

# foundings **AUSTIN**

ISSUE 11 | NOURISH

## **Camila Alves McConaughey**

PORTRAIT OF  
A MODERN  
WOMAN

Entrepreneurship. Inspiration. Lifestyle.



# Jennifer McNevin

## ON NOURISHING OTHERS AS A WAY TO NOURISH YOURSELF

“Meet me at Manuel’s” has been a common phrase and part of the Austin culinary lexicon since 1984, when third-generation restaurateur Greg Koury opened his iconic restaurant — dedicated to authentic regional Mexican cooking — at 310 Congress Ave. Well-known for its consistently excellent menu, cocktails, and service, Manuel’s received a boost of energy, style, and taste with the addition of Jennifer McNevin, who moved from Los Angeles in 2001 and became not only co-owner and marketing director of Manuel’s but also Greg’s bride. We got the scoop on her role in providing classic nourishment for Manuel’s loyal customers and for nourishing others through philanthropic outreach and the local arts community.

### Q+A

**DEBORAH HAMILTON-LYNNE:** The theme for this issue is “Nourish.” So talk to me a little bit about what that word means to you, to be nourished.

**JENNIFER MCNEVIN:** Really, the first thing that hits my brain when you say that word is obviously food. Right? Because I’m in the restaurant business and food really not only nourishes us, but food really socially touches so many things. There are so many ways to be nourished: food, drink, friends, ideas, conversation, and they can all be shared over a meal.

**DHL:** Tell me a little bit about your background. Were you always interested in the restaurant business? Have you always been an entrepreneur? What brought you into it and what do

you think now that you are a part of the restaurant business?

**JM:** I am a commercial interior designer. I was living in Los Angeles working with the Wolfgang Puck account nationally and doing some big jobs there with commercial design. I met my husband, Greg, who is the founder of Manuel’s, in Los Angeles. We dated long distance for one year and then he imported me here.

**DHL:** Speaking of Greg. Manuel’s is an Austin icon. There really aren’t many restaurants that have been around for 35 years and have such a large group of loyal customers.

**JM:** We’re very proud of that. There’s only a handful of restaurants in Austin

that have that kind of longevity. Really, it’s not rocket science. It does take a lot of hard work. To stay open that long, what it really takes is having a product and giving people an experience and a product that they want to repeat. It’s really as simple as that.



Greg Koury and Jennifer McNevin



Ahmad Modoni, Manuel’s and Changos partner



CAMPECHANA

Chilled seafood cocktail with poached Yellow Fin Tuna, Gulf shrimp & Black Drum fish tossed with fresh tomato, onion, serrano chile, cilantro & sliced avocado.



“UNDER THE BRIDGE”

Gray Hawn was in Cuernavaca Mexico walking back from dinner with friends when she saw the Mariachi band resting under a bridge. The spirit of the moment combined with the beautiful mural behind them caught her eye and she got the shot. It’s an exceptional photograph.

**DHL:** You make it sound “simple,” but I know the business requires a lot of hard work and long hours. Restaurants are closing every day in Austin and competition is popping up every day. How do you keep it interesting and fresh?

**JM:** The way we do it is we stay very involved, and we keep our quality very high — of what’s on the plate. We’re very picky about quality of ingredients. We make everything from scratch in small batches. We only buy Grade A. So we’re also sourcing about 70 percent of our product locally. Local meaning from the state of Texas, because we

want to support the local economy in Texas and it also gives our customers and patrons fresher product.

As far as our menu and really our business as a whole, we really always strive to be the market leaders. Even though we have been in business for 35 years, we never rest on our laurels.



We're always thinking of new things, doing new things, keeping it fresh.

**DHL:** Another thing I love about Manuel's is the impeccable service. Talk to me a little bit about your role as far as making sure that the service is high-quality service as well as high-quality food.

**JM:** Really, I can't take a lot of credit for the service. Our operations manager, which is one of our owners, Ahmad Modoni, does a great job, along with Greg, of managing the managers. We have 130 employees. So we can't possibly manage without a strong team. We have many, many long-term employees, and I credit that to the family atmosphere that we create. We try to keep things simple, we try not to over-complicate things. We pay above industry standards, and we work our managers fewer hours than most restaurants. We just try to create a safe place to work, where everyone can come in, do their job, make great money. We really stress the fact that the customer comes first.

**DHL:** If you were talking to somebody that was an entrepreneur and their dream was to open a restaurant, what would you tell them?

**JM:** We get asked that question all the time. We're really happy to see so many young people be more interested in food and beverage these days. Through the media, through all these great TV shows, the cooking shows. But the reality of the business is this: It's the type of business that everyone thinks they can do.

When we take calls from people that want to open their own restaurant, we always ask them the same question. The first question we ask is, "If you open your restaurant, can you afford financially to run the restaurant and be there every single day and have it for at least five years and pay all your bills without taking one penny from the restaurant?" If the answer is no, then we don't recommend you open a restaurant. Because typically, it's three to five years before you're gonna be able

to pull any money for yourself out of that restaurant. So how would you like to go to work every single day and run a business for 50 to 100 hours a week with no income?

**DHL:** Speaking of ups and downs of restaurants, you've had several restaurants — Changos, Iguana Grill, 612 West. How you decide if a restaurant's viable.

**JM:** It's a really hard decision to make because they become like your children. People often ask me, "Do you like the downtown Manuel's better or the one at Great Hills? Which one, Jen, do you prefer?" And I always say it's like having two children that are very different but you love them both the same. We had a Changos on South Lamar that just wasn't working for us: It never made money in nine years. But we kept it open by floating it through the other ones. At the end of the day, you can only do that for so long.

