experiences, so it allowed me to sort of get back into the food side of things. But while I was in the industry and I was working with people, I realized that I was making it hard for other women who were working under me. I made it hard, I think, because I had to work so hard to get there, I almost felt like that was a rite of passage. That you have to prove yourself to get promoted; you have to work harder than everyone else. I remember catching myself at one point and just thinking, "Wow. Why do we do this, as women? How can I support instead of continuing and encouraging these behaviours?"

I didn't know the phrase "hustle culture" at that time, but I realized now that I was perpetuating that. And that women didn't really support other women. And now, I think we realize that we can, and we should, and that there are ways to do it. We have a responsibility to make it easier and to create more opportunities for women in areas where opportunities are still given to men easily while women are still having to earn them.

MD: *Like separate stages for men and women. That's insulting to me. I want everybody up on that stage, respecting each other as equals.*

JB: *Absolutely. We produce the Garland Culinary Competition for Restaurants Canada and in 2020, we all came together and decided we needed to hold space for women and BIPOC chefs. When the mass industry applies to compete and there are 12 competitors, six of them need to be women, and we prioritize People of Colour. During these discussions and the planning, we all needed to learn what it means to "hold space". Truthfully, we're still learning and every year we uncover new challenges with this initiative and identify more obstacles for women and BIPOC chefs.*

Every year I have to pick up the phone and personally call young women out there and beg them to apply. Most women think they won't get in or they think they can't afford the time. They feel like they can't take the risk or invest in themselves. If they have families, they don't apply because they just can't possibly carve out the time to do this for themselves. We want young female and BIPOC chefs to take their rightful place on this stage. This is not a stage that's owned by white men anymore. It's for everybody."

MD: *Male camaraderie though, right? It's very intimidating. Camaraderie is tough when you know you're not a part of that. It can be a little like starting a new school.*

JB: *Yes.*

MD: *You can't expect change without participating in the process and the process isn't always fun. But if I want something for myself, I can't make everybody else do it for me.*

JB: *Totally. Yes. Women have a lot to take on and think about it in pursuit of fulfilment in their work.*

MD: *Yeah. There's a lot of boring s*** I have*

"I've reached a clearer understanding of how I want to show up for my kids, and how I want them to see me. I want to be there for everything, but I also want them to see me having other interests, having passions. I'm a mom, but I'm also a woman, a businesswoman and a driven entrepreneur. I want them to see all those things and I want them to learn that women can be all of those things."

~ Jasmine Baker

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to do as part of my job. I don't expect to just do the fun stuff. You can have a meaningful job but sometimes it's stuff like changing diapers, right? It's like, "Oh God, the baby's awake and it's 3:30 in the morning." That work is mundane, but still meaningful. If you're only doing the fun stuff, it's really not as meaningful in the end. I want opportunity for growth and creativity, I don't want to be muzzled or pigeonholed. I don't want my job to be defined to the point I can't grow and create within it. That's what meaning is for me.

Take my chef's jacket—I don't wear that boxy white thing men wear. I've got a nice figure, so why not, like, why not? I don't want to be a man, so I'm not going to wear that uptight, white starchy thing. I wear my nice black shirts because they make me feel like, who I am when I'm cooking.

JB: *I love that so much. I think that's a really great distinction because there are a lot of mundane tasks and like, just b*******, we have to deal with in order to serve a purpose and maybe that's part of what we teach the next generation. That you have to do a lot of things you don't want to do but are you still doing something with meaning. You have to ask if you're doing meaningful work in the grand scheme of things. Everything I do, whether it's a restaurant I've worked with or an event that I'm working on, I ask myself, "How am I serving a community?", "Has it served multiple communities?", "How am I continuing to serve?" I don't know if that provides enough meaning to younger generations, but I hope they ask themselves how they are being of service too. It sort of gives me a bit of a gut check, you know, like am I on the right path? I think, quite often we find ourselves doing things out of vanity or to serve our ego or to try to fill a void. If we're in service to a community or to people who truly benefit from it in some capacity, I think that helps to bring us back to where we should be.*

MD: *The task is to find our own bigger meaning and work hard and do whatever is required for it. How awesome would that be?*

The younger generation, especially people in their 20s, definitely don't have to contend with the same level of open misogyny or gender bias or ignorance.

JB: *Mm-hmm.*

MD: *That's a huge thing to unload. I'm 58 now, and I remember it was just so hard back then, right? You couldn't be a woman who was sensitive, you couldn't be Gay or Transgender. We have a little more room now to do some pretty amazing things, and I don't want to do anything boring.*

I recently had this experience. I'm a member of the Vancouver Green Party. I just joined to see what it's like because I'm looking for my next level of change. I have daughters, and I'm checkpointing what I'm doing on climate change, on making the world a better place. It's a bit of a selfish thing, but it works for me, right?

JB: *For sure.*

MD: *I'm not obsessed with my daughters but it keeps me focused. Does what I'm doing make the world a better place for Nanaki and Shanik? So I thought I'd start with municipal politics. We have a thing every day before service at Vij's called "Chai Chat" where we drink chai and we talk about whatever. For example, if I have a new fishmonger and he's doing a special fish, I will have him come in and talk to the staff about things and so on. This time, I said to my staff, "The elections are coming up. Would you like to have one of the Green Party members come in and talk to you? Not to get your vote, but to learn and ask questions?" One of my staff members who I really love just looked at me and said, "Meeru, no offense, but this is just a f****** job for us, okay?"*

JB: *Oh wow... Right.*

MD: *I was a little taken aback, but he didn't offend me. The safe space that Vij's is meant that he felt he could say that to me. It shook me a little because I see Vij's as my heart, my world, my everything. But I respect that. They're like, basically, "Don't push your agenda on us." While it pains me a little that people just come in, perform and go home, I can't push my agenda on them. Not everyone is going to find their meaning here, and maybe that's okay.*

JB: *As long as they have meaning in something else they do. It's not often, but I have come across people every now and then that have "just jobs". These are people who have so many other things in their lives they're passionate about and they come to work, do their work, and leave their work to go do all the other things that they love. Work just sort of funds the rest of their lives. One of these people was a former neighbor of mine and she loved to go out, she loved to read. She was a brilliant gardener. She loved to travel. But, her work was just her work. Her passion was reserved for everything else in her life. I found her to be so fascinating.*

If you have passion in your life, meaning doesn't necessarily have to come from work.

MD: *I think that experience showed me that my job is not to micromanage other people's sense of meaning at Vij's. It's to create a safe, equal, pleasant workspace where people can thrive and grow...or not grow and just do a great job as they are.*

JB: *By the way, I love Chai Chat. That's amazing. That should be a TV show-podcast—all the things. That time that you have with your team when you're connecting and you're offering outside education or outside services is so important. If you are working full-time and have a family or other demands on your time, you might be interested in local politics but not have the time to pursue it.*

"You said you were part of the problem, but what you did was turn that problem into a process. You didn't allow it to stay a problem, right? When you identified the problem, you didn't just quietly or safely contribute to it and keep that problem going because it suited you. You turned it into a process that gets something done to make change."

~ Meeru Dhalwala

So I think your, your interest and bringing some of this in and making it accessible to them is commendable and something you should continue to do.

MD: *Yes, and I'm not gonna let my feelings get hurt or shy away from what I believe in.*

JB: *Exactly.*

MD: And, let's have that uncomfortable talk about money, right? I was reading in the New York Times about how people find it harder to talk about how much money they earn. People think we're millionaires, but Vikram and I have made the choice as business owners, to allot ourselves $92,000 a year. That's our salary. We've done that and we haven't had an increase, especially since the pandemic. We're trying really hard to be honest and to show that we cap ourselves so that we can include organic farmers on my menu, without outpricing the menu and I want people to be able to eat at our restaurant. It's because I care about climate change and right now, unfortunately, being ethical is expensive. You can't be ethical and cheap right now because we live in a capitalist world. So for me, growth is, "How many people can I include?", versus, "How much money can I make?". Don't get me wrong; I like comforts. Part of the reason we can do this is because we bought our house a long time ago when a middle-class family could afford a house in Vancouver.

JB: *If we really want change in this industry, to recreate it, we need to connect and talk more.*

MD: *I really don't love the word "industry", but, we need to learn to talk about it and educate our customers. We have to have that "full disclosure" talk about money because customers think that you're just raking it in. They don't understand the little-baby, teeny-tiny margins. The celebrity chefs that made it look like we were so rich? Maybe they were because of television, but their restaurants are not earning that money.*

JB: *I think in part it's the celebrity chefs. It's also that hospitality people appear to live in a world of beautiful products and beautiful wines, and we know these products. So, the assumption must be, for some, that we're all living this opulent life. To this day, people outside of hospitality really don't get it when I try to communicate, how little everybody makes and how if just one event cancels at the last minute or a reservation system or your fridge goes down, that is your profitability for the month, or longer, gone.*

Listen, I'm the eternal optimist. I always want to believe that we're all going to learn from these things together. We lost restaurants and dining together for a long time because of lockdowns. I hope people will realize that restaurants are our community centres, our piazzas where people come together.

MD: *Yeah, and that's why it's important for us. I know Vikram's a celebrity chef, right? The public perception is very different from what he and I do. Even 10 years after our divorce, I cannot hear anything bad about Vikram.*

JB: *Love that.*

MD: *Whenever Vikram earns something, he throws it back into the business. It's tough to balance, especially if you pay liveable wages. All our kitchen staff at Vij's, starting from the dishwasher, all earn more than minimum wage because they have been working with us for so many years. So, labour costs are high. I am serving organic, pasture-raised lamb, I'm serving sustainable fish. If you're going to ask me to choose between the environment and the people, I can't make that choice. And our customers can't pay $50 for an entrée.*

JB: *This is like the best Tuesday I've had in a real long time. Thank you, Meeru.*

MD: *Yes. Let's get together and brainstorm again soon.*

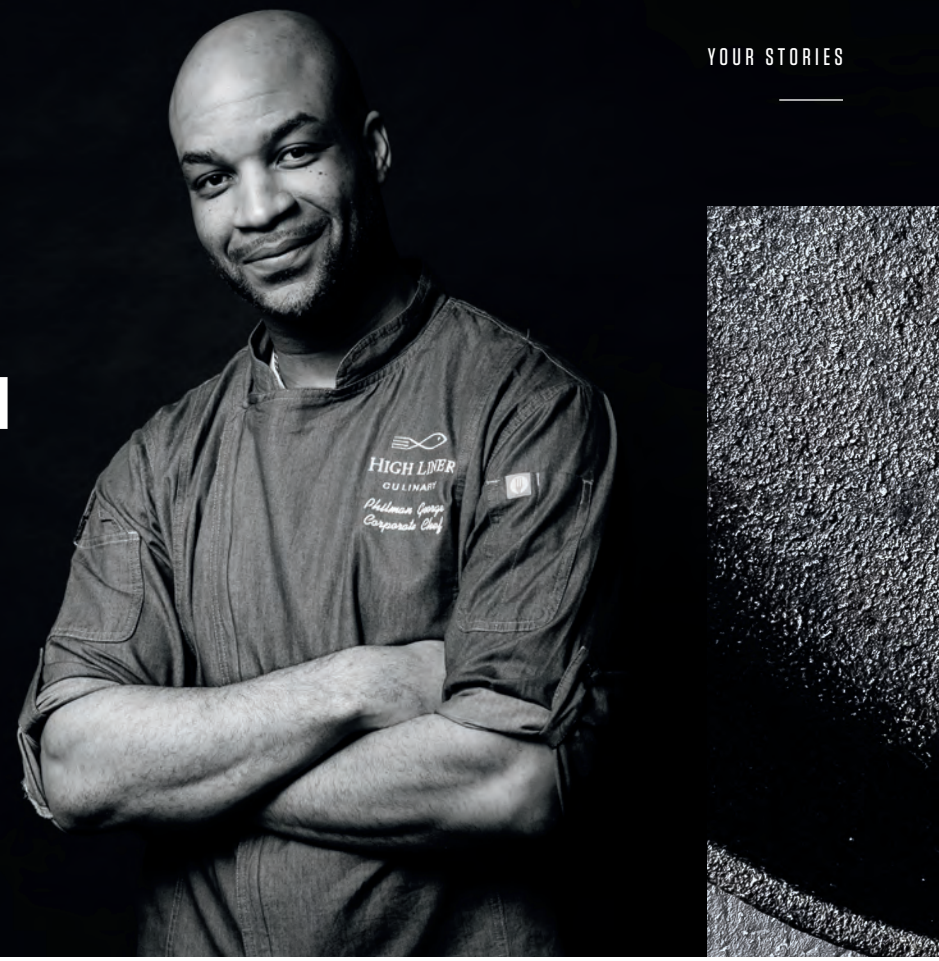
"I didn't know the phrase "hustle culture" at that time, but I realized now that I was perpetuating that. And that women didn't really support other women. And now, I think we realize that we can, and we should, and that there are ways to do it. We have a responsibility to make it easier and to create more opportunities for women in areas where opportunities are still given to men easily while women are still having to earn them.

~ Jasmine Baker

RC Show Restaurants Canada ·TORONTO·

Jasmine Baker and her EVNT MGMT team produce the **Garland Canada Culinary Competition** at RC Show. The competition has drawn its highest number of applications ever and **female culinary talent represents 23% of all applicants, the largest percentage ever to apply to compete.**

BLACK IN THE KITCHEN: CHEF PHILMAN GEORGE



BY ELLE ASIEDU,
THE RE-SEASONING COALITION

A long-time restaurant chef and the first Black corporate chef at a major Canadian seafood brand, Philman George looks back at two decades in the foodservice industry. His verdict? "The industry needed to change, not me."

