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Here We Grow

From lush coastal gardens to urban grit, Las Vegas newcomer Sonia Stelea maintains her market-fresh perspective.

By Xania V. Woodman

There was a time when bartender Sonia Stelea would have her pick of the more than 40 varieties of organic fruits, vegetables and herbs cultivated at Fresh Run Farm in Marin County, California. As the ordained "farm-to-bar liaison" at San Francisco's Cotogna restaurant, she would use the estate-grown harvest to create seasonal specialty cocktails that complemented Cotogna's cuisine. Now, as the bar lead and market specialist (a.k.a. produce whisperer) for Esther's Kitchen in Downtown Las Vegas, Stelea crafts a compact menu of five classics and five original market creations that incorporate whatever she selects from purveyors including central California's Regier Family Farm, Coleman Family Farms out of Ojai, and Urban Seed, Las Vegas' revolutionary urban farm.

The 33-year-old Romanian-born Chicagoan was once on the law-school track, studying English literature and philosophy with a minor in French. When the Great Recession hit, she watched her friends and colleagues struggle under mounting debt. That's when Stelea, who had been working in hospitality since the age of 14, began to see her restaurant work as not merely a way to survive but to thrive. "It took me a long time to accept that I wasn't going to go back to law school," she says. "But once I accepted that the food and beverage industry was something that I really wanted to be a part of, it just made sense." Stelea subsequently blossomed through positions at Chicago's Rosebud, Francesca's and Cibo Matto, San Francisco's A16, Frances and Coco500, and her transformative experience with chef-owners Michael and Lindsay Tusk at Cotogna.

Stelea arrived in Las Vegas in mid-December 2017, ready to tackle the opening of Esther's Kitchen, a neighborhood Italian spot helmed by Las Vegas native chef James Trees. With 50 seats inside, 10 at the bar and 30 on the patio, Esther's has had a remarkable debut year, establishing a locals destination since it opened in the Arts District in early January 2018. Stelea and her bar team—including Keith Bracewell, David Klarer, Bryan Pierza and Kevin Raspberry—have stretched their creative muscles, incorporating farm-fresh produce into drinks such as the summertime Head To-Ma-Toes, with Molesto Tomato Gin and house-made chive water topped with vegan aquafaba foam. Depending on what's at its peak, the drink might be garnished with ripe cherry tomatoes or chive blossoms.

"For being open one year, the creative side has been really, really active," Stelea says. "We have an incredible team that is really on board and just very excited. Despite being as busy as we are, and sometimes of feeling like there aren't enough hours in a day, we still communicate with each other. We work in very supportive ways."

Other creations have included making their own crème de menthe, cantaloupe liqueur, lemon balm shrub, a "super potent" passion fruit tincture, house limoncello and soon, perhaps, an all-spice amaro, plus a blood orange syrup. The origin story of that syrup is emblematic of how Trees and Stelea work together to create harmony between their respective teams: The kitchen was using blood oranges in salads when they were in season; instead of throwing away the peels, Stelea et al took them and made a syrup.

As impromptu as some of her creations might be, there was nothing spontaneous about Stelea's move to Nevada. "I thought about it for about four years," she says. "The cost of living was very low, and it seemed like the opportunities to own a business and see it progress were available."

That's right, she's already thinking ownership. But first, there is much to do at Esther's Kitchen, and another intriguing Trees-Stelea project opening this spring, where she'll be general manager.

The second project is shaping up as a pizza, gelato and gin concept in Tivoli Village. With the working title *Ada's*, it would be yet another win for that category in Las Vegas, which recently welcomed the gin-focused Juniper Cocktail Lounge in Park MGM and a new gin-centric cocktail program at Jardin in Encore Resort at Wynn Las Vegas.

Ada Coleman was head bartender of the American Bar at London's Savoy Hotel for 23 years in the early 1900s and one of only two women to ever hold that title. Still in operation today, the American Bar was named World's Greatest Bar at the 2018 Spirited Awards. It's where she created the Hanky Panky cocktail, another part of Coleman's great legacy.

Regarding Stelea's wishes for her own legacy, they don't fall far from the tree. "I want it to be about kindness, not just to each other as humans, but also to the world around us," she says. "If there was something that I would hope to influence, it's to make people aware—even when they're sitting through cocktails, even having a drink, wanting



to unwind—still keeping that connection between the individual person and the environment, the world in which we live."

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it's progressing, and that's the beauty of Vegas right now. It's blooming. You have these super-interesting minds and creative food revolutionaries working together, and everyone's happy for each other's success. Being a part of that—it's amazing to watch. I want to see Vegas five or 10 years from now. It's going to be a completely different world."

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