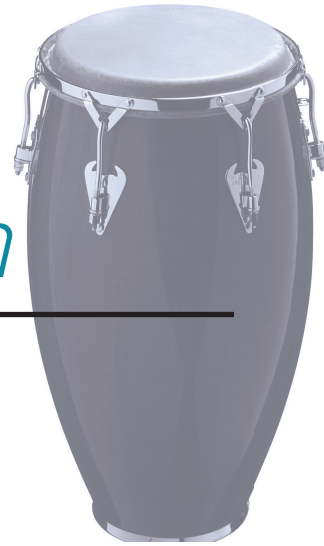




simplypure

BY CHEF STACEY DOUGAN

Marching to the Beat of a Different Drum



Two entrepreneurs take meandering journeys to success in Las Vegas concessions and cuisine. Roads Less Traveled

By David Garcia

For entrepreneurs like **Tammy Starring** and **Stacey Dougan**, it is the journey that shapes success as much as the drive to reach it. Starring, a serial entrepreneur and president of Las Vegas-based **Starr Vending**, began in her hometown of Gueydan, Louisiana, a tiny rice-farming community located about 145 miles west of New Orleans.

Starring's dream early on was to become the basketball coach at a women's college, and an athletic scholarship to McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, was her first step toward realizing that goal. After earning a master's degree in health and physical education, she briefly taught high school in Houston. She returned to her alma mater to become an assistant basketball coach, and eventually not only the head of women's basketball, but women's volleyball and tennis, as well. Having achieved her goal, Starring soon realized that coaching was not the fulfilling career she imagined it might be. She had a nagging itch to start her own business—a trait inherited from her parents, who were also teachers with an entrepreneurial streak.

By the time she moved to Las Vegas in the late 1980s with her then-retired parents, the city had become one of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the country. But there was one business that had not kept up with that growth. Valet parking had been limited almost exclusively to Vegas casinos, and Starring discovered that the demand for it extended to the entertainment venues and shopping centers that were sprouting up almost overnight. In 1990, she launched her own parking service, and by the time she sold the company nine

years later, it was the largest valet parking service in Las Vegas.

Then, in an unusual twist of fate, the valet parking business provided a transition into the food and beverage industry. Undeterred by an unsuccessful bid for a valet parking contract at



Starring

McCarran International Airport, Starring won a food concession contract to open a Quiznos franchise in the airport's new Concourse D in 1999. The store is now the chain's top-producing franchise in the country. In 2000, she successfully bid for a smaller food operation in the same terminal, and built a Juice Express smoothie store

from the ground up.

Today, Starring ranks among the top 2 percent of the most successful women business owners in the United States. That success was recognized in 2008 by the Las Vegas chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO), which named her one of its "Women of Distinction."

Diversification is one of Starring's golden rules for success. "Stay very open-minded; listen and learn," she advises. "Entrepreneurism is a different mindset. It doesn't stop. I'm always saying 'I can do that,' or 'I can do that better.' The opportunities are there for anyone."

Starring has not been shy about pursuing new opportunities. "Anything can be challenging," she says. "It's all about having the attitude and work ethic that will get you over the hurdles."

Pure and Simple

The same attributes also have helped drive Stacey Dougan's career, whose road into the food industry ran a circuitous route from Las Vegas to Atlanta to Chicago to West Africa and back. A noted raw foods and vegan chef and restaurateur, she was a vegan chef at the Five-Star, Five-Diamond Wynn Las Vegas before opening a vegan and raw foods catering service, **Baby I Like It Raw**, in

2012, and a raw vegan restaurant, **Simply Pure**, the following year.

Born in Detroit, Dougan moved with her parents to Las Vegas at age 15, and enrolled in Atlanta's Spelman

College upon completing high school. The 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta sparked Dougan's interest in the entertainment industry, and led her to enroll in a film/television exchange program at Columbia University. After earning a degree in sociology and French from Spelman, she interned at Virgin Records, and later joined Universal Music, where she handled artist marketing and promotion for the Southeast region, working with artists such as Mary J. Blige and Keke Wyatt.