Growing up in a single parent household in Toronto's Regent Park, Chef Philman George quickly learned that he had to work for what he wanted.

An avid basketball player and a charming, good natured teenager, one of his first experiences with the concept of "doing more to get more" came when he wanted the Grant Hill sneakers to help him excel on the basketball court. That was in 1996 when baggy clothing was in, the hip-hop world was thriving and the idea of a career in foodservice was not even the smallest blip on Philman's radar. He wanted to be a journalist; telling the stories of his neighbourhood, the Caribbean and the world of hip-hop and rap that fueled his days and nights.

But before enrolling in the journalism program at Carleton University, Philman had basketball shoes to buy and a new job to help secure them. "The foodservice industry was accessible as the entry-level positions required very little experience and help was mostly needed in the evenings and weekends which worked perfectly with my high school schedule," he recalls.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

While Philman had always appreciated a good meal and had developed a set of cooking skills as part of his upbringing in a Caribbean home, his lack of focused interest in the culinary world meant that his destiny in the industry did not begin to unravel until well after his freshman post. Graduation from George Brown's culinary school at the dawn of the new millennium soon followed.

"I actually never considered it as a career until I was three years in and working in an upscale, white-tablecloth restaurant," Philman remembers. "Prior to this, my experience was in English-style pubs where I had moved up the ranks from dishwasher and prep cook to assistant kitchen manager." The progression of his career had started at that point, but it wasn't until he was working in a casual fine-dining environment that the Head Chef recognized his talent and recommended he pursue it as a career.

That was to be a defining moment that would lead him to an unprecedented post in corporate foodservice.

But at that time in Toronto, the foodservice industry, and especially back-of-house positions in restaurants across the five-star scale, were notoriously White. While the diversity of prep lines and finishing stations has increased over the last decade, there's still more to be done to bring a new set of voices, talent and perspectives to the forefront. Being Black in the kitchen in the late 90s and mid-2000s came with a host of complexities; many of which were highlighted during his various stage placements.

FROM NOVICE TO EXPERT

As fine dining establishments and contemporary restaurants were still holding onto traditional values, an employee's first day in the restaurant kitchen was unpaid. It's what's known as a "stage", an opportunity to prove your skills, temperament, and overall fit to your potential employer and colleagues. It's a moment in time when the cream is separated from the milk and where a friendly glance from someone like you can go a long way to alleviate the stress of this trial by fire.

While the overall environments were as positive as they could be despite the toxic, military-style structure frequently seen in

well-run kitchens, Philman often found himself without the familiar nod, a common acknowledgement of another Black person at work. "As I look back, I'm not sure I ever did a stage where I wasn't the only Black person in the kitchen," he says. "I didn't think for a second that my skin colour would prevent me from getting a job in any kitchen, especially after showcasing my talents. I don't think it ever did."

But while Philman never experienced being called the N-word or finding himself on the receiving end of dirty looks or whispered insults, his experience with anti-Black racism in the foodservice industry had a very distinct, Canadian flavour. To hear him tell it, "None of the cuisines that commanded top dollar or that were honoured with fine dining status had any Black influence. I had never seen anyone in a position of authority who was Black and once or twice, I found myself wishing I had paid more attention in French class since French cuisine and French and European chefs were regarded as world class." In hindsight, however, Philman notes that speaking the language likely would not have made a difference.

"I felt like I was always on the outside looking in, even though I was deep inside the inner workings of the industry."

THE PROOF IN THE PUDDING

This passive-aggressive, but structurally-empowered type of discrimination still resonates in the industry, despite what many think. And while other sectors have been quick to recognize and address the oppression and racism in their workplaces, many of those within the food industry are still struggling to admit there's a problem.

Unwritten rules continue to dominate kitchens staffed by chefs like Philman who find themselves at a disadvantage when it comes to moving up the ladder—no matter how hard they work. "I was always welcomed in the kitchen because I was a hard worker and a fast learner with a positive attitude," he recalls, "but I learned quickly not to ask for a raise. Advancement opportunities simply were not afforded to me. My ceiling was already predetermined. It was never stated, but it was felt and observed. No one in management looked like me—my future was clear."

After more than a decade in increasingly senior positions and then one particular instance where he was passed over for promotion to Executive Chef despite having the experience and the support of back-of-house staff, Philman decided to leave his job as a Chef de Partie at a well-known golf club in the GTA for an opportunity he wasn't as familiar with.

The role was Culinary Manager, later leading to the Corporate Chef position at seafood giant High Liner Foods. It came with an office, a comfortable salary and a revolutionary adjustment: the typical Monday to Friday work week. "By that time I had achieved my dream of being an Executive Chef and was in my early 30s, ready for a challenge," he notes. "The job description at High Liner excited me because I would be directly influencing the company's culinary footprint through recipe development, writing and presenting. Plus, I wouldn't have to get my ass kicked during service on a Friday night anymore," he laughs.

MOVING ON AND MOVING UP

Philman's transition into corporate foodservice provided him with an opportunity to combine his childhood passions, university aspirations and hard-fought culinary expertise and led to what has become a decade of fulfillment with the Canadian seafood mainstay.

"My first day at the company was amazing. I was extremely fortunate to report to Ron Waters, a fantastic leader and the Director of Foodservice Marketing. He showed to me my office which was right next to my test kitchen," he recalls, smiling. "It's amazing how a few windows in an office can make a chef feel extra special!" Working on the corporate side of foodservice was a blessing Philman might not have expected, but it was a decision that has the potential to change the entire industry from the inside out.

In his current role as High Liner's Corporate Chef, he has a bird's eye view of the industry and has noticed that the more important the role in a company, the less diverse it gets. This realization was troubling, because it echoed the patterns he had seen in the dining space. Philman's view is that Canada is too multicultural to fail to engage the rich cultural diversity of its Black population. He believes this is missing in a food industry ravaged by the same structures of systemic racism as other sectors.
"This industry has the ability to excel and grow by regularly including Black cuisine and Black chefs as major components of our culinary landscape," he explains. "To help get this industry back on its feet, organizations of all sizes need to actively choose to be different, buck the trends, and welcome Black people and other people of colour into every level. I don't want to be part of a handful of unicorns in 2033."

> "It will take this industry a long time to show measurable change, but I know the satisfaction of a slow-cooked meal and I'll be stirring the pot for as long as I can."
>
> ~ CHEF PHILMAN GEORGE ~



To this end, the corporate leader has taken on a second full-time job as Co-founder of The Re-Seasoning Coalition, a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing the representation of Black Canadians in foodservice through research, programming, and content that showcases the reality of being Black in foodservice. It's yet another line on his culinary CV that Philman is sure will pay off. "It will take this industry a long time to show measurable change, but I know the satisfaction of a slow-cooked meal and I'll be stirring the pot for as long as I can."

Stay tuned to menumag.ca for more stories in The Re-Seasoning Coalition's Black in the Kitchen digital series

THE RE-SEASONING COALITION

To learn more and sign up for the Re-Seasoning newsletter, visit:

thereseasoning.org

To watch the Re-Seasoning webinar for research and insights, visit:

restaurantscanada.org

RC Show Restaurants Canada ·TORONTO·

Chef Philman George hosts this year's **Garland Culinary Competition** live on the culinary stage. Scan to learn more:





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In Conversation with *Jennifer Henshaw, Restaurants Canada's Regional Vice President for the Prairies and the North*



Jennifer Henshaw joined the Restaurants Canada national team to serve as the Regional Vice President for the Prairies (including Saskatchewan and Manitoba) and the North (the Territories) in February, 2022. Formerly in the role of Director of Provincial Government Relations for Western Canada, alongside Regional Vice President for Western Canada Mark Von Schellwitz, Jennifer has brought her passion for government relations and communications to become a strong voice for the restaurant sector.

Jennifer's experience and leadership style evolved in her previous roles as Senior Press Secretary to Alberta's Minister of Energy and Press Secretary to the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity. Prior to that, Jennifer earned her knowledge and grew her passion for the prairies over six years where she lived, grew her family and successfully advocated for independent businesses in the Prairie region with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business. Jennifer is also an accomplished equestrian and admits that government relations and horses are her "happy place".

MM Let's start with a little bit of your origin story.

I'm originally from the GTA—I grew up in Etobicoke, Ontario and moved to the Caledon Hills with my family when I was about 12. I went to Western University in London and graduated with an Honours specialization in Political Science and History. I then went to law school at the University of Bristol in England and got my LLB, helping to pay for my groceries and living costs while I was across the pond by working in the hospitality sector—everything from bartending to serving. You name it, I did it. I earned some "boots on the ground" experience at that time. And I've been out West now for about a decade.

MM How did you find your way into politics and to the Prairies?

I've been plugged into politics from a young age—since I was 12 or 13 years old. Since then, I've had the privilege to work for some amazing people and have had some pretty incredible experiences, like interning in the strategic planning department of the PMO while I finished my undergrad. After graduating, I was asked to join Andrew Scheer's office—he is the Member of Parliament for Regina-Qu'Appelle, and at that time he was the first assistant Speaker of the House—that was my first brush with the Prairies. I've spent some time working on The Hill, and that helped me get a better understanding of the inner workings of government, the day-to-day hum, the legislative process and policy development. It also gave me a strong start on developing a network of contacts, many of whom I am still close with. After finishing in Andrew's office, I crossed the pond to begin law school in Bristol, England.

After graduating, I realized that practising wasn't the direction I wanted to head, so I took a broader perspective on how I could make my legal education work for me. I came to the crossroads of advocacy and public policy

and headed west to work for a government relations firm, but got pulled back over to the other side of the table again to work for Joan Crockatt, who was the Member of Parliament for Calgary Centre at the time. This was a very vibrant city-centre riding and my first opportunity to experience Calgary's food scene. After a change in government in Alberta, in January 2015, my husband and I took a chance and moved to Regina (in -30°C weather, driving a U-Haul!). I'd been offered an advocacy role with the Canadian Federation of Independent Business (CFIB) which I accepted. I spent six years there advocating for small businesses in Saskatchwan and Manitoba as well as the North for a period of time.

MM Is this where you started working with the restaurant sector within an advocacy capacity?

Yes. There was a significant contingent of foodservice businesses within the CFIB membership. Then, when the pandemic hit, having just given birth to our daughter, we had to make the decision to return to Calgary for family support reasons in the fall of 2020. I was also asked to join the government as the press secretary to the Associate Minister of Natural Gas and Electricity and, after a few months, was promoted to senior press secretary to Alberta's Minister of Energy. It was very much in the hot seat—no two days were the same. It was an incredible learning opportunity. My role with Restaurants Canada has really helped me plug into some of the daily operational challenges restaurants are grappling with and understand which policy issues are impacting foodservice businesses.

MM How did you end up joining the Restaurants Canada team?

When I saw the original position, Director of Provincial Government Relations for Alberta, was available, I was so excited. Friends who and former colleagues of mine had sent me the opportunity saying they thought it was right up my street and that I could do a great job based on my time at CFIB and my experience. I applied, and the rest is history. I've loved it ever since I started. My role was first expanded to include Saskatchewan, and I was recently promoted to VP for the Prairies and the North.

I should also mention that my cousin and friend, Chef Michael Hunter, co-owns Antler Restaurant in Toronto, so I have family ties to the industry too. I spent my summers in Muskoka, Ontario at my family's cottage, so one of my first jobs was flipping burgers at a burger joint outside of the IGA in Port Carling. I served at a golf and country club and a Sherwood Inn on Lake Joseph. When I was at Western I worked for a catering company to pay rent and put gas in my Sunfire. It was a lot of work, but also a lot of fun, and gave me a real appreciation for the hustle of the sector and the day-to-day challenges. You learn to love it a lot because it gives you flexibility, income and opportunity. It's also given me great memories and insight on how to navigate within the sector.

MM The foodservice sector is often seen as a kind of "canary in the coalmine" or early indicator of demographic, economic and social change. What are some of the changes to the foodservice sector you've seen since your involvement?

I don't think anyone goes into the restaurant sector thinking it will be "easy money". I think people get into it because they're passionate about the food they make, they're passionate about serving their customers and their love of being a gathering place in their communities. Coming out of COVID we've seen the industry change, some say for the better, some say for the worse. Overall, I think we've seen the restaurant sector become more nimble, and I think it's had to learn to adapt further to labour shortages and challenges. Resiliency only goes so far, and even before the pandemic only about 50 per cent of restaurants make it past their first couple of years. My cousin is a great example of the shift we've seen in the industry. I think it's amazing that we're still attracting such young, hardworking and talented people to the industry. I always say that he and his colleagues across the breadth of the industry are the future—they're focused on fresh, local ingredients, constantly switching up their menus and really finding their corner in the market.

MM Are there any unique qualities or challenges for operators in the Prairies?

The foodservice sector in the Prairies is struggling with a lot of the same issues we're seeing across Canada, the labour shortage especially. The thing I always explain about Saskatchewan is that it's a huge province with a relatively small population. There are great, vibrant food scenes in Regina, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw—you name it. The distances between cities and towns are spread out, with over 600 municipalities and thousands of small towns and hamlets. Labour shortages are acute for a lot of the service sector, and it's a different, more challenging situation when it comes to small towns and rural communities—and there are a lot of each in Sask. It's a lot of the same, but it's more acute, given the geography. Because Saskatchewan is land-locked, transportation costs are fairly high and out-of-region ingredients need to travel a long way.

