

unity



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## Celebrity Chef Ming Tsai: Here! There! Everywhere!

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# Celebrity Chef Ming Tsai: Here! There! Everywhere!

In early 2020, award-winning Iron Chef Ming Tsai decided he wouldn't let the pandemic squash **MingsBings**, a consumer packaged-goods startup. He'd created a handheld plant-based Chinese **bing** and nothing was going to stop Tsai from getting it on the market.

"You either froze or you rose during COVID," he says. "Fortunately, I rose. It was a great time to start a company because every CEO picked up their phone; they had nothing to do."

Taking on a challenge is nothing new for Tsai. Raised in Dayton, Ohio, he learned to cook from working in his mom's restaurant, Mandarin Kitchen. He attended high school at Phillips Academy in Andover in Massachusetts and graduated from Yale University with a mechanical engineering degree, which he put to use creating his line of Simply Ming Appliances for **HSN** ([hsn.com](https://www.hsn.com)). Tsai played squash at Yale and was second team all-American in 1986.

Summers were spent apprenticing at restaurants in Paris. After his junior year, he attended Le Cordon Bleu for three months. Following college, Tsai studied under pastry Chef Pierre Hermé in Paris.

When Tsai returned to the United States, he pursued a graduate degree in hotel administration and hospitality marketing at Cornell University. Over the past several decades, he's owned restaurants and hosted and produced television shows.

**"You either froze or you rose during COVID. Fortunately, I rose. It was a great time to start a company because every CEO picked up their phone; they had nothing to do."**



Chef Ming Tsai spends two-thirds of his time in Massachusetts and a third in Montana. Photo by Joe St. Pierre

Tsai, the 2002 James Beard Best Chef of the Northeast, spends two-thirds of his time in Boston, where MingsBings is headquartered, and a third at BāBā, his restaurant at Yellowstone Club in Big Sky, Montana. In 2022, Netflix released "[Quest for an Iron Legend](#)," a reboot of Food Network's "Iron Chef America." Tsai is one of five iron chefs battling the challenger chefs.

Five years ago, Tsai's wife, Polly Talbott Tsai, had a health scare and decided to become a vegan. Tsai worried about her diet when he wasn't there to cook. He began his research at the grocery store by taste-testing veggie patties. "It became my mission to redefine the veggie market," Tsai says. "Create something that was delicious first, and then also plant-based."

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# New York mom builds community through comedy



Alyce Chan shares her comedy on a parenting platform and Instagram reels. Photo by Mike Bryk

Alyce Chan likes to say she started training as a comedian when she was 9 years old. She was one of a few Asian children in her school in Vancouver, Canada, and she was often bullied and called names. To make friends, Chan memorized 10 jokes to tell the other kids. Although Chan didn't understand half the middle school humor, the laughter from the other students gave the shy girl the validation she needed.

In 2018, Chan created [MomComNYC](#), a parenting platform for comedy, events and branding partnerships. Her almost-daily reels on [Instagram](#) provide relatable comedy sketches for parents and families.

She turns everyday situations involving kids, parents and grandparents into comedy routines. She limits her own family members' time in front of the camera by playing them herself. Sometimes Chan dons a wig and imitates her mother's expressions. A deep voice and baseball hat perched on top of Chan's head signals she's playing her husband in the reel.

"(My husband) is very supportive of my comedy," says the mom of two boys. "He inspires a lot of it. I just blow it out of proportion."

In her early thirties, Chan enrolled in acting and improvisation classes while working a corporate job in marketing. When she didn't enjoy being on stage in that capacity, someone suggested stand-up comedy. She liked it because she was reminded of the time she told jokes at school. Chan took a class at [Carolines on Broadway](#), a former landmark comedy club in New York City.

"I performed my first set and totally bombed," she explains. "I remember Judah Friedlander from '30 Rock' was there. He said, 'You have good content.' Because he said that, I had to keep going. This guy had been doing comedy for 20 years."

Chan continued to perform at open-mic nights but took a four-year break from comedy and her marketing career when she had her first son. In 2017, six months after her second son was born, she realized she needed a creative outlet. Chan founded [Bring Your Own Baby Comedy](#), a monthly, 45-minute morning comedy show for moms, dads, nannies and babies at [WORD](#), an independent bookstore in Brooklyn. For two years, before COVID-19 shut them down, Chan and another co-host warmed up the crowd before four other professional comedians performed. The show's audience eventually maxed out the bookstore's basement.

MomComNYC isn't just about making people laugh - Chan wants to provide an honest perspective on motherhood. The challenges Chan faced when she had children, loss of friends and loss of identity, motivate her to continue her work in comedy. She's careful not to depict herself as a perfectly manicured parent. Shooting a reel in her pajamas after jumping out of bed captures her creativity and authenticity.

