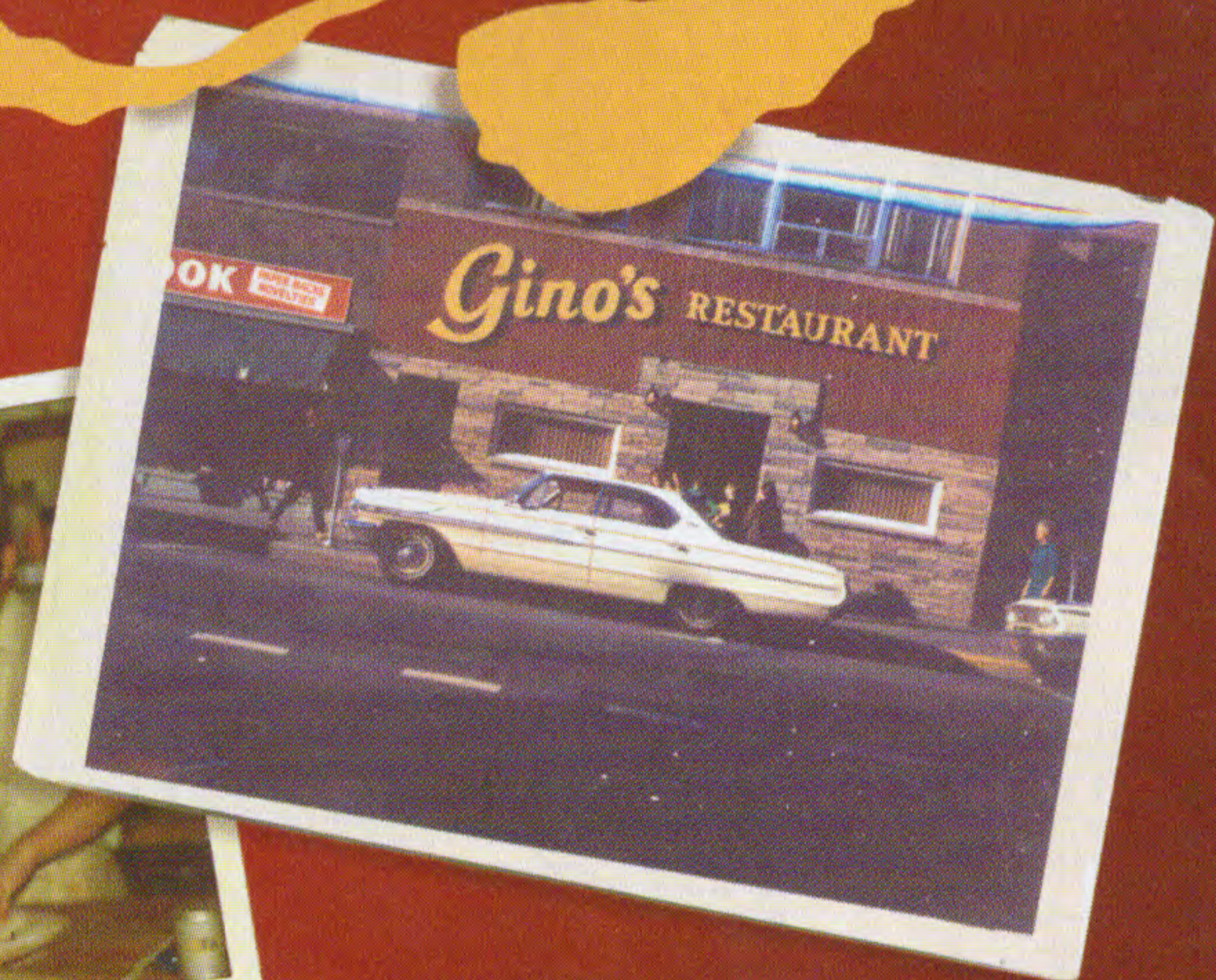


State Street's

Global

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By Masarah Van Eyck



STATE STREET GOES GLOBAL

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Pepino Gargano, Gino Gargano,
John Caputo and Maria Milsted

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a year later

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A Q&A with Tom
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man's big brother)

State Street's Global Legacy

It's hard enough to start
a business when you
speak the language.
Downtown's army of
immigrant entrepreneurs
deserves a tip of the hat.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTHA BUSSE

WORLD TRAVELERS:
Pepino Gargano and wife Anna
are among the elder statesmen
of downtown Madison's
international restaurant scene.