MM Transportation issues are a perennial issue. What are local operators doing to mitigate?

One of Saskatchewan's major economic drivers is ag, so many operators are focusing on local. There's a lot of focus on it Saskatchewan. There's a long growing season, incredible farming operations...all you have to do is drive across Highway 1 and you see it. Local restaurants are switching their ingredients on a seasonal basis, focusing on what's abundant and local.

MM What's the Prairie restaurant scene like? Is it unique?

It's tough to put a finger on it. There are a lot of independently-owned restaurants that are fiercely proud of being in Sask (as they should be!), and there are many local or Western-Canada multi-units like Leopold's, Western Pizza, and Trifon's PizzaTavern. In Regina, there are many incredible restaurants like Avenue Restaurant, Ginger Garlic...Odla in Saskatoon... Déjà vu in Moose Jaw...an exceptional, hyper-local restaurant scene has sprung up and developed in the Prairies. People here are pretty "loud and proud" about their restaurant scene—the same goes for Winnipeg—and they should be.

On the Prairies, everything is local, from the friends you make who become like family, junior hockey leagues, and your favourite spots in town to grab a bite and cerebrate life's big events.

MM What do you hope to achieve in your role, and what's on your schedule for the next quarter or so?

This is a new role for me, and one I am taking on with a lot of enthusiasm and a drive to get down to work. My goals are to really plug into the issues the foodservice sector is really grappling with in our region. I have a strong understanding of what they are, but I am looking forward to spending time in Winnipeg, Regina, Saskatoon, and the places in between to meet with and get to know the industry even more. My goal is to strengthen Restaurants Canada's presence and make sure the sector's key budget asks are front and centre as we enter budget season. I will be making trips out to Saskatchewan and Manitoba to sit down with restaurant owners and other stakeholder groups to build bridges and look for opportunities to work together. For the most part, governments at all levels across the country are keen to put the pandemic and its impact in the rear view mirror. But, many in the restaurant sector came out of it under an oppressive pile of debt, having lost crucial staff, and are now grappling with skyrocketing inflation. It's a bit of a perfect storm. It's critically important our government comes to the table ready to help the sector recover and takes the "do no harm" approach with respect to their policy development. I have my work cut out for me, for sure. Manitoba has an upcoming election in fall 2023, and we're looking for commitments to address the challenges facing the restaurant sector including rising inflationary pressures from food costs to equipment and everything in between, acute labour shortages, and making wholesale pricing available to all liquor licensees for all types of beverage alcohol products.

Jennifer welcomes operators in the Prairies and the North to contact her with any questions or just to connect:
JHenshaw@restaurantscanada.org

Jennifer's Winnipeg Food Experience Shortlist

There are so many amazing restaurants to choose from in Winnipeg, it's nearly impossible to whittle it down to just four, so consider this a starting point that offers different experiences, flavours and price points.

Nola

Nola is a brand new concept from Chef Emily Butcher and The Burnley Place Hospitality Group. Located in the heart of St. Boniface, Nola celebrates the Pacific Northwest upbringing of Chef Butcher, through share plates, in a Fun, Unique, and Elegant environment.

101-300 Tache Avenue
Winnipeg, MB. R2H 2A2 | www.nolawpg.com

Reason to visit: *"Nola offers very creative dishes, in a beautiful atmosphere."*

Capital Grill and Bar

A casual restaurant offering an updated take on comfort food prepared by Chef Wayne Martin and his talented team. Their creative bar offers seasonal and classic cocktails, a great selection of local and draught beers on tap as well as an eclectic mix of approachable wines from around the world.

Capital Roblin
3116 Roblin Boulevard
Winnipeg, MB R3R 0C1 | www.capitalwinnipeg.com/capital-roblin

Capital Broadway
275 Broadway #100
Winnipeg, MB R3C 4M6 | www.capitalwinnipeg.com/capital-broadway

Reason to visit: *"Incredible food made with local ingredients and a wonderful staff."*

East India Company

Offering one of the most extensive five-star South Asian menus for lunch and dinner in Canada, they are known for their endless mouth-watering buffets which, for the last 50 years, have changed daily and include a salad bar, chutneys, pickles, yogurts, appetizers, sizzlers, up to 25 hot entrees, and a decadent dessert bar.

349 York Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3C 3S9 | www.eastindiaco.com

Reason to visit: *"Amazing buffet and very friendly service."*

Clementine Café

Winnipeg's hugely popular and busy brunch restaurant serves up flavours from chef Chris Gama that range from the Mediterranean to Latin America.

123 Princess Street
Winnipeg, MB R3B 1K8 | www.clementinewinnipeg.com

Reason to visit: *"Brunch!! Fried chicken on toast. Need I say more?!?"*

The Sweetness of Success

BY CHRIS SZEGO



Zainab Ali and her husband Joseph Chaeban moved from Hamilton, Ontario to Winnipeg when Joseph, a dairy scientist, became plant manager at a local cheese production facility. When they and their children were settled, Zainab and Joseph decided they needed to help Zainab's extended family, precariously spread across Lebanon and Turkey, relocate to a safer new home. In 2015, a local group of like-minded individuals in their neighbourhood came together to combat the worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria. The South Osborne Syrian Refugee Initiative (or SOSRI) sponsored more than a dozen of Zainab's relatives.

To thank the community for its warm welcome and also to provide employment for her arriving family, the couple decided to capitalize on Joseph's wealth of dairy experience. After much planning, some setbacks, and a great deal of hard work, Zainab and Joseph—along with Darryl Stewart, an original member of SOSRI—opened Chaeban Ice Cream, Winnipeg's first made-from-scratch, super-premium ice cream shop.

Chaeban Ice Cream first opened its doors at the end of 2017. More than five years later, Chaeban products are sold locally and regionally in more than a dozen stores, including neighbourhood grocery stores, Safeway, and Sobey's. And the original ice cream shop remains a beacon of friendly (and delicious) comfort.

Darryl Stewart, the third business partner in Chaeban Ice Cream, is also CNEO (Chief Nerd and Executive Officer) of The Inclusion System and IBEX Payroll. He was part of the group that sponsored Zainab's family. Entrepreneurship and community are part of his makeup, but he wasn't expecting ice cream. "Zainab and Joseph wanted to stay and live in the community where SOSRI made things happen. I got caught up in that, and have been their partner ever since. We all learn from each other."

"It's what's different about our ice cream that makes it special," he says. "Zainab and Joseph, their passion for what they do, are at the heart of that. Joseph's skills as a dairy scientist meant we developed the highest quality ice cream base we can make. There's not a lot of air in it, but there is a lot of cream. It has the feel of an old fashioned ice cream."

The other half of the equation is the distinct flavours Chaeban has on offer. "That's Zainab," Darryl explains. "She makes the most unique flavours. They appeal to international expats and longtime Canadians alike." Like "Donnie Darcocoa", in which a hint of coffee gives dark chocolate and cocoa a little extra smoulder. Or "LaLa Lemon", which is the closest you'll come to lemon meringue in ice cream form. Or "Abir Al Sham", Zainab's iteration of a classic Syrian flavour, starring rose and orange blossom, pistachios and cashews, ricotta cheese and orchid root powder.

Packed in environmentally responsible



> Makers are passionate, and customers are equally passionate about supporting them. The passion for handmade comes from all directions: from people who have been on the scene for years, from brand new start-ups, and from customers.
>
> *~ Darryl Chaeban*

glass jars, which can be returned to the store for a deposit, those original flavours have taken them far. In July 2022, Chaeban was even named the best ice cream in Canada at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair (the Royal takes place in November, but moved several of their food competitions to the summer for more appropriate tasting and judging). Chaeban entered in four categories, placing in all of them. Their "Rocky Ricardo", in which almonds, marshmallows and milk chocolate are tied together with praline sauce, won first place in the 'chocolate with inclusions category'. And their "Salty Carl", with a decadently rich caramel sauce cooked right into the ice cream base, won both first place in the 'other' category and the Grand Champion award.

Salty Carl is one of Chaeban's most popular flavours. "We make the caramel from scratch, every day" says Darryl. And by 'make', he means hundreds and hundreds of litres of it. Producing Salty Carl is a three-day affair: one day for the caramel sauce, a second to prepare the ice cream, and a third to freeze the two together properly. Winning the Grand Champion award, which came as a wonderful surprise, made all those hours over the stove making caramel absolutely worth it.

Those are not the only awards Chaeban has brought home. In 2019, Chaeban Ice Cream was awarded "Foodie of the Year" by Western Living magazine. And last November, Joseph was named one of CBC Manitoba's Future 40. Every two years, CBC Manitoba honours 10 people under 40 making a difference in their communities: entrepreneurs, organizers, and scientists enacting change, who are working to make life better for everyone in the province.

And in late 2022, Darryl was awarded one of Manitoba's Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Medals, an accolade bestowed on individuals who strive to improve the lives of those around them. Nominated by his MLA (and Leader of the Opposition) Wab Kinew, Darryl received his award as a leader who works daily in the service of his community.

PASSIONATE PRODUCERS



Over the last several years, Winnipeg has seen a strong shift in preference for an artisanal, handmade approach. Chaeban is happy to be part of that segment. "Makers are passionate," says Darryl, "And customers are equally passionate about supporting them. The passion for handmade comes from all directions: from people who have been on the scene for years, from brand new start-ups, and from customers."

On Chaeban's side, their dedication extends to sourcing only the freshest, most accessible local ingredients. Chaeban pasturizes its own milk for their ice cream base, and obtains fruit from local growers. They have also developed partnerships with other local makers and products, partly as a fortuitous sort of accident.

Like most food operators, Chaeban was closed for much of the early pandemic. To survive, they created a local ice cream club. "The club had an overwhelming pickup when we first announced it, a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic," Darryl relates. "The welcome it got was heartwarming. Lots of people wanted to support us."

Although smaller now that the shop has reopened, the ice cream club has carried on, buoyed by the continued support of a devoted local contingent. It has changed along the way, from strictly ice cream delivery to a wider food community club. "Frozen foods can be tough to deliver, especially in summer. Some of our customers reached out to us, saying



'If you're coming all this way anyway, why don't you bring something else along with you?'"

When ice cream club members reached out to Chaeban with suggestions and recommendations, Darryl reached out to other local food makers and providers. "We now deliver local products from eight other companies. Pasta, cookies, frozen pizza, honey—even berries from local farmers." Not only is it good business, it's another way to strengthen the community as a whole.

The club isn't the only innovative business strategy Chaeban has adopted in response to the pandemic and other business pressures. Winters in Winnipeg aren't prime ice cream selling months, so creativity is in order. This winter, the Chaeban team decided to focus on an appropriate theme, inviting their customers to 'Come Into the Warm'.

"We want to make the store a warm place for people to visit," says Darryl, "As rich and comfortable as we can make it. That goes for decor, for service, for the menu. We want to make a wonderful experience for people." After years of closures, restrictions and working from home, people are eager to have a snug and satisfying place to go. Chaeban puts board games out on all the tables, inviting guests to relax and have fun during their visits.

They also warmed up their menu, adding baked goods and a special centerpiece feature: hot chocolate. It's more complicated than it sounds, but remember the source is ice cream. "We experimented, and learned how to turn our ice cream into hot chocolate. Now customers get to choose half a scoop of their favourite flavour, then we steam it with milk and cocoa." The new pastry treats and hot chocolate have been eagerly snatched up by guests. Not to mention this current winter has been unseasonably warm by Winnipeg standards. "That's good for ice cream sales."

NECESSITY IS THE MOTHER OF INNOVATION

Another major innovation was driven by a pressure felt by all food operators coast to coast: namely the steep rise in the price of ingredients. "We actually had to raise our prices over the summer. Dairy costs have gone up a lot." Milk, which Chaeban sources solely through the Dairy Farmers of Manitoba, has a non-negotiable price. And that price has risen steeply.

But Chaeban had a secret weapon: Joseph's experience as a dairy scientist and second generation cheese maker. "One of our responses to the pandemic closures was to start making cheese; that has been great." Chaeban has a mini dairy plant, which not only provides meaningful, full-time employment, but also makes the business financially viable all year round.

Although the focus of the shop is ice cream, of course, there's also a fridge full of artisanal cheese selections. Darryl's personal favourite is a soft, creamy feta. "It's fairly unique. The taste is very similar to that of a firmer feta, but you can easily spread it on crackers or bread. Delicious!" In addition to being stocked in local stores, their cheese has recently made its way onto Sobey's shelves. "We've recently started being distributed in Western Canada: Eastern Canada is up next."

WHERE THE HEART IS

Chaeban is an excellent match for Winnipeg's eclectic and exciting food scene. "We're a cultural mosaic here," says Darryl. "Winnipeg has a wide variety of foods from around the world on offer, made by the people who come from those places." Winnipeg is also well supplied with eager and adventurous diners. "People here are curious, interested, and very supportive. It's like an extension of Folklorama. Maybe it's because of our long winters. We like to frequent new places, try new things."

Even in times of economic uncertainty, Winnipeg reaches out for the new and novel. Darryl is aware that the road ahead will probably see them facing more challenges, but Chaeban is looking forward with the same optimistic, hardworking attitude that brought them this far. "As it stands, on the store side, we're a treat. And ice cream is a cheaper treat than some."

