



WOMEN IN BUSINESS WEDNESDAYS INTERVIEW

ROHINI DEY
OWNER & FOUNDER
VERMILION RESTAURANTS (NYC/CHICAGO)

WF: How did you get your idea or concept for your business/ what was your inspiration?

ROHINI: After a Ph.D. and a stint in academia, I left a career at The World Bank and McKinsey to open restaurants – Vermilion Chicago since 2003 and Vermilion NYC for 10 years. Driven by the conviction that fine dining in the US was excessively Eurocentric (think 18 years ago) and that Indian cuisine was grossly misrepresented – the curry in a hurry bad rap. Both these stereotypes persist, but I’m chipping away. Vermilion is a melding of Indian and Latin cuisines. I’m appreciative of our accolades and we have launched many a chef to spin off their own businesses. I’m still very much a policy wonk though and will publish opinions at the drop of a hat.

WF: Did you have any mentors/support systems that encouraged you? If so, who were they and how crucial have they been in the development of Vermillion?

ROHINI: Unstinting backing by my husband and family, even though they were perplexed by my bizarre career trajectory. When I entered restaurants and found the “gastro-ceiling” fundamentally lower than any glass-ceiling I had encountered in corporations and policy, I teamed up with the James Beard Foundation to found their Women’s Leadership Program, which I chaired and led for a decade as a JBF Trustee. The President then, Susan Ungaro, was a WFNY member. I never would have met her and done this and changed the map of our industry without this connection! Between WFNY, IWF Chicago, and The Chicago Network, I’ve made countless friends, allies, and investors. The power of women backing women is enormous and not to be underestimated.

WF: How has COVID affected your business and what operational changes did you have to make? What new ideas did you implement?

ROHINI: With Covid was born Let’s Talk Womxn. This came about my simply reaching out to 10 other Chicago women restaurateurs to see how they were coping with the isolation and business challenges. It was instant alchemy for us – the sharing and backing was instantaneous, with no BS whatsoever. The lack of bureaucracy and direct line to helping each other has been a void we filled for ourselves – no industry association or foundation has given us this. Since then I’ve grown Let’s Talk Womxn to over 350 of us women restaurateurs across 12 cities and counting. This has been a huge silver lining for us since our industry was hit hard. Apart from the rarity, women entrepreneurs are undercapitalized, carry extra workload at home and are much more at risk. Beside the camaraderie and cohesion, through Let’s Talk Womxn, we’ve undertaken a myriad of economic initiatives at breakneck speed together, including our recent IWD “Dine Together & Let’s Talk” celebration across nine cities (Today and GMA featured this), we’ve pooled our voice, bargaining power and visibility. This is a strength we intend to nourish as we help each other scale and change policy. We invite

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help from all quarters - our brands are amazing, we are much loved, and our consumer reach is powerful. I can see our model of self-help apply across any sector or even within any corporation.

WF: Where do you see the future of the restaurant/dining industry heading and how do you envision the future of Vermillion?

ROHINI: That's a tough one. With ghost and cloud kitchens and growing delivery, it's a battlefield of competitiveness. I do believe the consumer increasingly craves new and global flavors. Food can be comfort, but it's also a mini mode of travel, stimulation and exposure. I'd love to keep spreading the gospel of Indian cuisine with my unique Indian-Latin melding and make it scalable. I'd love to showcase our Let's Talk Womxn restaurateurs by developing business content by us for entrepreneurs – we've seen it all – and by building out concepts by us to leverage our incredible combined talent.

WF: What are some tips you would give other female entrepreneurs who are looking to start their own businesses?

ROHINI: Vanquish what I deem the dreaded "Gap Trifecta" – the Confidence, Aspiration, and Financial Literacy Gaps. Very true for all women within corporations too. These are muscles that can and must be built, starting from when we're little girls. Stop asking women to play nice – ask them to dream big.