

Halejian, sitting in Redbird, one of over a dozen restaurants working with Sprout LA.

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THE STORYTELLER

It's all about the buzz for restaurant marketer Alexis Halejian

A little more than a decade ago, success for a new restaurant in L.A.— the trend-setting capital of the world—depended on star-spotting, word-of-mouth, and one or two key local influencer's favorable print reviews. Today, commanding diner attention in a city percolating with high concept restaurants and celebrity chefs requires a photographer's eye for detail, a novelist's gift for descriptive language, and the technical agility of the digerati to weave them together effectively across the social media landscape. Creating such mass mystique is the domain of Alexis

Halejian, VP of Marketing at Sprout LA and her team of marketing savants.

For Halejian, raising the profile of the company's dozen or more distinctive restaurant investments and each of their operational partners is the proverbial piece of cake. "I've always been a storyteller," says Halejian, matter-of-factly. "As early as six or seven years old, I would 'self-publish' books in our basement which I would conceptualize, write, illustrate and layout photography for myself."

Raised in Wyckoff, New Jersey as the eldest daughter of a physician and pharmaceutical sales executive, Halejian had limited interest in or facility for math or science. Instead, she had a fascination with and natural gift for documentation, narr-

ative and communication. Encouraged by her parents to pursue her passion, she was also inspired by the pioneering role model and legend of her maternal great-aunt Armine Dikijian, who wrote a column in the *Mirror Spectator* for decades. This made it easy for Halejian to assume communication-centric leadership roles, whether as editor of her middle school yearbook, president of the high school student council and co-editor-in-chief of a niche magazine in college. She found her speaking and writing voice early in life and exercised it effectively.

Even during summers spent as a camper and later, counselor at AGBU's Camp Nubar, Halejian found outlets to practice her gift for documentation and



Alexis Halejian

Title: **Vice President, Marketing**

Company: **Sprout LA**

Location: **Los Angeles, CA, USA**

Affiliation: **Camp Nubar, New York and Yerevan Summer Internship Programs**



The Rose, located in Venice, California, is one of the many restaurants that Halejian works with.

Camp Nubar gave way to the AGBU New York Internship Program, where she also served as activities coordinator on a following summer, which subsequently steered her to an internship at *Sports Illustrated* magazine.

Additional college internships included a stint working in hospitality at the Winter Olympics in Italy with NBC Sports, and eventually to a PR firm, Nike Communications, that represented Moët Hennessey's wine portfolio, raising the sorority public relations chairwoman's awareness about some of the more rarified levels of hospitality. "Up until then, I was still enjoying wine from a box and Bud Light like most sophisticated college students," Halejian quipped.

Her internship experiences helped her secure a permanent spot out of college working in PR for the New York based restaurant group B.R. Guest, at a time when the restaurant and hospitality industries were slowly waking up to the power of digital marketing, and social media was in its infancy. Newly-graduated Halejian remembers her gentle suggestion to the owner of the company: "There's this new website called Facebook. I think I can create a profile for us there."

From establishing B.R. Guests' brand presence on Facebook very early on, Halejian taught herself digital marketing, finding that, as a so-called "digital native" she was easily able to not only keep pace with technology, but also master its application for her hospitality industry vertical. Search engine optimization, website traffic, mobile-responsive design, and developing a brand voice on social media were tools no longer limited to large corporations; by 2013 their application was mandatory in establishing even the most niche-like of restaurants.

After six years at B.R. Guest, and concurrently volunteering her time as chairperson of the AGBU Young Professionals of Greater New York, Halejian made her way to L.A. via a job offer from SBE and eventually to Sprout. There she rose from Senior Director of Digital Marketing to Vice President of Marketing, within a year. The business model for success is unusually cohesive, with Halejian and her team wielding the power of visual and the written word to create an authentic

narrative. Years before the broad adoption of digital media by individuals and non-profits, the young sports counselor at the time, armed with her first digital camera, set about chronicling daily experiences at the beloved camp.

"I always loved the dark-room photography classes as a camper at Camp Nubar, and one summer, I started my own program, which I called DMT—short for Digital, Media and Technology," recalls Halejian. "Digital photography had just become a real thing, and that summer, I went around camp and captured as many activities as I could, day and night. At the end of each session, I would edit the photos together, create slideshows and upload them to the camp website. These retrospectives have become an expectation for camps now, but at the time, this felt quite progressive and humbling to see how happy they made campers, counselors, the committee and parents alike."