"I want to be a safe, supportive space for mothers and for new moms to feel like they're not alone on this journey," says Chan, a resident of Westchester County, New York. "Parenthood is a struggle. Not a lot of people talk about the challenges. I want to create a community for these mothers."

And Chan's comedy is also about paving the way for shy kids, especially Asian children, to reach their potential. In a 2020 comedy show for elementary-age children, one student asked, "Why are you so weird?" The question catapulted Chan back to her grade school days when she was called weird. Her thoughtful response allowed other students in the class to embrace the word. "Thank you for calling me that. You know what weird means, right? It just means that I'm very different, and I can use my different skills to stand out from everybody."



"I want to be a safe, supportive space for mothers and for new moms," says Alyce Chan. Photo by Josh Francois

# A contemporary tribute to tradition

The works by the three artists chosen for this issue of *Unity* exemplify the strength and passion indicative of their Asian heritage. Their works convey messages of Western influence and lifestyles, yet maintain connections to and respect for their Asian roots.

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## SHARK TOOF

Shark Toof is a Chinese-American artist who has established his visual calling card, a wheat paste, hand-drawn shark head, as his logo and is recognized for his graffiti street art and his works on canvas. Toof says his art process relates to his heritage.

Toof describes his work as “saturated with bold color, tension of composition and use of spatial relationships.” Using acrylic and spray paint on canvas, Toof’s work reveals parallels of Asian culture,

yet is driven by vintage-like portrayals of American males and females with facial features replaced by bursts of energy. His piece, “Boy, Girl and Two Wolves Show,” was inspired by a trip to Southeast Asia where a strong American influence was present. “The painting shows a mutual embrace while decisions are contemplated and the wolves’ mouths (nature) represents the ultimate answer,” says Toof.

“Girl and Tiger Show” is a juxtaposition of the question, Which is the predator and which is the prey? “Boy, Three Girls and Tiger Show” has “many questions,” Toof says, “from unraveling the title of the piece to arms and grasping hands that seem to appear from out of nowhere.”

Toof also collaborates with other artists with his art and designs of sharks to raise awareness of shark and ocean habitat conservation.

## JAYANTHI MOORTHY

Jayanthi Moorthy is a Brooklyn-based artist born and raised in India. Her art career began as an interior designer and a character animator of 3-D graphics.

Many of Moorthy’s works are created on unstretched pieces of canvas and cloth with the use of mixed media such as paper, rice flour, acrylic paint and flowers. The heavy textures and printed paper in the center of “Making Sense” are surrounded by a



“Boy, Girl and Two Wolves Show” by Shark Toof



“Girl and Tiger Show” by Shark Toof



“Boy, Three Girls and Tiger Show” by Shark Toof



"In the Moment," "Making Sense," "The Testament" by Jayanthi Moorthy

combination of deep and bright reds. Moorthy says this piece is her personal reflection on religion, culture and life and spearheaded a series of works called Ceremonial Lines. She says "In the Moment" was inspired by nature and the explosion of springtime color. The calligraphy and dots symbolize a Sanskrit daily prayer and the foot binding worn by Asian women, respectively. The white and red horizontal lines in "The Testament" are inspired by the sacred markings on the forehead of Indian men and women: white for ashes and red for saffron.

"I draw inspiration from Asian culture and its age-old rituals and ceremonies, which has been the biggest influence in my choice of medium, themes, materials and process," says Moorthy. "They fascinate me not just because of their aesthetic appeal but also (their) ephemeral nature." Moorthy's work has been exhibited in New Delhi and the New York City area.

### ARTHUR LIU

Arthur Liu grew up in an artistic family and says he has been in love with fine arts since childhood. At a young age, his father, a calligraphist and artist, taught him to

express his thoughts and imaginations on paper. Liu attended the Guangzhou (Gawn-szoh) Academy of Fine Arts in China and in 1984, then left for the United States to continue his studies in fine art. He earned a master's degree in fine arts from The City College of New York in 1990 and began his career as an artist. After more than two decades of research and creation, Liu created a U.S. patent called Flowing Colors Oil Painting technique and the Flowing Colors Oil Paint. Under Liu's method, he combines the traditional Chinese water-and-ink technique with oil paint that artists were unable to accomplish in the past.

Liu, influenced by the conciseness of traditional Chinese paintings and the sense of freedom in contemporary Western art, brings the two together in an abstract depiction of natural scenes with motion and vitality. "Motherly Love" is an oil painting with a mix of sculpture, painting and installation art that represents a mother's love toward her child. "Thinker" utilizes the same technique and depicts a woman in front of a window. Inspired by his desire for peace and unity, "Peace of Love" shows affection between a man and a woman. When viewed up close, these three works have a marbled-like look that reveals Liu's patented oil painting technique.

