



PROFILE: LIZ MENDEZ TAKING THE GRIT WITH THE GLAMOUR

WORDS JESSICA DUPUY

In July of 2015, sommelier Liz Mendez, along with her chef/husband Mark were sitting in the basement office of their wine bar, Vera, analyzing their financials and working on marketing strategy. Partners, both in business and life, the two are married not only to one another, but also to their life's dream of owning their own restaurant in Chicago's West Loop neighborhood. Sitting at their facing desks, Mark looked up at Liz and declared, "You know, considering the time of year it is, we're in a really good financial position right now."

Considering the good news, Liz felt a smile spread across her face. Five years into the entrepreneurial venture, finally having a little financial security was a rewarding feeling. But then, a strange sound erupted from another side of the basement.

She asked, "What's that noise?"

The couple stared in horror at one another as they heard water spewing from the water heater. The bottom of the unit had rotted out, making it clear that a major repair was imminent.

"We didn't know whether to laugh or cry," recalls Mendez. "Of course that would happen right when we were feeling good about things. That's just life. It's real."

It wasn't the first time the Mendez's had to endure a panic moment. Five months after opening Vera in the up-and-coming Meat Packing District, a powerful thunderstorm flooded the restaurant's basement with two feet of water, halting service and ruining the freezers and inventory. A few years later, the entire HVAC system had to be replaced—when the air conditioning conked out two days before a special wine event.

"We had to find portable AC units to put a band-aid on the problem," Mendez recalls. "Not having AC in Chicago in the summer is just not okay. But it's not as though Mark and I had

an extra \$18,000 laying around."

So goes the life of a restaurant owner, as she sees it. This take-things-as-they-come perspective has evolved for her over time, but looking back on the past ten years in her career, she wouldn't trade her path for a less bumpy road.

Mendez sees herself as a business owner first, but she's a sommelier, too. And a good one at that. In 2016, Chicago's culinary elite recognized her accomplishments with a Jean Banchet Award for Best Sommelier at Vera. Moreover, her work often takes her to illustrious places where she can further her knowledge of wine—from California wine regions to Portugal and Spain. In May, for example, she spent two days in northern Sonoma County at the 5th Annual Alexander Valley Cabernet Academy, which is hosted by the appellation's winegrowers and offers 25 hand-selected wine professionals an immersive education (ranging from the region's weather, micro-climates, geology and soils, and indicating how they are manifested in wines from many different vintages). "From the outside looking in, most people see the job of a chef or a sommelier as something glamorous," says Mendez. "And don't get me wrong, there's a lot of fun to be had, but the truth is, there's as much grit as there is glamour. That's the reality of being a business owner."

Mendez comes from a farming family in northwest Indiana. She came to Chicago by way of her college education at DePaul University, where she took on restaurant work to pay her way. And like many industry professionals, she never left.

"That was a different time in the restaurant industry, when people didn't have to be politically correct or nice," she recounts. "It was the kind of restaurant world in which chefs threw plates and general managers gave ultimatums."

One such ultimatum was for Mendez to learn about wine. “It was either that—or I couldn’t work in the place,” she recalls.

Out of fear for her job, she was motivated to befriend a few wine-savvy waiters and take some long walks through the aisles of Chicago’s legendary wine retailer, Sam’s. She chatted up sales clerks and took in every bit of information she could get. And in the midst of this process, she got hooked.

Subsequent experience on the floor and later in management gave her the chops by 2005 to help open *Carnivale*, a vibrant and festive Latin-American restaurant, as its wine director. Although she’d managed wine lists in the past, this new role drove her to dig even deeper. She began taking classes taught by Master Sommelier Serafin Alvarado of Southern Wine & Spirits, which provided opportunities for enhancing her knowledge about hospitality as well as wine.

“I remember watching Liz become a frequent student. She was genuinely interested in learning more about the world of wine, but there was something a little different about her than the other attendees,” says Alvarado. “You can tell when people are taking classes just to get enough knowledge into their head to pass a test. And that’s fine in some ways, but Liz didn’t care about that. She had a sense of humility that made her—and still makes her—very approachable.”

Mendez attributes much of her development as a sommelier to mentoring from Alvarado as well as renowned sommelier and local importer, Robert Houde of Robert Houde Wines. Houde worked with her during her days at *Carnivale* as well. While regularly pitching his selection of Jorge Ordóñez wines at the time, he took note of a certain spark she possessed.

“She was catching onto things as we tasted together, and over time, I could see she was genuinely invested in knowing more about the wines I was showing her. They weren’t ones that could be understood as a group, but rather distinctive wines that exemplify their places of origin, and Liz showed a true interest knowing the story behind each of them.”

If you ask Alvarado and Houde, that sort of passion isn’t something imparted by teaching, but rather a natural quality to be fostered.

As Mendez’s love of wine was deepening and her network of friends within the industry was expanding, she came to a point of decision. One part of her loved the idea of pursuing education and certifications, but she was also drawn to the possibility of owning and running a restaurant with her husband, Mark, whom she’d met while working at *Carnivale*.

