

FOOD FEATURE



Keeping it small

WITH A TINY STAFF AND A HANDFUL OF DINERS, YAMI GRILL OWNER FINDS SUCCESS

By Elena Kadvany

Yiyi Chen might hold the title as the sole restaurant owner in the Bay Area who regularly turns customers away.

Chen opened the unassuming Yami Grill in a small neighborhood shopping center in Mountain View in 2016. He believes he's found a winning approach to surviving the tide of economic pressures facing local restaurants in the Bay Area, from rising minimum wages to third-party delivery costs — he's keeping things exceptionally, almost unbelievably, small.

When he notices diners who are struggling to figure out what to order or he overhears their kids asking for French fries (which are no longer on Yami's menu), he happily suggests they might find something more to their liking on Castro Street's restaurant row. Yami Grill is open for two hours for lunch and three for dinner. After 8:30 p.m., the kitchen will only take to-go orders

— preferably through Yami's own online ordering platform, which Chen built, rather than third-party delivery apps that take a 30-35% commission.

The restaurant's staff totals just three people: Chen, his chef and his chef's father, who waits on the seven-table dining room. On a good lunch service, they see 10 diners total — and Chen is fine with that. Actually, it's what he prefers.

"I see restaurants come and die," he said. "After long deliberation myself, I understand this is the only way to do it, to be running as a family restaurant." That way he can control costs while preserving the quality. Time and word of mouth are Yami's best form of marketing, Chen said.

Yami Grill is unusual in a number of ways. Unusual aspect No. 1: Chen, a native of China who lives a few minutes from Yami Grill, studied Hebrew as an undergraduate at Peking University, then came to the United States to pursue master's and doctorate degrees in Near Eastern and

biblical studies at Cornell University. (Fun fact: He is believed to be the first person to directly translate a Hebrew novel into Chinese, according to a 1996 article in the Cornell Chronicle.) He returned to China for some years, where he got into real estate investing, started software companies and a think tank on Middle Eastern policy and became director of the Institute for Hebrew and Jewish Studies at his alma mater.

Chen also loves to eat, and said he opened Yami Grill out of a desire to have a space to gather over healthy, quality meals with friends and family.

Unusual aspect No. 2: Yami Grill gets the majority of its produce from an organic farm run by a Buddhist temple in Fremont.

Chen donates to the Maitreya Buddhist Institute and is good friends with the monk who leads it. The temple's vegan followers, Chen said, transformed a 20,000-square-foot yard into an organic garden that provides 80%



MAGALI GAUTHIER

Yiyi Chen, owner of Yami Grill, prepares a vegetarian fried tofu gyro. The dish is shown at top.

► See **YAMI GRILL**, page 16



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YAMI GRILL

► Continued from page 15

of Yami Grill's vegetables. He picks up a box of surplus produce weekly, so the menu changes based on what's available. Recently, he received a photo on WeChat of bowls and baskets overflowing with Buddha's hand citrus for donors to pick up.

Unusual aspect No. 3: Yami is the sole restaurant on the Peninsula to serve Guamanian food. Chen's chef, Brian Perez, was born and raised in Mongmong, Guam. He left a career in information technology to go to culinary

school in San Francisco, then worked in hotels and catering before finding the job at Yami.

Perez recently added a second, small menu showcasing traditional "chamorro" dishes (the term for the indigenous population of Guam and the Marianas Islands). There are chicken empanadas with an achiote-flavored corn crust, soy-lemon grilled chicken with red rice and chicken kelaguen, grilled chicken thigh that's minced, mixed with fresh grated coconut and lime juice and served cold. Traditionally it's served with coconut tortillas, Perez said, but at Yami it comes with slices of warm pita bread. For dessert, there's latiya, a Guamanian cinnamon-custard cake.

Guamanian food is scant in the Bay Area, save for Prubechu, a recently reopened restaurant in San Francisco. Perez described the cuisine as "island comfort food" that reflects the Spanish and Filipino influences on the island. He's planning to add new dishes soon, including tinaktak, ground beef simmered in coconut milk with vegetables.

The main Yami Grill menu is a culinary mishmash: tom yum soup, potstickers, fried plantains, gyros, adobo pork, tri-tip steak. The mishmash is purposeful — Chen said he doesn't want customers to get bored — and everything is made with quality ingredients.

"What we cook, my baby will eat," he said.

It took Chen \$350,000 and a year to open Yami Grill. In the beginning, he debated going the route of a quick-service, fast-food restaurant to reduce costs and turn a higher profit. But he's happier, he said, being a small-scale, truly neighborhood restaurant. A weekly alarm on his phone reminds him to leave coupons in the local newspaper racks outside the restaurant to encourage patrons to return. If you dine there consistently enough, Chen might tell you when salmon belly is available, or that the kitchen will pan-sear any fish if requested. You'll probably get to know Perez's sweet, soft-spoken father, Tom, as he moves throughout the dining room. Chen might brew you a red tea from an organic tea garden he owns in China and tell you about the link between early Chinese writings and the ancient Ugaritic alphabet.

It's not a restaurant experience you'll have anywhere else. ▣

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MAGALI GAUTHIER

Top: Yami Grill's pork adobo features marinated pork sautéed with vegetables. The restaurant sources its produce from a Buddhist farm in Fremont. **Bottom:** Brian Perez, chef at Yami Grill, picks some parsley from the restaurant's herb garden.


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