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PHOTOS BY BEN GRAY

WARUNG INDONESIAN NOURISHES A DIASPORA

IN THE ATLANTA SUBURB OF
DORAVILLE, INDONESIAN CUISINE
TAKES CENTER STAGE.



IN A SMALL STRIP CENTER LINED WITH RESTAURANTS JUST OFF OF BUFORD HIGHWAY, ONE BUSINESS STANDS OUT.

The fragrant scents of turmeric, ginger, galangal, and chiles entrance the hungry. Inside, golden chairs and red tablecloths, along with Javanese artwork and a large map of Indonesia, clue diners in to the provenance of the menu offerings.

At Warung Indonesian Halal Restaurant, customers are treated to some of the best Indonesian food in the nation. Plates of nasi pecel, a rice dish served with vegetables bathed in a sweet peanut sauce; vegetable fritters called bakwan sayur, hot out of the fryer; and an array of soups, stews, and salads cover the tables as guests eagerly tuck in.

When they opened, they decided to focus on Indonesian food. “We’re Indonesian,” said co-owner Sri Astuti. “It’s gonna be Indonesian-owned, and it’s going to be our taste.”

Astuti and her husband, Deni Mulyana, opened Warung in April 2020, just as the COVID pandemic wreaked havoc across multiple sectors of the economy—including the restaurant industry. Despite the difficulty of opening during such an unpredictable time, the restaurant has gained steady popularity in and around Atlanta.

I lived in Indonesia myself while completing a Fulbright fellowship, and I came to love the country’s food. Since returning home to the United States five years ago, I’ve missed those flavors. I

never expected to find them at a suburban Atlanta hole-in-the-wall. I first visited Warung in early 2021. I was cold, tired, and hungry following an eight-hour drive from Little Rock to Atlanta, and the meal was just what I needed. When I later gushed to Astuti about that experience, she took my enthusiasm in stride.

“The expats and people who have been to Indonesia and know Indonesian food, they really appreciate and love the food,” she said. “They tell us it makes them feel like they’re back in Indonesia, because there’s no such fusion in the taste. We’ve made all the ingredients and spices from scratch.”

The Indonesian diaspora in the United States is a relatively small one—a population of about 129,000. There are some 2,000 Indonesian Americans in the Atlanta metropolitan area, making it one of the largest Indonesian communities in the South. Yet fewer than five restaurants in the Atlanta metropolitan area serve Indonesian food. Astuti and Mulyana, who immigrated to the United States in 2001 and 1998, respectively, noticed this absence.

“When we leave the country, we bring Indonesia in our hearts,” said Astuti. Even as she sought to build a life in the United States, she says she



Deni Mulyana, co-owner of Warung Indonesian Halal Restaurant in Doraville, GA, chats with a guest while taking his order in March 2022.

found herself wanting to promote and share her native Indonesia.

Astuti observed other Indonesian-owned restaurants and saw that the most successful ones opted to market themselves as pan-Asian, rather than Indonesian. These restaurateurs rounded out Indonesian menu offerings with dishes from more recognized Asian cuisines: Chinese, Japanese, Thai, or a combination. At first, Astuti tried a similar strategy, running an Indonesian-Asian food stand at local festivals. But ultimately, she was determined to focus on the flavors and dishes of her homeland.

Astuti explained that while Indonesian cuisine is influenced by the food of many other countries, it still has a taste all its own. Even though it was challenging at first, she was committed to communicating her food and her culture.

Rather than give up on the idea of an Indonesian restaurant, Astuti dug into pursuing identity and authenticity even more. She came up with the idea of building a *warung*—the Bahasa Indonesian word for a small, typically family-owned food stand or café—in the United States. As a

Muslim Indonesian, she'd become familiar with the diverse Muslim communities in the United States. She realized that about 75,000 Atlantans identified as Muslim. Coming from a country that's almost 90 percent Muslim, Astuti saw an opportunity: She could market Indonesian food as halal food, attracting Muslim Atlantans of many nationalities.

Astuti decided that Warung was definitely going to be Indonesian, but that she and Mulyana would take a unique approach to promoting it. She researched the demographics of the area and realized how many Muslims lived nearby. And so, as she explained, "Let's introduce us as a Muslim Indonesian [restaurant]...to the Muslim community here."

"Meat is slaughtered out here abundantly in the halal way," said Astuti, referring to ethical and religious butchery practices. So it made sense to market Warung as not just an Indonesian restaurant but a halal-friendly dining destination.

While Indonesian immigrants in the Atlanta area have found a home at the restaurant, Sri says it's non-Indonesian Muslims who make up the

largest portion of her clientele. Guests come in hungry for a meal that's both delicious and that aligns with their religious values.

"Overwhelmingly, we had such a great welcome. A lot of Muslims in this area are not from Indonesia," she said. And, she added, she takes pleasure in introducing non-Indonesian Muslim guests to a new cuisine.

