



Limited-Service, Unlimited Possibilities

[WOMEN IN FOODSERVICE \(/OPERATIONS/WOMEN-FOODSERVICE\)](#) | [November 2013 \(/byissue/November-2013\)](#) |

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When Family Means Business

Partnering with family members gives women greater resources, wider perspectives.



Doc Popcorn cofounder Renée Israel works alongside her husband, Rob, to run the 80-plus-unit snack brand.

DOC POPCORN

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Though many women dream of striking out on their own in the foodservice industry, others envision working alongside their spouse or launching a new concept with the help of their siblings. For women looking to partner up in a restaurant brand, family members often make great allies: They know what you're great at and where you could use some help, and they're not too shy to speak up when you need to hear the truth.

For Renée Israel, cofounder and chief marketing officer of Boulder, Colorado-based Doc Popcorn, developing a brand with her husband helped it achieve the success it's seen today. The partnership also gave both Israel and her spouse the opportunity to discover that they had very different skill sets to contribute to the business.

Israel describes her husband, Rob, as “an entrepreneur from birth” who possesses a retail background, negotiation skills, and real estate experience. She, on the other hand, has a marketing and business-strategy background that she gleaned from her time in corporate America. “We bump heads a lot less these days because he has his areas and I have mine,” Israel says. Her husband defers to her on issues such as branding, and she passes questions to him concerning product or other areas within his expertise. “That’s how we work together well as a couple.”

Knowing each partner’s strengths and weaknesses has served the three Esendimir sisters well in business. Their combined—and often brutally honest—input allowed the siblings to create the right internal structure at Flatbread Grill, a fast-casual Mediterranean concept. Each knows the experiences of the other two partners and where one may need some support.

“All these things come into play when you’re doing a business,” says Arzu Esendimir, cofounder and CEO of the Upper Montclair, New Jersey, restaurant. “We just know when we have to step up our game and work harder to make things work.”

It’s also an accepted reality that sometimes one partner will shoulder more responsibility—and more stress—than the others, but that those burdens will rotate as the business evolves.

Employees can sometimes try to play one leader against another, but the staff at Scottsdale, Arizona-based America’s Taco Shop know that America Corrales Bortin, founder of the brand, and her husband, Terry, are a

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cohesive team. “If it’s something that has to do with food, they come to me,” Bortin says. “But they know that, no matter what, I will always check with Terry.”

Even within their individual areas of expertise, the Bortins typically check with the other when making a decision. It helps to maintain the vision of the business while keeping the partnership on an even keel. “We communicate because we don’t want anything to come between our relationship,” Bortin says.

The Esendimir sisters can be a formidable team, they say, and rather than give new employees hard-and-fast lines about which of them handles various parts of the business, they prefer to blur the divisions among them. “In the beginning, you can’t tell who’s managing the money, who’s the point person, and who’s the communications person that interacts with the outside world. We don’t clearly explain that to them; they learn as they go along,” says Gonca Esendimir, chief marketing officer.

As employees figure out who does what, they also discover how freely information flows among the trio. “They pick up on how strong our bond is and how openly we communicate, and they understand it’s difficult to really turn us against each other,” she says.

By embracing the deep bond that comes from working with other family members, Fusun Esendimir, CFO of Flatbread Grill, says she and her sisters have discovered how to best leverage their relationship. “We’re smart enough to know that, in the end, if we do things against each other, it eventually hurts everyone,” she says.

Allowing egos to run rampant, pursuing individual goals within the business, and looking out for their own interests over those of the team would likely produce unwelcome results. Fusun Esendimir says she believes most partnerships that end badly are brought down by the consequences of heat-of-the-moment actions. Family members, on the other hand, know they’ll still be dealing with each other years from now, she says. “We have to be positive in this business,” she says. “If we plot against each other or steal from each other, it will eventually bring everyone down.”

In the case of husbands and wives, the distinction between home and work life can be hard to establish, especially when personal disagreements threaten to undermine progress in the business.

“Where most people leave a steaming spouse at home, we actually have to face each other every day,” Israel says. Deliberately putting on the Doc Popcorn hat helps the pair focus on business issues rather than whatever’s going on at home. “We’re pretty good at taking a deep breath and being professional about it,” Israel says. Though compartmentalizing may sometimes be more difficult for women, Israel says, “I know I’m here to do a job and I just have to make it happen.”

Unfortunately, bringing work—both its triumphs and its challenges—home is human nature. Bortin says sitting down for a family dinner can easily trigger business discussions, even unintentionally. “We just can’t help it, but we start talking about problems or everything that’s going on,” she says.

When it’s time to turn off work and switch back to home life, Israel says, it’s all about being diligent. “The No. 1 rule is that you don’t talk about work [at home],” she says. “You take it elsewhere. And if you can’t help yourself, you’ve got to get up and leave. We definitely honor that.”