



of the World

Text by ASEEM CHHABRA Photographs by BARRY FITZGERALD

When terrorists flew hijacked airplanes into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, among the thousands they killed were more than 70 mostly immigrant workers at the Windows on the World restaurant on the 106th and 107th floor of the north tower, which took the first hit.

Another 350 employees of the restaurant—waiters, cooks, busboys and dishwashers struggling to earn a living and support their families—were left without jobs. They were among 13,000 restaurant workers in New York—67 percent of whom are immigrants—who were unemployed because of the attacks, according to the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees local union chapter.

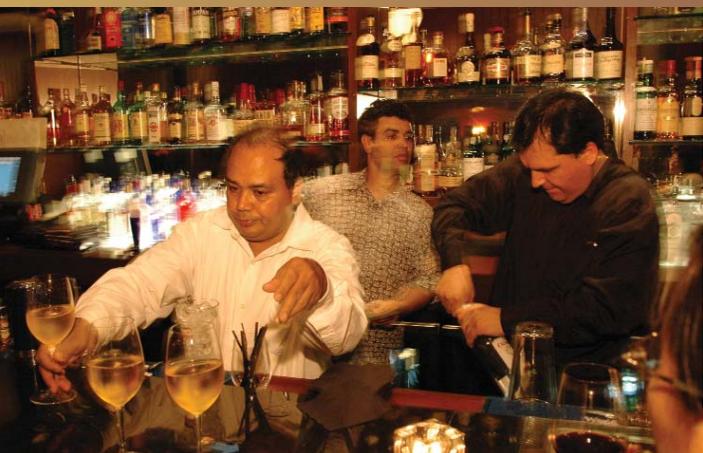
Jean Pierre, Memon Ahmed and Patricio Valencia—from Haiti, Bangladesh and Ecuador—were among the survivors. Despite the shock, the fear and grief for their lost colleagues, they had to find work in a city where restaurants were shutting down

because of the sudden drop in tourist and business traffic. After several years of struggling through odd jobs, including occasional low-paying restaurant work, Pierre, Ahmed and Valencia are now employees of a new eatery—Colors—that opened in January 2006 in New York's eastern Greenwich Village. But more importantly, the three men, along with 55 other workers, are co-owners of the restaurant that operates like a cooperative. About two dozen of the Colors employees had worked at Windows on the World, which was one of the most popular restaurants in the United States.

On September 11, 2001, Pierre's regular 6 a.m. shift had been delayed because

of construction work at the restaurant. He was asked to report to work a few hours later. And so Pierre was in New Jersey buying formula milk for his six-month-old son when the first plane hit the twin towers. The full extent of the disaster didn't strike him until he returned home where his father sat holding his baby boy and staring at the television.

"And then they showed the buildings come down and that's when I started crying," says Pierre, 34, a Haitian immigrant who worked as a sous chef at Windows. "My reaction was that I was upset on Sunday when my boss told me that I would have to come at a later time and on



Top: The main dining room at Colors, one of the few cooperative restaurants in New York City. Above: Awal Ahmed (from left), Fekkak Mamdouh and Patricio Valencia on a busy day at the bar. Above, right: Saru Jayaraman, lawyer and activist, who helped set up Colors.

Tuesday, God saved my life. Due to the construction I ended up alive.”

Ahmed, who came to the United States from Bangladesh 19 years ago, was working at Windows on February 26, 1993—the date of the first terrorist attack on the twin towers. On September 11, 2001, he was asleep at his home in Queens, New York, when the planes hit the landmark

buildings in Manhattan. His shift as a waiter at Windows didn’t start until 2 p.m. An Indonesian colleague woke him up and told him to turn on his television.

“It’s hard to imagine,” says Ahmed, 39, about the devastation and deaths. “Sometimes I think I am luckier than the others, because I skipped death two times from the same place.”

Colors, with its eclectic international flavor and menu, is a tribute to the 79 Windows workers who died on September 11. The restaurant was developed by Fekkak Mamdouh, a Moroccan immigrant who worked as a Windows waiter, and Saru Jayaraman, a feisty Indian American

immigration lawyer and labor activist, who had been approached initially by the union that represented the Windows workers to establish a permanent restaurant workers center.