Liu is the only Chinese-American artist who has been granted patents in the art field in the United States. He's the founder of the Queens Art Education Center, which offers studies in fine arts and opportunities to pursue art as a career.



"Motherly Love," "Thinker," "Peace of Love" by Arthur Liu

# A lifetime in the kitchen pays off



"(Our menus) focus around Japanese flavors and techniques," says Michael Lee, restaurant-group owner and chef. "But me being South Korean, I incorporate Korean flavors and techniques into it." Photo courtesy of Michael Lee

Chef Michael Lee's journey to restaurateur started when he was a child. He immigrated with his family to the United States from South Korea at the age of 9. They moved every two to three years for his parents' factory jobs in Arkansas, Illinois, Oklahoma and many other states. The family eventually landed in small-town Washington, Missouri.

"When my parents moved here (United States), they had to give up their regular jobs," Lee says. "None of us spoke any English. They brought us here for a better education."

In 2016, many years and miles later, Lee and his wife, Kim Lee, formed North Carolina-based M Restaurant Group. M Sushi in Durham opened in 2016 and is the company's flagship restaurant. Over the next six years, they launched M Sushi in Cary; and M Koko, M Pocha, M Sushi and M Tempura in Durham. Menus include sushi, tempura and other Japanese-style dishes. The couple live in Durham with their two children.

Lee is always searching for fundamental ingredients to make simple food. "I've always had a fascination with Japanese cuisine," Lee says. "(Our menus) focus around Japanese flavors and techniques. But me being South Korean, I incorporate Korean flavors and techniques into it."

Interest in food started as a teenager when Lee worked part time at Sonic Drive-In. "I started flipping burgers at 15," he says. "I always had a part-time job through high school and college to make side money."

In 1999, during his last semester at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas, Lee dropped out of the computer engineering and computer science programs and moved to the West Coast to work in the restaurant industry.

"I'm not sure I can exactly say what the reason was behind it, but I really enjoyed interacting with the customers," he explains. "It was fun to make food. I preferred that over a small cubicle in the corner, which I got a small taste of during an internship."

His goal at the time was to gain as much experience in the restaurant business as possible, working in places like Phoenix and Tucson in Arizona, Los Angeles, California, and Las Vegas, Nevada.

"I went to big cities on the West Coast, trying to work at different places," Lee says. "It opened my eyes and (I) absorbed some different techniques and surroundings. I worked at fancy high-end (restaurants) and some holes-in-the-wall, and I took away more from the holes-in-the-wall run by three, four family members. Those are the places I remember the most and learned the most."

He made his way toward the East Coast, working in New Mexico, Texas and Louisiana. "After I decided this is what I wanted to do, I concentrated on back of the house (working in the kitchen)," Lee says. "I tried to learn different cuisines, but I stuck to Japanese restaurants where they had hibachi or sushi."

In 2005, Lee visited his parents in Wake Forest, North Carolina, where they'd relocated, at the same time Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, Louisiana. "The restaurant where I was supposed to go to was wiped out," Lee says. "It was quite a moment. It was a catastrophic event, and I was lucky to have decided to take a break at the right time."

Lee stayed in Wake Forest, saving money and researching the area's restaurant scene. In 2008, he opened his first Japanese restaurant, Sono, in Raleigh. He sold it in 2014.

The restaurant group's newest concept, M Test Kitchen, that opened recently in Cary. "We didn't want to put any limitations on the kitchen's creativity," Lee says. "We wanted a restaurant where we can make any type of food that we can possibly use at other locations."



Michael Lee traces his interest in food to a part-time job at a Sonic Drive-In. Photo courtesy of Michael Lee

# Devotee of food with an appetite for storytelling

Dressed in a red-and-white striped shirt, Kalamata, the main character in Sarah Thomas' first children's book, "Kalamata's Kitchen," heads out on a mission to try all kinds of food. This Indian American girl brings Al Dente, her alligator pal, along for food adventures. Along the way, they learn about open-mindedness and respect.

"We describe her as being curious, courageous and compassionate," Thomas says. "She's a fearless food adventurer and she wants everyone to know it. She wants her friends to come along for the ride."

Thomas was raised in Somerset, a town in rural western Pennsylvania, by parents who immigrated from Kerala, India. She had a traditional Indian upbringing, she says. "My culture was always a little bit in conflict with the environment I was raised in," says the cofounder and chief brand officer of [Kalamata's Kitchen](#). "It was hard for me, and I struggled a lot. My goal was assimilation when I was a kid, but I wasn't ever successful."