Astuti and Mulyana both grew up in West Java, a province on Indonesia's most populous island. Astuti was born in Bogor, near Jakarta, while Mulyana grew up outside of Bandung, the country's third-largest city. Astuti studied at the National Hotel and Tourism Institute, where she learned how to share the history and beauty of Indonesia with residents and tourists. The job took her across the country to places like Lombok and Bali, and food was always a key tool in her messaging.

Astuti immigrated to the United States in 2001. She settled in Detroit and went to work in the hotel industry, hoping to combine her passions for food and travel. Not long after she arrived, she met Mulyana, who'd trained as a hibachi chef. Astuti loved the snow, as it was vastly different from her homeland, but Mulyana was less than enthusiastic about the cold climate. While Astuti enjoyed living in the city, she struggled to find Indonesian food and community. She regularly visited Indonesia to see her family, and her mother, a professional cook, explained to her that understanding how to cook Indonesian food—whether for business or personal sustenance—was essential.

"We gathered a lot [at] the table," recalled Astuti of her upbringing. "So there were a lot of

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memories...over food, really. So every time I went back home, every couple years since 2001, I always tried to cook myself." She said her mother would tell her, "You don't have to do it like me, professionally—having employees and all that stuff—but you do have to learn how to do it at home."

As Astuti began to master Indonesian cuisine, she started to toy with the idea of opening her own restaurant. Mulyana was on board, but he was ready to leave Detroit. He suggested moving down to Georgia, specifically the Atlanta area, where a sizeable number of Indonesians had immigrated for jobs in the tech, health, and service sectors. And he was drawn to the climate, which would be more similar to the hot and humid Indonesian islands. The couple initially moved to Winder, about an hour from Georgia's capital, and then closer to the city. It's the Atlanta area where Astuti found the perfect location for her restaurant.

"Oh, this is perfect," she recalled thinking. "This is located on Buford Highway; this is where the culinaries are. People are going to look for a lot of different cuisines, and there is no Indonesian restaurant." She decided she was going to give them one.

At Warung Indonesia, Astuti aims to amplify a cuisine that's both underrepresented and misunderstood in the United States. Warung Indonesia is located in Doraville, a suburb just fifteen miles northeast of downtown Atlanta. Since the 1980s, immigrant populations have rapidly increased, making the area home to one of the largest South Asian populations in the country. An estimated 69 percent of Doraville residents speak a language other than English at home. A Bangladeshi halal butcher and grocery store is right next to Warung, and the neighborhood is filled with international



Warung's
Tilapia Goreng



Warung co-owners Deni Mulyana and Sri Astuti check lunch orders in the kitchen.

restaurants, including Vietnamese, Indian, and Ethiopian. Warung Indonesia has quickly carved out its own niche. The restaurant has become a hub for the local Indonesian community, as well as for Muslim diners drawn by the halal designation.

Astuti remains true to the culinary skills she picked up from her mom. The beef rendang, a hearty beef stew that's one of Indonesia's most famous dishes, is bathed in coconut milk and aromatics and cooked for hours, until the beef is falling-apart tender. Satay ayam, seasoned chicken served on skewers, is cooked over an open flame, offering a smoky taste to balance the peanut sauce that covers the meaty chunks. Ikan tilapia goreng, or fried fish, is served with steamed with rice and vegetables. And there's plenty of sambal and kecap manis—staple Indonesian condiments—to go around.

Astuti was clear that Warung reflects a personal take on Indonesian cuisine. After all, she said, “Indonesia is 17,000 islands.” She's not trying to tell the whole story—just the one she and Mulyana know.

According to Astuti, Indonesian Atlantans have offered an overwhelmingly positive response to their efforts.

“They're very, very proud of us,” she said. “They have spread the word to family, the friends that come from out of town, so the locals actually help us out in spreading the word about us,” bringing in new customers.

While the restaurant is still young, it shows the promise that has unfortunately evaded Indonesian restaurants in the United States, even in large cities. In New York, Bali Kitchen, a popular, Indonesian-owned restaurant in the heart of Manhattan's East Village, was forced to close in summer 2020, a casualty of the pandemic. In Houston, too, Indonesian restaurants have struggled with longevity. Houston's 3,000 Indonesians tend to rely instead on local home-based caterers.

Astuti hopes that her restaurant can be an anomaly, and an example of what's possible when immigrant restaurant owners stay true to their vision, values, and cuisine. So far, it's working. 🍷

Kayla Stewart has written about food and travel for The New York Times, Travel + Leisure, The Washington Post, and other publications. She is the co-writer, with Emily Meggett, of Gullah Geechee Home Cooking: Recipes from the Matriarch of Edisto Island, forthcoming from Abrams in April 2022.