Who says you can’t mix business with pleasure?

Beyoncé and Jay-Z, Jada and Will, Teyana and Iman are just a few celebs whose joint business deals are bringing in millions. But outside of celebrity stardom, more and more Black power couples are emerging as partners, not just in love, but in business as well. The goal? To successfully run a business enterprise and build Black generational wealth at the same time. Of course, it takes effort and energy to ensure that such partnerships prosper. Working together every day and maintaining a solid connection means being committed to good communication, setting boundaries and knowing when to separate the job from the relationship, especially if you both have strong personalities. But while operating a company always comes with challenges, especially when growing and scaling your enterprise during a global pandemic, couples in business can rely on unique bonds to help them thrive in uncertain times. It’s been said that a couple that gets money together, stays together—and if the success of these business ventures is any determination of how these power couples will continue to thrive, we’re banking on their future.

HOT IN THE KITCHEN

For entrepreneurs Pinky Cole and Derrick Hayes, a love of food and community—and now each other—has turned their multimillion-dollar businesses into a family affair

BY JENNIFER OGUINSOLA | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DREA NICOLE

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et me tell you something about me,” says Aisha “Pinky” Cole. “I’m so confident in myself that two things are either going to happen—either you’re going to love me and be inspired, or you’re going to be intimidated.”

During a recent appearance on the nationally syndicated radio show The Breakfast Club, these words from Cole stood out. The quote exemplifies who and what Cole represents: At just 34, she has built a vegan empire while becoming a cultural phenomenon. And no, these words of power and self-esteem aren’t being thrown around loosely.

Four years ago, Cole created Slutty Vegan in Atlanta. You’ve most likely heard of it, eaten it or wanted to eat it. And if you haven’t, your chance to do so has just increased, as Cole is scheduled to open a new Slutty Vegan every month this year in a different city.

The rise of the provocatively named plant-based burger joint has seemingly been discussed everywhere. This summer, you’ll also be able to buy Cole’s first cookbook, Eat Plants B*tch (Simon & Schuster), and make your own mouthwatering vegan dishes. “It’s plant-based recipes for the meat eater, because my target audience is not the vegan,” she explains.

In August 2018, Cole—who goes by Pinky, a nickname given to her at birth by her godmother because she came out so pink—opened Slutty Vegan in a shared kitchen. Several weeks later, as the brand’s popularity grew, she launched her food truck. Four months later, on January 13, 2019—a date that holds special significance for Cole, as it is the anniversary of the founders’ day for her beloved Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.—she opened her first brick-and-mortar store. By 2020, amid a global pandemic, she cut the ribbon on her second and third locations in Atlanta. As the world seemed to be falling apart, the Slutty Vegan brand was experiencing powerful growth, drawing daily celebrity sightings and massive crowds of people from all over the world.

Chaka Zulu, Atlanta music veteran, cofounder of the Disturbing Tha Peace label and longtime manager for rapper Ludacris, was one of Cole’s early customers. He then became her manager. “She showed such grace in success,” Zulu recalls, describing what so impressed him about Cole. “Not in the long-term success, but in the success of the moment, which can make you stop working. That affirmation of…”

“Essence Ventures founder and chairman Richelieu Dennis is an investor in Slutty Vegan.”
3,000 people standing in line on the first day could have slowed her down. I've seen that happen to a lot of people. And I saw her, in the moment, be graceful to receive it. And then I saw it propel her, all within that one day. And that's why I was like, ‘Yeah, she's got it.'

The Baltimore native successfully opened three locations created a new bar and restaurant concept, Bar Vegan, in one of Atlanta's highest-profile developments; became a multi-millionaire; and started The Pinky Cole Foundation, which has provided scholarships to juvenile offenders in Atlanta, created scholarship funds for students enrolled at Cole's alma mater, Clark-Atlanta University (CAU), and donated 100,000 pounds of fruits and vegetables to feed those who are food insecure.

And that's just in her first two years in business.

Today, almost four years after serving her first vegan burger out of the shared kitchen, she has established herself as a philanthropist, humanitarian and an unstoppable moneymaking, money-giving entrepreneurial genius. That's because it's much bigger than burgers and fries for Cole. For her, the magic is in serving her community.

