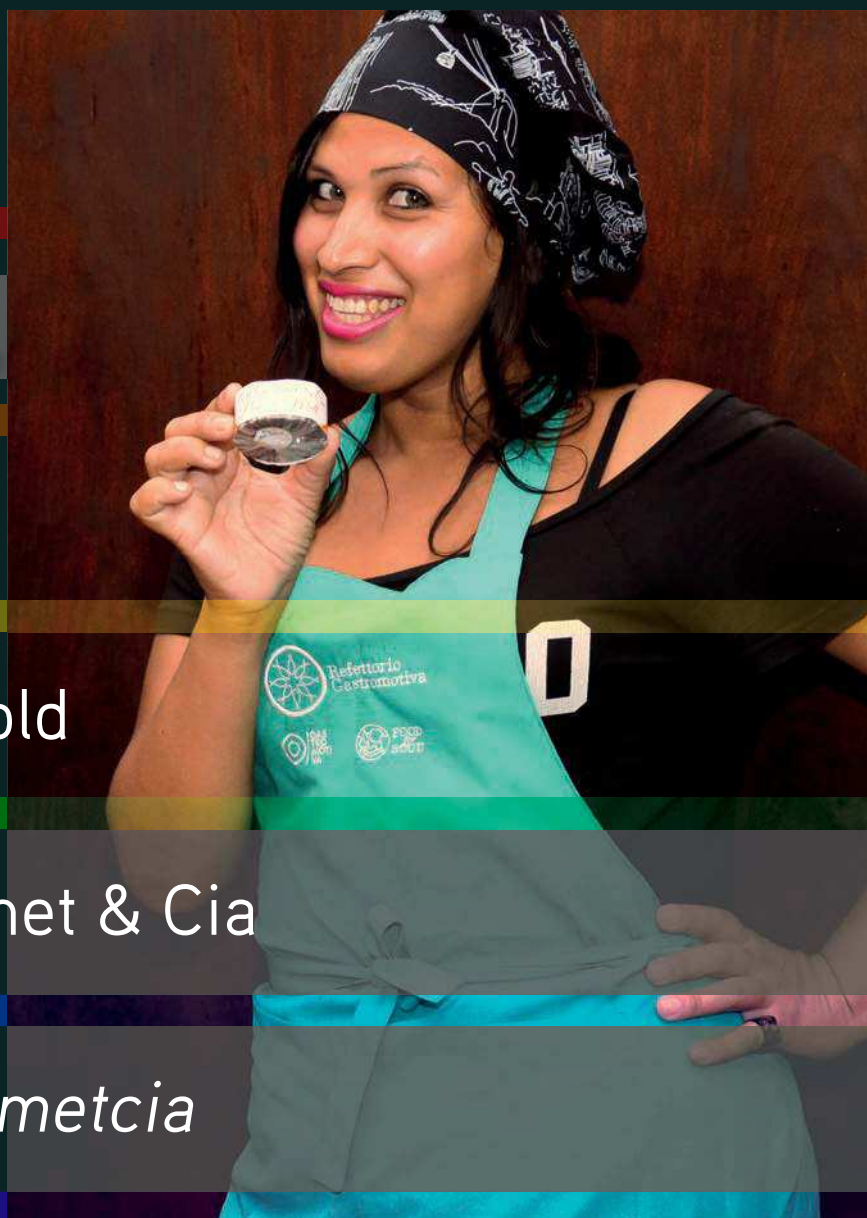


MELL

35 years old

Art Gourmet & Cia

 [artgourmetcia](#)



SINCE SHE WAS A CHILD, MELL LOVED HELPING HER MOTHER and aunt cook. Making sweets and confections was one of her favourite pastimes in a kitchen that brimmed with affection. Many years later, Mell experienced haute cuisine in the restaurants and bistros of Europe. By then, her mother and aunt were no longer with her, but the desire they had planted in her heart was sparked by those delicious and finely decorated dishes. She began to seek job opportunities in those restaurants, “*even to mop the floor*”, so strong was her desire to be in an environment full of aromas and flavours. Mell had suffered many rejections, but she did not give up hope – the hope of getting off the streets, breaking the stigma and becoming a trans chef.

ONE STEP AT A TIME

At the time, Mell was sad, tired and afraid for her health, since her body already showed signs of pulmonary complications caused by working on the streets on cold nights. She never liked being a sex worker because of the abusive behaviour of the clients and the competitiveness in terms of aesthetics and clientele. According to her, *“in the streets, some people earned more, some less, but all went through the same experiences of discrimination, violence, prejudice and suffering”*.

After undergoing sex reassignment surgery in Thailand in 2007, Mell believed she could return to Brazil and get other types of work. However, this path was not as straightforward as she imagined. Upon her return, Mell felt the pressures of transphobia and had to face the streets again to support herself. She realised that she needed training to find work in another sector, but she couldn't see a way out:

“One day I cried a lot on the street, and I said, ‘I need professional training to get out of this’. But I didn’t want to do something obvious, like being a hairdresser. I wanted to do something different, so I thought of something I was good at, which was cooking. And that’s what saved me”.

