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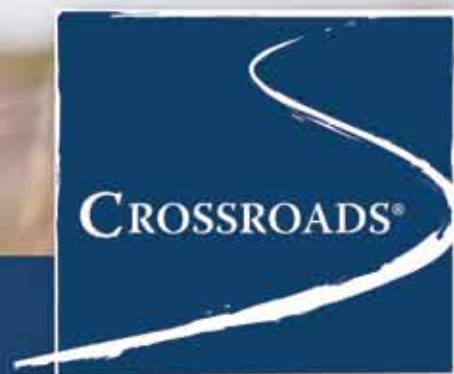
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# New Wave Asian

A new wave of restaurateurs brings modern interpretations of authentic **Thai, Vietnamese, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese** food to Portland.

BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER

PORTLAND'S HUNGER for the food of Japan, China, and Southeast Asia continues unchecked. The more we learn about the cuisines of each country, the more they become vital to the restaurant landscape here—and the more they transition from exotic to mainstream as their loyal fan base grows. **Panda Express this is not.**

MEAGHAN MAURICE

A warming bowl of chicken pho from Cong Tu Bot.



## HUNGRY EYE



**Clockwise from top left:** An array of appetizers at **Cheevitdee** includes Thai classics like Gai Ta khrai (lemongrass chicken skewers) and Kanom Jeeb (shumai dumplings); A bowl of Pad Kra Pow features ground chicken, boiled egg, and “riceberry”—a type of purple Thai rice; Head chef and co-owner Jay Pranadsri; The shrimp crepe, or Kanom Buang Youn, is served with a cooling side of cucumber vinaigrette.



## HEART AND SEOUL

**Yobo** is proof that, in Portland, when one culinary door closes, another opens. When owners Bill and Andrea Boutwell decided at the end of 2016 to shutter Bibo’s Madd Apple Café, the hippie-style pre-show dinner destination for Portland Stage-goers for 18 years, the place didn’t stay dark for long. **Sun and Kim Lully Chung’s** new Korean restaurant opened at 23 Forest Avenue this summer. Today, there’s not a batik pillow in sight. Serene rooms with creamy-cappuccino walls are silhouetted with handsome black wooden furniture and banquettes.

“Yobo isn’t quite traditional, but it’s exactly what we intended: small and intimate with a short, thoughtful menu,” says chef Sun. “Good honest food.”

**Kim Chung**, serving as hostess and waitress, starts us out with sake service. “In Korea, it’s a form of hospitality to offer your guests a little gift of some sort.” She places a stemless sake glass for each of us in its own small lacquer box. Pouring the ice-cold sake, she allows the glasses to fill and then overflow lavishly into the boxes. “Now you have a glass of sake plus a little gift.” She smiles.

We feast on a mung-bean pancake with garlic-chive kimchi minced into the batter. It’s nicely browned and cut into wedges for easy dipping in a soy-scallion sauce. Skinny steel chopsticks and serving spoons are the utensils here. “Metal sticks are traditional,” Kim says. Pan-fried pot-stickers have an irresistibly crispy skin; they’re filled with pork and kimchi and are delicious. I take back every snarky thing I’ve ever said about kimchi!

Braised, boneless beef ribs are meltingly tender. Daily *banchan* veggies of local, seasonal produce include cleaver-cut zucchini with toasted sesame seeds, spicy eggplant, and remarkable potato cubes dressed in Korean chili powder and sesame oil. Potatoes?

“I’m a County girl,” says Kim of her Aroostook roots. “In Korea, *banchan* are made of whatever vegetables are plentiful, just like here.”

“We ran Sunny’s Table in Concord, New Hampshire, for years,” Kim says. [It’s now closed.] “Sunny was born in Korea. He came here when he was six.” Kim is not Asian, but “Mama Chung says that after a couple of decades in the family, I must be at least half-Korean.”

“Asian cuisine allows people to try simple items like dumplings or pancakes in a whole new way with flavors and textures that are bold and comforting at the same time.”

