



No one has ever earned a degree in culinary arts from  
Columbia College Chicago. That hasn't stopped these  
Columbia alumni from finding success in the field, pursuing  
a passion for good food, good service, and entrepreneurship  
that is more closely connected to their Columbia studies—  
in drama, dance, and marketing—than one might think.

This is ...

**THE**  
*second course*

BY JEAN IVERSEN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEREMY LAWSON

## PHILIP GHANTOUS

**Cafecito** 26 E. Congress Pkwy. / 312.922.2233

Cafecito quickly became a favorite dining destination among students and faculty when it opened last summer in the heart of Columbia's South Loop campus. But most who have feasted on the savory Cubano and chimichurri sandwiches are probably unaware that the friendly owner behind the counter is an alumnus. Philip Ghantous, originally from Peoria, Illinois, fell in love with corner cafeterias during a visit to Miami. "In Miami, it's all Cuban eateries, cafés, not Starbucks or Seattle's Best," he says. "I wanted to bring the flavor of Cuba to this city."



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Ghantous came to Chicago in 1994 to pursue an acting career.

After playing a wide range of roles on stage, Ghantous enrolled in Columbia's theater program, where he was cast in Chekhov's *Ivanov* by department chair Sheldon Patinkin. He earned a B.A. in theater in 2000. "Columbia made me more serious," he says. "If students are smart, they will make friends with their teachers. They can help get your foot in the door."

A life in the theater is notoriously unpredictable, though, and Ghantous—in love and newly married—was looking for more stability. He took various day jobs and was admittedly "successful, but also miserable." While working in admissions at the Cooking and Hospitality Institute of Chicago, Ghantous discovered a second passion. "I always loved food, always loved cooking," says the gregarious restaurateur. Determined to open his own restaurant, he drove all around the city scouting locations, night after night, kids protesting in the backseat, until he finally found a vacancy on the ground floor of the historic Hostelling International Chicago building at the corner of Congress and Wabash.

Cafecito opened its doors in July 2008 to rave reviews. The bright eatery boasts a menu of Cuban coffee drinks, including its namesake (an espresso poured over caramelized sugar) and made-to-order pressed sandwiches. The popular Cubano is a mouthwatering combination of roasted pork marinated in mojo (the restaurant's secret sauce), ham, Swiss cheese, pickles, and mustard, all on Gonnella French bread. Ghantous's goal is to foster an environment in which people stop, talk with each other, and enjoy the lively Latin music. "When people come in and start moving, that's the biggest compliment I can get," he says with a grin.

Future plans include an interdisciplinary arts open mic. "I want to support the arts," says Ghantous, "perhaps with a studio, a theater." But despite his success with his new passion, he hasn't forsaken his love of acting, saying he definitely plans to get back into it. "This is my last chance to be involved in theater. I refuse to fail."



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## JEANNE UZDAWINIS

**Café Selmarie** 4729 N. Lincoln Ave. / 773.989.5595

“If you take a classroom full of dancers and ask them to see their future, they’ll say performance, teaching, but not business,” notes Jeanne Uzdawinis, who earned a B.A. in dance from Columbia in 1979. The co-owner of Café Selmarie, a Lincoln Square landmark, certainly didn’t envision a career as a restaurant owner when she was studying at Columbia. Uzdawinis initially studied dance at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, but found a lack of performing opportunities there. So she transferred to Columbia, where Shirley Mordine, department chair at the time, invited her to be a member of Mordine and Company Dance Theater. “This is the key about Columbia: its location,” says Uzdawinis. “I knew I had the chance to perform here.”

After graduation, Uzdawinis found herself with injuries that limited her ability to perform, and also wanted more financial security. She took some cooking classes, which ignited her interest in the culinary arts. “A lot of dancers are foodies,” she reveals. She landed a job at the now-shuttered Gordon doing desserts and salads. On days off, Uzdawinis worked at Rolf’s Patisserie, where she was eventually offered a full-time job.