For the first 90 days after the terrorist attacks, the Rockefeller Foundation had funded a union-run relief center, with multilingual caseworkers who offered financial help, counseling and other services. The continuing need, however, was jobs.

The Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees union encouraged Jayaraman and Mamdouh to launch the Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York, or ROC-NY, as a permanent workers’ center,

offering job-search assistance, classes and legal advocacy, to attract low-paid and often unorganized restaurant workers into collective action.

When Jayaraman was initially approached, she was hesitant to join their cause because she feels unions in the United States “tend to be fairly mainstream” and she favors a more activist approach. But then she met the workers of Windows and she was impressed by their diversity and commitment to good working conditions. “Their immediate concerns were jobs, money, relief, just basic concerns of survival and living,” she says.

Jayaraman grew up in the working class neighborhood of East Los Angeles in California. She attended Yale Law School and Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, then chose to become an activist and an organizer fighting for workers’ rights.

“ROC’s vision is to organize,” she says,

Some of the worker-owners at Colors are (from left) Awal Ahmed from Bangladesh; Rosario Cera from Mexico; Sonali Mitra from India; Memon Ahmed, Mohammad Quddus and Mohamed Ali from Bangladesh.

from her office in downtown Manhattan—a space given to the organization by Brooklyn College. In addition to her work as a co-director of ROC, Jayaraman teaches courses on immigrant rights, labor economics, political science, sociology and community organizing at Brooklyn College and New York University.

“The vast majority of New York workers aren’t union members. Working conditions are awful. Seventy percent of all restaurant workers are immigrants; 90 percent don’t

have health insurance; 60 percent don’t get proper overtime. The median annual income is \$19,000,” says Jayaraman.

Some Windows on the World workers found jobs at Noche, a Latin-themed restaurant that was opened in Times Square in June 2002 by David Emil, who had owned Windows. But other workers were angry that Emil did not hire more of them. With ROC’s help they approached the news media and held demonstrations. They alleged that Emil was trying to hire only



On the Menu

Colors’ menu includes an array of international dishes representing the staff from 24 countries. Entrees include Organic Chicken, Bangladeshi pot pie, Congolese Seafood Bowl, Goat Curry with Peruvian lentil-rice cake. Entrees range in price from \$18 to \$33. Appetizers, priced at \$11 to \$17, include Lambi Salad, with Haitian-style stewed conch; and Tuna Tartar, served with capers and American sturgeon caviar.

Jean Pierre, executive sous chef, cuts pineapples at Colors’ ergonomically designed kitchen.



non-union workers in his new restaurant.

Emil said that many jobs at Windows, such as banquet waiters, captains and food runners, did not require English language and other skills, and those jobs did not exist at the much smaller Noche. An accord was reached, however. Emil hired more ex-Windows workers and promised others the first chance whenever Noche opened banquet facilities.

"It was a really big victory and the workers realized that even though we were in this relief mode, there was so much we could do if we got together," Jayaraman says. However, Noche closed down. Many of the workers found themselves out of a job again and approached ROC for help.

Forming a coop restaurant was Mamdough's idea, Jayaraman says. It took four-and-a-half years and \$2 million in funds, Jayaraman says. In January 2003, she had spent time learning about the Indian Coffee House chain while on a personal visit to India. In 1957, when coffee was a restricted item in India and quite expensive, employees of the state-run

Coffee Board set up a cooperative society, which established the chain of restaurants to sell coffee at a reasonable price. It became popular with students, intellectuals, traveling salesmen, politicians and several prime ministers.

Colors, with its international cuisine and 1930s art deco style, contrasts with the Indian Coffee House's homey atmosphere. But in either case, cooperative ownership doesn't mean that the employees allow the restaurants to operate in a chaotic manner, Jayaraman says. "They own the place and there is the sense of pride, but there is still the hierarchy," she says. "The general manager (Stefan Mailvaganam) runs the show and the kitchen is managed by the executive chef (Raymond Mohan).

"And it's not just about money," she continues. "It's really about governance. The workers have input in a lot of things. They chose the chef; the general manager and they just selected an assistant manager. They helped design the menu from their family dishes."