FOR THOSE OF US WHO CUT OUR CULINARY AND SARTORIAL TEETH ON STATE STREET, the multitude of businesses owned by immigrants from all over the world broadened our tastes in ways that chains and franchises never could.

Like many Madison natives, I remember Gino's Restaurant before its recent makeover. And Husnu's and Kabul before their outdoor seating. And the now burned-down Athens Restaurant. And the handful of import shops that seemed to come and go, but that supplied a steady stream of Indian baubles and Asian knickknacks to teenage girls and dorm-decorating coeds.

So when I returned to live in Madison after 15 years in bigger cities, I was not surprised by the spectrum of new businesses run by more recent newcomers. Today, as always, dozens of downtown proprietors speak three or even four languages on a daily basis: Italian, Spanish, Arabic, Greek, French, Turkish, Japanese, Chinese, Albanian, Nepali – the list is far from exhaustive.

But what my time away from State Street's commerce had given me was a burgeoning curiosity about the stories behind the storefronts, the views not from the sidewalk in, but from the desks and countertops of these entrepreneurs, looking out.

During the coldest week of the year, I set out to talk with a handful of State Street denizens in hopes of gleaning a sense of what brought them to Madison's most international strip, and what makes them stay. Perhaps no family illustrates State Street's international legacy as well

as that first group of Sicilians who arrived in the early twentieth century.

In 1935, Carlo Caputo arrived in Madison with his bride Rosamarina to open a grocery store on the 600 block of State Street. Twenty years later, he opened an Italian pizzeria, Carlo's, and ran it with his four children, Maria, Bernie, John, and Tom.

Caputo was also instrumental in bringing over his three Sicilian nephews – Gino, Peppino and Biagio Gargano – who arrived in the 1950s. We have the Garganos to thank for Gino's Restaurant on the 500 block; Peppino's now on the Capitol Square; and Bellini's (previously The Monastery), now run by Biagio's children on East Washington Avenue.

With sketchy English and a new culture to adapt to, says Virginio "Gino" Gargano, starting a restaurant in Madison as a 21-year-old immigrant took business savvy, family connections, and an Old World determination. "I slept with my work," he says of the years he lived above his res-

taurant. (His old bedroom is now the bar.)

Gargano credits his early success to the help of Sicilian Joe Aiello, who was the first to bring pizza to Madison in 1943. By the time Gino arrived, Aiello had closed his restaurant, Joe's Pizza Pie, and was working as a food supplier.

"He knew my father back home," says Gargano, whose family had been in the lemon business for 200 years until a string of bad weather took them under. Aiello was willing to give them food on credit. "He knew we were a good family, hard workers," Gino recalls.

Now, Gino's Bar & Italian Restaurant (540 State) is one of State Street's oldest establishments and serves as a kind of parent restaurant to newer businesses – and a nostalgic hideaway to generations who have dined there. "People come and ask for a certain booth or table where they had a date 30 years ago," Gino says. "I had one professor tell me, 'Don't change a thing about this place.'"

Nor are establishments like Gino's unappreciated by the city. "The quality and variety of Madison's restaurants is second to none," says Mario Mendoza, assistant to Mayor Dave Cieslewicz. "The international owners of some of our most distinctive eateries literally and figuratively add spice to our downtown."

But at the same time, rising taxes and rents for downtown proprietors can seem to work more in favor of what Gargano calls "the big guys" – franchises that can afford to vie for State Street's customers. What's more, today's diners have more business districts to choose from. "It's much more competitive than before," Gargano says. "But I'm not working just to make money. I work hard because the name 'Gino' is outside this door."

