

Making a Difference

The Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability

An Interview with Denise Mari,
Chief Creative Officer, Organic Avenue



Denise Mari at Mari Manor on Long Island

EDITORS' NOTE Denise Mari holds the vision and directs the expression of Organic Avenue. She holds a Master's degree in Education and is also pursuing a Master's Degree in Human Nutrition. Mari continues to explore cutting edge health education and holds certification in hydrotherapy, phlebotomy, live blood analysis, holistic health, and living food lifestyle counseling. She recently published her first book, *Organic Avenue: Recipes for Life, Made with LOVE**. Mari founded Organic Avenue in 2002, combining her passion for whole foods, holistic healing, vegetarianism, and entrepreneurship. She's inspired by the implications of a live, organic, vegan experience. From a natural passion for product development, brand building, retail reinvention, and education she continues to innovate and refine the offerings of Organic Avenue.

COMPANY BRIEF Denise Mari, the original founder of Organic Avenue (organicavenue.com), has returned to the company to transform

it into a world-class brand with innovations that the wellness community has never seen. She has partnered with Steve Fisher, the owner and founder of Fisher Capital Investments (FCI), a division of Fisher Brothers, a 101 year-old family-run business. FCI is the majority owner of Organic Avenue. Steve Fisher and the FCI team are helping to support Mari's vision and build a brand that will change the world of health and wellness.

Would you discuss your vision in founding Organic Avenue and how your life experiences led you to creating the business?

My life's experiences have led me to desire to live a life of meaning, purpose, and contribution. When I was a child, I faced the realities of life and death when my sibling Kimberly was diagnosed with cancer. With great fear, I watched her experience cancer treatments that ultimately lead to her death two years later at the age of six.

Watching my sister slowly die created deep questions around life and death for me, such as, "What caused my sister's cancer" or "Would I be diagnosed with cancer next?" Around that time, I learned that Santa, the Easter Bunny, and Tooth Fairy were not real, forcing the question, how could there be a God? Also, I had an innate fondness of animals and was equally confused and disgusted to learn that the sweet, sentient beings of my nursery rhymes and children's stories were being served as breakfast, lunch, and dinner. None of this sat well with me.

Soon thereafter, I had an experience with my father. We went fishing one day, and the experience of catching a fish and then seeing it struggle to breathe (or so it looked to me) and die further etched into my mind that we were not so different from this fish. We both had eyes, hearts, families, and a will to live. That day, I began my journey toward becoming a vegetarian (ultimately vegan). First, I gave up fish. Then in college, I met a vegetarian for the first time. I thought, "I love animals too, and I don't know why I am eating them," so I gave up red meat. Within a few months, I gave up chicken and turkey. I lived as an ovo-lacto-vegetarian (dairy and eggs permitted) for five years. Eventually I came across information (PETA, PCRM) connecting the dots between factory farming and consuming the by-products of animals and faced the reality that I was still contributing to the pain, suffering, and pure horror

that the animals were enduring. Being compassionate, I could feel that pain and wanted nothing to do with contributing to it.

I sought out vegan groups in NYC and there I learned of raw-food veganism. I truly only wanted to learn how to omit the dairy and eggs from my diet, yet today, I feel incredibly blessed to have learned of raw/living foods, as a lifestyle of cleansing, healing, and restoring the body and planet to an energetic and healthful balance.

A few years into my raw-food, plant-based journey, I received a call from my father with troubling news. My mother had been diagnosed with the same cancer that took my sister's life 30 years earlier. I was in shock. On my journey and quest for truth since my sister's death, I had discovered many life-enhancing lifestyle techniques and food preparation styles purported to increase health and vitality. Personally, I had experienced a relief from symptoms of imbalance such as stubborn weight gain, chronic acne, low energy, and depressed mood. My new lifestyle had given me a renewed purpose and motivation, not to mention clear skin, ideal weight, and energy to pursue my goals. My mom's diagnosis pushed me to look further.

I found Dr. Robert O. Young and The New Biology based on an alkaline diet and lifestyle. His theories made sense to me, and I decided to study his approach to disease by using food and supplementation to combat the acidic diet and focus on alkaline eating to help support proper blood formation. I found his information to be the next key to taking a raw/live, plant-based vegan diet to an even more healing, life-promoting, and optimal health approach.

I attempted to share what I was learning with my mother, yet the conventional medical doctors prescribed chemotherapy and discouraged this nonconventional approach. Sadly, she died within a year of her diagnosis/treatments at age 60.

These are just a few of my life experiences that have kept me devoted to my own personal practice of a plant-based diet and lifestyle and fostered my desire to help educate and share what I've learned via Organic Avenue.

