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Soli Cooksey

when life gives you
ashes, you plant
sunflowers

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



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CULTURE

COMEDY Q&A: KIRAN DEOL IS DOING EVEN BETTER THAN 'PERFECT KIRAN'

BY MARK STEFANOS

Kiran Deol is a standup, who also just so happens to be an Emmy-nominated documentarian, podcaster, actor, writer, director and double reed oboe player.

Born in England and raised in the paradise of Boca Raton, FL, (the Shangri-La of Palm Beach) she's been lighting up stages and screens with her sharp humor and bold storytelling, headlining the New York Comedy Festival and delivering breakout performances, like in the Sundance 2025 zombie flick *Didn't Die*, and the NBC/Hulu comedy *Sunnyside*.

Her acclaimed comedy special **JOYSUCK on Amazon Prime** showcases why her unique voice, rooted in her South Asian heritage and American upbringing, resonates with audiences worldwide.

You can catch her live at the **Belly Laughs comedy festival**, which is coming July 12 and 13 to LA Live and will feature a stacked lineup of Asian American comedians and a sampling of over 20 LA Asian restaurants.

Now let's see what "the other Kiran" is all about —

You're an actor, writer, director, podcaster, documentarian, etc. etc. How do your other creative interests inform your comedy?

Releasing my first special was so cool because I got to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end. It's called **JOYSUCK, it's on Amazon Prime**, and I'm super proud of it. All that knowledge of how to shoot, what a cut feels like, how you want to write, tell, and perform a story comes into play. If you watch this special I will love you forever.

Where'd you grow up?

I was born in England and grew up in South Florida, in Boca Raton. Home to Marilyn Manson, Eric Andre, and Seinfeld's parents' retirement home: Del Boca Vista. Where every nice Indian girl belongs.

What was your favorite job?

Manning the poetry room in this massive library during college. No one was ever in there. You just sat there, did your own work and got paid. It was incredible.

I actually got kind of annoyed when people came in.

What was your first joke?

When I was a teenager I wrote this ridiculous Mary Had A Little Lamb rap in a garden. It was ... high satire? It incorporated backup dancers who were supposed to sexy whisper "bah bah bah." Still slaps.

What's the best advice you've ever gotten about comedy?

I remember Hasan Minhaj telling me "you can go onstage tonight and they'll say the next comedian coming to the stage. It's not medical school. You can get up right now and do it if you want to." This was back when he was still driving a Toyota Camry.

What's your favorite city to do comedy?

It's a toss up! I love them ALL and they are ALL my children. But DC is incredible — so smart, so sad. They need a laugh because they are stressed AND that makes for a great comedy city. That, and when the weather is bad.

What's your favorite open mic or indie show in LA?

I run an independent show called **Peacock** that started back before the NBC network Peacock. Maybe our show will outlast the streamer!?! Lol. It has two great producers, **Ali Hart** and **Becca Rufer**. We have a wonderful DJ named **The Lord**. And a co-host, comedian **Danny Jolles**. I've developed a lot of my new material there; it's every Thursday at 8 p.m. in Club Tee Gee in Atwater Village. It's the best.

The Belly Laughs Festival will feature a ton of great LA Asian food — what are you looking forward to?

I had a chance to try **Jilli in K-town** and LOVED it. The food is fusion like me! The kimchi vodka noodles were spicy perfection and I will be stuffing my face with more of them at the festival.

What's your favorite book?

"My Year of Rest and Relaxation" by Ottessa Moshfegh.

What's your most unpopular opinion?
If I told you this, I'd be canceled so SHHHH!

What's your most niche interest?

I played the oboe! It's a double reed! Two reeds!

Who's your nemesis?

There was a girl in college we called "perfect Kiran." She's a doctor now and married to an Indian. I was "the other Kiran" always doing theater and carrying toilets around campus sweating. Some things never change.

If you could play someone in a movie or show, who would you play?

Ma Anand Sheela from "Wild Wild Country." She led the cult in that hit Netflix documentary. Love her. What a queen.

Catch Kiran Deol at the Belly Laughs comedy festival, which takes place July 12 and 13 at L.A. Live, and at her standup show Peacock every Thursday at 8 p.m. at Club Tee Gee in Atwater Village.

📍



BIRDIE THOMPSON



CULTURE

Soli Cooksey:

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU ASHES, YOU PLANT SUNFLOWERS

BY MICHELE STUEVEN

Soli Cooksey

COURTESY OF SOLI COOKSEY/JOONBIRD

It's been six months since the devastating LA County Wildfires. In what was once the ashes of Soli Cooksey's living room and kids' bedrooms in Altadena, a spreading patch of sunflowers and fire followers is thriving.