Investing and then working in one of Atlanta's top gourmet raw and living foods restaurants, Everlasting Life, led her away from the entertainment industry and into the culinary arts. "I still have a great love for the entertainment industry," Dougan says. "But the restaurant business became an evolving theme and opened up a lot of opportunities."

It also taught her a lot of lessons the hard way, she says. "Back then, I was a 'kumbaya' entrepreneur," Dougan says of her first experience investing in a restaurant. "I overlooked a lot and left running the business to partners, who did not manage the business well."

Everlasting Life eventually folded after Dougan ended her relationship with her fellow investors and moved to Chicago, where she honed her vegan culinary skills at Eternity Raw Bar and Deli and expanded her business as a

private chef. One of her clients was an Israeli ambassador stationed in Chicago.

In 2007, when the ambassador assumed new duties in the Republic of Ghana, he invited Dougan to follow him as his personal chef. A three-day tour of the capital city of Accra turned into a two-year stay. In addition to serving as his personal chef, Dougan founded ANEW Wellness Spa and Consulting and became a representative to the Ghana Ministry of Health's Regenerative Health and Nutrition Project.

In 2009, she returned to Las Vegas to help care for her parents, and began teaching raw foods and vegan cooking classes at local Whole Foods stores. She also worked as a private chef to Jonathan Kinney, one of the owners of Greens & Proteins Healthy Kitchen, who recruited her to help expand the restaurant's raw foods menu.

Though she had trained at the Soul Vegetarian Restaurant, the world's largest chain of vegan restaurants, and at the Living Foods Institute in Atlanta, Dougan was still mostly self-taught. That changed in 2010 when she joined Wynn Las Vegas, which became her official culinary-arts boot camp. Working at the Wynn was filled with "aha" moments and challenges—such as having to prepare raw meat like all of the other chefs in the resort's catering and banquets department.

"Prior to working at Wynn, I had not touched meat in 12 years," she wrote in a blog post. "Let me just say that going from preparing baked tofu cutlets to searing raw, fleshy, bloody filet mignon was an adjustment. And this adjustment carries over to all aspects of the kitchen."

What Dougan found out there is something she has in common with Starling: Accept the fact that you are going to make mistakes; learn from them and move on.

In 2012, a chance encounter with Shane Stuart, then mixologist at Greens & Proteins' and a nationally recognized expert in blended fruit and vegetable drinks, led to an instant connection—and a new business venture. After only a 20-minute conversation, she and Stuart had sketched ideas for launching **Baby I Like It Raw**. "Starting a business is

not for the faint of heart," Dougan says. "But you can make any business work if you believe in it."

The Journey Continues

Looking ahead, Dougan plans to open a second restaurant in Las Vegas and finish a vegan cookbook that has long been in the works. She will then begin writing a second book chronicling her experiences as an expectant single mother, entrepreneur, and vegan. The entertainment industry still tugs at her heartstrings, though. Her ultimate aspiration is an ambitious one: to follow in the footsteps of television celebrity chefs Rachael Ray and Giada De Laurentiis.

As Starring works to grow Starr Vending into one of the top woman-owned business in the industry, she continues looking for new opportunities, particularly those that are not as labor-intensive as airport concessions. "For most business owners, the business ends up owning them," she says. "They don't know to how to delegate authority or trust others. But that is what gives you the freedom and ability to expand into other businesses."

Key to any expansion effort is a strong team of colleagues, and for Starring, that team eventually will include her two adult children, whom she raised on her own. Her daughter, Diman, is a business major at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas, and is preparing to join Starr Vending. Daman, her son, is a professional basketball player in Italy, and has longer-term plans to join the company. "They both have an entrepreneurial mindset," Starring says. "Together, we're hoping to build Starr Vending into a huge family business."

For Starring and Dougan alike, the entrepreneurial journey clearly is far from over. ♦

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