But the root of Chaeban's appeal doesn't rely on the price tag: it's their sense of welcome, and their all-pervasive passion. "I think if you're committed to doing a good job, people will come back."

Find them at
www.chaebanicecream.com
chaeban_ice_cream

Folklorama

Every summer, Winnipeg celebrates the diversity of its citizens at Folklorama.

A two week festival highlighting the many international cultures and traditions to be found in the city, Folklorama showcases the incredible variety of ethnic cuisines, art, music and customs of the people who call Winnipeg home.

Housed in individual pavilions, dozens and dozens of cultural groups have the opportunity to share the sights, sounds and tastes of their ethnologies. Tens of thousands of people visit pavilions during the festival, to learn and partake and discover something new.

The longest running festival of this kind in the entire world, Folklorama got its start in 1970. Though the official party happens for two weeks in August, Folklorama hosts events at Home, School, Work and Play throughout the year, so Winnipeggers remain aware of the richness of their cultural heritage.

groupex CANADA
GIVING INDEPENDENTS THE BUYING POWER OF CHAINS!

SUPPER CENTRAL
EST. 2009

SUPPER CENTRAL

Operator:
Louise & Palmer Nowak
Groupex member since: 2022
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Independently owned and operated by a mother-daughter team, Winnipeg's Supper Central is a thriving retail food store that specializes in ready-to-cook and ready-to-eat meals from their kitchen and custom catering. Supper Central's success is founded on the strength of relationships with the community, suppliers and each other.

While the original Supper Central opened in 2009, Chef Louise Nowak purchased the business in 2018. At the time, Louise was a busy personal chef and caterer, and her daughter Palmer was in Ontario, pursuing post-secondary studies in finance at the University of Toronto.

Palmer recalls tagging along with her mother, watching and learning as she worked as a personal chef, and acknowledges that food was always a large part of their family dynamic and conversations. While away at school, Palmer found that finance wasn't resonating with her. "We were not your typical students. We were hosting dinner parties in second year—full turkey dinners with our friends. I practiced a lot and really enjoyed that." When the opportunity to join a Toronto catering company as a cook came up, Palmer jumped in. She found herself sharing her experiences and ideas with Louise as she developed Supper Central back in Winnipeg. Then, in 2019, Palmer came home to join the business.





The duo has since evolved the business into a more modern prepared foods operation offering prepared "heat-and-eat" single serving meals and fully prepped fresh or frozen meal kits for busy families to cook at home as well as fully customized catering services. Supper Central's success lies in its focus on quality, Louise notes. "There is a limited selection of independent providers for heat-and-eat meals. Grocery often provides a version of that, but everything we create reaches a higher standard. Our food has only travelled from our kitchen to our freezer. It's all made right in the city, and people like that."

Unlike many large meal services, Supper Central meal kit ingredients are fully cut and prepared for their customers, which minimizes at-home prep and cook time. They've also eliminated the subscription model, giving their customers the freedom to fit their offering into their lives. "We feel that subscription-based services put pressure on customers to have that company be part of their life every day or every week," says Palmer. "That's a lot to expect people to keep up with. Our customers really appreciate that they can opt in when they want, based on their needs and schedule. We've taken a personal approach and have



seen it grow from there. In Winnipeg, people really like to support local and they like that they get that personal touch."

Supper Central appeals to a wide range of consumers across all life stages and need states, from weekly or bi-weekly heat-and-eat orders from seniors to weekly or monthly orders for meal kits from families, along with as-needed orders for parties, births and bereavement gifts. Louise and Palmer develop Supper Central's recipes themselves and the creative direction they've taken has returned consistent growth over the years. "Our tastes are very similar, but we 'chef it up' differently", Louise observes. "I would be more on the traditional side, whereas Palmer is a little fancier. There's always a way to bring that back to the middle into a cohesive dish. We both like classic flavours, and we both 'get' flavour combinations," Palmer continues. "That helps us reach a wider audience. Creatively, we're a little different, but that lends itself to custom menu creation for the catering side of the business."

While the Supper Central menu is anchored by customer favourites like their Ranch Crusted Chicken, Beef Taco Pie or the newer Korean Beef Bowl, Louise and Palmer are always innovating and experimenting. "We try and listen to what people want," shares Palmer. "They want fast and simple food, but they want it to feel and taste home cooked. If it tastes like you might have been able to make it yourself, you don't feel regret about outsourcing." As part of their customer engagement strategy, Supper Central sends out a weekly newsletter and solicits feedback and suggestions from their 10,000 subscribers. "It's very much like a letter from our home kitchen," says Palmer. "We talk to our customers about what's going on, what's in season or what makes sense for the time of year. It's important to stay nimble and pivot with customer needs, and this is our way to stay connected.

"We touch a lot of people," Louise notes. "But, across the board, we have strong loyalty. We have a 60 to 70 per cent return customer rate. The quality really speaks for itself, and we get a lot of feedback on the flavour of our dishes and the results are good. We thoroughly test all our recipes—fresh and frozen—so you're getting a superior product to any other meal kit we've tried. The food has to be good. If we don't like it, we won't sell it."

Supper Central has a partnership with *Great Tastes of Manitoba*, a locally-produced farm-to-table TV series with the distinction of being Manitoba's most-watched food series. "They filmed the series in our store for two seasons", says Palmer. "We also started partnering with them on meal kits, working with local commodity producers. We create meal kits using their recipes, so it has become an all-encompassing local food marketing effort. It helps people connect with locally grown foods and farmers."

Thanks to her vast experience as a personal chef, Louise has undisputed strength in ingredient and packaging sourcing. "Louise has been able to navigate a lot of the shortages and price changes over the past two years, creating recipes with ingredients we know we can source," says Palmer. "She also works really well with our reps. Getting to know the people who are selling to us and our distributors and understanding the "why" behind price changes and supply challenges has been really important."

As food and supply prices have increased dramatically over the years, relationships with partners like Groupex have mattered to independent foodservice operators more than ever. Supper Central's relationship with Groupex began through one of their distributors, Gordon Food Service (GFS). "In this industry," says Palmer, "anything you can do to save or source things better helps. That's the advantage of working with Groupex. Asking your reps questions and being transparent about what your needs are can really help you solve problems. Don't be afraid to ask questions and open up your business so they can help find you rebates or better systems or services."

While working with family members can be challenging, Louise and Palmer feel it works for them. "We've always been close," Palmer notes. "It hasn't always been easy, of course, but it's pushed us to have an even better relationship because we want to succeed together. We've learned a lot about each other's strengths and working together as adults is really interesting. We see opportunities very similarly and are willing to see where it takes us. We didn't know this would have such an impact—it's all clearer in the rearview. We're in a really great place right now."

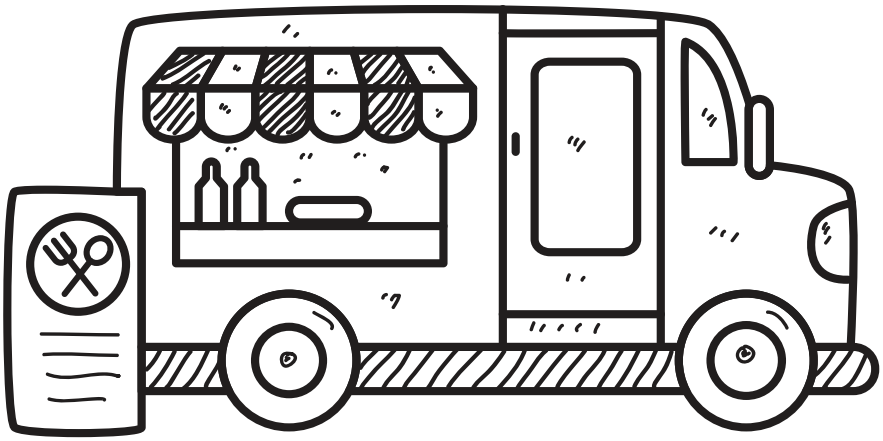
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Street Eats:

Winnipeg's Food Truck Movement





BY CHRIS SZEGO

Exploring a new city is best done on foot, wandering the streets and avenues, building an understanding of how neighbourhoods fit together. So, when *MENU* magazine wanted to delve into the food scene in Winnipeg, we went straight to the source: we reached out to local food truck operators to get their take.

Serving Salvadorian dishes with a modern twist, the Tamale Time food truck offers pupusas, tostados, and tacos along with their namesake tamales. Chef and co-owner Stan Montano admits it came about by happy accident. Originally from Vancouver, Montano moved to Winnipeg when his daughter was born. "At the time I was working as a sous chef at a restaurant, but the flavours and techniques didn't excite me. I was actually really missing home, getting bored of Winnipeg, and ready to move back."



At that point, by lucky chance, he attended a music performance by a visiting friend. There, he met Frank Alvarado, who is now his business partner and Tamale Time's co-owner. "He offered me a tamale and it was amazing. I jokingly said we should start a tamale truck." Although Montano wasn't completely serious, the coincidences kept piling up. "Suddenly, one of Frank's friends was selling his food truck. A few fixer-uppers and lots of cleaning, paperwork and loans later, by the time you knew it we had our own little red tamale truck."

The Little Eggplant food truck, which presses paninis from fresh dough, also has a surprise origin story. Fil Romolo had considered operating a food truck after university, but at the time the idea was unworkable and just fizzled out. A Winnipeg native, he spent several years living in Toronto and working at restaurants in the Little Italy neighbourhood, but eventually moved back to his hometown.

But his hankering for a food truck re-emerged. He found a truck for sale in northern Manitoba and decided to buy it after a telephone call. "My wife said, 'It's time to try. I don't want another 10 years of you talking about it.' I had no experience at all—had never even used a trailer hitch before. And I had to drive on an ice road to get the truck. The truck came first, the menu came later. It was an adventure."

The adventure of it all remains one of Romolo's favourite things about operating a food truck. "There's lots of learning to do. Everything is different every day. You're always encountering a new situation, whether it's mechanical or something food related. Some days are smoother than others, but there's always something new."

In contrast, Miss Tiny's Jamaican food truck arose from family history and tradition. Husband and wife team Marcia and Heron Warmington pursued the idea after hosting many family events. "We developed the skills necessary for cooking for large crowds and the



teamwork needed to get it done," says Marcia Warmington. Preparing meals of that size and calibre woke their entrepreneurial instincts, and Marica and Heron started Miss Tiny's in 2018. Today they operate the truck along with other family members, serving jerk chicken, rice, peas and other Jamaican foods all over the Winnipeg area. "Our passion for entertaining and cooking was passed down from a lady from humble beginnings, after whom the truck was named."

Family tradition was also the driving impetus behind The Churro Stop food truck. Jacko Garcia started operating in 2015, wanting to bring the handmade churros of Cordoba, Argentina to the streets of Winnipeg. "Here in Winnipeg there's such a large population of people born in or who travel to Latin American that it was hard to believe this delicious street food wasn't being made by anyone," says Tara Garcia, his wife and co-operator. Since then, The Churro Stop has grown from one food truck barely big enough for Jacko to a fleet of three larger trucks that Jacko and Tara operate with their children and a staff of 17.



"We love introducing people who have never tried Argentinian food to our menu," Garcia says. It gives them a chance to share their culture. They stay true to their roots and traditions. "We make our family recipe churros from scratch, by hand."

EVERYTHING, EVERYWHERE

When we asked what made Winnipeg unique, there was no single answer. And in fact, it's all the answers together that give Winnipeg food trucks their individual appeal: it's diversity that matters most.

"As we all know, Winnipeg winters are long and harsh, which makes our summers even that much more important to us," says Warmington. "I believe that is what fosters such a vibrant food truck scene in the city—it can bring the foodie out in anybody." The Miss Tiny truck can be found serving their spicy treats at events all over the greater metro area and beyond, including the Corn and Apple Festival in Morden, the Island Night Market in Portage La Prairie, and CountryFest in Dauphin. "To me, the best part about the food truck business is going into those different communities and seeing the smiling faces of new and returning customers."

Garcia agrees. "We love being able to share our food with a large number of people." Being mobile means The Churro Stop can share that love at events all over Manitoba. "One of my favourite things overall is probably all the awesome feedback we get." Hungry fans can follow the food truck on Instagram and Facebook. "It's awesome to be face to face with people when they come back again and again to order food, tell us how much they love it, and follow us around."

People who appreciate the taste of something new and different are everywhere in Winnipeg. Garcia believes that sense of adventurous openness is a driving force behind Winnipeg's incredible food scene. 'There's so much influence from global recipes because of our diverse community. There is a real melding of people and flavours here." And the appeal isn't only limited to taste. "I love being able to work in the food truck and talk to people from all over the world over the course of a single day, and having such a wide variety of places to eat. And I love that people come here and want to share their passion for their comfort food."

Showcasing his culture and his food is what Montano values most about operating a food truck. "Winnipeg is growing pretty fast," he says, noting that means the culinary environment is rapidly changing. "Although we are most known for meat and potatoes, there is a huge movement in local, fresh, multicultural and diverse quality food." Adding his own take is important. "It's exciting, being a food truck that helps elevate the scene with innovative, healthy and great tasting food."

Romolo shares Montano's sense of excitement. "In the past five, seven years, there has been an explosion of ethnic food trucks. I got to be part of that—we're one of only a few Italian trucks." And it's not just food trucks that offer variety, either. "Here in Winnipeg, we have a very high restaurant-per-capita ratio. There are always new and interesting places to go, lots of diverse flavours and experiences."