**DHL:** How would you describe your main roles?

**JM:** My main role is really public relations, community involvement, business development. I oversee all the ads, all the graphics for the ads. But after I saw the movie *Food, Inc.*, it opened my eyes to a lot of practices I wasn't aware of. It spearheaded a very significant change that we made. It took me a year, and the partners supported me, but I changed all of our meats to hormone-free, antibiotic-free. I went the non-GMO route on the corn masa for tortilla chips and tortillas that we make from scratch in the kitchen. We started sourcing locally. We started buying only the wild-caught seafood from certified sustainable waters in the U.S., not farm-raised shrimp from Taiwan. These are just practices that really are common sense, good things to do. Not only for the health of the planet, but for the health of our patrons that are eating our food. But surprisingly, many restaurants that you would think, that tout themselves as being healthy, are not serving the wild-caught seafood and are not serving the all-natural meats. It does put us in a different category.

**DHL:** How complicated and costly was the process of making that shift?

**JM:** I wanted to prove that if a local, small restaurant group like ours that's not corporately owned can serve this level quality-of-product at a reasonable price and still make a reasonable profit, then anybody can do it. It did take a year to source all this reliably and we're feeding anywhere from 200 to 400 people a day through each one of our restaurants. I really wanted to be a model and start more of a trend to show other restaurants, 'Hey, if we can do this, you can do it, too.' In fact, that has happened. That's probably what I'm most proud of. As the public becomes more educated on food practices, they will start demanding this kind of quality. That's what we've tried to do.

**DHL:** And speaking of providing nourishment to the public, let's talk about your dedication to community involvement in Austin and beyond. Why is it important to you?

**JM:** We support every year at least 20 local nonprofits in Austin. We have done that well before I ever got here. Greg and Ahmad have always been exceedingly generous in giving back to the community. Our passion has always been the same. Children, anything to do with children, and the arts. So those are our priorities, always have been. As a restaurant, we get hit up by everybody in town. Everything from the soccer moms to hospice to Ballet Austin, the arts groups. We really try to help as many people as we can. That's my role. Through the restaurants, I've also tried to help with raising awareness and raising funds.

**DHL:** Your outreach has expanded and also includes international outreach through Finding Freedom Through Friendship. How did that come about?

**JM:** It was through my friendship with Turk and Christy Pipkin that made me realize it's not enough to just help out in your own community, that you need to do more. After seeing his film, *Nobelity*, the message to me was it's one world. If everybody that has would just

do something for those that have not, it could really change the world and help to right that huge imbalance that exists. Seeing that film, I realized as much as I thought I was doing, I was not doing enough. So the two international charities that I've consistently tried to support have been the Nobelity Project and Finding Freedom through Friendship, which was founded by my sister, Jody Greenlee.

**DHL:** And you also are active in and support the local arts community.

**JM:** Yes. Right now, we're focused on the exhibit with Gray Hawn at Manuel's as a way to showcase a local artist and raise money for the charity at the same time. We're always looking for creative ways to tie the arts to philanthropy and

giving back. You can see Gray's beautiful photographic exhibit "Romancing the Light" at the 310 Congress location through June 30, and 25 percent of the proceeds benefit Finding Friendship through Freedom. Almost all of these women and children we are serving are severely malnourished. They don't have a way to meet their basic needs. I am so proud to be a part of trying to change that.

**DHL:** Nourish others and you will nourish yourself.

**JM:** Yes, absolutely.

Please note that the conversation has been edited for purposes of space. To hear the entire interview go to [shows.pippa.io/view-from-venus/](https://shows.pippa.io/view-from-venus/)

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## Philanthropy in Action

**Greg Koury, Jennifer McNevin, and Ahmad Modoni, owners of Manuel's and Changos restaurants, have a long and rich history of community support for food-related programs, charitable organizations, and the arts. Through donations of product, gift certificates to be raffled, and annual fundraiser events, their outreach has helped countless local organizations, and an international outreach provides services for women and children escaping poverty and malnourishment. The group is also dedicated to showcasing the work of local artists and combining the exhibits in their fundraising efforts.**



### Romancing Light by Gray Hawn

Through June 30th, Manuel's downtown, located at 310 Congress Ave., will be showcasing

the work of internationally renowned photographer Gray Hawn in her exhibit entitled *Romancing Light*. The exhibit showcases eclectic and inspiring images from Hawn's travels in Mexico, Egypt, Africa, and India. Hawn is known for her extraordinary landscapes and portraits. Her art and photographs have won numerous awards and grace the collections of many museums, including the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

25 percent of sales of the prints on exhibit benefit Freedom Through Friendship.



### Freedom Through Friendship

Freedom Through Friendship is a nonprofit organization that empowers widows, single mothers, and children in rural Guatemala and Egypt by lifting them from endemic

poverty by providing shelter, health services, nutrition, education, and economic skills through microloans and microbusiness development.

For McNevin, supporting the organization is a family affair. "My sister started going to Guatemala on medical mission trips with 20 nurses — just doing free healthcare for the women and children there. The number grew to 150 nurses, doctors, and volunteers going down there every year. About 10 years ago, she started Finding Freedom Through Friendship because she saw repeatedly that, while it's great to provide healthcare and doing these free operations, almost all of these women and children are severely malnourished. They didn't have a way to meet their basic needs.

Through the restaurants I have helped with raising awareness and raising funds.

In Guatemala, these are some of the most impoverished women on the planet. Especially the indigenous Mayan women. I love the way the microloans and microbusinesses have helped pull them out of poverty. Through the foundation, we've helped more than 500 women now. No one in the charity takes a salary of any kind. All the money that we raise goes to help the moms and kids. I am so proud to be a part of it."

 [finding-freedom-through-friendship.org](https://finding-freedom-through-friendship.org)