And the translation of Yobo? “In our house, it means ‘Yes, Dear,’” says Kim. “Yobo is an expression of communication between husband and wife.”

**Hakka Me** food truck serves Chinese classics to-go, like Lu Shui Ji, brined chicken with “grandma’s ginger sauce.”



## FINE CHINA

Portland’s ongoing renaissance for quality Chinese restaurants continues. **Empire** gave us a taste for elegant Cantonese dishes. Then **Bao Bao** arrived, with Cara Stadler’s superior dumplings. This year we added **Sichuan Kitchen**, the neighborhood café in the shadow of the State Theatre. And this summer, we gained Chinese food on wheels.





## FIRST WAVE

Maine's hunger for Chinese food dates back long before Empire and The

Golden Lotus began to delight us with dim-sum and cha siu bao. An advertisement for the Chinaman's Tea & Coffee Store on Congress Street appeared in the Portland City Directory in 1871. The tea shop was run by Ar Foo Fong, who had arrived in Portland from China in 1860. Nine years later, "Ar Tee Lam opened what is believed to be Maine's first Chinese restaurant at 1 Custom House Wharf in 1880 [...]. At the time, Portland's population of 33,810 included nine Chinese men," says Gary Libby in *Chinese America: History & Perspectives*.

"Maine's first known Chinese immigrant, Daniel Cough, came here in 1857," Libby tells *Portland Monthly*. "Bernard 'Sonny' Cough was his grandson." Bernard was one of the founding father of the College of the Atlantic and owner of the legendary Atlantic Oakes by-the-Sea Motel.



"Growing up, this was rice for a special occasion, not every day," **John Wen** says as he hands out a small carton of Nou Mi Fan, a fragrant pilaf of jasmine and sticky rice studded with shreds of pork, tiny dried shrimp, and slices of Chinese mushroom. He's in the kitchen of **Hakka Me**, a Cantonese food truck.



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## HUNGRY EYE



**Above left:** The “Big Mami” burger at **Mami** restaurant uses squid ink to give the bun its signature color.

**Above right:** Yakisoba has been a favorite dish since Mami’s inception as a food truck.



Wen’s menu includes tasty braised chicken, pork dumplings, and plenty of veggie sides. “My family is from the Guangdong province, where people are referred to as Hakkanese, supposedly descendants of the Han Dynasty. I was born in China, and I came here in 1998. I grew up in Oxford, graduated from Oxford High School. My family has a Chinese restaurant there—Ocean Pearl.”

**H**akka Me can be found on the block of Spring Street between Center and Union streets at lunchtime, the Eastern Prom, and at local breweries. “I did the Cape Elizabeth Strawberry Festival, and I’m going to Sugarloaf this weekend for the mountain bike festival,” he says with the wide smile of a free spirit. “I started the truck because I didn’t want to cook American-Chinese like my parents. They haven’t changed their menu in decades.”

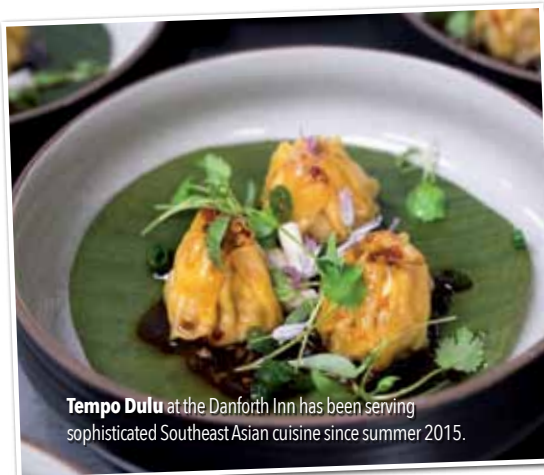
### INTO THE OLD PORT

**Cheevitdee** has transformed the glass-storefront corner at Fore and Market streets into a sun-washed palace of delicious, healthy Thai food. And we do mean transformed—a Dunkin’ Donuts occupied this spot a few incarnations and light years ago. Spotless planked floors and simple wood-and-wrought-iron furniture, plus salvaged rough-plank wainscoting, set a sophisticated, minimalist tone. Even the la-

dies’ room is pretty enough for a selfie.