THE RETURN OF MANYFEST

Meeting the city on its own streets and terms is one of the big draws for truck operators. During the pandemic, Romolo found his truck in high demand. "Business owners reached out to us, allowed us to park in their lots free of charge. We were outdoors, we had line protocols and could spread people apart. We also visited a lot of farmers' markets."

Farmers' markets, fairs and festivals—of which Winnipeg has many—are huge draws for customers and food trucks both. Operators are glad to see those events start to make their return. Events that bring people together are important to Warmington. "Some of our favourite events to take part in are the Assiniboine Downs Night Markets, the Food Truck Wars in Brandon. And Manyfest." Montano agrees. "Our favourite event has to be ManyFest."

Garcia is very much on the same page. "We really love to be at big events with other food trucks, with large attendance, getting to feel the power of a large event. We missed our food truck family during the pandemic and sure came to realize how much we love being around people."



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Manyfest is the biggest street festival in downtown Winnipeg. After being on hiatus for two years, the street festival returned in 2022 to the delight of the city. It's a jam-packed weekend full of entertainment of all kinds: a carnival, an artisanal market, athletic contests, animal competitions, family fun, musical acts, and above all, the Food Truck Wars.

Dozens of food trucks convene on Broadway for the chance to offer food and drink and make themselves known to the city at large. And also, to compete. The Food Truck Wars come with notable prizes. "Manyfest is an awesome event," says Garcia. "We've even won some food truck awards over the years."

Several prizes are awarded each year. Last year, Jeepney, a truck known for lechon baka, Filipino-style roast beef, earned a win for Best Presentation. BBK's, with its offerings of barbecue brisket and smoked sausage, got the nod for Best Bang For Your Buck. Potoba took home the Most Original trophy for its bao and wraps deliciously filled with Indian favourites like butter chicken and paneer tikka. And Champs Food Truck took home the Judges Choice Award.

Champs serves Filipino street food like longanisa, tochino and lechon, alongside fusion creations like caldareta poutine and a slew of Filipino halo-halo creations. Operated by the same team that owns Charlee's Restaurant and Lounge, the truck has been wowing customers since 2019.

And Kyu Grill, holder of seven previous wins at the Food Truck Wars, once again claimed the People's Choice Award. Having started as a single food cart in 2015, Kyu Grill has expanded their Japanese-Hawaiian fusion dishes to four restaurants in Winnipeg and several more mobile units across Manitoba and British Columbia. With birrias, tacos and delicately sauce-drizzled Hero sandwiches, Kyu's is a perennial fan favourite.

WHAT'S NEXT

Food trucks aren't immune from the issues facing the rest of the industry. The rising cost of ingredients affects food truck operators the same way it hits restaurant owners from coast to coast. "Produce is always on the rise," says Montano. "As a chef, I have enormous pride in our food: we don't sacrifice quality. Our prices can sometimes seem high, but the amount of work, prep, time, cost that goes into it is all worth it. We aren't trying to trick anybody. We make quality, authentic food and charge accordingly."

"Although we try to absorb as much of the inflation cost as possible, our biggest challenge now is keeping our food affordable for our customers," says Warmington. "Running a food truck is no picnic, it's hard work and long days. Our biggest challenge is preparing enough food for every event, considering all of our food, from the gravy to the dressings, is made from scratch using locally sourced ingredients."

"We hadn't changed our pricing since we started," Romolo explains. "2022 was the first year we raised prices. Dairy products and mixed greens have gone up in particular. There's no escaping it—everyone's going through it. It's taking a toll on businesses, but having personal relationships with your distributors helps. Thankfully, people are still supporting us, still coming out."

Montano also points out that truck operators are also directly affected by rising fuel prices. "Fuel is another big expense." The cost of fuel can sometimes dictate where or how far trucks can travel. "We have to buckle down and focus on where we can be most profitable." Sometimes that means tinkering with the menu, other times it means focusing on private or corporate events. "Those are the best from a financial standpoint."

"Our goal is always to make our food accessible," Garcia explains. "We make food because we are passionate about it and we want people to try it. The rising price of food and supplies along with the rising cost of employee wages makes that tricky. All I can say is that we will continue to offer our food at the lowest price possible so that people can enjoy it whenever they like."

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Scan to learn more about the **Food Truck'n Experience** and **NEW Food Truck Twisted Cuisine Chef Competition** at RC Show 2023:

CHEF EVA CHIN SERVES IT RAW

American ex-pat Chef Eva Chin is a rising star in the Canadian culinary scene. Her culinary style has been crafted in some of the finest kitchens around the world. She draws her inspiration from herself and a deep desire to radically improve the industry for generations that follow.

The Canadian leg of her journey began in Vancouver's Royal Dinette and Boulevard restaurants. Now she's part of the Toronto scene as executive chef at Avling Kitchen and chef, host and founder of the Soy Luck Club dinner series.

Our candid, introspective conversation was a great joy and even greater privilege. **Read on. It's well worth it.**

MM You're American, raised in Hawaii on your grandparents' farm. That sounds idyllic.

I was born and raised on a farm. My dad is a diplomat—he works for foreign services—so my parents constantly had to move to different countries. My grandparents have a traditional Hawaiian mentality; they really wanted the kids to stay on the island, so we were raised by our grandparents who were fishermen and farmers. That had a big impact on me because everything we wanted to eat, my grandparents made us do it ourselves. We were told to go out and harvest our own vegetables, fish our own seafood... they taught us how to cook it from raw.

My maternal grandmother was one of the rare female, non-Japanese sushi chefs that made it in Hawaii. She instilled a lot of Japanese cooking philosophy in me and my Asian roots were established by being surrounded by such a wide, diverse Asian population in Hawaii. I wasn't closely raised by my parents—I didn't have that traditional maternal-paternal relationship. My grandparents were "every-one" and it was more of a nurturing style of growing up. That really made me realize, even as a young kid, that even though I may not know someone, food is a common language between strangers. It set the path for me to become a chef because I have the need to feed and nurture people because of the way I was raised. Food can nourish and save someone. Having no food can destroy someone. So, growing up, food really stood out to me as more than just a commodity and more than just a necessity. It was a means of storytelling. It was a means of identity. It was a means of weaving community and culture together.

MM How did your parents feel about your career choice? Were they supportive?

A career as a chef wasn't really an optimal option. My dad really wanted me to follow him in politics. The formula, after high school, was to follow in his footsteps, go to Harvard, study law and get a lot of degree and so forth, whatever he had had to do for his career, but that did not interest me. I wasn't sure I wanted to cook, but I was sure I did not want to be a politician.

I ended up getting into Boston University. I didn't get into Columbia, which was my first choice, I ended up going to Boston. It was really important to my family that I attend an Ivy League school. I really like psychology, so I majored in behavioral science. There really was—and there still is—a part of me that really saw a future of doing research and writing papers. I thought



I had a future in fieldwork and research. After I graduated, I was lucky enough to have numerous job offers. One of them was to join the police force in the criminology department. But, young Eva did not want to give up partying and did not want to work at a place that did substance testing.

MM Uh oh... So how and why did you reconnect with food?

I'm a Millennial kid, and at that time, backpacking was a huge thing, right? So I thought, "Oh, you know what? I can always come back to America and do that nine-to-five job, so I'm just going to go backpack for a bit. I'm just going to go see what's out there." With my parents, having spent most of their career traveling and living abroad, I'd visit them in the summer. I've always had that travel bug in me. As an American, I wasn't really welcome. In Europe, in terms of visas, the maximum stay for Americans is very short in numerous countries. I knew I needed money to travel, so I thought cooking, or construction or teaching English would be the best way to make money under the table.

My first journey was to Japan because I wanted to trace my grandmother's culinary footsteps. It blew my mind. It was everything my grandmother taught me amplified by a hundred. It was less about instilling the culinary aspect, it was learning the philosophy of culinary, the discipline behind it. The thoughtfulness, the mindfulness was the theory of culinary that Japan instilled in me. I still didn't know yet if I want to be a chef, but I wanted all the qualities a good chef had. I wanted to discipline, I wanted the patience, I wanted the skill sets. I wanted that tenacity.

While I was in Japan, my chef told me I needed to go to Paris, because that's where all the chefs go. So, after my visa ended in Japan, I took my backpack and went to Europe, to Paris. I'll never forget my first meal. I walked in... I can't remember the name of the restaurant; I'm really terrible at French. The chef was Iñaki Aizpitarte, he was a very, very talented chef at that time. He's a bit older now, but at that time, he was in his prime. He was like a rock and roll, 20-something chef with tattoos. He was calling the pass with a cigarette in his mouth. I was like, "What is happening...?" The food was phenomenal and it was next-level plating. I thought, "This is the height of that movement of haute cuisine." But this guy was so rude to his cooks. He was barking orders...he was an incredible jerk with this cigarette hanging out of his mouth.



Photo courtesy of William Luk

MM Was this a moment of arrival or a kind of rude awakening for you?

I wasn't okay with this. This was not what I wanted. I had just come from a pristine Japanese kitchen into this crazy world and I felt the same trend as I continued to eat out in places that were considered top dining, "rock-and-roll chef" kinds of restaurants. I felt a chaotic type of stress from the French kitchens while I was in Paris, and I thought to myself, "I don't think I can survive this." I was terrified. I was intimidated. It was incredibly sexist. I didn't want to put myself in such an uncomfortable position. I didn't know how to speak the language. So I took the train and I went to London. And I'm so grateful I did that.

London changed me. London, was where I told myself, "This is what I'm gonna do. I'm not gonna go back to do research; that's done. This is what I want."

I immediately felt a sense of comfort, because I spent some years growing up in Hong Kong—and this is pre-1997—so, there's a deep, colonialized British culture, that is in my blood. So when I stepped on to London, I was like, "Wow, this is comforting. It's like I'm in Hong Kong, right." And, at that time, the food was amazing. All of these British chefs in London were rising from working under, you know, the top great chefs, like Pierre Koffmann, Marco Pierre White, Raymond Blanc at that time. It was their proteges' era.

I was very lucky. I staged, I worked three or four jobs sometimes in order to pay rent. I was living by Brick Lane and the rent was cheap there because at night, there was all these ethnic food stalls open, so a lot of people found it undesirable to live above it. It was perfect for a broke cook and it expanded my palate. Even though I was living in London, I did not eat fish and chips—I was eating curry every night. I loved my time in London. It opened my mind to a lot of cultures.

MM How was the kitchen culture different in London?

One thing I really noticed, up to this point in my career, was that London was the least sexist of any culture of kitchen I worked in. It was actually very matriarchal and very common to see females in the kitchen. They were very tough. I remember talking to my colleagues at that that time and it never occurred to them that woman couldn't be

> One thing I really noticed, up to this point in my career, was that London was the least sexist of any culture of kitchen I worked in.

leaders. I mean, for God's sake, they had the Queen and Margaret Thatcher.

That doesn't exist in America. There's no strong woman leader in America we really look up to. I was so inspired -by that environment, you know, the disciplinary, slightly micromanaging, but truly equal opportunity environment in London. It made me fall in love with cooking as a true professional chef. It pushed me to every limit—past every limit. I owe my mentor, Shane Osborn, everything. Forever.

MM It sounds like a wonderful, intense time in your early career. Why did you leave?

I was super burnt out by London. I still wanted to see Europe, so I saved my money and did a backpacking trip. I didn't want to do more full-time jobs at that point. I wanted to live my life and just see what was out there. Shane, during our personal time, had said, "I'm not attached to my Michelin stars, Eva. I'm just gonna return them one day and travel the world with my family." I laughed at the time, but he did it. He really did. That really changed me. It made me realize that you can be the chef who cooks for accolades, cooks for the Michelin stars, cooks to be on the magazines, but what are you doing it for? Is that really why you are a chef? So, I had this amazing, world-class chef telling me that, "At the end of the day, it's just food. I don't care about the stars, I care about my family."

That inspired me to go back out and see more of the world. That educates and shapes a cook far more than just slaving away in a kitchen. I spent the next six months just backpacking around Europe, doing some unpaid stages here and there.

After that, I travelled throughout Australia, southeast Asia. I didn't stop traveling for a long time. Eventually, I ended up in Vancouver for a friend's wedding in Whistler. I partied so hard at the wedding, I missed my flight. I really liked BC and thought it was beautiful, so I decided to stay and check out Canada. It's been my neighbour in America for so long.

MM So, you ended up in Canada because you missed a flight...?

Totally, and I settled in Vancouver at first. It was very beautiful, but very boring. I kept getting this itch, so I actually left twice in the five years I was there.

I left to go to Hong Kong again to work with my mentor Shane. He had opened two new restaurants there. After awhile, I came back to Vancouver. I got dissatisfied again, left again and came back. Again, I felt it couldn't give me enough. It was too "chillax," it wasn't my "hustle city." I had been interviewing extensively in San Francisco and I had a job with Dominque Crenn at Atelier Crenn. That year she had been voted Best Female Chef in the World. That was my goal. I always had to work for the best and learn from the best. But at the very moment I was about to leave for San Fran, I met my wife.

MM The universe had other plans for you...

Right?

So, we got married and, for some reason, my career has been rising since. I'm very lucky. When I came back from our honeymoon, I was the executive sous chef at Royal Dinette, a new restaurant a friend of mine opened in Vancouver. It was farm-to-table and very daring. I was just married and in love, so I thought I'd relax and help my friend out as his sous chef. But when I came back from our honeymoon, he told me he was opening a new restaurant and wanted me to be the head chef. I was like, "Cool, cool." That gave me a platform in Vancouver. That's when people noticed my name.

