



JENNIFER AND NICOLE VITAGLIANO SISTER ACT

If you're amongst a certain sect of New York or even Paris, London or Milan's creative class chances are you've heard of Raf's or had the privilege of dining in its warm, muraled ceilinged, dining room. Jennifer and Nicole Vitagliano, two New York born and bred sisters, opened their Nolita restaurant in 2023 to give people a welcoming place to stop in for breakfast, lunch, dinner and anything in-between. On the surface, it's a neighborhood restaurant with Italian roots, the sisters have Sicilian blood, but it's become much more than that. Not only do writers, designers and editors flock to it, but so do droves of regulars from the community who live nearby. In its short existence it's already become a staple and a beloved stop for a croissant, comforting bowl of bottaraga topped spaghetti or a perfect roasted chicken. We sat down with Jennifer and Nicole Vitagliano to find out just how they continue to run of New York's hottest restaurants.

Kyle Beechey: Why the restaurant business? It's notoriously unforgiving, especially in New York.

Jennifer Vitagliano: It's something that's always been a part of us. We grew up in a family that was always entertaining, cooking and feeding people. That sense of community is the core of who we are and why we got into hospitality. Twenty years into my career, it's the most meaningful part of what I do. It's only now that I get to kind of create these experiences on my own or with my sister. We've been really successful with Raf's, especially in putting our personal touch on everything we do and leading with heart. Our family is here. We've been asked to open in other parts of the country and parts of the world, but I've always said that I think I'm

so good at what I do because I'm surrounded by my people who give me confidence and strength. When I get to see one of them enjoying one of our restaurants, it's satisfying.

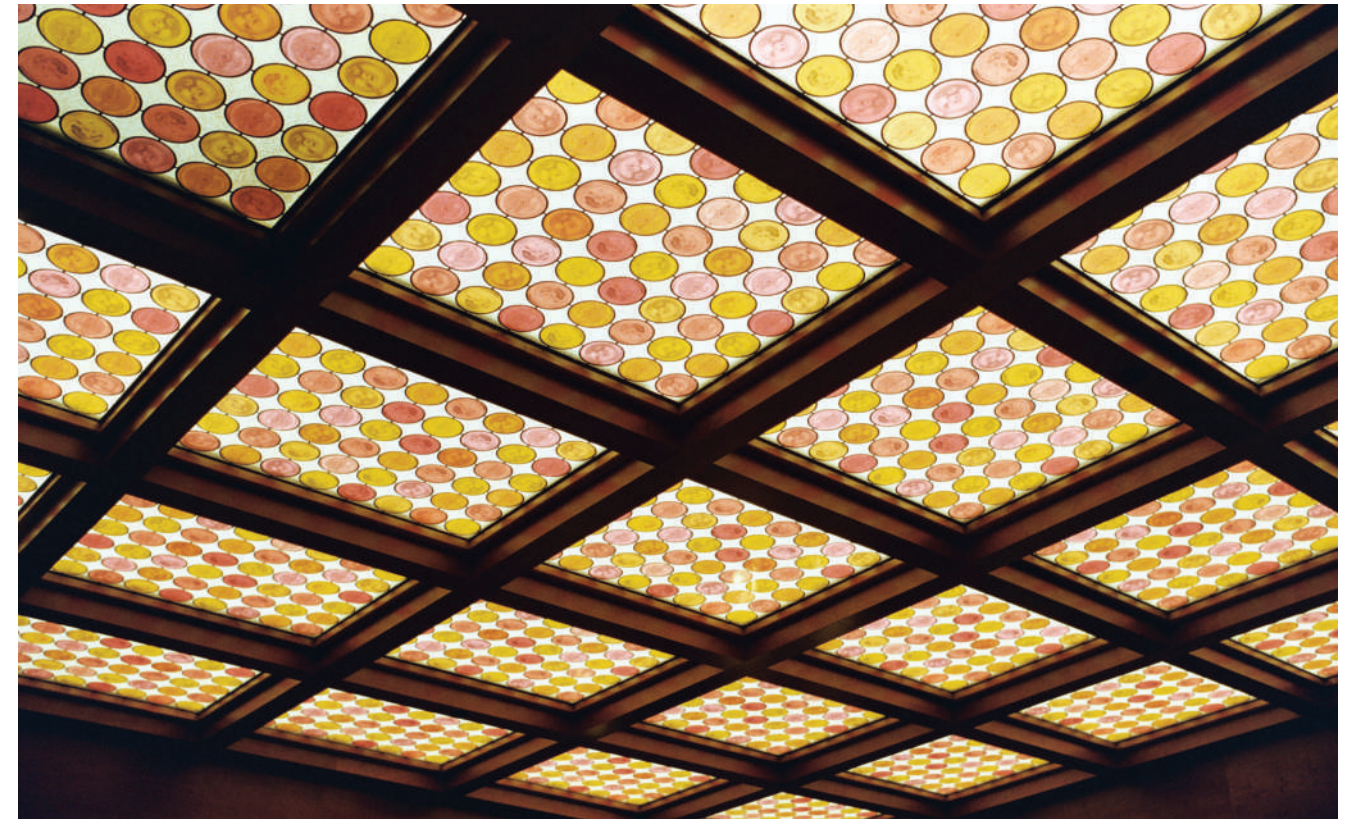
Nicole Vitagliano: I always say I don't know how other people make it here because we have endless support and favors and it's still extremely challenging.