Oscar-winning actress Viola Davis was introduced to Slutty Vegan on Instagram like everyone else. Intrigued, she booked the food truck while on set filming. From there, the relationship grew, and she has now become one of Cole's biggest supporters.

“We were in a pandemic where we were watching George Floyd, Ahmad Arbery and Breonna Taylor on a loop,” Davis reflects. “And it was a constant reminder that we were, and have been in this country, the leftovers. It’s amazing how people come to life when they are cared for, when they’re literally thought about in any way—their health, their joy, their comfort. And perhaps the secret sauce to her company, other than absolutely awesome food, is that she cares about her people.”

Cole's service to her people would actually lead her to the love of her life. But while she may be open to share much of her life with the world, she’s been mum about a few things, including her beau. So we decided to pay the Slutty Vegan CEO a visit to get the scoop on all the things that we couldn’t Google.

Tucked away 30 minutes outside of Atlanta is a community filled with pristine luxury homes that for sure belong on Bravo’s Million Dollar Listing—Or even on the early-2000s documentary-style show MTV Cribs. We’re given two addresses—one for the security gate and another for the recently purchased home of Cole, her significant other and their baby girl. Everything inside the gate is top-notch, including the 51,000-square-foot country club and the 27-hole golf course you drive past on the way to Cole’s home. The residents here might as well be royalty.

A visit to her Instagram feed reveals Cole’s new motherhood, but while she shared glimpses of her bundle of joy, she kept the world guessing about the identity of the father. “To be honest, there was a business concern that I am in the vegan community and he’s not,” she admits. “But what I realize is who cares what people say. Even though we’re different, we can still exist together and still love each other—because we are tapped into each other’s hearts. And,” she adds defiantly, “whoever’s got something to say about that can kick rocks.” It’s clear that Cole goes hard for who and what she loves.

Her partner’s name is Derrick Hayes—but if you’re around him long enough, you’ll hear Cole and those closest to him affectionately call him D. An entrepreneur and philanthropist born and raised in West Philadelphia, and now the father of three girls, Hayes smiles with approval as her woman firmly shuts down the potential haters. “Yeah,” he says, looking at her with admiration. “She said it. We don’t judge each other.”

“I think that our relationship is symbolic of what the world should look and feel like,” says Cole, whose two best friends separately encouraged her to date the fellow entrepreneur. “It should look and feel like a place where there is no judgment. Just because you might not believe in the things that I believe in, doesn’t mean that we can’t come together in friendship, love and spirituality.”

In fact, Cole and Hayes have been loving, supporting, building, creating and enjoying each other in plain view for a while. The public saw them together all the time but just didn’t know they were closely connected they were. As the CEO and owner of Big Dave’s Cheesesteaks in Atlanta, Hayes, too, is one of the city’s most captivating entrepreneurs, philanthropists and cultural leaders.

Five years ago, fellow Philly native and Grammy Award-winning rapper and actress Eve stepped by his first restaurant, a 700-square-foot space at a gas station, while filming a movie. Blown away by just how delicious and authentic his cheesesteak was, and how well it represented their hometown, Eve promised to post her chicken cheesesteak to her social media accounts, and it’s been all uphill from there. Celebrities like the Migos, Meek Mill and Lena Waithe have also been fervent supporters, but it’s the trio of everyday Atlantans wrapped around the corner at his two locations that tell Hayes how far he’s come.

Actress, producer-director and Emmy Award-winning writer Waithe first found Hayes on Instagram and started rocking with him while he was working out of the gas station. She believes what makes him special is that he doesn’t run away from his past. He embraces all of himself, and his business feels inclusive.”

The 34-year-old seems to have it all together now, but that wasn’t always the case. Like many young Black men in inner cities throughout the country, who lack resources and feel there’s no other way to provide for themselves and their families, Hayes once fell into the trap of selling drugs. “I got arrested, and I was looking at some time,” he reveals. Hayes recalls going to court every day thinking that his life was over. “I thought, ‘If I get out of this, I’m straightening my life up. I remember before walking into the courtroom when...”

