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life

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Chef and restaurateur
Moon Krapugthong
takes lessons learned
from the pandemic,
as well as a hopeful
heart, into the
future.

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Chabaa Thai Bistro favorites include the Grilled Wild Salmon Pad Thai (foreground) and the Pineapple Fried Rice.



Chef and restaurateur **Moon Krapugthong** takes lessons learned from the pandemic, as well as a hopeful heart, into the future.



CHEF AND RESTAURATEUR MOON KRAPUGTHONG ACKNOWLEDGES THAT IT'S BEEN A TOUGH FEW YEARS FOR THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY. In spite of many challenges, life at her two Manayunk restaurants—Chabaa Thai Bistro and Yanako Hot Kitchen & Sushi Bar BYOB—is moving forward, and upward, with the lessons taken away from this trying time.

“We got shut down and managed to survive during the worst—knock on wood—of the pandemic,” she shares. “We’ll likely never forget that time; the uncertainty of each day, staff members getting sick. ... Through that turbulence, we made the decision to stay strong, persist, and alter our business accordingly to weather the storm.”

Krapugthong hesitates to call it a dark time; rather, she describes it as “a time that taught us and let us see so many things, like the person who is next to us.”

This includes her team, her city, and the community around her, all of whom Krapugthong thanks profusely for their support since March 2020, when the pandemic altered the American way of life.

“Back then, we didn’t know how things would go,” she says. “We just kept cooking, kept serving, and doing whatever we could do at that moment. The light that shined through for us was help

ONWARD AND UPWARD

from the government, and support from customers and our community. Without the help of the City of Philadelphia, the federal government, restaurant associations, and local neighborhood associations like the Manayunk Development Corporation, I don't know where I'd be."

This help, as well as plentiful support from friends and neighbors, kept a vital fire of hope burning throughout the long months.

"All these regulations and financial help really shaped and paved the way for us to make it, step after step after step, until we could see a light at the end of the tunnel," she says. "When the vaccine came out and unemployment was given to those who'd lost jobs, we slowly began to see more people eating at our restaurants again. That's when things started to brighten."

Chabaa Thai welcomed back customers who had been hungering for Krapugthong's brand of authentic Thai cuisine, delicately spiced and made with market-fresh ingredients. Notable dishes include customer favorites such as fresh spring rolls, made with steamed shrimp and tofu, fresh herbs, and house-made sweet chili sauce; gaeng dang red curry with coconut milk, sweet basil, bamboo shoots, and galangal (a spicy-sweet relative of the ginger and turmeric roots); and savory king crab fried rice with tomatoes and cilantro.

Likewise, customers were glad to return to Yanako for Krapugthong's menu of Japanese cuisine, each dish subtly flavored and beautifully prepared for the table. Popular items include the Seven Seas roll (featuring tuna and yellowtail topped with avocado and spicy aioli) and Manayunk roll (a combo of crab and cucumber topped with nori and broiled eel), along with a variety of teriyaki, udon, tempura, and curry dishes.

The supply-chain issues that have disrupted myriad other industries have also affected—and continue to affect—the restaurant business. Combine that with an ongoing labor shortage, and Krapugthong suggests some obstacles remain obstinately in place. "A supplier may just say they don't have a key ingredient, or if they have it, the price has increased," she says. "You have to accept the price increase, figure out a substitution, or '86' the item."

Challenges aside, Krapugthong is grateful for the help she has received from sources near and far, including customers who have come to love the food she serves.



Chef Moon with members of her staff



Fresh Spring Rolls

She is also optimistic about the future, including the upcoming holiday season's celebrations, which are sure to be more festive than those allowed last year. She has already experienced a number of small blessings she hopes are the beginning of a full-fledged recovery. Just recently, a family celebrated a baby christening at Chabaa Thai, a sight that warmed Krapugthong's heart.

"When people come to you to celebrate an anniversary, a birthday, or a new family member, you carry that picture with you long after the event," she says. "That's the kind of thing that's really rewarding. I'm hopeful that more celebrations will return to the way they were pre-COVID and people will appreciate being able to gather at—and support—restaurants in this way again. We will certainly appreciate the opportunity to share in your joy."

Krapugthong always strives for consistency at both her restaurants, a feat that offers much-needed comfort in the midst of so much instability. As she always has when faced with uncertainty, Krapugthong has returned to her roots by focusing on what she does best—preparing memorable dishes to share with the community to form lasting connections.

"I just cook sincere food," she says mat-

ter-of-factly. "I want people to know we are working hard to try to keep things as normal as possible, when it comes to food and service. It's not easy, however we are proud of the experience we're delivering day in and day out.

"COVID has not been the best mark of time in my life," she continues. "But I'm glad to be a consistent bright spot in people's lives during such uncertain times. It's truly an honor." ■

→ Chabaa Thai Bistro Yanako Hot Kitchen & Sushi Bar BYOB

Chef Krapugthong welcomes new customers to her two Manayunk restaurants, Chabaa Thai Bistro and Yanako Hot Kitchen & Sushi Bar BYOB. For Chabaa Thai, call (215) 483-1979 or visit chabaathai.com. For Yanako, call (267) 297-8151 or (267) 297 8341 or visit theyanako.com.



Chef Moon in action