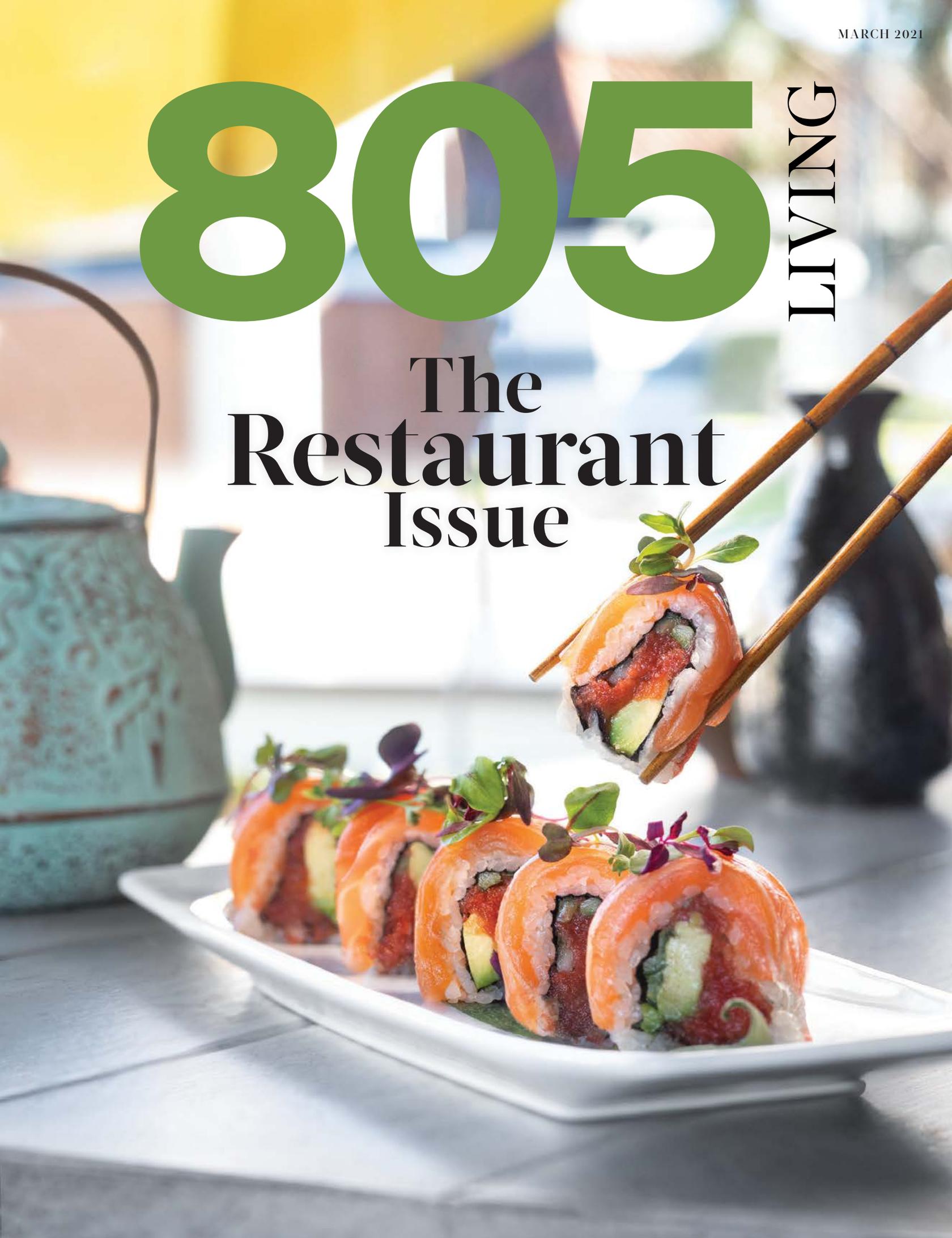


805

LIVING

The Restaurant Issue



A conversation
among four
805-area
culinary
proprietors about
the unprecedented
challenges
that their industry
continues to face.

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20 Questions for Restaurateurs

20 Questions is *805 Living's* regular, virtual conversation connecting people who make this community such a special place. The premise is simple: Four residents of the 805 area learn a little bit about another participant and then ask five questions about that person's life and work. In turn, each participant answers five questions from someone else. This month we connect four restaurateurs who have kept their businesses afloat and the rest of us well fed during the pandemic. Read on for their 20 questions and 20 answers.