When I look back at 2020, it was really love at first sight. But at the time we didn’t know that’s what it was.”

—PINKY COLE

On Cole: an Alex Perry gown, $2,400, and Schultz with $155, Helmut Lang dress, Atlanta, Vintage Chanel earrings; stylist’s own. Hayet, ears a Hideoki diamond earring, $3,600, Hideoki Bespoke Atlanta, and Solitaire supply, Little West supply.
I was supposed to get sentenced, my sister called and prayed for me. That day was the third time the DA didn’t show up. The judge said he would give the DA five minutes and then he would throw the case out,” he says.

Hayes admits those were the longest five minutes of his life, waiting to hear if his sister’s prayers had worked. Those five minutes until the judge hit the gavel and threw his case out also changed his story. “The entrepreneur continues to be deeply thankful for his second chance. “While I was walking out, the detective who was supposed to testify against me was coming in,” he remembers, “and I realized how close I came to losing my freedom, and now I had to change my life.”

He’s reflective as he recalls losing his father and best friend, who he called “Big Dave,” to lung cancer. Hayes had promised him that he would do great things in life, and feels he can finally say that promise has been kept.

Cole’s father, too, imparted the kind of drive that continues to propel her to places that might seem out of reach for many. Few people knew that on the day Cole was born, her father’s future was snatched away as he was sentenced to life in prison. He had been found guilty of operating a criminal enterprise that included distribution of cocaine and possession with intent to distribute. He also owned and operated several legal businesses, including popular nightclubs in Baltimore. He remained in prison throughout Cole’s childhood, physically unable to be a present father for her. However, she sees her hustler’s spirit as his gift to her.

For both Cole and Hayes, their business ventures aren’t just about food—they’re about being of and for the people. And one thing about the Baltimore and Philly natives: They really love Atlanta and go hard for the community there. “We are able to use this one thing over everything, and that’s love—not just for ourselves, but for the community,” says Hayes, recalling how, when the pandemic hit, he went straight into service mode, feeding front-line workers at nearly 40 hospitals across metro Atlanta.

Giving of themselves is what brought the two together. “Remember we tried to bail out 100 inmates the second, third day of knowing each other?” Hayes says to Cole. “We couldn’t do it, because it was last minute. And then, sad to say, I think the following week Rayshard Brooks got murdered. That was our first time really giving back together. When we did that, I saw how powerfully people resonated with us doing something together. So we wound up saying, ‘All right, well, let’s build a business together!’”

That was the beginning of their joint entrepreneurial legacy. “We started a life insurance campaign, where we provide Black men in Atlanta who make $30,000 or less with life insurance that they don’t have to pay for,” explains Cole, who adds that Prudential recently signed on to the venture as a partner. “And to give back in the name of Rayshard Brooks, we partnered with Clark Atlanta to provide $600,000 worth of scholarships for kids, and a brand-new car and life insurance for his family. We bought this house in August of 2021, but before this, in December of 2020, we bought another house as an investment property. And we’re about to buy some more.”

The two also opened Dinkies—get it, Derrick + Pinky—a vegan Philly cheesesteak concept inside Pinky’s Bar Vegan, and this past Thanksgiving, they fed the entire city of Atlanta. Meanwhile, the ink is almost dry on a deal with a major retail company for Hayes’s egg rolls and seasoning line and Cole’s chicken dip, spinach dip and vegan bacon. The duo is now creating and establishing partnerships and collaborations with major brands such as Pepsi and Puma to push the culture forward.

In the midst of our conversation, I hear their assistant confirming their plans to fly out to Denver the next morning to meet with Robert F. Smith, the Black billionaire tech investor and philanthropist who paid off the student loan debt of Morehouse College’s graduating class of 2019. Cole and Hayes are building relationships and making deals that young, Black, restaurant entrepreneurs couldn’t dream of until now. Next up, Hayes will open a new location not too far from one of Cole’s current spots. And over the next two years, he’s planning 10 additional locations and eight food trucks. And Cole, who worked as a television producer before becoming a restaurateur, is going back to his journalism and entertainment roots. “I’m doing a documentary called Slutty,” she says. “It’s about the media rise of Slutty Vegan during the pandemic. I also just created Slutty Productions, and I’m doing a show with journalist Jacque Reid about those who are Black and missing in America, because we need to amplify those stories.”