When she was already on the verge of exhaustion and despair, her first opportunity arrived - a scholarship for a confectionery course.

MELL'S HONEY BREADS

With this training, Mell created her own honey bread recipe and started to sell her product in order to increase her income. Her honey bread was a success, but she wanted to continue her training and gain experience in the kitchens of great restaurants. In February 2016, Mell joined the Micro Rainbow Brazil Project and was referred to the professional cooking course at *Gastromotiva*, an NGO project partner. This course helped her further improve her culinary skills and knowledge. Mell continued to invest in the sale of honey bread, but she still lacked confidence and knowledge to expand her business, which had low earnings. Moreover, despite improving her training, she continued to face the most obstinate barrier to trans inclusion in Brazil: access to the formal labour market.

In the face of this challenge, Mell decided to invest in the development of her own brand, *Art Gourmet & Cia*. Thus, she joined the second class of the Micro Rainbow Brazil entrepreneurship course in May 2016. The knowledge she acquired included marketing, pricing, planning, audience targeting and other indispensable tools for the development of a business plan and the structuring of an enterprise. Through the course, Mell also gained the confidence that she needed to launch her business, putting into practice the knowledge acquired in *Gastromotiva* and strategically investing in innovation, product presentation and market niches.

While she was still finishing the entrepreneurship course, Mell seized another opportunity from the Micro Rainbow Brazil Project. The NGO Rede Cidadã, another great partner of the project, trained Mell and 15 other LGBT professionals for job vacancies at the Olympic Games (learn more on page 38). This was the ingredient that was missing from her recipe. After the training, Mell was selected for the Sapore Olympic Restaurant team. Her goals and dreams, which had previously seemed so far-fetched, were coming true one by one. She was working in the international kitchen of a great restaurant, she had her first work experience in the formal job market with guaranteed labour rights, and most importantly, her social name and preferred pronouns were respected in an environment that valued her professionalism and competence. Thus, Mell was quickly promoted and had her contract renewed for the Paralympics:

“I loved working at the Olympics. I learned a lot, I made contacts from all over the world, I found many job opportunities. It was a once in a lifetime experience”.

“THE PROJECT THAT MADE THE MOST DIFFERENCE IN MY LIFE”

Mell has participated in other LGBT inclusion initiatives and she believes in the power of affirmative action to address the historical inequalities that affect the LGBT community. She has been fearless in

making the most out of the opportunities she has had, since so many potential opportunities are inaccessible for trans women. In this sense, she believes that the Micro Rainbow Brazil Project brought the most concrete results to her life. Her participation in employability and entrepreneurship activities allowed her to build a more solid professional path, aside from increasing her income and improving her self-esteem:

“The courses that gave me a boost, that made me push forward and create ways to get out of the hole where I was, came from here. It was like the answer that I was looking for, the project that made the most difference in my life”.

Just over a year after joining the project, she takes stock of this impact. She says that the *Gastromotiva* course provided technical and safety qualifications that enabled her to invest in her chosen sector, and the entrepreneurship course taught her the basis of consolidating and expanding a business. Regarding her work at the Olympic Restaurant, mediated by Rede Cidadã, she gained experience, expanded her professional network and diversified her gastronomic repertoire, getting to know chefs and cuisines from all over the world. In addition, she acquired formal work experience for her résumé as well as a financial situation that allowed her to save and reinvest in materials and equipment for *Art Gourmet & Cia*. Most strikingly, she felt welcome and respected in her trans identity in all



these environments, without which she would have been unable to advance to where she is today.

Currently, Mell is developing a new project “*Gastromania, Sabores do Mundo*” (Gastromania, Tastes of the World)⁷, a YouTube channel where she gives tips about cooking, restaurants, explores regional cuisines and reveals the secrets of “family recipes”. As a YouTuber, her goal is to take gastronomic trips that inspire people to diversify their cuisines and even complement their income with practical recipes, always with a lot of charisma and humour.

Despite these advances, Mell explains that she still faces difficulties in changing her legal name. This process, which

has been stalled in the legal system for years, has caused discomfort, incited transphobia and is the greatest obstacle to her access to the labour market today. Her process of empowerment and financial autonomy was also crucial in helping her cope with domestic violence, a condition still present in her life.

Despite all the difficulties, Mell thinks that the total outcome is positive. She believes that, in addition to the support she received, this has all been possible thanks to her own determination to confront conservatism and her refusal to settle for the places and occupations typically attributed to trans women in society. She still dreams of pursuing higher education in gastronomy, which would allow her to be a trans chef and university professor. It is easy to believe that she will get there one day. ■

⁷ Learn more about her YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/38isjeKhqEM>



Students from the second entrepreneurship course