Although Thomas intended to pursue medicine in her early twenties, she migrated to restaurants after undergraduate and graduate studies. She studied to be a sommelier through The Court of Master Sommeliers. The change made sense to her.

"I fell in love with the hospitality industry," she says. "I realized, as a child, my favorite thing in the entire world was food."

Thomas was the sommelier at [Le Bernardin](#), a Michelin three-star restaurant in Manhattan, when her friend, Derek Wallace, asked her to build a business based on Kalamata, a character they created. Wallace's son had just turned 3 years old, and he wanted to connect his son to the world through food. "(We thought,) what if we could create the character that inspired kids to experience the whole world through adventures with food?" Thomas says.

With colorful illustrations by Jo Kosmides Edwards, Thomas and Wallace self-published "Kalamata's Kitchen" in 2018. The first book features Thomas' mom's recipe for dal and rice, one of the first solid foods Indian children eat, says Thomas. Throughout the story, the dal, with its smells, sounds and texture, cooks on the stove. "The book follows along on Kalamata's self-exploration," she says. "She's nervous on her first day of school. Her mom reminds her that she can be brave."

From the start, Thomas felt a personal connection to Kalamata, a little brown girl with big hair and big eyebrows. Kalamata is willing to share her authentic self with others and in turn, learn about them.



"I realized, as a child, my favorite thing in the entire world was food," says author Sarah Thomas. Photo by Chancellor Humphrey

"It's the epitome of empathy and respect," Thomas says. "Those are the lessons we're trying to translate to children but through this very narrative, fun, imaginative, inspired medium."

In 2020, Thomas, a Brooklyn, New York resident, left Le Bernardin to focus full time on Kalamata's Kitchen. She's been part of its give-back program to support [No Kid Hungry](#), a nonprofit raising awareness about food instability.

Thomas' second book, "Taste Buds in Harmony," was published in 2022 by Penguin Random House. It highlights a Malaysian dish within the Baba Nyonya culture and was inspired by Kyo Pang, restaurateur, founder and executive chef of [Kopitiam](#) in New York City.

Soon, Kal and Al will have their own animated series, a project with [Imagine Entertainment](#), the film and TV production company founded by Brian Grazer and Ron Howard. With a similar storyline and preschool audience, Thomas hopes to reach more children with the Taste Bud Pledge: I promise to keep my mind open and my fork ready, to try each new food at least two times and to share what's on my plate when someone doesn't have enough.

"At the end of the day, that phrase is at the heart of everything we're doing," Thomas explains, "and what we're trying to put out into the world, for kids and for families."

# Celebrity Chef Ming Tsai: Here! There! Everywhere!

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After a blind taste test, Tsai chose Before the Butcher and Just Eggs, for the gluten free, plant-based Bings and Breakfast Bings. And the mechanical engineering degree from Yale came in handy again. "I designed our current MingsBings machine," Tsai says.

The plant-based proteins and spices are wrapped in a crispy brown rice wrapper and are available in 4,000 stores across the country or online in a variety of flavors, from cheeseburger to Buffalo cauliflower. Bings cook in an air fryer for 16 minutes (best), or in a convection oven or cast-iron pot. "I took this awesome plant-based protein and did what any chef would do," he says, "I added caramelized onions. I added a great cheese called Violife. I added spices - whatever it was to make it delicious."



Ming Tsai's packaged-goods venture, MingsBings, consists of dairy-free, gluten-free, plant-based and vegan selections. Photo by Joe St. Pierre

## Vegetarian Chow Mein

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Servings: 4

### Ingredients

- Grape seed oil for cooking
- 3 tablespoons minced garlic
- 2 tablespoons minced ginger
- 1 bunch scallions, sliced, white and green part separated
- Kosher salt and freshly cracked black pepper to taste
- 1 zucchini, julienned
- 2 bell peppers (red and yellow), julienned
- 1/2 pound blanched or ready to go chow mien or Shanghai noodles

### Sauce

- 1/4 cup naturally brewed soy sauce
- 1/4 cup honey
- 1 teaspoon sambal (chili paste)
- Juice of 2 limes

### Garnish

- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil, for drizzling
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds

### Directions

In a hot wok or sauté pan, coat with grape seed oil and add garlic, ginger and scallion whites and season with salt and pepper. Add zucchini and stir-fry for 3 to 4 minutes until softened, season. Add the bells and cook another 3 minutes

Mix the sauce together. Add the noodles and sauce and cook for 3 minutes until the noodles are hot; check seasoning.

Transfer to a platter, drizzle with the sesame oil, garnish with scallion greens and sesame seeds and serve.

**On the cover:** Chef Ming Tsai. Photo by Joe St. Pierre. Articles on pages 2, 3, 6 and 7 by Vanessa Infanzon.

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