



# MAMA JO'S

## THE BREAKFAST CART THAT CONQUERED NYC

A conversation with street-food icon **Joanna Despas.**

BY MARIA BENARDIS

**JOANNA DESPAS**, better known as Mama Jo to her customers, has been cooking up a breakfast storm from her cart on the corner of 47th Street and Park Avenue in New York City for more than 35 years. Hers was one of the first breakfast carts in the city, and through the years, her corner has become a second home for her. Today Mama Jo's is considered one of the best food carts in the city, winning the 2018 Vandy Award for the best breakfast cart. Not surprising, she is among the most recognizable and beloved figures of New York's exciting street food scene. She is also the city's oldest street-food vendor—and she isn't planning on retiring anytime soon.

Despas has a warm, bubbly, inviting personality, and has more energy than most people with half her 69 years. Visitors to her cart are treated as if they were her own children, with many adopting her as their second mother. She has managed to keep a softness about her in a city that can be quite harsh and competitive. The huge American metropolis, after all, is not the easiest place to work for a woman on her own at night.

The story of Mama Jo's is another one of those inspiring tales in which people, driven by an unquenchable desire to get ahead, manage not only to succeed through years of hard work but to carve out their own little empire.

Despas had a love for cooking from a very young age growing up with her grandmother in the small town of Pylori, near Kozani in Northern Greece. It was a difficult life, and her family struggled to make ends meet. "I worked in the fields, then went to school, then back to work again—this was my daily routine," she says. In 1968, with little money and limited knowledge of the English language, she made the trek to the United States to start a new life with nothing but her own motivation and willingness to work and succeed. It was here in the U.S. that she raised her two daughters, Katerina and Barbara.

Her nickname, “Mama Jo,” came about because of her motherly appearance and her constant smile. She has become a familiar figure to thousands of workers who scurry the streets of Manhattan. “The idea to start a breakfast cart came up 38 years ago. We used to work in furs and then in restaurants—three, in fact—but I wanted something smaller scale and with a slower pace in the food business. I set it up at a time when there was no such thing. I now have the oldest morning breakfast shop in New York City,” Despas says.

It’s an extremely cold day in the city, and the streets are bustling. But at Mama Jo’s breakfast cart, the line is long and her cell phone is buzzing with orders. In the queues are bank employees, lawyers, and company executives waiting next to chilled fans who traveled an hour to try Mama Jo’s famous breakfast. Despas serves staples like bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches, and omelets, but traditional Greek pastries (spanakopita, pumpkin pie, leek pie, and baklava) are also on the menu, and she makes her own olive bread. And Despas is on top of the trends: Her cart has vegan and vegetarian options. “I have Greek pies that are vegan, and I can grill some veggies to make a delicious breakfast roll,” she says.

“There are many carts surrounding me nowadays, but they don’t do what I do,” Despas says with confidence. “I learned my cooking from my grandmother and mother. People used to invite my mother to their weddings in Greece so she could cook for them. She was well-known for her cooking. People love my food, and some have been coming to me for over 30 years. I offer natural, quality ingredients, and the food is made well, with olive oil only. My soups are homemade—not from a tin. I offer true home cooking on the streets of New York City. They come to me and skip their company’s cafeteria,” she says.

Her well-heeled clientele knows quality, Despas asserts. “They will know if something is out of a can. They also know I am extremely clean. Sometimes they ask me to make lentil soup or trahana, and I am

happy to make it for them. I keep everything authentic. I do not mix it up like many do to modernize the dish. I am a purist; I keep it simple and natural. Everything is made from scratch, just like my mother and grandmother taught me,” she says. And Despas has not missed a day of work—even in a snowstorm, she is in her usual spot serving breakfast.

Her routine is rigorous: Despas wakes up just before midnight every night to go to a local fruit and vegetable grocery store in Astoria, where she purchases all her produce. She then picks up her cart and heads to her spot, arriving at 2 am to begin preparations for the day. At 4 am, the grill is turned on and service begins, closing at noon. It takes a very special kind of person to set up in the middle of the night to provide a delicious breakfast before dawn breaks. Between serving clients, Despas receives calls and text messages on her cell with orders from the locals.



Some clients will send a message while on their commute, and others will call, getting in their orders and taking in health and personal advice from their adopted Greek mama.

“One day a young girl ordered a coffee and asked for seven teaspoons of sugar. I thought this was too much and not beneficial to her health, so I put in two teaspoons instead. She came back a few times and expressed that the coffee was different and delicious and she couldn’t understand what had changed. I revealed that I had reduced the sugar from seven to two teaspoons, and she laughed. Customers in line chuckled and said, “Yes, that’s Mama



Jo.” Despas cares about her customers and takes the initiative, like a mom would, to benefit their health.

When she arrives at her spot, there are always some homeless people there waiting for her, whom she will feed, in true Mama Jo style. All remaining food items on the cart at the end of service are donated to families in need and to the homeless. “As my grandmother would say, if you do something good for someone each and every day, that good will return to you,” she says.

The secret to success, Despas says with a smile, is understanding that the true meaning of success is to “wake up every day and realize that I am alive!”

“I try to live without stress and with the motto ‘Live every day as if it is your best day,’” she says. “Fear nothing. Do what you love. Love yourself, and then you will have love from others. Be real. Be your authentic self. If you have a big problem, leave it for tomorrow. The problem may not be there the next day.”

Asked how much longer she plans to work her little cart in the heart of the global metropolis that is Manhattan, she shrugs. “It’s a man’s job; I can’t say. My kids and my grandchildren ask me when I should stop, since I should be getting a regular pension, but I tell them that I will continue to do it as long as my feet are grounded and I am healthy. I have not been a day sick in my life.”