

The women who saved Melbourne restaurants during their toughest year DANI VALENT Mar 5 2021 at 4:48 PM

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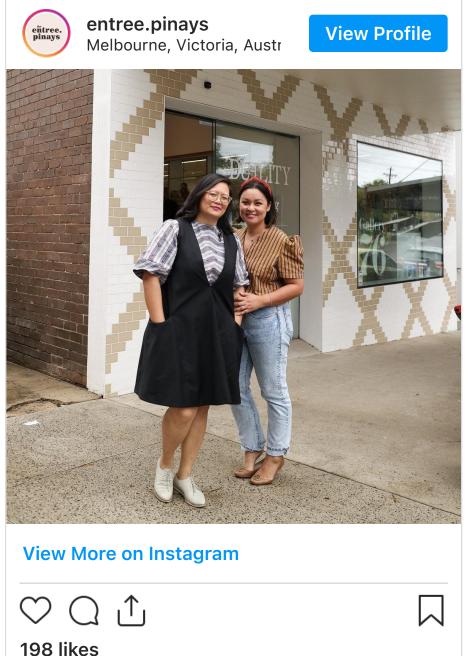
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Chibog restaurant owner Janine Barican (centre) with Fides Santos-Arguelles (left) and Grace Guinto. *Photo: Eddie Jim*

Any Melbourne restaurant that made it through three lockdowns is underpinned by creativity, energy and resolve. Often it's a man credited with keeping his business afloat. So where are the women? Ahead of International Women's Day on March 8, we spoke to five unheralded women who kept Melbourne dining alive through an especially challenging year.

The Entree Pinays is a collective of Filipino Australian women co-founded by Fides Santos-Arguelles and Grace Guino to support and promote Filipino cuisine.

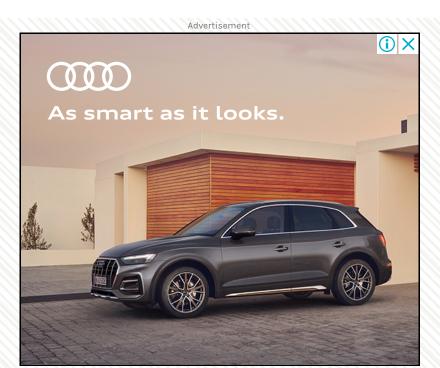
Among the pair's many pandemic projects was a concerted effort to assist Chibog, a Filipino restaurant in West Footscray that launched in February last year. "It's been closed much longer than it's been open," says Guino.



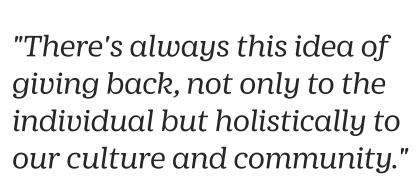
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The women drew on a corporate connection with BlueScope Steel to organise a series of Chibog virtual masterclasses for the Australian Institute of Architects. Class fees paid Chibog chefs – most of them struggling international students – to create meal boxes, which were delivered around town.

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"It was incredible to watch these top architects make adobo pork and insalata with watermelon and cucumber, and an amazing way to bring awareness to the restaurant," says Santos-Arguelles. "Some of the participants have even gone back to Chibog now that it's reopened."



The Filipino concept of "balik bayan" (foreigners who return home and give back) is at the heart of Entree Pinays. "There's always this idea of giving back, not only to the individual but holistically to our culture and community," says Guino. "We rise up together."



Kylie Staddon. Photo: Kristoffer Paulsen

Manager of the internationally renowned Ripponlea restaurant Attica, **Kylie Staddon** is also the partner of Ben Shewry, Attica's owner-chef. "Ben and I work well together because he's 'big picture' and I help put his ideas into place," she says. When Melbourne locked down almost 12 months ago, it was Staddon who developed systems for Attica's home delivery.

"If we had known how hard it would be, we might have had more trepidation but Ben and the kitchen team cracked on with the menu and I worked out purchasing and how to get the menu to people," she says. "There was mapping, checklists and run sheets. Some stuff needed to be kept cold, some hot. It was a very manual system at the start."

Staddon also drove ideas, such as an elaborate home-delivered tasting menu. "There was pushback from the kitchen because it seemed crazy and overwhelming but I thought we should offer a premium experience."



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The \$380 menu became one of Attica's most popular delivery orders. "People were still having 50th birthdays or engagements and they wanted to celebrate," she says. "It brought people a lot of happiness."

The past year has left Staddon with more confidence. "I learnt to trust my decisionmaking and do it quickly. I now have the ability to not be overwhelmed by things – to just get on and do it."

Shewry is in no doubt that Staddon was – and is – essential to the business. "There's no way Attica would have survived without Kylie," he says. "There's no romance in that statement. It's a cold, hard fact."



Mrs Singh co-owner Jennifer Narcisco. Photo: Griffin Simms

Jennifer Narcisco is the undersung business partner of prominent chef Jessi Singh in modern Indian restaurants such as Daughter In Law and Mrs Singh wine bar in Melbourne's CBD.

"I come up with the concepts," she says. "Guests come for food and drink but the way they feel is to do with all the careful decisions made around interior design, wording on the menus, and how the team communicates. That's all me."



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A leaner post-lockdown business means Narcisco is now working on the restaurant floor at Mrs Singh. She has encountered some interesting attitudes from diners as a result.

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"I can't tell you how many times a week I'm asked who the boss is," she says. "Maybe because I'm wiping tables they don't think I'm the owner. My personality is unassuming – it could be that. In the beginning, I felt it as an insult but now I look at it as an opportunity. I am the owner. I'm happy to surprise by saying it's me."



Massi restaurant manager Jade Ryan is now helping steer the ship at Mister Bianco in Kew. *Photo: Supplied*

Pre-pandemic, **Jade Ryan** was the manager of Joseph Vargetto's Little Collins Italian wine bar Massi, which hasn't reopened since the doors shut last March. Now she moved to Kew to help Vargetto helm Massi's big brother restaurant, Mister Bianco.

"I took on any tasks that would alleviate stress," says Ryan, who started as a waiter with Vargetto in 2012. "Joe was pivoting and getting ideas out there and that is difficult if you are drowning in the day-to-day, so I did a lot of that – checking on staff and constantly communicating even if we didn't have news."



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