

Social enterprise putting power into the hands of Vanuatu’s culinary Mamas

By Scarlett Hawkins, [Daily Post](#) (Vanuatu)

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Mariette Jeffry was at home when a stranger came to visit. He was a foreigner, with wavy dark hair and a ring in his nose – a friend of one of her family members.

He introduced himself as Jero Escudero Rivas and explained, in a voice tinged with a Spanish accent, that he was a chef. He told Mariette that he had started a social enterprise: A food delivery service where women most vulnerable to the economic shocks of COVID-19 could learn culinary skills, basic nutrition and food handling and hygiene, and keep the profits of the business for themselves. He called it Aelan Mama’s Cuisine, and he wanted Mariette to work there.

“Jero talked like a gentleman,” recalls Mariette, adding in hybrid Bislama and English: “Wan smol boss-man, but a big boss-man.”

It took Mariette a moment to wrap her head around this job offer that had fallen from the sky. Originally from the Shepherd Islands, she had spent the last seven years not only raising her three children in Port Vila, but also juggling her own business baking cakes and pastries from her home. She wasn't looking for work, and certainly hadn't expected to be shoulder-tapped to become a chef's right-hand. But the strangest part of the entire proposition came moments after: He wanted to give the business to her.

Jero had moved to Vanuatu in early 2020 when his girlfriend accepted a job there. He wasn't just following his heart: After had a successful career as a chef in Spain, Amsterdam and London, he hoped to work in Vanuatu.

"All over the world, there is always a need for chefs," he says, "So I was excited to move to Vanuatu and experience the hospitality industry in this country."

But then COVID-19 changed the world. Vanuatu was forced to close its borders to protect its population from COVID-19 – a move which successfully prevented the pandemic from entering the country, but eliminated Jero's chances of finding a job.

Unemployed for the first time in his life, Jero passed the days cooking restaurant-quality meals for his girlfriend and their two housemates to keep his skills sharp. One housemate worked from home, and the regular stream of friends and clients that came through the house lead to great interest in the meals Jero was cooking, just metres away. After a while, somebody approached him to ask if he would be willing to cook for them.

"I knew I wouldn't be here long enough to make a business for myself," says Jero, "So then I thought: 'What if I make a business for someone else? What if I plant a seed and someone else can take over and make the tree grow?'"

The idea of Aelan Mama's Cuisine came to Jero almost by accident. Before the hospitality industry shut down, the little he'd seen left him uneasy. He'd witnessed bosses talk to their staff in a rude and condescending manner, insufficiently nutritious food offered to staff during long workdays, and extremely low wages in contrast to high retail costs.

In contrast to that, Jero was drawn to the idea of establishing a food delivery service that could provide high-quality, delicious and affordable food for busy people, but set a higher standard for workplace culture: A good hourly rate for staff in an environment where mentorship and training is as important as the food being sold to the public. He would guarantee free transport to and from home for all staff and give them the lion's share of the weekly profits, as well as enough food for each staff member to feed their families to take home at the end of each working day.

"I wanted to help a group of people who were most damaged by the COVID crisis," says Jero, "In my personal experience, I feel that women in this country work very hard but don't have as much opportunity as men. They work hard in the workforce, they work at home, they work for a boss, they work for their families. To me, Mamas in Vanuatu are a symbol of life itself. They have pure hearts."

As the business model for Aelan Mama's Cuisine took form, a friend of Jero's mentioned Mariette. She was described as kind and capable. Jero went to offer her a job the next day.

"I didn't need to think," says Mariette, recalling the moment, "It was a big opportunity. I just said yes."

She was in the kitchen within days, and Jero was immediately impressed. Though almost all the recipes were new to her, she moved like a professional cook in the kitchen. It turned out that she had studied culinary arts many years before.

"Mariette is really methodical," says Jero, "She learns really fast, and she's very curious. She has a great memory."

The work required them to set a hard pace. Aelan Mama's Cuisine posts a rotating menu on Facebook and Instagram or reaches out to clients individually, and every Monday, they zip between homes and offices across Port Vila to drop off string-tied takeaway containers of food.

The orders flooded in, and Mariette brought in another rising star: Fabiola Stev.