Colors' employees own 20 percent of the business, but did not put their own

money into the restaurant. Instead, as worker-owners they volunteered their time. ROC, of which Jayaraman and Mamdough are directors, owns 40 percent of the restaurant. The rest of the ownership is divided between an Italian coop—Good Italian Food—and the Nonprofit Finance Fund.

"We are not in the business of restaurant ownership," Jayaraman says about ROC. "We are still organizers." But she adds that when Colors starts to make profits, ROC will use its share to launch similar coops.

Until then, Colors remains a model experiment—one of a small number of coop restaurants in New York City. Colors' staff earns at least \$13.50 an hour. That is double the New York State legal minimum wage of \$6.75. And they divide the tips evenly.

Colors' interior is designed by Jim Walrod, whose other restaurant credits include Pace and the Park. The light fixtures and the globe lamps are inspired by the

New York pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair.

"It is very exciting. It will be my business with my co-workers.

But for now, it is

another job," says Valencia, 41, the Ecuadorian bartender who starts work in the afternoon because Colors, for now, is only open for dinner. "This wasn't easy. In fact it was very hard," he adds.

On September 11, 2001, Valencia was about to leave his home in Queens for the 10 a.m. shift at Windows. His wife had worked late into the previous night in the coat check section. Valencia had a Spanish-language radio station on when he heard the breaking news about a plane hitting the World Trade Center. The Spanish cable television channel he normally watched had gone black. The channel's antenna, located on top of the north tower of the World Trade Center, had been destroyed.

"I cried for days," Valencia says. "Never in my life had I cried like that. Every time we would talk, someone would mention another person who died. It was painful."

For Pierre, the mission of Colors is as important as having a job. He strongly believes that he is part of a movement that is trying to change the restaurant industry.

"We want to show that people can come together and do something good and posi-

Recipe from **COLORS**

Pam Thai
Serves 6 to 8

Thai Salad

- ✓ 1 piece (about 1 kilogram) green papaya (julienne on a mandolin)
- ✓ 225 grams chive buds
- ✓ 225 grams long beans
- ✓ 1 large carrot (julienne on a mandolin)
- ✓ 115 grams bean sprouts
- ✓ 30 pieces spicy cashews
- ✓ 1 pack of tamarind candy (without seeds)
- ✓ 10 sprigs cilantro
- ✓ 10 sprigs Thai basil
- ✓ 10 sprigs mint

Prepare all above. Keep refrigerated. Just before you sauté chicken mix all of the above in a bowl with vinaigrette (recipe below). Let sit for five minutes.

When chicken is done sautéing, place on serving plate and top with Thai salad.

Chili Vinaigrette

- ✓ 1 bottle of sweet chili
- ✓ 1 cup diced ginger
- ✓ 2 cups fresh lime juice
- ✓ ½ cup Thai fish sauce
- ✓ 10 lime leaves chopped fine

Combine all ingredients in a bowl and mix well.

Boiled Chicken

- ✓ 1 whole chicken (1.5-2 kilograms)
- ✓ 2 tablespoons peeled ginger, diced
- ✓ 2 tablespoons lemongrass, chopped fine
- ✓ 2 tablespoons oil
- ✓ 1 lime
- ✓ Thai fish sauce

Place chicken in 20-liter stock pot. Cover with water. Add one tablespoon salt. Bring to a boil and cook it for 45 minutes on medium heat. Let cool. Pick meat off bones and shred (not too fine). In a 30-centimeter sauté pan, heat two tablespoons oil and add chicken. Let sit for two minutes on medium heat then add ginger, lemongrass and a squeeze of lime. Add a dash of fish sauce and mix all ingredients. Cook for one minute. Place cooked chicken on plate topped with Thai salad.

tive and everybody gets treated equally," Pierre says. "And in the end you will benefit from it because we are giving a great product and everybody cares for what they are doing." □

Aseem Chhabra is a New York-based freelance writer. Laurinda Keys Long contributed to this article.

Events at COLORS

- 5th anniversary memorial for Windows on the World workers. September 11, 8-11 a.m.
- 2nd anniversary celebration of The Fruits of Our Labor. September 12, 6 p.m.

