

THE MIGRANT KITCHEN



FOOD & LIVING

Chef Kimmy Tang's Wanderlust Inspires Bistro Mon Cheri's Eclectic Menu

Eddie Lin July 20, 2017

Chef Kimmy Tang loves to travel, and while her cosmopolitan approach to cooking can be partially attributed to globetrotting, it also originates from the influence of a Taiwanese chef-mentor she endearingly calls Uncle Chu, a man Tang met in 1989 while working at her first restaurant job in Bakersfield upon immigrating from her birthplace Vietnam. Tang now owns and operates a charming, new restaurant in Pasadena called Bistro Mon Cheri located on the second floor of a small shopping center. While sitting against a radiant red wall adorned with bright, colorful, abstract paintings by an artist named Kane, she remembers the advice of Uncle Chu who strongly suggested for her not to limit herself by being placed “inside a ring.” Tang says, “This is why I cook many styles.”

Peruse Bistro Mon Cheri’s menu to understand how Tang’s list of offerings doesn’t fit neatly into any “ring.” Starters can mean spreading luxurious foie gras onto a fresh baguette, munching on crispy chicken wings marinated in coffee grounds and drizzled with a double espresso aioli, or dipping a shrimp bundled Vietnamese summer roll into sweet chili sauce. Ideas for her diverse dishes can come from literally anywhere, like the small backyard herb garden at her Sherman Oaks home to a food challenge issued by a coffee fanatic friend — this is exactly how the coffee chicken wings happened.



Kimmy Tang in Holland | Courtesy of Kimmy Tang

Perhaps Tang's highest profile concept, which made its Beverly Hills debut in 2009, was 9021Pho, the approachable Vietnamese restaurant centered around the popular beef noodle soup called *pho*. When all five locations shuttered in late 2016, Tang took some time off and went abroad. While visiting places like Copenhagen, Prague, Brussels, Berlin, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Osaka, Chengdu, Sichuan, Shanghai and Hunan, she immersed herself into the culinary scene overseas.

Friends in Japan took her to small neighborhood eateries, daring her to sample exotic fare. Tang happily obliged, eagerly devouring everything. "I always said, 'Yes, of course!'" she recalls. "Japanese cooking is very clean, light, colorful. I like the plating."

Spain ranks high on Tang's list as far as food destinations. "People are friendly. The food is colorful and flavorful. We went to five tapas restaurants one night. You eat a little bit at each place," she says. "One place had the brain of a cow. It was good. They stir-fried it with garlic, ginger and wine."

Back in 2008 after she sold her first restaurant Michelia, Tang similarly was bitten by the travel bug and found herself relocating with her boyfriend to Romania for two years. She got herself acclimated in her new country by offering to help cook at friends' homes. "When I went to dinner parties, I usually talk to the mama or grandma and learn technique and ingredients. I help and I learn. This was the best way to learn about food from other countries. Not in restaurants."



"[The] most important ingredient is passion."

Learning to cook has always been navigated by Tang in an unorthodox fashion. In 1989, her mentor Uncle Chu trained her to replicate recipes from cookbooks without actually reading the instructions since she couldn't decipher English anyway having newly arrived to the country. She's come to count on her creativity and learns by doing.

Methods acquired from Romanian grandmothers, German friends, Vietnamese relatives and a Taiwanese mentor, as well as experience from professional kitchens have served her well in serving her guests a creative mix of edible delights influenced by her life and travels. To this very day, she can go to any country, crack open a cookbook and figure out a recipe. "I went to Copenhagen and look at all the beautiful cookbooks. I can't read the language, but I know how to make it when I look at it." She operates by experience, instinct and imagination, "I'm very visual," Tang says, who has a degree in fashion design.



Roasted pork in Prague | Courtesy of Kimmy Tang

As much as Tang's yen for traveling the world invigorates her eclectic culinary ways, the vibrant and delicious meals of her childhood in Vietnam is further fuel.

"There was always food and I was always eating," she shares. "Then one day Mama Tang told me, 'Kimmy, there is no free lunch. If you want to eat, go help.'" She was 7 when she began assisting in the kitchen doing basic prep work. Soon, however, she was entering cooking competitions at church. Tang realized she was very good at cooking.

Beyond her fond food memories, Tang's time in Vietnam was tragic and tumultuous. She recounts a moment when she was very small: her nanny was shot and killed by a North Vietnamese soldier, while holding the young Tang in her arms. "Blood was all over me, but I was not shot. My nanny was killed,"

she explains. “I was covered in her blood. My parents were so scared. It was terrible. Horrible. That’s a long story. It’s another story. Very terrible.” This event took place during the historic Tet Offensive.

Her family lived in the city at the time known as Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. Her father was the owner of a cookie factory. When the North Vietnamese took control of the entire country, her father was jailed and soon released based on favorable testimony by his former employees. She remembers the army evicting her entire family from their home in the middle of the night and having nothing but the clothes they were wearing.



Grilled shrimp in the Czech Republic | Courtesy of Kimmy Tang

When Tang’s family immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-90s via the Philippines, they arrived with \$35 and lived in a relative’s garage until they saved enough for a home. Tang worked as a server in the Bakersfield restaurant when one day a customer asked if there were any off menu items available to order. Tang asked her chef if he could make something different for the guest. He refused but would approve if she wanted to do it. This was her first opportunity to cook in a professional kitchen. She jumped at the chance and made something that she learned back in Vietnam: pepper mignon steak, (her variation on *thit bo luc lac* or shaking beef). She scoured the kitchen for ingredients, prepared and served it. Pepper mignon is, for good reason, a sentimental dish and was on the menu at Michelia and now at Bistro Mon Cheri.

Uncle Chu began to teach her cooking in earnest. He trained her palate by seasoning several bowls of broth with varying degrees of salt and asked her which bowl was saltier. “He taught me to ‘talk to ingredients’,” says Tang. “[The] most important ingredient is passion he said. When guests come to my house, I go to the kitchen, look at what I have and imagine dishes.”

In many ways, the concept of Tang’s current restaurant Bistro Mon Cheri is pure imagination and not adherent to constraints or “rings” as Uncle Chu would describe it. This would explain the panko encrusted meatball concealing melted Belgian dark chocolate she dubs Chocolicious, inspired by lava cake. And where else will you need to debate between the main course choices of squid ink pasta created Thai-style spiked with *makrut* lime leaves and her father’s favorite Chinese chicken noodle soup swimming with broad rice noodles, which many customers mistakenly refer to as *pho*. Fortunately, Tang doesn’t mind the confusion. With so many varieties of dishes influenced by so many cultures and places served at her restaurant, she’ll take it as a compliment.



Chef Kimmy Tang holding squid ink pasta | Eddie Lin



Chocolate meatballs at Bistro Mon Cheri | Eddie Lin



Coffee chicken wings at Bistro Mon Cheri | Eddie Lin

Top image: Spicy and Sour Seafood Noodle Soup | Eddie Lin