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Happy Valley Restaurant Opens in Lafayette

By A.K. Carroll



Nancy Kwan and Amy Yee Photo Andy Scheck

When it comes to the day-to-day duties of owning and running a restaurant, for sisters Nancy Kwan and Amy Yee, it's all in the family. Their family immigrated to San Francisco from Hong Kong and have lived in the Bay Area ever since. Yee has always been drawn to the kitchen and started cooking at the age of 12.

"My sister, she didn't like to cook," Yee said, adding with a smile, "but she liked to eat."

Following high school Yee began working in a restaurant in San Francisco. She's been in the industry ever since, from bussing tables to balancing books in fast food joints to banquet halls.

It was through restaurants that Yee met her late husband, Wayne. He was a chef at Tong's in Lafayette until 1990, and then at Great Wall until 1995. Not long after the Yees married, they opened their first Happy Valley in Tracy. In 2004, they relocated to Belmont, then San Mateo and finally to

Berkeley. When Chef Yee fell ill in 2013, the couple sold the business to new owners. (It retains the name but has no ties to the new location). Following Chef Yee's death in 2014, Yee began searching for a way to get back into the restaurant game. When Lily's House closed early this year, Yee was quick to snatch up the property.

"I was surprised that this was the location," Yee said, remarking that 3555 Mt. Diablo Blvd. is not only the former home of Lily's, but also of Tong's, the restaurant where she first met her husband. The opportunity seemed to be fated.

Yee has taken Kwan's son (her nephew) Adrian Siu on as a co-owner and business partner. "We always work together," said Kwan, who has partnered with Yee from the start. "We're a team as a family."

Siu is finishing up his last semester at UC Davis where he majors in sociology. While working as a server and bartender in a Presidio bowling alley, Siu fell in love with customer service and the food industry. He is eager to cut his teeth as a partner. "I'm really grateful my aunt has taken me in," said Siu.

It comes as no surprise that opening Happy Valley in Lafayette was a family affair. Yee and Kwan's older sister oversaw the interior decor, from the Chinese prints on the seafoam and dark-paneled walls to the bamboo on the counter and the mirror in the bathroom. Even Siu was able to make it up from UC Davis for the soft opening.

"I was excited and a little nervous," said Siu, who someday hopes to open a place in San Francisco. "It's still a little overwhelming."

Happy Valley has had a slow start since opening its doors on Feb. 23, but the family is hopeful to connect to the Lafayette community.

"We're trying to serve the best Chinese food we can while taking care of our customers," said Siu. "We're a little family restaurant and we want other families to come and try our food."

When it comes to Happy Valley's menu, recommendations and options abound. "Hands down the chow mein," said Siu. "It's a go-to for sure." The Lafayette location features many of Happy Valley's original offerings, with the addition of Peking duck and a few other dishes. Less adventurous eaters will find solace in the subdued flavors of orange chicken and chicken chow mein, dishes with little flair and mild familiarity.

More exotic eaters might opt for the jammy, sweet syrup of the strawberry-glazed pork chop or the savory pepper notes in the honey-glazed beef. Yee's favorite has always been her husband's crispy ginger chicken, a dish that her current chef is still learning to replicate. She also recommends the "yee mein" noodles, a traditional flat Cantonese egg noodle that is softer and thicker than chow mein. Also called "birthday noodles," the long length of yi mein is meant to signify long life. Personally, I'd go with the golden pumpkin prawns, battered and fried whole prawns and wedges of pumpkin that are reminiscent of Japanese tempura, it was by far the best thing I tried at Happy Valley.

"It's like having a home," Kwan said of working in the restaurant. "When clients (first)come in, their children are young. We (get to)watch them grow up." Regardless of the size or age of your family, consider bringing them to Happy Valley and meeting the new neighbors. It may just be an introduction you'll be glad that you made.

Happy Valley Restaurant
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Photo A.K. Carroll

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