You won’t find crab Rangoon on this menu. Cheevitdee’s menu nicely exploits the trend in small-plate sharing, with appetizers such as Pla Goong (shrimp bites with lemongrass) and Gai Ta Khrai (grilled chicken skewer). There’s papaya salad that, like much of the menu, can be served vegetarian or vegan. Entrees include Ping Ngob (grilled salmon curry wrapped in banana leaves) and Kanom Buang Yourn, a shrimp crêpe with tofu and sprouts.

Our waiter recommends Kanom Jeeb. “These are *shumai* dumplings filled with shrimp and organic tofu, very light and tasty.” He delivers a rectangle of slate upon which stand four porcelain spoons. Each spoon holds a *shumai* pouch in a pool of sweet ginger soy sauce, garnished with a



**Tempo Dulu** at the Danforth Inn has been serving sophisticated Southeast Asian cuisine since summer 2015.

“I started the truck because I didn’t want to cook **American-Chinese** like my parents. They haven’t changed their menu in decades.”

—John Wen, *Hakka Me*

few gossamer slivers of red pepper and infinitesimal dots of crispy-fried garlic. It’s one of those simple masterpieces of presentation and flavor. “Cheevitdee means ‘good life,’” he says.

Out the window, the Old Port marches by as ever, in late-season tank tops, tattoos, and plaid flannel. But you’re in an oasis of wood and bouquets of fresh flowers, tasting the subtleties of lemongrass, lime, and ginger.

### TRUTH, BEAUTY, FOOD TRUCK

“We wanted a casual place where people can come sit and relax and enjoy a bite to eat,” says **Austin Miller**, who, with wife **Hana Tamaki**, owns the Japanese restaurant **Mami** that opened six months ago in a prime spot at 339 Fore Street.

Mami debuted as a food truck a few years ago and quickly became a beloved member of the mobile food fleet.

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## HUNGRY EYE

It was Tamaki, the daughter of Portland's first sushi chef, who introduced Miller to Japanese cooking, and he embraced it completely. They cook together in the Mami kitchen now. And the name? It means "truth, strength, and beauty," the hostess says.

The restaurant is classic Old Port, with brick walls, a couple of sofas, a smattering of tables, and a glass front overlooking Boothby Square. Local breweries are heavily represented on a chalkboard drink menu, including Bissell Brothers and Austin Street on tap. "We started out at the breweries here, and everybody in Japan drinks beer. It goes great with the food," Miller says.

The menu is also on chalkboard only, and as with so many of the new Asian places, it's very appealing price-wise. You order at a counter, select a drink, find a seat, and your food's delivered when ready. Yakitori or shiitake skewers are \$3, octopus takoyaki is \$7, and Donburi rice bowls run \$10 to \$14. My daily special of crunchy green beans and neat cubes of tofu dressed in a house-made tahini and garnished with toasted sesame seeds is delicious. Together with a molded cylinder of



**Above:** A dish of vegetable slaw piques the taste buds with chili and salty peanuts at **Cong Tu Bot**; the Vietnamese restaurant bustles with an eclectic and casual crowd.

**Below:** Kim and Sunny Chung opened **Yobo** on Forest Avenue this summer; The Korean restaurant serves an entree of Bi Bim Bap with either beef, chicken, or tofu. "Bi Bim Bap" literally translates as "mixed rice."



neatly cubed sushi tuna and ripe avocado garnished with pickled onion shreds, it's a perfect lunch.

The couple has a three-year-old daughter and a six-month old son in addition to a restaurant and food truck. "It is a lot," Miller says, grinning, a black chef's bandana around his forehead. "But you meet someone and you just know, I can do all this. I can do all this with you."

