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News

## Salute E Vita bids a ‘bittersweet’ goodbye to longtime patrons

By **ALI TADAYON** | atadayon@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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As Salute E Vita owner Menbere “Menbe” Aklilu served meals, shook hands and hugged customers on the Richmond restaurant’s last day of business Friday, some may not have noticed the scars and burns that line her arms.

They’re the unambiguous reminders of an abusive relationship that forced her into homelessness when she was nine months pregnant.

Her painful past prepared her for success and inspired her to always give back, Aklilu said in an interview Friday. That’s one big reason her restaurant has given free meals to thousands of homeless people, veterans and low-income single mothers over the years. She still bears memories of seeing her mother shot to death in her home country of Ethiopia, living in a women’s shelter in Italy, and raising her son in government housing in Oakland.

Aklilu has owned Salute E Vita since 2002, eight years after being hired there as a minimum-wage hostess. The restaurant has become a staple of the community, attracting regulars from all over the Bay Area and widespread praise for its philanthropic events. It has provided a prosperous life for her and her son, who is working on his doctorate degree in psychoanalysis in New York.

But after a years-long, contentious relationship with the restaurant building’s owner, developer Richard Poe, Aklilu decided to close the restaurant. She is currently working on re-opening Salute E Vita in Point Richmond within nine months, she said.

“It’s bittersweet, I know everybody in the community, and saying goodbye is tough,” Aklilu said.

Aklilu is also sad to leave the restaurant’s staff of 40, some of whom have been working there since the 1990s.

The restaurant has been serving free meals during its last two days and asked patrons to donate whatever they can afford to the staff, to be divided among them.

Her greatest memories of owning the restaurant were the annual Thanksgiving lunches and Mother’s Day brunches. For the past nine years, the restaurant has served free meals to the homeless on Thanksgiving, typically about 1,300 people.

The homeless were treated just the same — if not better — than regular customers, she said.

“We serve them with dignity, we serve them one-by-one, ‘yes ma’am, no ma’am, with your dessert would you like a cappuccino, espresso, or green tea?’ ” Aklilu said. “I will take that with me forever.”

And over the past eight years, the restaurant would annually serve about 100 single, low-income moms on Mother’s Day in what was billed as the “Yes, You Are Worthy” event, after having treated them to a beauty salon trip beforehand. Aklilu would tell them of her own experience being a single, low-income mother and how she rose to success.

Many of the restaurant’s patrons are effusive in their tributes to Aklilu. “You come here for the food and the view, but you come back because of Menbe and what she’s done for the community and the difference she’s made in people’s lives,” said restaurant patron Melissa Male.

Aklilu plans to continue the Mother’s Day and Thanksgiving traditions. After Salute E Vita closes, she will be volunteering full-time at the Greater Richmond Interfaith Program soup kitchen.

“I don’t give back because of this restaurant, I give back because it’s the right thing to do,” she said.

Longtime regular Mike DeSimoni took a chance on Aklilu when she was working as a manager for the restaurant. The original owner wanted to sell it, and although Aklilu hoped to take over, she didn’t have the money. So DeSimoni, an immigrant himself, said he loaned her thousands of dollars to be paid back within five years. She paid him back in 11 months.

“Part of why I did it was because she has a touch with humans, she had a tough life and is always helping people out,” DeSimoni said.

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