Bree Gugliuzza

Westlake Village
Co-owner, The Royal Egg Café
theroyaleggcafe.com

After high school, Bree Gugliuzza attended the Academy of Culinary Education in Woodland Hills to study culinary arts and pastry. This is where she met her husband, chef Jaron Gugliuzza with whom she co-owns The Royal Egg Café. After interning at several fine-dining restaurants, she became the pastry chef and baker at Saddle Peak Lodge before serving tenures in various departments at Four Seasons Hotel Westlake Village. She manages the front of the house and is the café's head baker as well. **Sherry Villanueva**, founder and managing partner of Acme Hospitality, asked Gugliuzza the following questions.

1. What is your superpower?

I would consider perseverance to be my superpower. There have been many ups and downs over the course of opening, owning, and operating our restaurant—especially during the pandemic—while simultaneously raising children. I'm thankful for the perseverance we've maintained.

2. What are some of the simple joys you have reconnected with during the pandemic?

Slowing down. I have been so accustomed to never stopping and hardly taking a breath throughout the

days that something I had forgotten how to do was to slow down and take in more.

3. What is your favorite go-to dessert?

Anything involving chocolate. I'm particularly fond of making brown-butter chocolate-chip cookies, fudge brownies, and seasonal pies.

4. If you could live anywhere else in the world where would it be?

I would probably choose Italy and France. I fell in love with those countries while visiting and would happily return!

5. What is your secret for building a strong culture inside your restaurant?

In addition to a transparency regarding our vision and expectations, what I believe has brought a strong culture into our restaurant is working side by side with our employees and going through everything together as a team. I frequently work as a regular employee alongside our team. We all count on one another and support each other through the challenges. I also value our employees' feedback tremendously and try to let them know that as much as possible.



Daisy Ryan

Los Alamos
Owner and chef, Bell's
bellsrestaurant.com

Santa Ynez Valley native Daisy Ryan attended The Culinary Institute of America in New York before working for top-shelf New York City restaurants like Gramercy Tavern and Per Se. When she returned to the West Coast, she helped open The Line Hotel in Los Angeles before spending three years in Austin, Texas, working for McGuire Moorman Hospitality. She opened Bell's in Los Alamos with her husband, Greg Ryan, in 2018. **Greg Finefrock**, founder of Finney's Crafthouse & Kitchen restaurants, asked Ryan the following questions.

6. What was the most challenging aspect of navigating through the pandemic?

We obviously wanted to be sure we were

making safe decisions for our staff and guests. It was also important to keep people engaged when no one was leaving their homes. So we did this through social media and thinking outside the box to create different meal packages every week featuring different cuisines, from Chinese to cold fried chicken to Italian-American food. We are a French restaurant, and we realized very quickly that French food doesn't lend itself well to takeout. So we needed to change some things.

7. Do you plan to open additional Bell's locations, or another restaurant concept in the future?

We are currently in the process of opening a seafood restaurant called Bar le Côte in Los Olivos as well as partnering with our friend Nick Priedite to open a barbecue concept next to Bell's.

8. What did you learn about yourself and your ability to lead a restaurant team during the pandemic?

I learned that I was capable of helping out but that it was okay to be scared and to not know what I was doing. I think I also learned that as long as we kept trying new things and changing we could succeed.

9. How did you feel when you were recently selected one of *Food & Wine* magazine's Best New Chefs?

That they had called the wrong person.

10. How did working for Thomas Keller at Per Se influence or help you in opening your own restaurant?

Obviously, chef Keller and Per Se strive for excellence every day. The attention to detail and to guests' experiences prepared us to know what is important even in a more casual restaurant. The attention to detail in the food also taught me what ingredients can and should work together and that knowledge serves as a road map for me on a day-to-day basis.

Greg Finefrock

Lake Sherwood

Founder, Finney's Crafthouse & Kitchen, finneyscrafthouse.com

In 1995 Greg Finefrock opened his first restaurant in Studio City, followed by 14 more throughout Los Angeles County over the next 25 years. He created his restaurant concept, a modern American tavern called Finney's Crafthouse & Kitchen, in Westlake Village in 2016. He has since opened additional Finney's restaurants in Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo, each with a globally inspired menu and 30 California draft beers. **Bree Gugliuzza**, co-owner of The Royal Egg Café in Westlake Village asked Finefrock the following questions.