MM So, you finally found purpose in Vancouver, and a star was born.

That was the wildest time of my career. It was my real first executive chef job. Before then I was only head chef of my own pop-ups or a residency. But now I had a business card! My friend transitioned me in for a month, but then he peaced out to open a new restaurant. I had to figure a lot of it out on my own.

I came up with the wildest creations in my career at Royal Dinette. The Globe and Mail gave me a four-star review. It was incredible for my career, but it was not good for my mentality. I became so full of myself to the point where, when I was creating dishes, there was no voice in my head to say, "Stop. Think." I was just so confident. I was riding a high and I was so young and untamed. So, as it was a creative high-point, I almost feel like it was very unfinished or rough. It was the first time I put my name out in Vancouver, and the reviews were good. Thankfully, I wasn't traumatized by that.

MM You got away with it.

I did. When I think back, I can't believe I didn't flame out. I was constantly angry because I was overworking myself. I felt like I had so much to prove. And, I was a very, very tough boss to myself and my colleagues.

After two years of that, my wife sat me down and said, "This needs to change. Something's going bad in your life right now, and you're gonna crash and burn." She laid down the law, and she was right. I was so tired mentally; I almost hated myself. So, in 2018, I quit.

MM That's a huge intervention and a huge point of introspection. What was it like to just walk away at such a high point?

I needed to snap out of it. And you know what? I sat in my apartment for one whole month. I needed to rest my body and my mind. It was during this time a friend of mine who was also my seafood supplier asked if I had heard of Alex Chen.

At that time Alex Chen was a rising name in Canada, not just in Vancouver. His restaurant. Boulevard Kitchen & Oyster Bar, continually won awards for best fine dining. I was looking at his food, and this beautiful plating. It was French, traditional plating that reminded me of my days in London, and I really missed it. And that's when I realized my problem. Royal Dinette was very Nordic farm-to-table, following the Noma trend. Our plates were very experimental. I thought, "Oh my god. I got sucked into that." I had forgotten all of the discipline, the finesse, that really drove me as a chef. I needed that back in my life.

I reached out to Alex Chen and he immediately hired me as sous chef. He had four sous chefs at that time. I came in knowing I had to prove that I had what it takes to be his chef de cuisine. I was wounded from my experience at Royal Dinette and my ego was super hurt, so I was ready to go to work and pick myself back up.

Boulevard was a monster of a kitchen. We had 45 cooks on staff and we did 200 covers—it was easily a $10 million-dollar restaurant. It was a pivotal decision for me. Roger Ma was my direct boss; my executive chef. There was no chef de cuisine at that time—Roger and Alex had never successfully hired a chef to cuisine other than themselves. No one had been able to handle that kitchen, and other than one female sous chef that they've had from the beginning, there hadn't been a female in management. I didn't recognize all those red flags. I was there to fix my problems.

*I was there for six months before I was promoted to chef de cuisine. That was a big piece of humble pie for me. Alex and Roger were very good to me and I'm forever grateful for Boulevard slapping me awake. I was dealing with my own struggles. It made me chef and a business person. It made me realize that running a restaurant wasn't just an outlet for a chef, It was the f****** business. You need to make money.*

Boulevard was all about making money, but also producing the finest dining and food. That's incredibly hard and but that is the sustainable way to actually make this industry work. Alex is smart. He doesn't run by ego. He genuinely listens to customers, and he genuinely cooks food that sells. That's what really woke me up as a chef. And when I got promoted to chef to cuisine, I felt like I've truly healed the trauma that I put on myself at Royal Dinette.

MM So, this is where you really start to shine, and start becoming your true self as a chef?

Yes. I finally started really moving forward at Boulevard. I started working with local farmers. I put farm-to-table in, when before they were just ordering from distributors. I started teaching my cooks about agriculture. I began to prioritize inclusion and diversity in the team. I started being the head chef I really should have been from the beginning—not just creating amazing dishes, but actually being a leader.

That's when I realized I was ready to tackle the next level of my career, tackling the problems of the inner industry. I realized all the red flags were unsustainable parts of our industry, underpinned by classic fine dining traits like overworking cooks, not offering any kind of benefits, food waste. When I fixed my own problems, I started to really see all the others and wanted to change them for the next generation.

Before then, cooking was 95 per cent of my life as a chef. It's only 20 per cent right now, which leaves a lot more room for creating a safe environment for the well-being of my cooks—mentoring and training them to be a chef one day, not just another cook.

MM How did you end up in Toronto? Was it Momofuku?

When Momofuku poached me and brought me to Toronto, it opened a portal of cooking Asian ingredients. Having an everyday Asian pantry in my kitchen was something very unfamiliar for me. All of a sudden I was that kid who went to Japan for the first time again. And I walked into my third set of problems to solve and face: the identity, heritage and authenticity of my cuisine.

Throughout my career, there have been three groups of challenges—internal, external and culinary—that I've faced and am battling still.

I'm trying to figure out how to be authentically myself, learning how to trade my tweezers for chopsticks. And, after Momofuku or at Avling, where I really took the leap of introducing Asian progressive cuisine in Leslieville to granola moms. But now I can proudly say there are people traveling from Markham and west end to Leslieville just to eat my food. I want to bring diversity to Leslieville, you know, and I'm doing it.

MM You don't do things in small measure, huh?

No! I guess I think that if you have the power to work toward a greater cause, just do it. It's just so funny that most chefs don't realize, the impact they have. That's why, as the years go by I realize that my role as a chef has so much less to do with cooking than people think and so much more to do with things people don't even think about.

MM This is a fantastic conversation, and it's a little emotionally uncomfortable. It's quite remarkable really—a little like a TED Talk.

I'm really into personal development and I listen to Brené Brown on a daily basis—uncomfortable conversations as part of my everyday. It still is uncomfortable but you know like there's not a lot of us in the industry. I don't know where or when walk into another gay,

"Throughout my career, there have been three groups of challenges—internal, external and culinary—that I've faced and am battling still.



minority female in the industry who will be given a platform like I was given in the past two years. But that's not right. And there's so much pressure. A friend of mine in the film and television industry once said to me, "Sometimes I'm burnt out from just representing. Do you ever feel that way?" And I said, "No, because you have millions of followers and I don't even know what that feels like." But, I do feel that sometimes, I do feel tired sometimes being the one people go to for Lunar New Year or the only female Asian chef to talk to. I get it, and you know, like 10 years ago, that was Anita Lo.

MM What are your greatest hopes and fears for the hospitality industry?

My biggest fear is that we fail to set our next generation up for success—that this keeps happening to us. We need to provide the right tools to our cooks to succeed, and that's not just a knife.

We need to develop the person, not just the cook. I don't remember every service, they're all a blur. But, I do remember entire conversations from my career. I remember the sous chefs who didn't stand up for me. I remember the leaders who weren't the people I needed them to be. These are the things that stick with you as a cook. One of the most common things cooks share when we meet are trauma stories. We're like, "Your chef threw something hot in your face?!? Oh, that's so funny." But it's not funny, and it's often the most common thing we share. It's like our past trauma a form of currency. We tell the story and say we're over it, but the fact we're telling it means we're not over it, right? If you take something out on a cook, know that you're going to be the story this cook is going to tell for the next 20 years of their career.

We need to be mindful of how we speak to and treat one another. Anyone who has an opportunity to lead and mentor has to think about the impact we have on our staff, and the trauma we leave behind. We need to be as mindful about our mentorship, as parents need to be mindful about parenting. It's not just teaching you how to cut an apple anymore. The golden quote of our industry has always been, "This is how it's always been done." This is the most toxic sentence ever.

The art of leadership is the art of hospitality. Here's an example: At one of the restaurants I worked, someone ordered one of our tomahawks, and they wanted it well done. I watched my chef just lose it, berating the customer and throwing a hissy fit—behind closed doors, obviously. But then, he disappeared for about 10 minutes, and he came back and personally cooked the tomahawk, well done, to perfection. He turned around to the cooks and then says to us, "I'm so sorry guys. I just lost it for a second because I felt like I was cooking this tomahawk for myself. But I'm not. We're cooking for the customer, and we're going to make sure this is the best well-done tomahawk this customer ever has. Because that's what hospitality is about."

That's always stuck with me.

MM You're judging the Garland Culinary Competition at RC Show this year. What drew you to the opportunity?

I think I am ready to step out and go beyond just influencing my own team and my own cooks, and I really support competition. But once again, we're back to the same topic. Let's say a cook creates this plate for this competition. Why did they create this plate, this way? Are you creating this plate to tell Chef Eva and Chef Tre how talented you are? Is it, "Look! I have 12 different components with 12 different methods of preparation." Or, are you making it this way because it's just so damned tasty. Or it's something your grandmother made for you and you're trying to show me that this is why you're a chef. Did you make this plate because you had to make it 4,000 times at your last restaurant and you feel it's the best representation of your skill? There are many reasons that compel a chef to make that plate, but at the end of the day, there are four things I ask: Are you proud of it? Are you actually going to make this one day for your mom and dad? Is it tasty? And, number four, if you could do it again, what would you do differently?

As a young cook, if you still haven't figured out what you're trying to prove, then you need to reconsider this industry because you have a long road ahead of you and you're going to tire yourself out from just proving yourself. Being a young cook and joining a competition like Garland is one of the best ways of figuring that out.

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Watch **Chef Eva** on the judging panel at the **Garland Culinary Competition** live at RC Show! Scan to learn more:



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FOR THE WIN:

BY CHRIS SZEGO

CULINARY COMPETITIONS AT THE RC SHOW

RC Show Restaurants Canada
·TORONTO·
CONFERENCE • TRADE SHOW • COMPETITIONS • EVENTS
HEART & HUSTLE
APRIL 10-12, 2023

The Restaurants Canada Show is Canada's largest hospitality conference and trade show. Coming up **April 10-12, 2023**, the theme of this year's RC Show is Heart & Hustle—a theme that drives at the core of the restaurant industry. And what better way to show off both than with some dazzling competitions?

This year's RC Show features both returning and brand-new contests, so the whole industry has a chance to shine.





BEYOND THE RAIL

Every year, the Bar and Beverage stage at RC Show plays host to the best, brightest and most inventive cocktail creators in the industry at the Beyond the Rail cocktail competition. Arguably one of the most entertaining competitions at the Show, Beyond the Rail is sponsored by Beam Suntory.

Past Beyond the Rail competitions have highlighted the creativity and innovation Canada's best bartenders are known for. During the pandemic shutdowns, entrants even created cocktail kits for distribution. This year, competitors will work in pairs, to emphasize the teamwork and collaboration that make the Canadian bar industry so unique.

"Mixologists will present their vision of an ideal bar, telling the story through a cocktail flight," says Christina Veira, co-Bar Ambassador for the RC Show Bar and Beverage stage. "More and more, we're finding that guests are looking for an immersive experience, one that incorporates all the senses, beyond just taste and sight."

Using both mandated and personal ingredients and alcohols, six teams of two will demonstrate their skills on stage. Their challenge will be to transport the judges by telling a story through three separate cocktails. "Beyond the Rail is especially exciting this year because it truly showcases not only the resilience of the Canadian bar industry, but also its deep well of creativity," Veira says.

Creativity, cooperation and collaboration are three crucial qualities in bartenders across the country. Competitions like Beyond the Rail give them a chance to exhibit their artistry and finesse, to make a mark—and a name for themselves—in the industry. Veira herself was an avid competitor, all the way up to the global level. "Competitions are great ways to push yourself, to try new skills and showcase your talent."

There's also the chance to take home prizes, and if past years are any indication, the winners will devote their awards to passion projects. "Over the last few years, we've seen bar professionals not only maintain their craft, but push it forward."

Interested teams submit an application, from which a pool of finalists is chosen for the big show. Keep an eye on the RC Show site for details.

BOCUSE D'OR & WORLD PASTRY CUP

The Bocuse d'Or is the world's premier culinary competition. Prestigious and demanding, it is the Olympics of cooking competitions, requiring dedication, training and multiple rounds of international competition to get to the biennial final.

In January 2023, our national team of culinary athletes placed 11th at the Bocuse d'Or. Led by Chef Samuel Sirois, with commis Léandre Legault-Vigneault, coach Chef Gilles Herzog and team president Chef Alvin Leung, the team is proud of this significant achievement on the world stage. With monkfish and scallops as required ingredients, Team Canada infused their entry with skill and passion, showcasing Canada's gustatory products and culinary heritage while delivering on this year's theme, "Feed the Kids".

The Bocuse d'Or has a sister competition, the World Pastry Cup, and for the first time since 2008, Canada took to the stage at the finals. Team president Daniel Garcia joined sugar specialist Patrick Bouilly, chocolate master Jacob Pelletier, and Ross Baisas, king of ice carving, at the creative and challenging competition in January. In 10 hours, the team presented frozen whole desserts and lollipops, plated individual restaurant desserts and a whole chocolate dessert to share, while also creating extraordinary artistic chocolate, sugar and ice sculptures for display.

Team Canada placed 10th overall, a remarkable showing for their first appearance in 15 years. In addition, Team Canada was awarded the eco-responsible prize for their use of sustainable products, which dovetailed incredibly well with the theme of "Climate Change".

At this year's RC Show, Canadian chefs will compete for a chance to represent Canada at the next Bocuse d'Or and World Pastry Cup. Chefs Canada is on the search for the talented chefs to shine the international spotlight on our industry.