Meanwhile, new generations have also brought new roles to the Sicilian family. Carlo's daughter, Maria Milsted, for example, is now membership development director for Downtown Madison, Inc. She and her husband Dan, along with her brothers John and Tom Caputo, have also become significant State Street landlords, having acquired a good portion of the 100 block.

"It's really exciting to be able to help other people along the same path of entrepreneurship," says Milsted from her downtown office. "It was really my father



FIRST GENERATION: Gino Gargano, Peppino Gargano, Maria Milsted and John Caputo, shown here at Gino's on State, are largely responsible for incubating downtown's international restaurant scene.



who paved the way for a small Sicilian family to help create an American dream that is a reality that continues today.”

The Caputo-Gargano family is just one of dozens who found their way to the State Street area over the years. And, as later generations have come to share the street with newer arrivals, there seems to exist a kind of network, a loose cohort of entrepreneurs whose associations reach across sidewalks – and the globe.

Rajan Pradhan, owner of Chautara restaurant (334 State), knows something about this network. “I grew up on State Street,” he says. Born in Nepal, a young Pradhan and his three siblings maneuvered in English, Nepali and their caste’s language, Newari, while their father taught linguistics at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

An aspiring art teacher, he began helping his mother in her kitchen when she opened her own restaurant – the small and perfect Himal Chuli (318 State) – and one of the mall’s first lunch carts. (“There were so many less rules back then!” he says of the latter venture.)

While studying art at the university, Pradhan also found himself working in Gino’s kitchen, learning as much from his Sicilian boss, he says, as from his own family.

“My mother taught me to cook,” says Pradhan, “but Gino gave me experience in



a commercial kitchen. He’s the one who taught me: ‘be your own boss’ – though I thought I would have some free time.”

Pradhan’s culinary ambitions were unconventional for his heritage. “As a male adult, you’re not involved in the kitchen except during festivals,” he says. Nevertheless, he set aside his painting and turned his creative energies toward his own restaurant, which he first opened in University Square in 1992.

While his mother’s menu strives to replicate authentic Nepali cuisine with traditional herbs and ingredients, Pradhan’s has always been experimental – a fusion of Nepali, Indian and other dishes in a décor that reflects his own social and modern leanings.

“Food in Nepal is a big part of religious and social culture,” says Pradhan. “Here, it’s like a social life for me. I speak with my customers. They’re my friends. Now they invite me to their houses – not to cook but to eat.”

Even its name betrays his penchant for bringing people together. Chautara is a Nepali word for a kind of oasis, a place

THE NEWCOMERS: Shkelquim “Jimmy” Pashaj (above left) started at the family restaurant in Albania before opening Pizza di Roma. Chautara owner Rajan Pradhan (above), son of a UW linguist, spoke three languages at home after coming to Madison from Nepal as a child.

where travelers and workers gather together for conversation and respite.

With the restaurant’s open floor plan, accessible kitchen, and two-tiered glass storefront, Pradhan keeps an eye on the comings and goings of his customers, and he welcomes them back to the kitchen to say hello. In the summer months, he’ll even hover around the outdoor seating, greeting people across the threshold.

Armed with a wry grin, Pradhan clearly loves the hustle of a gathering crowd. But his charisma also helps put less adventurous Wisconsinites at ease.

“Being in the Midwest, people don’t know Nepali [culture]. I mean, they get a little shy at the door.”

It was that similar social and cultural finesse that drove restaurateur Sami

Fgaier to open Le Chardonnay (320 W. Johnson), a French-Mediterranean bistro around the corner from Chautara, three years ago. Fgaier, a fearless charmer, may have been just 27 at the time, but his business sense was intact.

Growing up on the Kerkennah Islands of Tunisia, Fgaier and his brothers worked in his mother's bookshop, a small family-run business that welcomed people in to sit and talk over tea and homemade doughnuts. While books and magazines of far-off locales whet Fgaier's appetite for travel, he took with him on his travels a nostalgia for the ambiance of that small store.