Back in college, during the early days of my vegetarian journey, I heard a voice in my head that echoed, "By living my life as an example, I could positively impact the lives of others" and "That by helping just one other person, my life would have meaning." These sentiments have

stuck with me and motivated me to continue to pursue an optimally healthy lifestyle for myself (even living in New York City) and to create Organic Avenue as the vehicle to share products, information, and experiences with others. I knew that my life experiences had grounded my journey in a spiritual way. Yet, I also knew others did not have these same grounding and motivating experiences and the Organic Avenue lifestyle offering would have to be approachable, easy, and enjoyable to adopt and have multiple benefits.

Organic Avenue was born of the desire to share the bounty of life, love, and abundance without any sense of deprivation. I wanted a place people could come to learn, gather in a community for empowerment, and enjoy what the food and lifestyle has to offer. My spiritual convictions were clear, and I felt that if there was a God, we would not need to kill other sentient beings for our health and happiness. I have been on a 25-year-long journey practicing these principles and watching how they work for me, and I enjoy sharing with those who want to experience more for themselves.

Do you see Organic Avenue as a juice brand or are you building a lifestyle and wellness brand?

Organic Avenue is a brand focused on the lifestyle of health and sustainability. The original store concept and focus was on everything one needs (or wants) to improve the quality of one's life, from organic clothing to super foods, whole-food supplements, books, beauty, baby, gifts, kitchen equipment, etc., as well as community events, travel opportunities, and education. The food and juice are an extremely important pillar of a true wellness lifestyle. From the original loft-space start-up on the Lower East Side, I launched the LOVE*Cleanse



program. These delivery programs focused on four cleanse program options. LOVE*Easy (a raw food program), LOVE*Fast (a raw food and cold-pressed juice program), and LOVE*Deep (a cold-pressed juice cleanse program). Additionally, I added GO*Green, a focus on the chlorophyll rich alkaline plant-based foods and juices. These juice offerings, bottled in our signature glass milkman style bottles, caught the attention of celebrities and trendsetters and set our brand on its path to reach many. The popularity of the juice and cleanse programs caught the attention of investors desiring to get in on the product trend. Though this essential raw, cold-pressed juice product had officially launched via Organic Avenue retail as well as the LOVE*Cleanse programs, I knew it was just one of many products that rounded out the true wellness lifestyle.

What makes the Organic Avenue product offering different from its competitors?

Organic Avenue holds pure core values around the use of organics (non-GMO, no chemical fertilizers), and it's vegan (no use of animals or by-products of animals). Organic Avenue's adherence to these core values lends itself to fully promote health for people, animals, and the planet. By keeping this core focus, the products can extend into every aspect of living. That does not "pigeonhole" us as a juice-only brand, although it comfortably keeps us connected to core truths about health, animal welfare, and environmental concerns. By being and staying organic and plant-based, we lower our environmental footprint and aid in offering true health solutions for prevention and maintenance of a holistically healthy lifestyle.

How do you define the target market for Organic Avenue, and how broad is your customer base?

I define the target market as all those who are sick and tired of being sick and tired; people who know that the way they are living is unsustainable and who want to find a better way; those who feel they can do more for themselves and may not know where to start or need supportive products and services to create convenience; the youth, aka millennials, who want to keep and preserve their good health and those who may have traveled far down a path of destruction and are ready to try something different; those who want to enjoy their remaining years free from pain and suffering; mothers who know their children deserve pure foods, and fathers who want the very best for their families; and all who want to participate in the solution to the environmental crisis including global warming and those who care about the welfare of our animal friends.

Some might technically categorize our core or target as women 25 to 55 yet, ultimately, with a few tweaks to how the products are marketed, we find there is no limit to who would benefit and be attracted to the offerings at Organic Avenue.



Some of Organic Avenue's products (bottom); Denise Mari's book (top)

You trademarked LOVE*. What does this stand for, and would you elaborate on its meaning for the business?

LOVE* is an acronym that was used to sum up what Organic Avenue is all about. It defuses the highly charged word “vegan” and puts the emphasis where it really belongs. Love, most would agree, is what life is all about and the Live. Organic. Vegan. Experience exudes love for people, our precious mother earth, and the animals that we share the planet with. Adopting a plant-based (vegan) diet, emphasizing over time, a more green, alkaline way of eating and incorporating the additional lifestyle elements (meditation, prayer, yoga/exercise/play, gratitude, positive affirmation/mantra, community of love and acceptance, personal growth, and evolution etc.) along with balanced eating is a prescription for happiness, health, purpose, and a life well lived.

For business, it’s a wide-open playground of authentic offerings and opportunities that does not stop with juice or food. Every aspect of life lived consciously can be viewed through an ahimsa (non-violent) and sustainable lens, and this is what Organic Avenue aims to do and be.

Organic Avenue went through difficult times when you left the business. How challenging was it to see the business underperform during that time?

