

These five women were starting businesses in Lynn. Then COVID-19 hit, and the challenges multiplied

Support from one another and the community has kept them optimistic and determined

By **Alison Arnett** Globe correspondent, Updated July 21, 2020, 12:00 a.m.



Estefani Orellana Garcia and her mother, Fidelina Garcia, owners of Estefani's restaurant in Lynn. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

LYNN — The year 2020 started off with hope for five women hospitality entrepreneurs in Lynn. They had brand-new businesses — three restaurants and a wine shop — and were

seeking success in a city known more for its shoe factory past, poverty, and potential than for its food options. But Lynn's multiculturalism, rapid growth in residential projects, and its lower commercial rents made it all seem promising. Then came COVID-19, upending plans and changing the very nature of hospitality.

One would expect to hear despair, but like Michelle Mulford, who left a catering career in the Boston area to open the farm-to-table Uncommon Feasts in May 2019, they take a different view. The challenge "is pleasurable in a more fulfilling way," she says, and has connected her more closely with the Lynn community.



Chef/owner Rachel Miller of Nightshade Noodle Bar in Lynn. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

The other newbie owners echo her sentiments. Rachel Miller, who had been chef at the former Clio in Boston, opened Nightshade Noodle Bar last December in a tiny space in downtown Lynn, serving the Vietnamese and Asian-inspired dishes for which she had gained a pop-up following. Sommelier Sarah Marshall started Lucille Wine Shop in January, wagering that Lynn and surrounding communities were ready for her specialty

wine and beer, plus tastings and classes. And Estefani Orellana Garcia and her mother, Fidelina Garcia, opened Estefani's, serving Central American and Mexican specialties on bustling Union Street, just a few weeks before the governor temporarily closed down indoor dining in Massachusetts.

The shock to hospitality businesses everywhere continues as restaurateurs assess whether offering takeout and opening dining rooms at reduced capacity makes financial sense, all while worrying about the health of customers and employees. These owners have the same concerns. Miller tells of "crazy, long days" after Nightshade Noodle pivoted in early spring to takeout and delivery and she reduced her staff to only a few people. The first two weeks were slow, but "then rocked," and since then she figures she and her tiny staff sell just as much as before with half the staff. There is now a little patio with a pickup window, a rarity in the neighborhood, and takeout Wednesday through Sunday.

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But, she adds, "I've definitely found a new sense of purpose." Miller, who was drawn to

Lynn for its diversity, also found a deeper sense of community, donating a portion of profits in June to the North Shore Juneteenth Association and the NAGLY, the North Shore Alliance of GLBTQ Youth.



Estefani Orellana Garcia and her mother, Fidelina Garcia, owners of Estefani's restaurant in Lynn. BARRY CHIN/GLOBE STAFF

Mulford's Uncommon Feasts has become not just a takeout and delivery restaurant but a retail space for products from farmers who lost other restaurant accounts. She wanted to support them and offers their products on her takeout menus along with prepared foods. "I've completely shifted my perspective," she says. Catering and larger events are off the table, and in fact she can't see opening her airy dining room again in the near future because "we can't do service the way we want." But artists in the Lydia Pinkham Building where the restaurant is located have presented online shows. The small patio is surrounded by the bustle of Western Avenue, she says, where trucks rumble by and children play in nearby spaces. It "all feels fun and vibrant."

Estefani Orellana Garcia grew up in Lynn and is fiercely proud of that. After graduating from Bentley University and spending several years working in accounting and finance,

she decided she “hated the corporate world,” and realized she wanted something more fulfilling.

With her mother, she opened Estefani’s “in the heart of the city,” on the first floor of a residential building that her family owns. Their goal, she says, has always been to “make their city better.” The restaurant serves dishes of her Guatemalan and Salvadoran heritage, plus popular Mexican specialties, and it’s very much a family affair with her cousin’s husband as chef, her mother running the kitchen, and Orellana Garcia dealing with social media, customers, and “everything else.” Since reopening in early May, they’ve been doing takeout and delivery, but the restaurant space is large so Orellana Garcia is considering trying indoor seating.



Sarah Marshall, owner/sommelier of Lucille Wine Shop & Tasting Room, in March. BLAKE NISSEN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

Marshall, of Lucille Wine Shop & Tasting Room, was able to stay open throughout the shutdowns, but found she also had to find new ways of doing business. “It was almost like

starting a second business,” she says, as she added curbside pickup and home delivery, substituted in-store tastings with online events, and began to put her eclectic inventory online. “The first couple of weeks were very stressful,” Marshall, who was formerly sommelier for Oleana in Cambridge and Sarma in Somerville, says. But there were silver linings, she adds. “I wasn’t planning to do e-commerce for a year or so” but now that she’s got online ordering up and running, she’s glad “that’s out of the way.”

Now after months when “every single week was a new animal,” she is beginning to feel more confident that customers will gravitate to her very personal customer service and curated inventory. The neighborhood and her customers have been loyal and supportive, ordering cases of wine and joining in virtual tastings. More clients now are feeling more confident about coming into the store, and she’s getting calls about private events (16 people or fewer) in the future.



Michelle Mulford, owner and chef at Uncommon Feasts. BLAKE NISSEN/THE BOSTON GLOBE

The other women also found loyalty in customers. “People deliberately shop with us

weekly,” Mulford of Uncommon Feasts says, adding that, surprisingly, she’s even getting new customers. “It’s growing our connection to Lynn,” she says.

The difficulties are real, too. Orellana Garcia says that when Estefani’s reopened to offer takeout, there were shortages of supplies every week. One week it was trays, another week bags, another food compartment boxes. One week “there were no containers anywhere,” she says, and she had to figure out ways of getting supplies. Although she had waitressed in college and her mother had been a banquet waitress, the whole restaurant business was so new to them that she admits to Googling how to open a restaurant. Now she’s getting comfortable with social media as Estefani’s birria tacos, with slow-roasted beef and a Mexican favorite in Los Angeles, is taking off, attracting customers from as far away as Maine and New York.

One benefit, all the owners say, is a sense of women working together. When Orellana Garcia couldn’t find supplies for takeout at Restaurant Depot, she said, “Rachel [Miller of Nightshade] said she would share some.” Mulford, Miller, and Marshall also talked of earlier collaborations with other women owners.

The owners have “formed like a little club,” says Miller. “It’s huge to have women-owned businesses.”

For, as Marshall of Lucille Wine Shop says: “If I can survive opening through a pandemic, I can do anything.”

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