"The goal wasn't so much to make money," Fgaier remembers. "It was more like a social space."

It is that feel, he says now, that he strives to replicate with his warm, window-lined bistro that attracts a devoted multi-lingual crowd who gather as much for Fgaier's company as for his mussels and martinis. The adoration is mutual: "I feel like they belong to me," Fgaier says of his regulars, many of whom come to relax after work at the hospital or in the courtroom. (Last winter, in fact, Fgaier sent a Madison couple to visit with his mother in Tunisia. He received a phone call from the three of them lunching at her home during this interview.)

Fgaier speaks Arabic and French fluently, though here, of course, he works in English. More recently, he has mastered "Spanglish," thanks to his Puerto Rican fiancée.

Like Pradhan's, Fgaier's first foray into the restaurant business was tangential. While earning a degree from the UW-Madison in computer science and business, he worked at State Street's Tutto Pasta Trattoria Bar & Caffé (305 State) (owned and run by a more recent arrival of Sicilians, by the way) to put himself through school. But when he completed his degree, he spent just five weeks in a cubicle at a brokerage company before quitting to open his own restaurant around the corner from his old employer.

"Working in restaurants was much more fun for me," he says. "The cubicle? Not so good. In restaurants, you always get to meet new people. I just feel like I'm onstage when I'm working."

Perhaps it's not so surprising to find successful restaurateurs whose social lives revolve around their businesses; State Street personalities like Pradhan and

Fgaier may enjoy their stage, but what goes on behind the scenes requires more toil and hours than they let on.

"Restaurant is a hard job everywhere," says Shkelquim "Jimmy" Pashaj, owner of Pizza Di Roma (313 State), just across from Himal Chuli. "Hard job, long hours."

But Pashaj had worked in his family's seafood restaurant in Durres, Albania, before moving to the U.S. five years ago, so he knew what he was in for. "You can never get rich with a restaurant, but you can make a good living." And if the popularity of his New York-style pizza, sold by the slice or the pie, is any indication, he'll be making a good living for some time.

Three and a half years ago, Pashaj bought out the previous pizzeria where his own now stands (they were also his first Madison employers). He grew up in a port town across the Adriatic Sea from Italy (speaking Albanian, Italian and Greek), so Pashaj already knew something about pizza. A short stint at a New York pizzeria didn't hurt, either.

His goal for Pizza di Roma – which he established with a French-Canadian Albanian who has since returned to Quebec – was simple: "to have good food at reasonable prices." Now, with their own sauce recipe, high-quality cheese, and plum tomatoes imported from Italy, Pashaj and his wife Marinela Manastirli have easily secured the reputation as a quick, delicious destination for lunch or an after-bar bite.

And while Pashaj may still be polishing his English, his daughters – now 4 and 8 – are so at home that they respond to his Albanian only in English. But that's all right with him. "Assimilation is so big here. I think it's a great thing," he says. In fact, from his first days in Madison, Pashaj has spent time across the street chatting in Greek with Gus Vranas, whose long-standing restaurant Parthenon-Gyros Restaurant (316 State) introduced legions of small-town undergraduates to the correct pronunciation of gyros (YEE-ross).

For owner Samir "Sam" Chehade, Michelangelo's Coffee House (114 State) offers an opportunity to celebrate cultural differences and challenge some of the inequality he has witnessed over the years.

Born and raised in Cali, Colombia, Chehade moved with his Lebanese father and Colombian mother to Madison as a

teenager. Having lived in the States for more than 30 years now, Chehade says, he has long accepted that he will always feel like a misfit – to this day, he says, Americans always ask him where he's from, while his Colombian friends don't consider him particularly Colombian. "I am a citizen of the world," he says in response.

Previously a jeweler, Chehade opened Michelangelo's eight years ago partly to establish a haven for fellow misfits. "We get everyone here," Chehade says proudly. "Politicians, judges, students, all the non-conformists. I feel like I found a place where I fit in!"

