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Oscar Alvarez, who came to the United States from Guatemala 13 years ago, is head pastry chef at Via Matta.

From modest means to all-star players

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Four strangers work at four different restaurants around Boston. They come from different places, grew up in different cultures, and ended up in Boston by different means. But they share an aggressive ambition and drive that we can all look up to.

Oscar Alvarez is the head pastry chef at the upscale Via Matta. He came to the United States from Guatemala 13 years ago and started washing dishes at the 5-star restaurant Radius.

Guillermo Machado, chef de cuisine at Lala Rokh on Beacon Hill, came to the States in 1990 from El Salvador. He, too, started as a dishwasher.

Ronie Bicalho, head chef at Miracle of Science in Cambridge, came from Brazil.

Shelley Som's family escaped to this country from Cambodia during the Vietnam War. A recent Suffolk University graduate — the first college grad in her family — she helped support herself as a hostess at the Beacon Hill Hotel and Bistro, often coming in for extra hours in between classes. Three years later, she's the general manager.

All four came from modest means and have lived out their version of the American Dream.

"I've been able to provide for my family," said Alvarez, 43, who has a high school education and came into the

restaurant business with no formal training. "I learned all of the recipes from watching others and practicing. Making the desserts isn't very hard. Once you learn the basics you can make almost anything."

And learn they did. All four spent their time — in between washing dishes, cleaning tables, and seating patrons — watching chefs and managers at their jobs and learning the tricks of the trade.

"I started washing dishes, then I became a prep cook and then I became a line cook, now chef," said Machado, 35, sitting at a table at Lala Rokh as he was getting ready to open for lunch one morning.

Machado faced an added challenge of learning to cook Persian food, which has little in common with his native cuisine.

"It's complex beyond belief because this is the food of the courts of kings and queens," said Babak Bina, who owns Lala Rokh. "[Dishes] have to be perfected, and they have to tantalize and be sensual and really go beyond the palate's expectations."

Machado said he paid attention to the other chefs. He strictly follows the ancient recipes to the letter. But for him and the others, the work is the easy part.

Som was born here and Machado, Bicalho, and Alvarez are legal immigrants who have gone through the rigorous process of becoming US citizens. The hard part was getting here and getting decent jobs in the first place.

"Just getting in the restaurant was the first step," said Machado, who spoke no English and came here with no education. In El Salvador, he said, there weren't many options besides joining the army. So he left. "I came through the border of Mexico, and then I met a friend who told me that restaurants [in Boston] were hiring."

Bicalho, 38, is an opportunist. Going back 15 years, he's been an all-star utility

player at the restaurants owned by Matthew Curtis and Chris Lute: Miracle of Science, Middlesex Lounge, Audubon Circle, Cambridge 1, and the new Tory Row. He's been a busboy, dishwasher, line cook, and more. When the head chef at Miracle left, he stepped in. He also manages the cooking staff and cleaning crews at all five venues.

"You have to work a little hard," Bicalho said. "The harder you work, and the more you care about your job, the better you will do."

Bicalho also gets to be a little more creative, with menus and recipes that are less strict than other restaurants. He even gets to invent his own dishes. His Ronie Burger consists of jalapeno peppers, habanero chilies, and cayenne pepper ground into the meat, topped with pepper jack cheese. It's one of the best burgers in greater Boston.

"You have to like whatever you do. You have to like the job."

Som, 24, said her family always pushed her to excel.

"Growing up, I think my parents really instilled the work-hard-and-you'll-get-rewarded mind-set," she said. "They worked full time when we were younger, and I think that if you have the gumption and dedication and motivation to do something, I think you can get to where you want to be, and it shouldn't matter where you're from."

For all four, working hard also means working long. Som's days are usually 3 p.m. to midnight or later. The three chefs regularly work morning to night.

All four say they enjoy their jobs, but would consider opening their own restaurants one day, coming full circle from the bottom of the proverbial barrel to the very top.

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