

LADIES TOO BUSY TO LUNCH

Be inspired by these five very different women who all have impressive business stories to share.

BY JENNIFER BLAKE



ANGELA VITHOULKAS
VIVO CAFÉ GROUP

“I COULDN'T POSSIBLY BE THE REAL BOSS, I'M NOT BIG OR HAIRY ENOUGH!”

SERVING UP SUCCESS

“Women are incredibly hard done by in hospitality,” says Angela Vithoulkas, which beggars belief coming from the successful CEO of Vivo Café Group. “People can assume that because you're in a perceivably insignificant industry, you can't be a very smart, ambitious or important person.” She explains that as a young business owner, suppliers would come in and ask to speak to the boss. When she introduced herself, they'd ask for the real boss. “Because I couldn't

possibly be the real boss, I wasn't big or hairy enough.” It's been hard for the self-described ‘five-foot nothing slip of a girl’ to overcome a lack of confidence and embrace her success. “It's taken some age and some hard knocks and some

disasters to turn around and say I've done so much, and people should know, they should learn from me!”

Vithoulkas, 44, who co-owns the business with brother Con, won a NSW Telstra Businesswomen's Award in 2007 and hasn't looked back. She says her biggest challenge is creating unique concepts as business grows. “Raisin toast is raisin toast. I don't have a product you can get from somewhere else.” What she does have is a unique attitude: a burning passion to professionalise hospitality. “A great waitress or a great waiter should be a career. We do apprenticeships for chefs but what about the hands-on service people?”

Like every small business owner, Vithoulkas says her biggest challenge is time. “If you want more for you in your personal or business life then you are going to fight time. The word balance should be taken out of the businessperson's dictionary. We should learn to love the word *imbalance*. Because some days you've got more time for one thing, some days you've got more time for another. Balance for me implies something static.” And if there's one thing Vithoulkas isn't, it's static.



RACHEL ARGAMAN
TOGA HOSPITALITY

PEOPLE POWER

Rachel Argaman is quick to deflect credit for her enormous success as CEO of Toga Hospitality. But in 13 years she has led Toga to take over Travelodge group, create the Vibe hotel brand from scratch and open an incubator apartment business in Europe. Argaman is most proud of her quality staff, and the focus on people she has fostered at Toga. “Businesses have two challenges: money and people. I honest think money is the easy one. You have to kiss a lot of frogs to find a prince, and it's never more true than in recruitment.” Once you find great people it is your responsibility as manager to grow and develop the best and brightest so they never leave, she says. “One of our most senior people here at head office started with us in housekeeping!”

Argaman, 45, believes she has been lucky to work in hospitality, where many strong women hold leadership roles. She says her success has been a case of ignoring the stereotypes. “It's never been an issue for me. I've just focused on being the best I can be and working with great teams, whether they be male or female.” With billions of dollars of development on the cards for 2011, Argaman shows no signs of slowing down. “I believe that focus is transformational. You have to be absolutely clear about that single, crystallised metric of success for your business. For us, it's revenue per available room.” Toga has the measures and drivers strategy clearly articulated at every level of the business.

At Toga, a porter can become an award winning sales manager and a housekeeping lady can end up reporting to the CEO. It's an impressive employment culture, but Argaman says it's a simple achievement. “You always have to create culture by design, not default.”

PIECE OF CAKE

It's a long way from Wall Street to George Street but Ghazaleh Lyari gave up a lucrative life as an investment banker to start her own business selling gourmet cupcakes to sweet-toothed corporates and yummy mummies. For the Iranian-born entrepreneur, it wasn't enough to fund exciting new ventures – she wanted to *be* one.

Cut to 2011 and Lyari owns Ghermez Cupcakes, a booming premium cupcake business in Sydney. The move came partly out of a desire to spend more time with her now five-year-old son, which has been a challenge in both her careers. “To figure out how to spend quality time with him every single day and be part of his growth as well as the growth of my business and all the demands that that entails.”