She knew she wanted to run her own pastry shop. “I come from a family of bakers,” she says. “Mom was a great baker.” She wasn’t quite ready to take the leap, however. Instead, she rented a kitchen on the West Side and opened her own baking and catering business. “I had maybe six clients then,” she recalls.

It was a one-woman operation, with Uzdawinis doing the purchasing, baking, and delivering. In 1983, she pooled her profits with business partner Birgit Kobayashi and opened Café Selmarie (the name is a combination of the co-owners’ middle names). “We wanted a place with a European flavor, plus I wanted to work in my neighborhood,” says Uzdawinis, who still lives within walking distance of the café.

Café Selmarie’s timing could not have been better: since its opening, Lincoln Square has grown in leaps and bounds, with new shops, restaurants, and condos proliferating in the family-friendly area. “We’ve had people come here who tell us they came here as babies,” she says proudly. Located along Giddings Plaza, Café

Selmarie has grown from a coffee café into a full-service restaurant almost five times its original size. Uzdawinis credits much of her success with hiring a good accountant from the outset. “He made us run the business as a business from day one, which made us a good candidate in the eyes of bankers.”

Reflecting on her days at Columbia, Uzdawinis offers, “The thing about Columbia is that there is a deep appreciation for the art you are involved in. You’re surrounded by involved teachers, involved students.” And she has remained involved in the local dance community, serving as a board member of Mordine and Company Dance Theater—where she once danced—and holding benefits for the company at the restaurant.

## PHIL TADROS

**Dollop** 4181 N. Clarendon Ave. / 708.655.6753 and **Noble Tree** 2444 N. Clark St. / 773.248.1500

Phil Tadros admits he was “a horrible student in grade school, high school.” But things changed when he enrolled at Columbia in 1997. “I showed up, for one thing,” he says of Columbia’s classes. “I got As and Bs. I had more respect for the teachers. They have real-life examples. Other people who don’t have experience, I just don’t respect or listen to them.”

An entrepreneur at heart, Tadros owned several cafés and wireless stores before opening Dollop, a coffee café, in 2004 with partner Shaye Robeson. Rather than opening up a bar or restaurant, which Tadros saw as “too ambitious,” he focused on finding a great location for a European-style café. The vintage, book-strewn atmosphere begs

comparisons to the Bourgeois Pig Café in Lincoln Park. Though offerings are mainly limited to coffee drinks (expertly made with local Metropolis brew), Dollop also carries Hoosier Mama pies and sandwiches from Bleeding Heart organic bakery.

In 2008, Tadros was “jonesing for a really unique, beautiful space” and found it in a three-story brownstone at 2444 North Clark Street. There he opened Noble Tree, another coffee café. Noble Tree offers the same menu items as Dollop but a slightly quieter atmosphere. The third floor features a private, cove-like domain, where customers tap quietly on their laptops. But creating a library-like place to study was not Tadros’s primary goal with either Dollop or Noble Tree. Though both cafés offer

free Wi Fi, there are various seating arrangements throughout to inspire face-to-face conversation as well.

Tadros is also the founder of Doejo, a company that helps start-ups and small businesses with web design, business consulting, and social media. “With Doejo, I’m doing exactly what I wanted to do back then, when attending Columbia,” he says. Tadros now speaks at universities and conferences about his expertise in interactive and social media. His clients include restaurants, the Kudan Group, [cheekychicago.com](http://cheekychicago.com), Burton Snowboards, and the Chicago Innovation Awards.

His advice for students? “Get your portfolio together. People need to

personally brand themselves. You should be able to email someone with one link, and they should be able to know who you are and what you do right away.” With the opening in 2008 of yet another business—Haystack, a vintage goods and clothing store at 2934 North Broadway—defining exactly who he is may elude even Tadros. Suffice it to say this entrepreneur follows his instincts and pursues his passions, be they one or many.

**Jean Iversen** (B.A. '93) is the author of *BYOB Chicago*, a guidebook to Chicago’s byob restaurants now in its third edition.

**Jeremy Lawson** ('94) is a Chicago-based freelance photographer. His work can be seen at [jeremylawsonphotography.com](http://jeremylawsonphotography.com).



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