Cooksey is the founder of [Joonbird](#), a vintage-inspired children's clothing brand known for its cheery prints and bright colors. She and her family lost everything, including her entire business, which was run out of her home garage, during the Eaton fire. She's now in the midst of a courageous rebuild.

The garage was full from floor to ceiling. There were times when new shipments of fabric would come in, and she and one full-time employee had to create a tunnel to get through it all. On busy days of packing, they would set up a little pop-up

that extended out to the driveway.

"My business is so material heavy, Cooksey tells *LA Weekly* from the charred concrete slab that used to be her studio. "I had hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of inventory, fabrics that I had custom printed, packing supplies, and pattern supplies. To start again, out of pocket, was extremely stressful and daunting. It's going to take a lot to get back to where I was."

"We had been here about five years," she says. "I had never connected with the community like after the fires. The one thing about Altadena is that everybody who is from here never shuts up about the city. You have such a diverse group of people. It's progressive, but not up its own ass. It was very harmonious. Everybody is artsy and a little kooky in the best ways

possible. We all became very close to our neighbors more than ever. I can't imagine living anywhere else."

The young mother and her husband discussed all the scenarios. Nervous about the toxicity of the land, should they rebuild? Move?

"If we get up and move somewhere else, it's a huge financial loss," she says, "because insurance only pays you if you rebuild. So if you have whatever you have left on your mortgage and then sell your lot, you're really just breaking even, and then you need the money to go buy somewhere else. Where do you get that money? If you want all the funds from your insurance, you're forced to rebuild."

So they decided to rebuild and will get a permit to break ground in a couple of weeks. The entrepreneur's mother bought

the lot next door and will make it her home. And while the family is excited about the rebuilding process, the toxins in the neighborhood are a concern.

"In the beginning, we were worried that it was going to take years to rebuild and that we would run out of our Additional Living Expenses money, which is what the insurance company gives you to rent for a couple of years. We were still paying our mortgage, and we didn't want to be renting and paying our mortgage and building; that's such a financial loss. But what if we build too fast? If we're first and everybody else starts building, and we pick up all that dust? There's so much unknown and variables you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. We have the mindset that if it's done fast and we're in the house within two years, we're



going to stay inside with the air purifiers on day and night. It feels like COVID all over again.”

After scraping the lot, the Army Corps of Engineers took an additional six inches of soil from the actual burn footprint. The lawn and concrete areas still need to be cleaned at the Cookseys’ expense. And while they do their part, when the neighbors start construction on the nearby blocks and the wind kicks up, it will end up on their property. Cooksey says that about half the lots in the area have been sold to developers.

“As far as clearing the lots, they are way ahead of the game,” she says. “Dealing with the Army Corps of Engineers was the fastest and easiest part of the process. Not only were they quick and easy to deal with, but they were also super respectful and sensitive. It took them less than two days to clear our lot, when we thought it would take a year.”

But rebuilding her seven-year-old Altadena business is more complicated. Cooksey applied for business grants to help recover. She received two small

grants out of the 50 she applied for. Despite being a woman-owned business and a mom whose house and business both burned down 100%, she was told she didn’t qualify. She’s starting from scratch in the kitchen of their rental home in Sierra Madre.

“I feel like I’ve gone 20 steps backward in life,” she says. “I’m working from the kitchen table again, and it’s driving me nuts because my work is very material-heavy. There are patterns, fabrics, embroidery machines, and so much physical stuff that comes with the business. We’re already bursting at the seams.”

But despite the challenges, even before the fires, Cooksey had made a bold choice to source everything – from snaps and buttons, to elastic and fabric – locally to create a supply chain immune to international tariffs, shipping delays, and price volatility.

“My factory is local and I print my own fabrics on deadstock fabric,” she says. “The fashion industry and the large clothing brands create a lot of excess, known as deadstock. When they go to



COURTESY OF SOLI COOKSEY/OONBIRD



COURTESY OF SOLI COOKSEY/JOONBIRD

print something for a shirt, they'll buy many tens of thousands of yards and print whatever they want on it. The excess blank fabric ends up in landfills. Many times, they even burn it because there's nowhere to put it. When the clothes for the giant fashion brands are out of season and they've already put the items on sale and don't want to put them on further sale, they will incinerate them. With the huge luxury brands, rather than discount their items because they don't want to cheapen their brand image, they'll burn the excess stock rather than give it away or sell it for cheaper.

"The amount of waste in this industry is shocking," says the designer. "So there's a plethora of deadstock fabric that isn't of lower quality; it was just excess. I often buy the blank deadstock and print my own designs on it. I also use a lot of vintage fabrics. My business originally took off when I started using vintage bedsheets and tablecloths from the 1960s and 70s because there was a lot of it. It blew up, and I just couldn't keep the items in stock."