Fast forward fifteen years and Halejian notes that, "Whenever I'm out with my camp friends to this day, if I happen to take a picture, they'll tease me with 'Alexis is doing her DMT thing again!' I have always had a desire to cement memories in time and capture the best version of human expression."

Her impetus to catch and curate happy times at Camp Nubar goes deeper than merely assembling a visual scrapbook. Her family's association with AGBU and the camp in particular, spans three generations.

"My grandfather Zaven, on behalf of the AGBU, found the Fall Clove Road property where Camp Nubar still sits today and my grandmother Floraine was on the committee," says Halejian, "and

although my parents did not initially meet at Camp Nubar, as teenagers they began their summer romance there," adding that her father Barry still remains active on the Camp Nubar committee and late mother Andrea was an avid fundraiser.

When other families in her neighborhood would go off to Disney World or other sunny climates for vacations, her parents would load up the winter gear and, Halejian, along with her two younger siblings, would drive to Andes, New York, to spend their vacations with other intrepid families, extending friendships that started at camp and a commitment to the Armenian community that forms the bedrock of Halejian's identity. Her ancestors fled the Genocide three generations ago, in some, but not all cases, tipped off early enough to have made safe passage first through Bulgaria, Egypt, France and finally, the United States. They settled in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, Harlem, New York, Providence, Rhode Island and Paterson, New Jersey.

Somewhat unusual among her peer group, Halejian is well-steeped in family lore and history, recounting stories with an affectionate recollection of detail and appreciation for the people and values that formed her—further deepened by the close association her family maintained to the Armenian community, including weekly church attendance, basketball teams and trips to Armenia. "I think the Halejians are a great case of a fully-assimilated American family that still feels extremely, extremely, staunchly Armenian—proud to be Armenian."

Halejian chose Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications for college, and summer idylls at

message with each of Sprout's chef/operational partners which include such notable dining establishments as Bestia, Redbird, and Republique Vespertine. From the line cooks and dishwashers to the front of the house servers and bartenders, no detail is too small to be overlooked for the partners, and, with the advent of "open kitchens," the back-of-the-house has now become part of many restaurants' appeal. Los Angeles is, after all, a city founded on excitement, appearance, and the status that accompanies being an early supporter of a rising star enterprise.

Maintaining the high profile of a single client across the media and marketing landscape can be an all-consuming task for a communications team, but to bur- nish more than a dozen at any given time across so many outlets—from Facebook and Google to Instagram and traditional media—is a bit like conducting an orchestra where each section is trying to outplay the other. The conductor must be sure each voice is heard clearly and as it was intended, but not at the expense of another. Furthermore, creating interesting stories for the restaurant industry requires attuned listening round-the-clock. A video following a chef selecting fresh produce and the catch-of-the-day in a farmers market at 5 a.m. may be equally as compelling as a post from the

Halejian was a speaker at the 2018 Potluck Hospitality Conference, a two day event for key players in the events and hospitality industry.

same restaurant fifteen hours later, when a celebrity and their entourage anoints the restaurant with their presence, launching it to the top of the foodie map.

Halejian knows these type of moments carry equal gravitas, and she has hired, trained and mentored a team that reflects her stamina and mirrors her ability to rec-

ognize how to turn an ordinary moment into a business-generating marketing asset. "Is it strange to say that stamina may be my super-power? I think the work ethic modeled for me by my grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, and even my younger brother and sister, has molded my overall career path, but also day-to-day energy," she says. "My parents worked tirelessly, not only for their careers, but for their community, never seeking the spotlight. I have always been willing to put in that extra time, attention to detail, and effort without expecting much recognition. Every new challenge and human encounter presents the opportunity to learn if you are listening. Progress in any capacity is always the primary goal."

She adds "While digital has revolu-

tionized the way PR is handled, one of the key factors that has never changed is that the storyteller must never become the story. One of the first words my father taught me as a child was hubris. In our roles, the chef and their life work are the story we are here to support—if we keep these stories honest and authen-

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In our roles, the chef and their life work are the story we are here to support—if we keep these stories honest and authentic, guests feel an extended version of loyalty...

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And while documenting adventures at Camp Nubar may seem a distant memory to Halejian, she takes the same delight in the results of her current work.

"It makes me so proud and truly honored to bring friends and family to our partner locations, introduce them to the chefs and greater teams and see their reactions for the first time," she says. "Or just daily, as I walk through the various dining rooms, watching a guest glow at a cocktail or a dish that just arrived at the table, enjoying their own time with friends and family with equal enthusiasm as my own." ☺