His coffee shop – which bustles with book bags and suits on weekday afternoons – also helps him sustain what his life has taught him, at 47, to value.

An early and major force in the fair trade coffee industry (which ensures decent wages for small farmers and coffee growers in other parts of the world), Chehade sells only fair trade coffee at both Michelangelo's and the equally popular Fair Trade Coffee House (418 State), which he owns with his wife, Lori Hann.

"I realized I wasn't going to take anything with me when I die," Chehade says of his commitment to fair trade products. "Now every morning I wake up and I know I'm doing my part – for the environment and the world."

Even the to-go cups inspire customers to "awaken your consciousness" and imagine "a food system that feeds your soul as well as your body." "Life is not perfect," Chehade concedes. "Look – I'm a capitalist. But all I want is a sustainable way of life for our planet and our people."

Meanwhile, the lure of capitalism is what drives Agape Hammond, who runs a boutique across the street from Chehade. Hammonds always dreamed of owning her own business someday. "Ever since I was a really little girl it was my passion," she says.

Hammond opened Ideal for You (103 State) two years ago in a move that brought her and her husband, Philip Jaklich (a first generation Yugoslavian), from California in search of a simpler life.

"Madison had everything we wanted except for the weather," says Hammond, waving toward the snowdrifts out the window. A relatively small population, a university, and easy commute were paramount priorities for them, yet they both wanted to be somewhere with the

continued on page 123

feel of a city. With the quick success of her shop (and the help of her sister Charis), Hammond recently unveiled another storefront, the candy store twee & luliloo (218 State), just a block away.

While Ideal for You caters to the professional crowd with luxury items, Hammond explains, the candy store appeals to just about everyone – what she calls State Street's "walking around crowd."

"Really," she laughs, "I don't think candy age- or class-discriminates."

The offspring of first- and second-generation Mexican immigrants, Hammond spent her childhood in several locales, including nine years in Honduras, before settling with her family in California. Like Chehade, she says she never quite fit in – appearing Mexican to her American friends, yet not looking "American" enough in Honduras. "I grew up always being aware of my heritage," she says. "At 12 you feel a little odd about it all. But now I use it to my advantage. I want to see what I can do with it."

Given Hammond's aesthetic – itself a fusion of feminine and modern, exotic and comfortable – it is clear why she finds in business an opportunity "to beautify the world, to bring a little extra to it."

"We'll see in five years how it goes," she says of her ventures. "But I'm putting everything I have into it, everything of myself."

Social, revolutionary, capitalist, innovative – whatever the drive that got them there, if there is any theme State Street's immigrant entrepreneurs share, it's a commitment to their work. And their skills as cultural translators only contribute to their success.

While we may pass by their stores for decades without knowing their histories, these folks – from Nepal and Tunisia, Albania and Latin America – know our community well. They have to – their livelihood depends on a familiarity with Madison's downtown customers, from judges to professors to students to artists.

They also know their entrepreneurial neighbors, if only by two or three degrees of separation. Some, for example, participate in Downtown Madison, Inc., attending meetings with their neighboring proprietors.

"I think it can be hard for immigrants to get involved in city politics," says Angela Gargano, Peppino's daughter, who has pitched in alongside her brothers at her dad's restaurant. "It can be intimidating. DMI does a good job of bringing them in."

But for many their network is much less

formal. Not only has Rajan Pradhan, for example, continued the legacy of earlier restaurateurs, he now also happily cooks for the newer arrivals on the strip ("I feed Tutto Pasta's kids," he says proudly). Meanwhile, Jimmy Pashaj, friend of Gus Varnas across the street, has gotten to know Sami Fgaier because they share a back door. And the Caputo-Gargano family? Well, Gino is still serving up spaghetti in his red-checked restaurant. But both Hammond and Chehade know his cousin, Maria, as their landlord.

Masarah Van Eyck is a freelance writer living in Madison. She holds a Ph.D. in French history from McGill University in Montreal.



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