"I hand-drew a lot of my own vintage designs, with the trim, the buttons, and elastic coming from deadstock. Downtown Los Angeles is an amazing playground if you're in this industry. Behind every door, there is an enormous

warehouse that specializes in something." She had no fashion background; she just ventured downtown and knocked on doors. One person would refer her to the next, and now she has a fat Rolodex of printers, mills, and even an old school trim factory that's been there 60 years.

"When you go in there, there are 30 of these big, beautiful machines that make vintage trims and elastic, but only one machine will be working because nobody uses these places anymore. Everybody gets everything done overseas. I'm happy to support the local economy, and it makes me feel proud of the craftsmanship behind my items. This isn't fast fashion. My hand is involved in every aspect of the business, down to getting the trim made and finding vintage buttons."

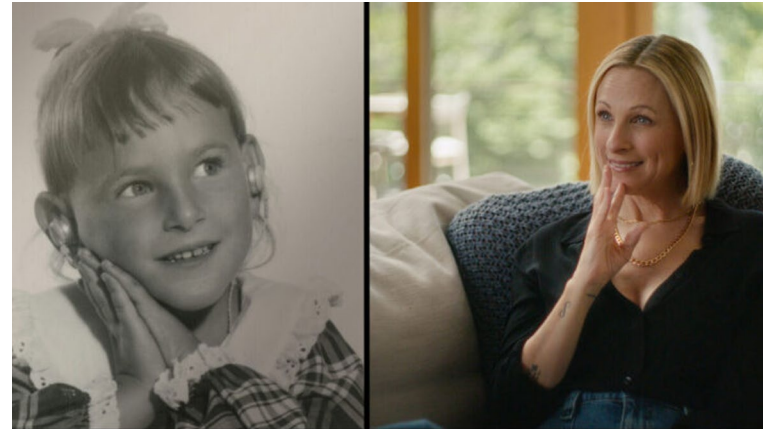
Known in the neighborhood as the crazy Sunflower lady, Cooksey finds joy wherever she can. She planted sunflowers on her naked property, and hundreds of fire follower sprouts have popped up. The dahlias are back in her raised garden bed, and a tomato plant is throwing off blossoms.

"There's no water, so I have to come out here once a week in my car with the milk jugs I filled up at home and water them by hand," she says. "I planted the sunflowers because it gave me something mentally. If they can bloom, so can I one day." 🌻



'MARLEE MATLIN: NOT ALONE ANYMORE' IS A TRUE HOLLYWOOD STORY

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



Marlee Matlin- Not Alone Anymore

COURTESY KINO LORBER

The *Marlee Matlin: Not Alone Anymore* documentary takes a deep and personal dive into the life and career of the trailblazing Deaf actress who took on Hollywood and was the youngest and first Deaf woman to win an Oscar for Best Actress for her role in *Children of a Lesser God*.

Through a treasure trove of home movies and archival footage, first-time director and Deaf actress Shoshannah Stern pieces together a rich and thorough portrait of Matlin's life from childhood and her complex family dynamic to her high and low points in Hollywood. Stern, a fixture throughout the film, uses her primary language of American Sign Language to tell the story the way she experiences the world through sign language, visuals, graphics, and closed captions.

While the documentary touches mostly on all the revelations from Matlin's 2009 memoir, *I'll Scream Later*, including her abusive relationship with actor William

Hurt and drug issues, there are sit-downs with director Aaron Sorkin, who worked with her in *The West Wing* TV series, and longtime close friend Henry Winkler. Matlin's childhood friend and family members candidly detail the personal dynamics of growing up Deaf in Illinois.

"My relationship with my mother was difficult, but I loved her nonetheless," Matlin told *LA Weekly* in a Zoom call via her longtime interpreter Jack Jason. "But I recognized that she had her own struggles with trying to make my life easier. Her perspective was that I would have the best education and friends. She wanted the best for me. She was the one who introduced me to acting. But she had struggles as a child. She had a very bad childhood; her father left her family when she was nine, and watched her brother and sister soar, finish school, get degrees, have amazing jobs, and she did not. She carried that grief until she passed.

"When my parents found out that I became deaf at 18 months, there was another thing for her to grieve over in her life, and she didn't know how to handle it," says the new grandmother and mom of four. "My dad also had a bad childhood, and they were both determined not to repeat it. So when I became deaf, which was a shock to them, they had to learn how to raise me. Back then, there weren't many resources or enough information like we have today. Everyone back then did the same thing for their Deaf kids.

"I said to myself that when I became a mother, I would allow my daughter or son to *BE*," she says. "My parents gave me independence, and I knew that I would do that for my children, and that we would have communication and be transparent about it. That was crucial for me."