Originally from Pele, Fabiola travelled to Port Vila to join Aelan Mama's Cuisine. She came from a culinary family, but had no formal training herself – just the strong sense of curiosity and focus.

"When Mariette called me and told me she had work for me as a cook, I was very happy because I wanted to improve my skills," says Fabiola.

"When Fabiola came, she retired me," says Jero with a laugh, "She basically got into the rhythm of the business on Day One and made it so I wasn't needed in the kitchen anymore."

The team was strong because each member was strong, but there was still a learning curve. The Mamas were learning recipes they'd never been exposed to before, and all the tricky techniques associated with them: Frying up fluffy Argentinean tortillas, layering a moussaka just-so, ensuring the right amount of crunch to the Vietnamese chicken salad and, of course, perfecting the art of the Spanish paella. And along the way, they tasted everything – though not all of the flavours were love at first sight.

"I wasn't sure about the tofu thing at first," says Mariette with a wrinkled nose, making Fabiola laugh in solidarity, "But I learned how to cook it right, and now I think it's good."

In creating an international menu, Jero had hoped that the Mamas could enjoy exposure to new flavours – to maybe learn recipes in a professional context that they could cook for love at home. Fabiola tested the theory her first week, when her father, himself a former chef, came down from Pele to visit. When he tried Fabiola's lasagne for the first time, he told her: "Wow! The food you are learning to cook is so nice. You and Mariette are so lucky. You must learn more."

The three chefs have an easy rapport. They crack jokes and tell stories, but are focused and driven when the time comes to prepare another batch of fragrant soup or portion out steamed rice. Periodically, Jero brings the kitchen to a standstill so he can demonstrate a teachable moment.

“People can learn in many places what they learn in Aelan Mama’s,” says Jero, “But we creating a teaching environment where it’s nice to come to work and to learn. We focus on the positives and let each other know what we are doing well.”

The three have worked together effortlessly, allowing to Jero increasingly step away from the pots and pans to allow the Mamas freedom to run the kitchen. They’ve blossomed under this trust, and the food has received positive reviews from customers. At the end of each day, Jero drives the Mamas home – Mariette to Freshwota, Fabiola to Mele Maat – their laps warm under a stack of takeaway containers filled with food for their families.

“I never expected to get a good salary and bring home food for my family for free,” says Mariette, “The more work is good for me, the more I want to help the business.”

As Jero’s date of departure from Vanuatu looms, Mariette and Fabiola have learned each facet of running the business: How to prepare menus and balance the budget. Tracking expenses and calculating profit.

As a last step, Jero took the Mamas to meet every client on the Monday delivery route... To introduce Mariette and Fabiola as the new owners of Aelan Mama’s Cuisine.

“Every client is so nice,” says Mariette, “They are all kind and good people.”

“It’s been a big blessing,” Fabiola agrees, “I always prayed that one day life would be easy for me and my family, and it looks like God has answered.

Fabiola is living with family in Mele Maat for the time being, and hopes to one day move closer to work. It will depend on the ability of Aelan Mama’s Cuisine to grow – when more client orders come in, the Mamas can take home a larger slice of the business’ profits in addition to their monthly salary. With enough clients, they can bring in more Mamas to learn from them – and have already begun with a new addition to the team named Belinda.

“I feel happy all the time,” says Fabiola, “Every morning when I get up, I’m always glad to come to work. I think in the future, I can be one Mama teaching other Mamas things they didn’t know before.”

As the last day in the kitchen comes to an end for Fabiola, Mariette and Jero, all three of them tear up a little.

“I don’t know if I feel ready yet to run the business,” says Mariette, “But because Jero has confidence in me, I think I can do it.”

“I know you’re ready,” Jero replies, “Because you understand that you have to do whatever you do with love. You can make mistakes, you can fumble the recipe, you can make the food too salty or too spicy. But if your clients feel that you did it with love, they are going to forgive you, and they are going to give you another chance.”

“I don’t know how to express my gratitude to Aelan Mama’s Cuisine,” Mariette says, dabbing at the corner of her eye as she talks.

“You’re not allowed to thank the business anymore,” Jero reminds her, with a faux sternness, “After all: It belongs to you. You’re the boss.”

Aelan Mama’s Cuisine can be found on Facebook and Instagram on @aelanmamas.