Lyari, 44, says she is privileged to have an incredibly supportive husband and a trustworthy team at work. “Because no one can really do it all. You can do it in different stages with a lot of help from people who can believe in you.”

Among the suits on Wall Street, Lyari became passionate about supporting women in business. “What will most help women in business is *more* women in business.” To that end, Ghermez Cupcakes has committed to celebrating the success of Australian women. In 2010, Lyari released three limited edition cupcakes to honour Gail Kelly, Cate Blanchett and Quentin Bryce. “We need to acknowledge the success of the ones that come before us.”

Lyari is immensely proud of the brand she has created, a business that is “a fantastic place to work and offers a financial reward for everyone involved”. But she's most proud of taking that first step on her own. “Success for me is having the courage to embark on the journey that you know you have to take. A positive outcome at the end of that particular journey is just the icing on the cake.” No pun intended.



GHAZALEH LYARI
GHERMEZ CUPCAKES

MAKING TRADE FAIR

Jacqueline Arias was a journalist at the ABC when she took a trip with her family to visit her birthplace in Columbia. As coffee snobs, they were excited to sample the beautiful brew of the Columbian coffee trade, and were shocked to discover the locals drank poor instant coffee. “That was a very eye-opening experience for me. It educated me about what happens in countries where beautiful product is grown. Growers don’t get to taste their own product.”

So Arias gave up a career and risked her house to create República, the first fair trade coffee brand to market in Australia. “I wanted to connect people to the growers of the products we all love: coffee, tea and chocolate.”

Coffee is a male dominated industry, Arias says. When República first got started, she typically met much older industry men who would start sentences with ‘I’ve been in this industry for 20 years and there’s no such thing as good-tasting fair trade coffee’. “That’s been my challenge: to smash through those doors. Really there is no way other than smashing through.” Arias, 38, believes both her gender and naivety have played positive roles in her business. “When you don’t know what the limitations are you think that everything is possible.” Hence República was stocked in Coles alongside global brands before it even had a reputation. “These men have been in the industry for twenty plus years. It means they have blinkered eyesight, they only see where they’ve come from. Being new, I saw what could be done, not what we couldn’t do.”

Last year República made the *BRW Fast 100* and secured a deal with Jetstar. This year, its cocoa had a coveted place in Oprah’s goody bags. Arias plans for 100 percent growth in 2011. But she says her greatest satisfaction is meeting with the men she approached four years ago and saying “Remember when you said this couldn’t happen? Look at us now.”



JACQUELINE ARIAS
RÉPUBLICA



ANNIE CRAWFORD
CAN TOO

CROSSING THE FINISH LINE

Annie Crawford was running a marathon in the United States when she stumbled across an idea: a fitness program where participants trained for marathons and raised money at the same time. Anxious to find a job where she could give something back to her community, Crawford prepared to spend her savings on developing a similar program in Australia. Six years later, she heads up Can Too, a successful charity fitness program sponsored by Macquarie Group. All over Australia beginner runners and champions alike have signed up for Can Too, committing to raising thousands of dollars for partner organisation Cure Cancer Australia. Crawford, 47, chose Cure Cancer as the disease took her father at 51. “I also strongly believe that we need to support young Australian researchers and Cure Cancer directly funds these innovative, creative researchers at the beginning of their careers.”

Crawford is a “feminist from way back”, but is pleased to report she has never found her gender to impact on her work. If anything, she has grown in confidence in the six years since she first meekly approached Macquarie Group for support. Crawford was blown away when head of Macquarie Group Foundation Julie White offered not only their backing, but also pilot funding and pro bono hours from Macquarie staff. The foundation has funded Can Too for six years and has committed to three more years. Can Too has expanded across three cities, coaching 14 pods of participants through their physical, fundraising and leadership goals.

For Crawford, Can Too is all about personal growth and development. As the organisation grows, Crawford wants to make sure they can maintain that culture. “We’ve put in place team captains and mentors, which is wonderful because it gives our Can Too-ers an opportunity to lead and become mentors in their own right. So I can become dispensable. That’s my goal.” **DB**