NEWS

"A newspaper is a grand thing. There is no labor of higher worth than that of the journalist."
ZE'EV JABOTINSKY JEWISH ORATOR AND LEADER

Local small business owners say cost of living is top midterm issue

BY SEVAG MARKARIAN
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



KAREN LIN / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

With the approaching midterm elections next Tuesday, four New Haven small business owners told the News that they want their future governor to lower energy costs and allow their customers to have enough disposable income.

A week before Connecticut residents head to the polls to choose between reelecting incumbent Gov. Ned Lamont SOM '80 and replacing him with Republican state Sen. Ryan Fazio, local small business owners said the cost of living is on top of their mind.

Small business owners have been grappling with Connecticut's challenging economic landscape. In the face of governor candidates making various promises on the economy, four New Haven small business owners told the News that they want a future governor to lower energy costs and ensure their customers have enough disposable income.

"If just living is more expensive, there is not enough room in the budget for a sweet treat," said Reinaldo Sánchez, who co-owns the plant-based ice cream shop Vía Láctea on Whitney Avenue.

He added that he is looking for stability in his preferred candidate and cited the rising cost of energy and ingredients — along with customers' cost of living — as the primary strains on his business.

Matt Fantastic, the owner of Elm City Games on Orange Street, expressed the same concerns about consumers and their disposable income. Between "groceries and Pokémon," he said, customers will always choose groceries. Fantastic also discussed rising energy costs, which he called a "big, glaring issue" both at home and at his store.

Last year, Lamont signed legislation aimed at saving customers around $100 per year on their electricity bills. He has also touted his administration's embrace of nuclear and renewable energy, which he has said will help bring down costs.

Fazio, meanwhile, has promised to eliminate the public benefits charge on residents' electricity bills and expand natural gas capacity. In a debate last week, he also pledged to reduce electric bills by 20 percent.

Fantastic criticized both Fazio's and Lamont's energy policies. He said that Lamont, whom he called a "business guy," could be "a lot more aggressive" against utility rate hikes. Asked about Fazio's pledge to reduce energy costs as governor, Fantastic called it "ridiculous, given that he is a senior member on the legislative committee around energy."

Ernesto Garcia, who owns Rubamba Restaurant, the Latin fusion eatery on High Street, said in a phone interview that he is looking for a candidate that uplifts Latinos in the state. He explained that he appreciates Lamont's support for the Latino community, upon whom his business relies, but did not think Fazio's policies would "help Latino businesses."

Fantastic pointed to Lamont's tackling of long-term structural issues in Connecticut's finances, including reducing pension debt and bolstering the state's rainy day fund, as his most impactful work as governor.

Sánchez, meanwhile, said he hasn't "seen any direct impact" on his business from the state government. He said that the national affordability crisis — not any developments specific to Connecticut — has had negative implications for his business.

David Duda, who owns Book Trader Cafe on Chapel Street, said in a phone interview that an increase in the minimum wage was the most beneficial policy enacted by Lamont that affected his small business. Lamont signed a law in 2019 gradually raising the state's minimum wage and aligning it with federal economic indicators. Duda expressed his hopes that the winner of the election will do more to "make healthcare and electricity more affordable."

A survey conducted earlier this year by the Connecticut Business and Industry Association found that just 9 percent of top executives believe the state's business climate is "improving," while 52 percent said it is "static" and 38 percent said it is "declining."

Referencing four businesses that recently closed in the New Haven area, Sánchez said he agreed with those who said that the business climate was declining.

"This is the worst year for restaurant sales," Garcia said, noting the recent closure of three New Haven restaurants.

Duda, on the other hand, said business in New Haven is "booming," citing "the number of people moving here" and "the number of new restaurants coming in." Having lived in New Haven for around 35 years, Duda said he has been "fortunate enough to witness" and be part of the city's economic and cultural growth.

Fantastic said "Connecticut's business environment is pretty good," instead attributing problems to a "significant downturn" at the national level.

4,368 new small businesses formed in Connecticut in September, according to registration data from CTData.

Contact
SEVAG MARKARIAN *at*
sevag.markarian@yale.edu.