I always saw my connection to building Organic Avenue, and when I was removed from the creative and decision-making process it was incredibly difficult. This was a challenge in faith. Yet, thankfully, my faith did prevail, and I knew deep down this was



a part of my journey and something good would come from it. I bought a house on Long Island during this time and converted it into a plant-based bed and breakfast, Mari Manor. The same passion for sharing the LOVE*Lifestyle continued to fuel my creative and entrepreneurial interests.

Fisher Capital Investments took Organic Avenue out of bankruptcy and you came back to lead the brand. What has made the relationship with Fisher Capital Investments work so well, and how valuable is it to have someone like Steven Fisher supporting your efforts?

When I was connected to Steven Fisher, his family, and Fisher Capital Investments

(FCI), I sincerely felt it a miracle. To have Organic Avenue change hands, underperform, and ultimately land in bankruptcy in my absence and then to be asked to return with an equity partnership position and creative role with FCI was nothing short of miraculous. I knew that all that had happened was for a good reason. To work with a solid investment partner like Steven Fisher and FCI was more than I could have hoped for. Without Steven Fisher, there wouldn’t be FCI, and Organic Avenue would have had a very different fate. Timing was key. FCI was a newly formed investment arm of the Fisher Brothers Family. Organic Avenue was pitched to Steven. He took swift action and took the Stalking Horse approach to get every bit of intellectual property and remaining assets, along with finding me and making sure I too was committed to returning. We’ve been partners for a year now and together have accomplished a lot.

What is the state of the business today, and where do you see growth opportunities for Organic Avenue?

After retrieving the assets, we set to reopen the retail stores. From May to September 2016, we renovated, developed and sourced product, created new menus, and launched six Organic Avenue retail stores. We received an amazing, heart-warming reception from clients and friends for the brand revival. We have seen a return of revenue and are motivated to expand the brand access, relaunch the LOVE*Cleanse programs, and launch a strategic ecommerce program. We’re readying an arsenal of Organic Avenue nutritional and health products for Consumer Packaged Goods beyond our Organic Avenue retail stores.

Are there natural product extensions for Organic Avenue as you look to the future?

Many extensions. Since inception of the vision, I have always believed Organic



*A selection of Organic Avenue Pure Juice Powders (top)
The front counter of one of Organic Avenue’s flagship stores on Crosby Street in New York (above)*

Avenue to be a global brand with categories from food to fashion, home, health, beauty, baby, travel, and media. There really is no limit.

Is the corporate market a focus for growth, and will you target leading companies to offer Organic Avenue products to their employees in order to provide a healthy option?

Yes, we intend to reach as many people as possible and help improve their quality of life wherever we can make access more convenient. We are launching a “Juice Bar” mini-fridge offering at no cost to businesses that want to provide quality nutritious beverages to their employees. We will manage the inventory and create a turnkey health offering for businesses looking to improve productivity and reduce healthcare costs by offering quality Organic Avenue products. This is one of many ways we will look to reach our potential in distribution of our health, fitness, and lifestyle products.

Did you always know you had the entrepreneurial spirit and the desire to build your own business?

No. I didn't know what an entrepreneur was or have any road map to achieve such a goal, although I had a paper route as a youth and went on to work many jobs before and through college. I never thought owning a business was something I could do. It wasn't until I met my first energetic, enthusiastic entrepreneur at a nightclub in New York City. I immediately knew there was something special about him. His enthusiasm for life and business was contagious, and I wanted to know more. I came to learn he was a high school dropout that was self-motivated and self-taught. He was the first



Denise Mari in the doorway of one of Organic Avenue's flagship stores on Crosby Street in New York (above) and at the front counter of that same shop (below)



person that exposed me to the thought that I could take my passion (at that time my vegetarian/health interests) and turn them into a business. It was a chance meeting that I must count as another miracle in my life. From there, the entrepreneurial spirit in me was ignited and, soon thereafter, I was inspiring what would eventually become Organic Avenue.

What do you look for in hiring the team for the stores in order to make sure they fit with the Organic Avenue culture?

Since the company had shut down abruptly in the summer of 2015, many dedicated employees that were connected to Organic Avenue for its core values and principles were laid off. It had been three years since my involvement in the company yet, when I came back, many former employees approached me about their sincere desire to be part of the revival. We were going to quickly open six stores so their return was essential. The culture component is key. Also, Organic Avenue's LOVE*-based approach allows for all people who are interested in learning to approach the brand. We want to make sure that our products, messaging, and brand image is always one of acceptance, diversity, and an underlying striving for the truth. We are looking to help educate and inspire our employees, as well as guests, to strive to be a part of the solution. We feel that the Live. Organic. Vegan. Experience summed up at Organic Avenue allows for all to approach and engage the experience at many different levels.

How special is it for you to be back leading the brand since Organic Avenue seems to be so much a part of your life and who you are as a person?

I'm grateful, inspired, and honored to be reconnected to Organic Avenue and look forward to the unfolding of new and exciting wellness lifestyle products and services that can change lives, save lives, and make this planet we all live on a better place. ●