“We both knew we wanted to start our own place at some point,” recalls Mendez. “But he was so wonderfully supportive that he said, ‘Decide whether you want to dedicate yourself

now to studying for exams, because we can put the restaurant on hold to make that happen.’ I couldn’t be more grateful for the opportunity he gave me to choose that option. But in the end, I knew I wanted to build this business with him even more.”

In 2011, the two set about creating their own restaurant, a modern Spanish food and wine bar, but one without the stereotypical décor most Americans might expect for a tapas-style establishment (think flamenco dancers, mosaic tiles, paella pans, and bright splashes of reds, yellows and oranges). Instead, *Vera*—named both for a style of western Spanish paprika, Pimentón de La Vera, and Mark’s grandmother—embodies more of the sleek, modern lines and minimal details you’d find in Madrid. Mark runs the kitchen while Liz runs the front of the house and, of course, the wine program. Actually running a restaurant gilded her résumé with a number of other notable job descriptions, most of which had nothing to do with wine.

“People always think it would be so great to run a restaurant of one’s own, but they don’t realize that being the owner also makes you the head janitor,” says Mendez.

Other revelations arose from actual ownership, including a very basic one regarding their initial frame of mind. “When we opened, we operated *Vera* like a chef and a sommelier. That was a big mistake,” says Mendez. “We were running the restaurant as though it was for someone else, instead of running it as our own business. It wasn’t until we were in knee-deep that I realized what a big distinction that is. Although it was fun to exercise our creativity and pursue our passions, we had to realize that this isn’t about unicorns and rainbows so much as the bottom line at the end of the day, which is directly connected to you.”

Asked about her other most valuable lessons, Mendez mentions a few simple things: taking care of people, accepting imperfections on the way to improvement, and having a positive attitude.

From her point of view, owning a restaurant has the effect of placing one in the people business. Not just the people walking into the place, but also those who are working with you every day.

“We are in the business of giving people hugs and making them feel good. That includes the guests, the staff, and the people in our community.”

Mendez has devoted much of her time to guests, cheerfully talking about wine and inviting them to share her love of the subject. But she’s also spent countless hours hiring the right staff and drawing out their capacities for hospitality—something she believes isn’t taught, but rather encouraged and polished.

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Which dovetails into the second lesson. Mendez tries hard to stay realistic about the inevitability of shortcomings as one works to improve sales, management, and relations with personnel, customers and suppliers.

“In service as sommeliers, we want everything to be perfect. But we know that doesn’t always happen,” says Mendez. “You’re going to make mistakes. The key is not to beat yourself up. You have to learn from them, and move on. As a business owner, it’s hard not to take mistakes personally, but you have to stop and ask yourself if you’re fixing the problems and getting better. Getting better comes with time and experience, and there’s no such thing as perfection along the way.”

At the end of the day, really living according to the first two lessons requires the third, which means having a positive attitude. Mendez has always seen herself as a generally cheerful person, but in recent years, she’s learned that actually resolving to remain positive—even when feeling beat down—can make all the difference.

“I’m not talking about being a Pollyanna,” says Mendez. “Bad things happen. But your disposition on anything is crucial. Being positive means being confident. And that vibe follows you wherever you go. That’s especially important in the restaurant world because you’re on display when you’re in that field. And it takes a lot of self awareness to know if you’re in the right frame of mind.”

In other jobs, she learned that managing people can be tough. But as business owners, Mendez and her husband have had to roll their sleeves up a time or two when staffing situations have gone sour. That includes instances such as rolling up sleeves—literally—to stand in for a dishwasher who had to leave when his wife was having a baby. But with time, Mendez has been able to grow in her management of people just as in other capacities.

“I used to be the tough cop when I was managing other restaurants. But I’ve realized that it doesn’t work to take a hard line every time. Different people have different challenges,

and ultimately, we’re all human,” says Mendez. “I truly believe that it doesn’t matter what any staff member does—the only two people responsible are me and Mark in the last analysis. How we handle it is what makes the most difference.”

In addition, Mendez is adamant about giving back, not only to non-profits (such as the Cystic Fibrosis Association of Illinois, the benefactor of the Jean Banchet Awards), but also to the community outside of Vera’s front door.

“This community has supported us, and it’s only fitting that we do what we can to support it in return. That’s what happens when you see success in your business, you have to work hard every day to earn it, but a lot of it still flows from outside.”

Having handled much of the marketing for Vera, she’s honed quite a skill for social media and promotion through blog writing, and she’s converted that skill into a small side business that helps others in her industry do the same.

Sitting down at Vera, it’s easy to feel a certain sense of welcome. The service is friendly, the small but well-appointed room is vibrant and inviting, and the menu—both food and wine—are nuanced and intriguing. In brief, the place is engaging, and one quickly feels more like a guest than a customer.

In the midst of that feeling, you’d never know about the flooded basement or the HVAC calamity from years past. You’d only know that whoever is running the show seems to care about the details, both big and small. You can taste the care given to the food from the kitchen. And if you’re lucky enough to have her on shift when you’re in the place, Liz Mendez’s cheerful smile will invite you to follow her vinous lead.

“With Liz, it’s all about hospitality. She gets it. There’s no pretention,” says Alvarado. “When you sit down at Vera, which is small and quaint, you know you’re being taken care of. That’s harder to achieve than the average customer may think, but Liz makes it look so easy.”