KB: At Raf's and at your other concepts, Musket Room and Cafe Zaffri, you cultivate wonderful groups around you whether it's your customers or the chefs you work with. Do you intentionally look for these people or do they find you?

NV: There's a pretty healthy vetting process. Chef Mary (Attea, executive chef at Musket Room, Raf's and Cafe Zaffri) kind of found out the hard way. It's a very long vetting process. We always want to make sure that when someone joins the team, it's someone we will be invigorated to collaborate with and spend time with. Also, that we were like-minded people and care about the same things.

JV: We find people, many that just so happen to be women, to work with that support us and our vision. That's helped accelerate our growth. I wish that we all would've been successful independently, but coming together at the moment we did and finding that support system sped up our growth collectively and individually. We didn't seek out to create an all female leadership team, but it happened that way. It's helped us track and retain a lot of talent, female or otherwise. We've created a friendly ecosystem at each of our restaurants.

KB: Did you know you always wanted to work on a project together?



NV: I think pretty early on we knew. We have a language about food and a shared experience around it. We've learned that we're both obsessed with details and kind of the emotional temperature of the room, like how people feel when they walk in. It hasn't been hard for us to build things together, of course there are hard moments, but it was a natural progression for us.

JV: I've been building restaurants with other people for twenty years in New York City. I didn't always know that I wanted to do it with my sister, but the opportunity came our way. If your partnership is built on the foundation of love and trust, then you become unshakable. It's made me a better operator, a better leader, just knowing that I have an unflappable support system.



KB: Raf's has now been open for nearly three years, yet it's still razor hot and a tough table to land. How were you able to maintain the buzzy-ness in this notoriously fickle town?

JV: It's organic and our growth has been pretty word of mouth. I'd like to think that our regulars, regardless, what industry they come from, are people who genuinely enjoy the restaurant and keep coming back for the right reasons. They may be aesthetically driven and I think the way the room is designed informs the way people use it as well as how they feel when they're in the space. We try to not take ourselves too seriously. Our restaurants tend to feel distinctly feminine in a city that so often feels masculine and that has its own appeal.

NV: We hope people do feel cared for when they are here. I like to touch tables and say hi to everyone. Our team has gotten really good at going the extra mile, like running next-door to the dive bar to grab a customer Sprite or flavored vodka, something that we don't have if they need it. We really try to take care of people.

KB: On the other side of the coin, the restaurant has only been open since 2023 and yet it already feels like an institution, how did you accomplish that?

NV: That was in our design deck. We wanted it to feel like it's always been there. We tried to pick things that looked lived in or with a little wear and tear, they will still look good. That's the genius of the design studio we worked with, The Post Company. We gave them directive, but they accomplished that feeling.

JV: The space was conceived as a living dialogue and as we grow our brand, we wanted to feel like something you step into and become a part of. There is this idea of design transporting you.

NV: It feels both elevated and also a little a little cheeky.

KB: You have a knack for finding great chefs, what are some of the qualities you look for when choosing a team member?

NV: We listen to our team and when someone new comes in for a trial shift, we rely heavily on their feedback. It's not necessarily talent or accolade based. It's really more if they are going to be a good cultural fit and that doesn't necessarily come down to our opinion alone.

JV: We tend to hire for culture first. Nicole and I have an idea of what we're looking for in terms of experience. We'll look at if a résumé makes sense and we know a lot of operators in the city so we always check references, but at the end of the day our team needs to

work with them. We lean on them to see if new hires will be a good fit for our restaurants.

KB: What is hospitality to you?

NV: Some people might laugh at this, but I think I am very warm, but hospitality isn't about perfection. It's more about generosity. People generally say they'll forgive your little mistakes if you make them feel special and we try to do that. I'll be walking around the dining room and I'll just make sure to go over and say hi to as many tables as I can. You can also be more invisible. People don't know why they're leaving feeling better, but they do know they feel hugged and cared for. It's not in your face and it's never trying too hard, it's natural.

KB: What are your goals for your restaurant group, Elizabeth Street Hospitality, in the near future?

JV: I'm focusing on re-introducing Musket Room, growing the Raf's brand and also evolving our offerings at all of The Twenty Two venues we're involved with. There are five, including Cafe Zaffri. We're constantly evolving at Musket Room. Somehow, twelve years in, people still don't know that we have a beautiful garden and that there's a great bar to come sit at with an à la carte menu or to have oysters in a perfect martini. The other restaurants people know well, but Musket Room is less known and it shouldn't be. Now that Raf's has become a globally recognized brand, there have been ideas to take it to other places. That could be in the works as well.

KB: What is your go-to order at any of your restaurants?

NV: Our club sandwich at The Twenty Two. It's in the little details; the sandwich is on house made milk bread, the chicken is roasted with a crispy skin, there's a spicy tomato slathered on it. It still tastes like a club, but a special one.

JV: Our chicken liver. It was the first thing Chef Mary ever made for us and it's been on our menu at Musket Room for at least the past six years, with fig and pistachio, but it's on all of our menus in one way or another. You'll find it at Raf's in the agnolotti and at Zaffri spread on toast mixed with arak (an anise-flavored Levantine liqueur) infused spread and topped with pistachio. It's just something that we always go back to. It's unexpected and it's become one of our classics.