As we’re talking, Cole’s mom is nestled on the couch in the family’s living room cooing to her granddaughter, Della Hayes, her journalism and entertainment roots. As we're talking, Cole's mom is nestled on the couch in the family's living room cooing to her granddaughter, Della Hayes, while bonding with Hayes's 88-year-old grandmother, who now lives with them. The family Cole and Hayes have created together is simply beautiful. “Now that I look back at 2020, it was really love at first sight,” says Cole, who just signed a shoe and handbag deal with a major shoe company, for a line to debut later this year. “But at the time, we didn’t know that’s what it was.”

Now, everyone is basked in the love Cole and Hayes have for each other and for their community. “I think people look at them and see themselves,” Waite says. “They inspire others to take their destiny into their own hands. They make it clear that the road was long and difficult, but they continue to wake up every day and get things done. I admire them both a great deal.” While y'all are focused on “Ciara’s Prayer,” it’s Pinky and Derrick’s prayer—confidence, philanthropic heart, soul mate vibes and a Midas touch—for us.

—DERRICK HAYES

We are able to use this one thing over everything, and that’s love—not just for ourselves, but the community.”

Jennifer Ogunsola (@jenniferogunsola) is an Atlanta-based writer and creator of the Story to Tell Project, a platform which shares personal accounts that aim to inspire, impact and uplift others. For more couples in business together, turn the page.
or Monique and Melvin Rodriguez, business is booming. The couple founded Mielle Organics in 2014 and have helped to provide organic, natural hair-care options for Black women across the globe. Melvin, a former systems engineer for UPS, and Monique, a registered nurse, managed to turn their joint venture into a multimillion-dollar business that recently closed a groundbreaking investment deal with Berkshire Partners, a Boston-based investment firm. It took a lot of blood, sweat and tears for the couple—who started by creating products in their kitchen, basement and garage—to get where they are today. The key was to constantly innovate, so when they outgrew their first and second warehouses, they moved into a new one with a salon.

"Monique and I complement each other's work styles because we fundamentally respect each other," says Melvin. "We recognize and value each other's talents and gifts. This allows us to operate and flourish as a family and as a business unit at a high level. When you have that foundation, you can do some extraordinary things together."

The couple don't shrink from the challenges of merging marriage and business. "Just like marriages have ups and downs, so do business relationships," notes Monique. "Melvin and I don't see eye to eye on every aspect of Mielle Organics, but we do share the same vision and goals. Those goals are to create a legacy for our family and for our children. So, once we really tap into our why, we either come to an agreement or agree to disagree," she says.

"The only other challenge might be that sometimes when you're together all day, you don't have time to miss one another," says Monique. "It's important to take that time away from each other at work so that when we go home, we can designate that time for us."  

*Essence Ventures founder and chairman Richelieu Dennis is an investor in Mielle Organics.*
Entrepreneurs Yolanda and Rick Williams are the visionaries behind some of the biggest brands in Detroit. Their partnership started in 2004 when the two got married while still attending Oakland University. Together, they now run their creative agency, Distinct Life, with projects that range from consulting and social media management to serving as creative directors for the revitalization of the historic Hotel Saint Regis Detroit. But Distinct Life is not the couple’s only business. Back in 2013, Yolanda created a natural skin-care line called Cream Blends UC in their kitchen. She continues to work on that brand full-time as its owner and operator, with Rick, who is the chief creative officer. “We know how to stay in our lanes,” Yolanda says, “and we focus on the things that we’re good at.” Adds Rick: “When you’re running a small business it’s not like we clock out at 5 P.M. and we’re done with work. You have to achieve the right work-life balance. So now we find ways of balancing our personal relationship, spending time with our children and making sure that our life isn’t consumed 24 hours with business.”

Married for 18 years, Rick and Yolanda Williams launched their business in 2004. For more entrepreneur couples and business partnerships, visit ESSENCE.com.