Applicants are interviewed by a committee of chefs who decide on the finalists who will then compete for a jury, cooking on stage at the RC Show in April for the opportunity to lead the next Canadian teams to world acclaim.

GARLAND CANADA CULINARY COMPETITION

Garland Canada continues its long-standing commitment to Canada's talented and passionate culinary community by spotlighting emerging talent at the annual Garland Canada Culinary Competition. Applicants prove their skills and creativity before a panel of esteemed judges in virtual and in-person rounds of competition. For this year's rounds, chefs were challenged to craft a dish that reflects the 2023 RC Show theme: Heart & Hustle.

First, culinary schools across Canada reviewed all the applications to narrow the pool and select the semi-finalists. Each of those semi-finalists will deliver a 45-minute culinary demonstration of the creation of an original dish to a panel of virtual judges.
That demonstration will incorporate black box items selected by the jury, and highlight the skills, techniques and heart-and-hustle of each participant. The jury will select four finalists and on April 11th, who will go forward and compete on the Culinary Stage at RC Show in a live, head-to-head contest in front of judges and an excited audience.

The winners will receive cash prizes, along with bragging rights and top-tier culinary gear and equipment from generous sponsors.





The judges will examine many criteria: personality and uniqueness, specifics and hygiene, control, and of course, taste. It's a lot for competing chefs to balance. Former judge Chef Billy Alexander, Director of Programs at the Culinary Tourism Alliance, knows that well. "All judges remember that feeling. The nervousness never goes away – and that's good. It means you're still excited; you still care." Heart and hustle indeed.

The application process is now closed, but RC Show attendees will be able to watch both the competition and the awards presentation on the Culinary Stage on April 11th.

JOHN BIL OYSTER SHUCKING COMPETITION

The 4th annual John Bil Oyster Shucking Competition will bring the best shuckers from Ontario and surrounding areas together to demonstrate their shucking skills. Presented

by Raspberry Point Oysters on the Bar and Beverage Stage on April 12th, it's a chance for competitors to share their oyster shucking talent and find out if they have what it takes to win $1,000 in cash.

Chef Charlotte Langley, CCO and co-founder of Scout Canning, started the annual competition for the most important reason of all: love. "I created this annual competition to celebrate the memory of John Bil and Brett Diederichs, two amazing humans and shuckers. The community misses them very much. We shuck in their honour."

An exciting combo of precision, speed and presentation, the contest follows global oyster shucking rules and regulations, which means competitors are given 14 PEI oysters to shuck, out of which they can select their 12 best for presentation. Chef Langley wanted the format to follow standard rules and regulations. "Any shucker that comes to the table at RC Show can compete in any other shucking competition in North America."

Shuckers will compete for both renown and for some generous prizes. Plus, there's an additional special prizefor the cleanest plate.

An oyster shucking contest is an exciting race against the clock, requiring practice and expert technique. Developing that technique is another reason culinary competitions are so important. "Competitions help people hone their skills," says Chef Langley. "They also spark joy and energy and bring excitement to our lives."



NATIONAL BARISTA CHAMPIONSHIP QUALIFIER

Canada's most talented baristas will take to the stage at the National Barista Championship presented at the Coffee Stage throughout RC Show. Presenting Espresso, Milk, and Signature Drink courses to a panel of esteemed judges, competitors will be awarded points for taste, technique, cleanliness, creativity, and overall presentation. The winner will go on to represent Canada at the World Barista Championship.

"The focus of the National Barista Championship is excellence in coffee, with emphasis on diversity, transparency, community and creativity," says Alison Ensworth, Marketing Coordinator for the Canadian Chapter of the Specialty Coffee Association (SCA). "It encourages baristas to stretch the limits of skill, technique and innovation in specialty coffee-making."

Competing baristas have 15 minutes to prepare and serve three espresso-based courses each to the sensory judges (12 drinks total). Set to music and including an oral presentation, technical judges evaluate the competitors' techniques while the sensory judges evaluate the taste and presentation of the drinks, as well as the performance. The espresso machines, grinders, water and tools are sponsored by Sanremo Canada, Water for Coffee, Eight Ounce Coffee, Forward Coffee, and other coffee companies.

Competition rules have changed this year to allow plant-based and non-cow animal milks for the Milk Course. There's also a new option to choose multiple brewing temperatures and two new types of scoring scales.

The top six finalists from the RC Show Qualifier will move to the Finals, where they'll compete for the title of Canadian Barista Champion. The ultimate winner will represent Canada at the World Barista Championship in Athens, June 22-24, with travel expenses and registration paid in full by SCA Canada and their generous sponsors. There are also prizes for the semi-finalists.



Ensworth sees competitions as a chance to create a legacy, for both the individual and the coffee industry. "We're happy to see greater diversity among competitors, with folks coming from further and further east and west, from smaller towns rather than just big cities, and from a range of ages, ethnicities, and experience."

Although there's always room to grow, it is good to watch strides being made. That's partly what competitions are all about. "Coffee competitions inspire greater and greater skill and innovation in the coffee community, and help push the industry forward," says Ensworth. "They bring the community together in friendly competition and put Canada on the global coffee map."

For more details, follow @sca_canada on Instagram, or visit the scacanada.coffee.

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PIZZA COMPETITION

This year, RC Show will host a brand-new pizza competition. Along with Ardent Mills and Lactalis Canada Foodservice, Restaurants Canada is searching for the best and brightest pizza makers across the country.

From completed entry forms, a panel of experienced pizza judges will select 24 finalists. On April 11th those finalists will have a chance to strut their stuff in front of the judges, competing live at the Pizza Stage. Each finalist will have to make, bake and present two pizzas in 20 minutes.

Consulting with the creation of the contest is Joe Leroux, owner of Amadio's Pizza in Mississauga. "The style of pizza is entirely open—contestants can choose whatever they want to make in the time period. We'll have Moretti Forni pizza ovens available at different temperatures." Though there isn't a strict theme for the contest itself, there will be an emphasis on minimal wastage. "We want competitors to come with just enough to make their pizzas." The other emphasis, appropriately enough, will be on hustle. "You have to hustle in the pizza business."

"Competitions bring out the camaraderie among participants, and the playfulness," says Leroux. "They also make you shake." Leroux himself is no stranger to pizza competitions. He has competed in Naples, Italy, and won in the international traditional category at the International Pizza Competition in Las Vegas.

A veteran with more than 100 restaurant shows around the world under his belt, Leroux believes that culinary competitions are important. "They separate you, give you that extra feather. Prove to the world – not just to your friends and family – that you can do this. It's accreditation."

Along with valuable Faema culinary gear to be won, there are also cash prizes to make the pot sweeter. The first-place winner will also receive two three-day Buyer's passes to Pizza Expo 2024, along with entrance to the International Pizza Challenge to be hosted there. "The IPC often fills up in a day," says Leroux. "Winning there, even a district title, is great advertising for your business."

RC Show Restaurants Canada ·TORONTO·

For more information on RC Show competitions, visit: rcshow.com/competitions.

LOCALLY CRAFTED, LATIN INSPIRED

BY ANTONIETA HERRERA



Chefs and consumers alike rave about Sabana's line of fresh, artisan Latin-style cheeses. The story behind these Ontario-crafted cheeses and the brand inspired by the Venezuelan prairies is a little less known and a little surprising... unless you've had the pleasure of meeting Sabana founder and cheese expert Antonieta Herrera.

When I was a young girl in Venezuela, I loved cheese and it was a staple in my home. I grew up in the city, but was privileged to visit my relatives' farms, where I could see how cheese was made, experiment, and milk the cows to get fresh milk. It was smelly, but it connected me to life with how everything starts.

These experiences and my heritage stayed with me when, as an adult, I moved to Canada with my husband. I had just graduated from law school and arrived in Canada for what I thought would be a two-year adventure. When the political climate back home





became increasingly worrisome, we decided to stay and make Canada our home. I went into banking and spent 15 years working in compliance and eventually international banking.

Over the years, I had three children and, as many career-minded women do, found balancing motherhood and corporate life difficult. I'd always had a wild dream of having a "side business" in the back of my mind, but as I found myself arranging to receive cheese samples from Venezuela via Miami to Canada, I realized I might be serious.

I was never able to find cheeses that resembled those from back home. The closest I could find, in terms of the texture and the look, was feta cheese. When I finally found a cheese here that looked like cheeses from back home, it was an imported product. I realized there was a niche and began the search for an adventurous cheesemaking partner to co-develop a locally-made version of the cheese, and it was tough, because these are fresh cheeses with a limited shelf life, so getting it here was a little like transporting an organ, but navigating red tape and logistics were skills I had earned in corporate life, so I persevered.

I started Sabana with three cheeses crafted for their unique properties. Queso Fresco, a semi-firm cheese for grilling, Queso Blanco, a soft white cheese, and Queso Cotija, a semi-hard, crumbling cheese that's a little saltier. We've recently added Queso Oaxaca, which is a very elaborate, labour-intensive and expensive cheese to make, but we were able to craft an equivalent, locally-made version at a more reasonable price. The only difference is that our Oaxaca is made with pasteurized milk to meet Canadian standards, whereas in Mexico it's typically made with raw milk and is sometimes saltier to preserve the cheese. This spring we are launching two new cheeses. The first is Queso Duro, a hard cheese, and the other is called "Chihuahua". It's a farmstead cheese with a creamy colour, soft texture and a little bit of a bitter aftertaste named for the Chihuahua region, made originally by Mennonites in Mexico.

More and more, chefs and home cooks are wanting to recreate recipes with authentic ingredients. This is the same rationale that guides Sabana.

I'm often asked how we make sure our cheeses are authentic to those made in Latin America, and my response is that all cheeses are influenced by the grasses in the fields that feed the cows, the weather and other local factors, but our technique is authentic and our product is truly fresh because it's local. Buying local isn't just the right thing to do to support people in your community. It's also about freshness. You can only guarantee the freshness of cheese if you can follow the trail of its ingredients all the way back to the farm. That freshness is our priority and the essence of the Latin-style cheeses we make. Chefs often tell me that our products are the most authentic Latin-style cheeses they've seen in the market, so the hard work to make it and make sure it's available is worth it.

It doesn't matter whether it's a small store or a big store or how many times I see it, every time I see the Sabana label surrounded by so many other cheeses, or on a menu, I feel it in my stomach; I still get excited and I can't believe it. This is a very ambitious project, but so important to me. When I started, so many doors were closed to me and only Latin-style groceries and small specialty shops would carry my cheese. Now, the people and brands that wouldn't open those doors are seeking me out and Sabana can be found at several grocery stores as well as foodservice distributors across Canada.

This content was sponsored by Dairy Farmers of Ontario in support of women in the foodservice and hospitality industry.

Sabana was a proud participant in Dairy Farmers of Ontario's Start-Up/Scale-Up program, which invests in the development and growth of small dairy businesses in Ontario. Antonieta Herrera completed the program, receiving guidance and mentorship along the way as well as three matching grants to help Sabana grow and thrive.



Photo courtesy of @kaascross

The Journey Within

with Inez Cook, author *and* owner of Vancouver's Salmon n' Bannock

Inez Cook is a fascinating person and a somewhat reluctant leader.

Born in Bella Coola, BC as a member of the Nuxalk Nation, at just one year of age she was a victim of the Sixties Scoop. She taken from her family without consent, put into care and adopted and raised by a White family. As she grew up and embarked on what would be a long career in the airline industry, Cook spent much of her life searching for her true identity and heritage, as detailed in her award-winning children's book, "The Sixties Scoop."

Cook traveled around the world, living in Saudi Arabia for a time and spending six-week stints in India, Egypt, Chad, Nigeria, Indonesia and England for her airline work. Her travel experiences always centred around food, and she'd long fantasized about someday opening a restaurant. Then, as she began the process of reconnecting with her Nuxalk heritage, she took the leap and opened Salmon n' Bannock, Vancouver's only Indigenous restaurant.

The truly crazy part? She only just retired from her flight career last September.

It doesn't take long to get the sense that Cook, despite her extraordinary story and many achievements, is naturally humble and inwardly focused on her own life and business. As we connect to discuss her experiences and what it means to be a leader in the restaurant industry, Cook laughs, noting that she's just been asked to participate in a panel for the EmpowerHER conference on women in foodservice in the U.S. "I guess I tick a lot of boxes. It's funny because you're an entrepreneur just plugging away and all of a sudden it's brought to your attention that you're considered a leader. They say that when women are asked to do something they're not completely confident about, they'll be honest and manage expectations. If you ask a man, they'll just say, "No problem," and fake it until they make it. When we're referred to as "leaders," I think a lot of female entrepreneurs feel like frauds. We're just over here working, trying to keep everything together."

During her career, Cook imagined a future when she'd open a restaurant and share some of her experiences by taking people on a journey through food. She got married and planned with her husband to open a restaurant based on his culture and food. But they divorced and the plan no longer made sense. She travelled to Kelowna, BC for the wine festival to try and forget about her divorce and encountered a huge sign that said, "Don't panic. We've got Bannock". Cook pulled over. She couldn't believe there was an Indigenous restaurant in Kelowna, but none left in Vancouver.

The idea of opening her own restaurant was compelling, but Cook put it out of her mind until, a few weeks later, she met a woman who was looking to sublet her restaurant. "I felt like I was kicked in the stomach.