### EAST BAYSIDE, OF COURSE

As ever, inner Washington Avenue is on the cutting edge of this new wave of Asian eat-

eries. Head for the glowing pink neon PHO sign on the corner of the former J.J. Nissen Bakery and enter **Cong Tu Bot**, a new Vietnamese spot opened by husband-wife team **Vien Dobui** and **Jessica Sheahan**. Counter seats overlook the big open kitchen, décor is simple, and bright pink walls bring a smile.

The pho here is strictly chicken. "Vien is really passionate about chicken broth," says Jessica, who is working as hostess and server on this visit. When Vien comes over, he elaborates.

"In Vietnam, a lot of places specialize in just one pho. We wanted a very small focus



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## HUNGRY EYE

here.” The concise menu comprises four noodle or rice bowls, a selection of add-ins such as poached chicken, pork patties, or a sunny-side fried egg, and side dishes of fried rice and vegetables.

“We keep the menu really short so each thing is excellent,” says Vien. “Some regulars walk in and already know what they’re having. And we price it so we can have regulars who can come in once a week.” Menu prices top out at just \$14; sides and add-ons are \$2 to \$8. The kitchen is also geared for take-out. On this visit, it appeared Cong Tu Bot meals would be on tables all over the East End, so numerous were the hipsters dashing in and out with sacks of pho-to-go.

A bowl of the house chicken broth is \$3. Without noodles or so much as a sprinkling of familiar herbs, chilis, or even a wedge of lime, this broth truly is “excellent” and sings with exotic flavor notes. Dobui’s verve is there in each spoonful. So are “star anise, clove, cinnamon, black car-



Izakaya Minato glows from the corner of Washington Avenue and Oxford Street. The Japanese “gastropub” offers up treats such as Udon Vongole (left).

damom, coriander, black pepper...”

I bite into a bright, spicy side dish of cabbage slaw studded with peanuts and dusted with crispy fried shallots. Suddenly, my lungs are on fire—my senses have been stripped, my hands can’t feel to grip, my toes too numb to... Just kidding. But this slaw packs heat.

“Bird’s-eye chilis,” Vien says, pointing to the red slivers. I should have heeded the menu, but a one-chili designation seemed safe.

“We didn’t want our parents’ gener-

ation of Vietnamese-American restaurant,” he says. His parents were refugees from Vietnam who settled in Southern California, where he was born. “We wanted it to be like Vietnam.”

## WASHINGTON AVE. CONTINUED...

Don’t miss **Izakaya Minato**. There are plenty of bar and high-counter stools as well as table seating in an adjacent room at this casual, Japanese café that shares a block with Red Sea, Terlingua, and Silly’s. Décor is at-

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**Thainy Boda** takes Longfellow Square favorite Boda "Very Thai" Kitchen on the road, featuring Thai red curry (upper right). Vermicelli rice noodles at **Nom Bai** Cambodian food truck (center).

tractive, right up to the red paper lanterns hanging from the ceiling. It's a happening spot at happy hour. Chef **Takashi (Thomas) Cooke** and his minions are intent at their grill and frying pans in the open kitchen as barstools fill.

Flame-haired bartender Lucy presents a tray of assorted sake cups, both porcelain and pottery, no two alike. "Choose your cup," she says before placing a six-ounce carafe of cold Ozeki Sumo Junmai

sake on the bar—a tiny but charming gesture.

A special starter of a fresh mackerel fillet—lightly pickled, sliced, and then seared on the skin side with a blowtorch—is a sparkling gem. Slipping each morsel in the soy and dabbing it with wasabi makes a perfect pairing with the sake.

"Portland's kind of spoiled us," says a young, baseball-capped fellow from Amesbury, Massachusetts, sitting nearby. "Portsmouth's pretty good," says his blonde goddess companion, "but we come here and there's always something new to try."

They decimate an Age Ochazuke—fried rice ball in seafood broth—and a plate of tuna carpaccio with their chopsticks while sipping Campari cocktails.

"This street didn't used to be like this, did it?" asks the goddess. ■

MEAGHAN MAURICE

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