Argentinian-inspired cafe brings pastries to State Street

BY ELSPETH YEH
STAFF REPORTER

When Camila Pistone arrived in New Haven from Argentina nine months ago, she wasted no time in pursuing her long-time dream of owning a coffee shop. Three weeks ago, she opened Mila Café in a remodeled storefront across from the State Street station.

Mila's menu is inspired by Argentinian foods and flavors. While it offers familiar cafe staples such as cappuccinos and croissants, showcasing food from her culture was also important to Pistone when designing the menu.

"I wanted a calm, open space for everyone to just be whatever they want to," Pistone said.

Pistone said she discovered her passion for hospitality in Córdoba, Argentina, where she worked for 10 years in a chocolate shop making sweets by hand. She said she decided that her new project in the United States would be making her own products at a cafe.

"I love New Haven because, having Yale and having the opportunity to meet and be on a daily basis with people from different countries, with different cultures," Pistone said. "We can meet here and have coffee, and we all kind of speak the same language."

Pistone said that while some people called her "Mila" in college, the name is actually a reference to milanesa, a breaded beef cutlet and popular staple of Argentinian cuisine. One of Mila Café's lunch options features milanesa in a sandwich.

Other cafe signatures include the Mila refresher, a homestyle version of the "Yerba Mate" canned drink which consists of green tea, orange juice and vanilla syrup. Pistone's personal favorite menu item is the Mila Cloud, a soft, melt-in-your-mouth cookie that is filled with dulce de leche.

Every item at Mila is handmade and prepared on-site, and Pistone spent almost a year developing her own recipes, she said. While she admitted making everything from scratch is "very challenging," Pistone said the hard work is worth it.

"I feel like handmade food is a different experience, and it's something that brings you joy," she said.

Piston described that what makes her food "Mila style" is its roots in family recipes, passed down through generations.

"The women of my family had a lot of power in the kitchen, so I grew up learning what they had been doing," she said. "So yes, it has a lot of grandma power in the back."

Pistone said her family still lives in Argentina, so Mila Café is her way of carrying them with her. Pistone spent four months remodeling the storefront at 524 State St. to evoke a homey and destimulating environment, she said, and she and her staff decorated the space by hanging up wooden spoons and wicker baskets.

Mila Café offers outlets and free Wi-Fi, and Pistone hopes that it will become a space where Yale students come to study.

Beto Michell, who lives two blocks away from the cafe, said he came in after seeing a post Pistone made on Reddit advertising her new business.

"I wish her nothing but the best," Michell said of Pistone. "I love the food business because it's given so many opportunities to hardworking entrepreneurs. But don't kid yourself; it's a hard business."

Pistone said her cafe has struggled with a lack of foot traffic in its early weeks of operation.

"The street was remade and remodeled, so right now I think this area is getting into full bloom again, because it was under construction for a long time," she said.

The owners of several local businesses recently clashed with city leaders over a proposed bus rapid transit system, which would see many Elm Street parking spots eliminated to create a fast-moving bus lane.

"It's a very calm environment to work in, even when we get pops of excitement," Marcelline Smith, one of Mila's baristas, said. "People have wanted a place here for a while, and I think Mila Café is filling that need."

Pistone has been developing a presence on social media to advertise the cafe. She recently partnered with Connecticut food influencer Marissa Tedesco, who runs the account @thatctmom, for a lunch giveaway. Pistone said Tedesco came into the shop unannounced and proposed the collaboration. Other coffee shop owners in New Haven have also been supportive, Pistone said.

In the future, Pistone said, she is dedicated to continuing to make high-quality products. She hopes to eventually expand Mila's hours to the weekends.

The cafe is open weekdays between 7:30 a.m. and 4 p.m.



COURTESY OF MILA PISTONE

Owner Camila Pistone, who arrived from Argentina nine months ago, said she based Mila Café on her home country's relaxed and robust coffee culture. She said hopes her cafe will attract Yale students looking for a study space with homemade food.

Contact
ELSPETH YEH *at*
elspeth.yeh@yale.edu.