That weekend I went back to Kelowna and met with Sharon and Darren from Kekuli Café to ask if they wanted to partner up. They weren't ready for that at the time, but they gave me their blessing. I didn't grow up in my culture, but I wanted to be authentic. I didn't want to be fraud, so I hired local Indigenous people and started learning more about my culture and food. Salmon n' Bannock Bistro opened February 15, 2010. Because of my airline career, the culinary world didn't know me. Because of what happened in my childhood, the Indigenous community didn't know me. I was an alien in both worlds."

Cook characterizes her exploration of her heritage through food as very emotional. "When my ex-husband and I planned to open a restaurant based on his culture, it wouldn't have been authentic to me, even though I learned how to cook all of the dishes," she shares. "When I was exploring my own heritage, it didn't feel authentic either, so I had to figure out ways to make it authentic and learn. I'm still learning every day—I'm definitely not an expert. I like celebrating Indigenous traditions with my modern viewpoint because no matter which type of restaurant I opened, because of my past, I never would have felt like I belonged."

Cook refers back to the theme of taking people on a journey through her food, saying, "It may sound super cheesy, but I never realized that the journey I was taking people on was my personal journey; the journey within. So, when people come to Salmon n' Bannock, you can feel it in the walls. Everyone has a story and all of our plates have a story. For example, our salmon burger is smoked with the same sage we smudge with. We have sweetgrass-infused cherries. For this year's Dine Out Vancouver Festival, instead of a poke bowl, we're doing a "smoké bowl", a vegetarian dish with smoked mushrooms and crispy Haida Gwaii kelp and seasoned barley. That's what we're all about. I hate the word "fusion". To me, that means bringing two totally different things together. We're not fusion. We're the only Indigenous restaurant in the city. We have ovens and a sous vide, so we're modern."

One of Cook's friends oversees Indigenous initiatives at the Vancouver airport and had been suggesting she open a location there. It wasn't until the pandemic when shutdowns forced a pivot to takeout and delivery, that Cook and her team made a simplified menu for Uber Eats, and that opening a streamlined version of the restaurant started to make sense. Inspired by the new menu, she called her friend at the airport back and the plans for Salmon n' Bannock On The Fly took flight. "I visited YVR to look at locations while I was laid off during the travel slowdowns, not knowing how long it would last. I signed a lease and a month later was called back to work full-time at Air Canada. I'd hit my service goal, so I decided to retire and Salmon n' Bannock On the Fly soft launched at YVR in December, with a grand opening on February 13th. After so long in the industry, I've become a bit of a brat about travel. I wasn't leaving without my free flight passes."

As Cook reflects on her experiences and purpose so far, what comes through is a sense of gratitude and a growing awareness and comfort with her responsibility to others. "I think my job now is to continue to inspire other Indigenous people to know that big things are possible. During the pandemic I posted a meme about the impact of lockdowns on restaurants. I thought it was funny, but I got in a fair bit of trouble. People felt that, as a leader, I should have been more optimistic and that I shouldn't have posted it. Understanding what it means to be a leader in other people's eyes is a big responsibility. It still surprises me, but I'm already there."

To see what's on the menu visit:
www.salmonandbannock.net



> "Because of my airline career, the culinary world didn't know me. Because of what happened in my childhood, the Indigenous community didn't know me. I was an alien in both worlds."

Soup Sisters:
A "hug in a bowl" for foodservice





Soup Sisters Founder and CEO Sharon Hapton *was inspired by just two ingredients: a passion for soup and a desire to fill empty bowls, starting with her own. Over the years, her passion project grew into a thriving social enterprise devoted to feeding people in need.*

Now, Soup Sisters has adapted and scaled their model to share their mandate, message and profitability with like-minded Canadian foodservice operators.

Soup Sisters is a grassroots superhero story that spawned a Canadian movement. In 2009, Sharon Hapton was an accomplished Calgary business leader and mother of two who found herself staring down her 50th birthday and an emptying nest. Like so many of us at that point in the journey, she was considering her next chapter. She had always been a soup maker and put her business experience to work, finding both warmth and new purpose in the humility and outsized possibility of soup.

Hapton started Soup Sisters as a series of soup-making events organized by volunteers in cities across Canada. Soup makers would come together and share the experience of cooking together and then delivering the soup to local organizations responsible for feeding people and families in need. The concept and purpose caught on, with Soup Sisters soon adding more cities and events to their schedule as well as three successful cookbooks and a second event category, Broth Brothers, in response to growing interest in soup-making from men. Today, Soup Sisters is no small operation. Prior to the pandemic, they were operating over 40 events in 27 Canadian cities every month, delivering over three million servings of nutritious soup to a broad mix of

> “There are no middlemen, so restaurants and foodservice partners can serve our soup, keep their profit margin...”





agencies offering nourishment to people in need. They had thousands of soup makers engaged in their mission through events across Canada.

The Soup Sisters model was to partner with cooking schools across the country to hold their soup-making events. “People paid to volunteer at Soup Sisters events, and that money went back to the culinary partner, ensuring the finest ingredients were used in our soups,” Hapton explains. “That quality is non-negotiable.”

The Soup Sisters model addresses the real-world challenges agencies face in feeding their clients using donated ingredients. “The local cooks and chefs receive donations they sometimes cannot use or store,” explains Hapton. “We have a fully-prepared, zero-waste product and it’s insanely efficient on a large scale. We have a laser focus on giving to people the right way. Soup is a big deal because it both nourishes and starts conversations. It’s a comfort food that delivers the full food experience, the full meal.”

Hapton’s work has had an enormous effect, delivering sustenance and inspiring soup makers across the country at Soup Sisters and Broth Brothers events. The venture has earned recognition and support from dozens of organizations like *Chatelaine*, CityTV, Women of Influence and the YWCA. Hapton herself received the Meritorious Service Medal from the Governor General of Canada on behalf of Queen Elizabeth II for “bringing honour to Canada through performing exceptional deeds.”

When the pandemic arrived, it shelved many great community endeavours, but Soup Sisters was ready. In March 2020, they launched their Soup Bank, producing their recipes at a food safe, large-scale production facility in Edmonton, Alberta. The recipes were developed with the support of food scientists and certified master chef Michael Allemeier. They are on track in February to deliver 7,500 pounds of soup in five popular varieties to agencies across Canada.

Soup Sisters’ expansion includes a new and exciting opportunity for foodservice to purchase their soup at a special, wholesale price. This is not a request for charity—Hapton is a business-minded person. The goal is to accelerate the growth of the Soup Sisters mandate while extending value to new restaurant partners a fair margin on an excellent and sustainable product. “Serving our soup can help restaurants realize profit three ways,” she says. “First, our soup is flash frozen and delivered nationwide by our in-kind partner, VersaCold Logistics Services. It arrives ready to heat and serve, which reduces restaurant labour and food waste. Second, the Soup Sisters story and service record are established across Canada, so restaurants that serve our soup may share that story benefit from that success. Finally, the soup not only supports people in need, it’s scalable and it’s delicious.”

Selling soup directly to foodservice will allow Soup Sisters to increase the volume of soup they can afford to make and deliver to agencies, feeding more people from coast to coast. Hapton points out that because Soup Sisters soups come straight from production to the business, “There are no middlemen, so restaurants and foodservice partners can serve our soup, keep their profit margin and know that Soup Sisters’ profits are used to produce more soup to give back to the people we serve. That is my mandate. That is what we do. That’s why we’ve developed the scale and capacity to deliver our soup not only to more agencies, but to restaurants, hotels and foodservice across Canada.”

“It’s just incredibly efficient,” she says. “All I care about is feeding the people and working with restaurants so we can deliver our nourishing “Hug in a Bowl”, impact food insecurity and thrive together.”

Scan to learn more about how to put Soup Sisters on your menu or become a Soup Sisters culinary partner.

RC Restaurants Canada Show ·TORONTO·

GET YOUR SOUP ON AT RC SHOW 2023
Soup Sisters soup will be served in the **Pop-Up at RC Show**, curated by **Matt Dean Pettit**. Scan to learn more:

From Personal Tragedy to Business Triumph

The challenges Staff Shop Founder & CEO Jennifer Ménard-Shand experienced as a young woman have been transformed into business leadership and purpose. Her team has national resources in place that can help solve restaurant and foodservice labour challenges.



Like so many women-owned and Indigenous-led businesses, Staff Shop has been deeply influenced by the journey and insights of its founder and CEO, Jennifer Ménard-Shand. Ménard-Shand grew up as a First Nations Ojibwe and French Canadian in Sudbury, Ontario and summarizes her life so far as a "tragedy to triumph" tale. "During my teenaged years, I experienced some of the challenges many Indigenous women face. There was a lot of domestic violence, abuse and alcoholism in my home. I spent the majority of my childhood trying to save my mother, wandering down dark paths before reconnecting with my faith and finding the right people and supports for PTSD."

Like so many young people, Ménard-Shand's professional journey began in the hospitality industry. "Everything I have has been supported by hospitality. Hospitality is my heart. I grew up working in restaurants. When I moved to Toronto, I landed a job at Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE), and I still do work for them today. While I was there, I met my mentor and "Yoda", Geoff Bagg, who in 2008 gave me an opportunity to work for his staffing firm. I continued working in hospitality on the side as I worked my way up through the company, eventually starting The Bagg Group's first hospitality and event staffing division."

In 2018, Ménard-Shand purchased the division she had incubated from The Bagg Group and took over leadership of what is now known as Staff Shop Inc., a staffing solutions company recognized across Canada as well as the U.S. and Caribbean.

Staff Shop provides temporary staff for restaurants, hotels and resorts, sports events and music festivals and catering and foodservice companies, taking on the time-consuming tasks of hiring, scheduling and managing payroll for thousands of temporary employees. They also provide direct hire recruitment, payrolling and consulting services for hospitality clients in all North American markets.

During the pandemic, Staff Shop experienced a sudden and shocking slowdown. Ménard-Shand used this time to review and reconnect with her business, successfully finding their employees roles in other industries with similar staffing requirements. This strategy has not only grown and diversified her business (her team plans to recruit and deploy over 10,000 people across Canada this year), it has allowed Staff Shop to retain its talent roster and offer employees more options and opportunities. "We were able to redeploy our hospitality workers into essential services like health and long-term care, retail and other foodservice businesses so that, when the pandemic ended, we were positioned across nine Canadian provinces. We also used the time to earn certifications with CCAB, CAMSC, WBE and WEConnect International."

Sector-experienced staffing firms could offer a solution to some of the labour challenges confronting the hospitality industry, even for operators concerned about adding cost to already strained bottom lines. Ménard-Shand notes that one of the most significant benefits Staff Shop can offer to operators is time. While previously, the company was most-often hired to provide temporary staff for event, hotel and catering clients, Staff Shop can also offer ongoing recruitment and direct hire search support for permanent employees, in various industries aside from hospitality. "If you're short staffed, you probably have little time to manage temporary staffing, let alone full-time recruitment and hiring," she notes.

As the industry transforms, many restaurant operators are adding catering, events,





pop-ups or other offerings to diversify revenue streams. Having a strong staffing partner can help free up precious time and support long-term success. The Food Dudes, Toronto's busy catering and event company, speaks to the quality and reliability of Staff Shop's talent roster: "Their staff is reliable and competent when dealing with large crowds and, under pressure, they cope easily and professionally, without losing their smile."

On top of her busy office schedule, Ménard-Shand is an in-demand speaker on business leadership, Indigenous Truth and Reconciliation (especially in the workplace), women in business and Indigenous entrepreneurs. She believes she has an obligation to put her experience and platform to service and is committed to mentoring upcoming talent and focusing on issues facing working mothers. Business partner Alison Hernández, who Ménard-Shand refers to as "the Roy Disney to my Walt", has taken over a share of the business leadership to free Ménard-Shand's schedule to do just that.

"I have one daughter and another one on the way in February," Ménard-Shand laughs. "Hopefully they'll be besties. Both business and women themselves are afraid of mat leave—of going from asset to liability in the workplace. Yet there are so many creative, hybrid ways to support women at work. At Staff Shop, 72 per cent of our workforce are women, and this is important to me. So many people have helped get me where I am.

The least I can do is pay it forward, so I've been working with partners on how business leaders can learn to support women in the workplace."

Ménard-Shand is a big believer in what she calls, "servant leadership", often asking herself how she can create a "leadership factory" within Staff Shop and clear the path for others to grow. "It's not about me anymore. In my 20s, I was a lot more selfish; it was about 'Jen the star sales rep'. After I healed and lost some of the personal baggage that had followed me since my childhood, I went through all of these challenges as an entrepreneur—only then could I be successful both within the organization and as a leader. I've been given gifts, and with these gifts comes a responsibility to use them to do what I was meant to do and lift others up to their highest level of contribution. Servant leadership is our battle cry for 2023."

The C.S. Lewis quote, "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending." informs Ménard-Shand's approach to both her life and her business. "The more I share my story, the more I encourage others to do the same," she believes. "If I can help make a difference in someone's life through storytelling and sharing, that's mission accomplished for me. I became a workaholic before I learned what becoming successful really means, so I don't run Staff Shop just to make money. We're good at what we do because of our core values—Faith, Passion and Freedom—and the priority we place on the wider community we touch."

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Soup Sisters is an award winning Canadian non-profit founded in 2009, when CEO Sharon Hapton transformed a milestone soup-making birthday party into something bigger for a local women's shelter.

Since then, Soup Sisters has delivered over 3 million servings of fresh soup to emergency shelters nationwide for women, children and youth in crisis. With three bestselling cookbooks and support from top chefs nationwide, the organization has developed a strong brand that is synonymous with kind and healthy giving through simple and delicious soup.

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