Matlin's co-stars in *CODA*, which was composed of Deaf actors and won three Academy Awards in 2022, including Best Picture, are also featured in the

documentary. And while that was a glorious Oscar moment for the Deaf community, and despite what seems to be a long, successful career for Matlin, she hasn't had a job since.

"It's called perseverance," says the legendary actress. "Yes, I'm still working in a way that means that people recognize me, acknowledge me, and I'm still around. Does that mean I get work like other people who can hear? No. My name might get floated around to certain people in conversations in the industry, but am I getting the work that I feel I deserve, the same as other actors? No. It was great after 35 years, when *CODA* swept the Academy Awards to finally come back, but what happened in between? Radio silence. Does that mean I have to wait another 35 years?"

"Marlee Matlin: Not Alone Anymore" opened at the Landmark Nuart and Laemmle Noho, Los Angeles, with plans to expand nationally.



Marlee Matlin revisits her Illinois neighborhood



Marlee Matlin and Henry Winkler

FOOD

WHAT'S UP POPPING UP

First Look: Esters Wine Bar Flips
to Esters Wine Shop And Oyster Bar

BY MICHELE STUEVEN



Esters Interior

COURTESY JAKOB LAYMAN

Ten years ago, [Esters Wine Bar](#) opened its doors with a simple idea: to bring the elegance and charm of a Parisian wine bar to Santa Monica. Over the past decade, Esters has become a neighborhood staple.

To celebrate its 10th anniversary, the bistro has welcomed a new culinary leader, Chef Wesley Barden, whose fresh seafood pedigree expanded the space into Esters Wine Shop and Oyster Bar, adding an oyster-forward menu featuring chilled seafood towers, crudo, new seasonal dishes, and, of plenty of champagne.

“Bringing this next chapter of Esters Wine Shop & Oyster Bar to life fills us with so much joy,” Kathryn Coker, Esters Co-Owner and Wine Director for Rustic Canyon Family, told *LA Weekly* in a statement. “When we opened in 2015, it was a dream come true to create a neighborhood wine bar and shop. Now, nearly a decade later, this evolution feels like the natural next step—something we’ve envisioned for a long time. We’ve been listening closely to our oceanside community, and we’re truly excited to share new menu offerings, a fresh raw bar, and thoughtfully curated wine pairings that reflect everything that makes Esters so special.”

Coker arrived in Los Angeles in 2006 and worked as a server at the recently opened Rustic Canyon, under the guidance of founder Josh Loeb and his wife, Zoe Nathan. She soon assumed the roles of sommelier and manager, building a list of more than 500 selections and a rotating list of 30-plus wines by the glass, with a strong focus on small producers whose stories she knew and loved. Her program has since earned Rustic Canyon a spot in *Wine Enthusiast’s* “100 Best Wine Restaurants” every year since 2015. In 2011, she was part of the opening team at Loeb and Nathan’s neighborhood pizzeria, [Milo + Olive](#), serving as wine director and manager. From there, her role expanded to wine director for the Rustic Canyon group of restaurants that also includes [Birdie G’s](#).

New raw bar menu items include:

Petite Plateau: A raw bar sampler with tartare, six oysters, and crudo served with Huck Hot Sauce, horseradish, minonette.

Grand Plateau: A decadent seafood tower with tartare, 12 oysters, crudo, and a daily special

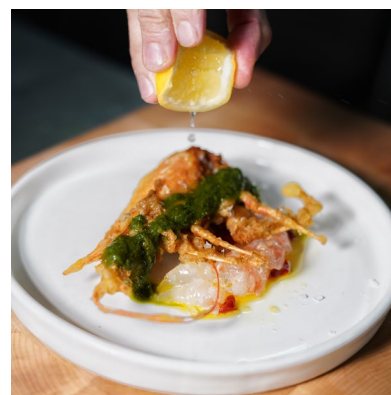
Spot Prawn: A rotating seafood special, often featuring rare and short-season delicacies like spot prawns or uni.

Kampachi Crudo: Thin slices of kampachi marinated in orange wine, served with tomatoes, leek flowers, lemon, and herbs.

Oysters: Daily selection of east coast and west coast raw oysters served with house-made mignonette, lemon, horseradish, and Huck Hot Sauce

Boquerones: Vinegar-cured white anchovies dressed in occhipinti olive oil and herbs. A briny bite, traditional in both France and served as tapas in Spain.

Scallop Tartare: Finely chopped scallops dressed with saffron aioli, lemon, and fresh tarragon. Served chilled. The saffron in the aioli is sourced from a single-family farm in Northern California. 🍷



COURTESY ROSS DEUTSCH