11. Does your globally inspired menu change frequently?

Constant menu innovation has been a key to Finney's success over the years. Our guests love that our menu is constantly evolving, and we make sure to change out 10 percent of it twice a year, in the spring and fall. In February, we rolled out our latest menu change, which included new, exciting dishes such as Chopped Italian Salad, Grilled Chicken Club Sandwich, Smoked Tri-Tip Sandwich, and seven new flavors of hot wings.

12. Do you have a hand in the creation of the menu items?

Menu development is handled by me and our talented executive chef, Eric Bosrau. I follow food trends closely and take frequent food safaris to see what's buzz-worthy in cities across the country. Last year I tried some amazing cheesesteak egg rolls in New York City. I asked Eric to create his version of the dish, and now it's one of our best sellers.

13. How has the pandemic affected your business most?

While there was no playbook for dealing with a pandemic, after the related shutdowns, we pivoted to a delivery-and-takeout model. We kept the wheels turning and never closed a day, but the most difficult decision was being forced to furlough a large part of our team, not once but twice. Our amazing team members are the lifeblood of Finney's, and it was heartbreaking to make those difficult business decisions. That being said, the resilience, stamina, dedication, and endurance of our team members throughout this pandemic has been nothing short of heroic.

14. How do you balance family life with being a restaurant owner?

When I started Finney's, I made a promise to myself that I would always make time to spend with my family. The key to a healthy work/life balance while operating

multiple high-volume restaurants is having a talented and dedicated leadership team at the helm. This has enabled me to stay true to that promise, and I will always have time to take my wife, Meghan, to dinner, coach my son Jordy's baseball team, or attend the cheerleading events of my twin daughters, Gracie and Frankie.

15. What are your biggest challenges in owning this restaurant?

I like to say: we are not in the restaurant business, we are in the *experience* business. Ensuring the happiness of our 300-plus team members and thousands of daily guests certainly is a challenge for me, but it's a challenge that inspires me every day and one that brings me tremendous joy and pride.



Sherry Villanueva

Santa Barbara
Founder and managing partner,
Acme Hospitality
acmehospitality.com

After 25 years working in marketing, Sherry Villanueva made a successful transition into the hospitality industry. Her Santa Barbara-based company, Acme Hospitality, now owns or operates some of Central California's premier restaurants, including The Lark, Loquita, and La Paloma Café, as well as other interests, like the Santa Barbara Wine Collective. **Daisy Ryan**, owner and chef of Bell's restaurant in Los Alamos, asked Villanueva the following questions.

16. What changes have you seen and what do you think makes for a successful establishment within the community?

I think the quality and the creativity of food has exploded in the Santa Barbara restaurant community over the last 10 years. Exciting new restaurants continue to open every year while more chefs source locally and seasonally, bringing techniques and inspiration from all over the world. I believe that a commitment to our broader community and a constant strive toward excellence are two of the key things that make for a successful establishment.

17. What challenges did you find in expanding from one restaurant to a multiple restaurant operation?

Expanding from one restaurant to two and beyond is kind of like having kids: two is twice as hard as one, and so on! While there are some economies of scale, particularly

on the operations side, each restaurant is unique and requires a focused commitment to its particular challenges and strengths.

18. What do you value most about the people who work with you?

I value integrity, loyalty, and authenticity the most. I'm fortunate to have a team that embodies these qualities. I also love them (and my husband, Jim) for their ability to have fun and laugh. There have been many dark times over the last year, and our ability to find joy and laughter has been a lifeline.

19. Do you see any changes that Acme made in response to the challenges presented by COVID-19 becoming permanent?

I do see a few trends that are here to stay. Takeout will continue to play a role, so developing dishes that are portable while still delicious will continue to be important. There has been a return to comfort food while simultaneously an increased demand for more innovative dishes that you can't make at home, and I think both are here to stay. Plus, cocktails, more cocktails!

20. What cookbooks do you value most?

My go-to reference books are Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and the ever-classic *Joy of Cooking* [Irma S. Rombauer et al.]. I am a die-hard Yotam Ottolenghi fan and have every one of his cookbooks. I love *The Art of Simple Food* by Alice Waters because that's the way I like to eat. Samin Nosrat's *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* was a great way to break cooking down into four simple concepts. Lastly, I love Alison Roman's *Nothing Fancy* because it gives me hipster street cred with my kids. ♦