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BACK STORY

Gloria Athanis of Phyter on rise of plant-based bars

BY GREG TROTTER | Chicago Tribune

Sure, there are a lot of granola and protein bars out there, but how many refrigerated plant-based bars are there?



Gloria Athanis and her co-founders at Phyter, a new plant-based bar company based in West Chicago, are trying to blaze a path as pioneers in the category. Launched in December 2015, the bars are sold in Whole Foods Market's 52 Midwest stores, as well as other stores and health clubs in the Chicago area.

Athanis started the company with David Choi Jr., former head chef at Amitabul, his family's vegan Korean restaurant in the Norwood Park East neighborhood. Choi is the culinary mind behind Phyter flavor pairings such as beets and cocoa; butternut squash and peanut butter; and sweet potato and coconut. Jeff Adeszko, a third partner in the business, oversees manufacturing and operations.

A key part of Athanis' role is telling the Phyter story to those who may be unaccustomed to the idea of a refrigerated plant-based bar.

Q. What have you learned from launching Phyter?

A. The biggest thing is to listen to yourself. I believe in getting as much information as you can. And I'm really big on networking. But you have to listen to yourself. We had people who said, 'If you can just get your products to be shelf-stable' And I'd say, 'OK, bye.' This is real food. We're not some bar just sitting on a shelf. ... What people didn't see was their negative was really our positive.

Q. How are Phyter bars different from the competition?

A. No. 1, they're made with 100 percent organic, farm-fresh ingredients as the very first ingredient. So that's really important. Secondly, you're going to find them in the refrigerator because they're perishable. And the third thing is these are made by a chef.

Q: How this business partnership come about?

A. I've known David since he was about 8 years old. I've been friends with his family. I've always supported what their family was doing with plant-based eating. His family started the first plant-based restaurant in Chicago about 30 years ago. And I've always wanted to work in health and wellness, and in plant-based food. ... We came up with Phyter bar because people we knew were looking for something clean and healthy as a grab-and-go. David saw a big opportunity in the market for that.

Q. What was your first job?

A. Making pizza and baked ziti at the Sbarro at the Massapequa mall on Long Island.

Q. What book is on your nightstand right now?

A. "Steve Jobs" by Walter Isaacson. Honestly, I'm finding as much value from the wrong things he did as the right things. I'm learning a ton.

Q. Who is your mentor?

A. Chef David's father. They call him Chef Dave. It might sound weird, but he really taught me to just be — and not look forward or backward. And he taught me to follow my passion.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

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