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BIDEN GIVES UPDATE ON VACCINE ROLLOUT

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GETTING SALTY

She started her career at a truck stop. Now Rachel Miller is helping to revitalize downtown Lynn

She arrived in Boston with nothing but her bicycle; today she owns Nightshade Noodle Bar

By [Kara Baskin](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated April 6, 2021, 12:00 p.m.



Chef-owner Rachel Miller of Nightshade Noodle Bar in Lynn. BARRY CHIN / GLOBE STAFF

Rachel Miller, 32, got her start working at truck stops down South, moving up to Boston movie-style on a bus as a teenager with nothing but her bike and a mohawk. She ended up at Bondir and as chef de cuisine at Clio before launching the Nightshade Vietnamese-

American pop-up in 2017. In 2019, she opened Nightshade Noodle Bar on Exchange Street in Lynn, cooking bone marrow fried rice and chili-ranch crab cake banh mi for a loyal clientele. She plans a formal launch for Sin City Superette, which sells everything from toiletries to sushi, in the coming weeks.





Nightshade Noodle Bar's Rachel Miller. HANDOUT

How has business been this year?

We opened in October 2019. We were only open for five months before the pandemic, right? So we quickly switched gears, went right to takeout, and didn't skip a beat. And it was a wild experience, like it was for everybody. But somehow I hit this strangely smooth stride and have been pulling bigger numbers. Which is bizarre.

What do you think accounts for your success?



We did a lot of promotion in the area. I was a private chef around here for a long time, and I think I built plenty of clientele through that. I had a pop-up for two-and-a-half years, and a lot of that was up here. Then, most places had just shut down all the way around here in March, so I think we were just one of a few that were open. I was just going as hard as possible on social media.

We have a very steady, regular clientele of people who eat there, you know, three times a week or so. So I think it was just a mix of everything else being closed and then all the things that we had done to promote the restaurant in the first place. It was all still fresh. We were still the fresh new thing.

What are your most popular dishes?

There are two. There's a homemade egg noodle with garlic sauce, and we serve it with shredded beef or mushrooms. And then the bone marrow fried rice is the reason why I only have one fried rice on the menu, because I cannot keep up with it. We have these ridiculous wait times because it's just two of us cooking. It's a good problem to have. But, yeah, I've got to upgrade and hire a cook.

Why can't you hire more staff?

Our location makes it difficult. I feel like it's not all that common for cooks to also have cars. So unless they're already suburban, it really limits the job pool. And definitely the people are still weirded out by the location.

Why did you choose Lynn?

I moved to Lynn abruptly after a breakup, like five years ago. A friend of mine called and said they had a room. And that was it. I just completely fell in love with it, and I started to sort of realize, living in the downtown neighborhood, it's a small neighborhood. I started to quickly realize who everyone is and what their initiatives are, and seeing all the nonprofits and the artwork and the efforts to revitalize and bring some more life into the city.

I found out about some programs that they had for small-business owners, for women, for minority women in particular. I'm Jewish, and I'm a lesbian, and I'm a female. For the first time in my life, I used that trifecta in my favor. And I applied and I worked my ass off.

I didn't want to cook in Boston anymore. I've just made a lot of friends and have a sense of community that I've never had before. And the city is very hands-on and helpful. The health inspector is a text-message-away kind of person. We can have good relationships, because it is small. There's more attention for us. My permits happened in like a day.

As a restaurant owner who serves Asian-inspired food, what are your thoughts about the shootings in Atlanta a few weeks ago?

It's still on my mind. The original goal of the restaurant was to boost the local economy. And here we have an enormous Asian population.

I definitely do not serve authentic Vietnamese food, by any means. It's just been the biggest influence in my career so far. I posted on Instagram about how I want to take responsibility. It's a little bit difficult to word and explain. It's been on my mind since I opened: 'OK, great. I'm going to look like the white girl who's opening an Asian restaurant.'

I have not met any Vietnamese people or Asian people who have had anything but excitement for the restaurant. It is a pretty large portion of our clientele.

Thursdays are usually our busiest day, and I wanted to do something. It's still a very

...days are usually our busiest day, and I wanted to do something. It's such a very helpless feeling. I'm just stuck at a stove and trying to make sure that I set a good example for the community. So I donated 5 percent of the night's sales to the Asian American Pacific Islander community fund on GoFundMe. That was just the closest one that I could find that seemed like the most responsible and organized and funneling money to the right place, because it is very much not in my wheelhouse whatsoever to pick and choose. I don't want to just throw money at stuff. That looks weird, too, and is not really my intention at all.

People felt supported and seen with [my posts on social media], and have not felt ripped off in the style of food that we cook. And that was really nice to hear, because I would never, ever want to do that to anybody. I guess my objective at this point is to just keep the awareness on full throttle. The violence against Asian Americans is just obviously horrendous.

The only way I know how, and the only way I'm capable of right now, is by selling food that I cook.



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Why did you become a chef?

At 15, I worked at a doughnut shop, at a truck stop in Mississippi. I also worked at a Burger King. I was a high school dropout. I had this foot-tall mohawk; no one would hire me to do anything. So I got jobs as a dishwasher, worked my way up to line cook, and then would move on to the next restaurant and just try to learn as much as I could.

When I was 17, maybe freshly 18, I randomly moved to Boston with a friend on a Chinatown bus. I was just like a wild animal back then. I got on the bus with my bicycle and rode it around until I found a job. And I got my first job as a butcher at Lionette's in the South End. As I was training, Beacon Hill Bistro was hiring. I met Jason Bond there, and he had a very large meat-curing and butchering program that I had the opportunity to be a part of, and that was my passion at the time. So I joined his team for about five years, with a short break in between to go to Texas, but I'm a girl, so no one would hire me. My appearance doesn't really help. Being female is hard enough, and then having tattoos makes it a little bit more difficult when you're in a conservative area.



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But I haven't really ventured out of my little box. I've just been fighting so hard and keeping my head down. We have this funny situation at Nightshade, where if I don't post on Instagram every day, we don't do any business. We did an experiment once. I didn't post on a Wednesday, and we had a \$200 Wednesday — and it's usually a \$2,000 day, which is a lot for my little tiny shop over here. I've spent lot of time on social media trying to plan out my material and figuring out how to promote myself and what to talk about today. That's been probably the most time consuming thing. It's a blessing and a curse.

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