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## Noodle Theory coming to Rheem

By Lou Fancher



Photo Lou Fancher

Louis Kao, age 48, father of a 7-year-old son and twin daughters, age 5 - and soon-to-be parent with his wife, Yvonne Ling, of a fourth addition to the family due in October - loves to play with noodles. Happily, Kao's passion for Asian fusion cuisine extends beyond Chinese style ramen to Grilled Niman Ranch Beef Udon, handwrapped Shrimp and Chinese Chive Dumplings, Grilled Fulton Valley Chicken over Ginger Noodles, Pan Roasted Miso Marinated Black Cod, dry-sautéed spicy green beans and his beloved chicken thighs or wings.

These and other dishes featured at the chef and restaurant owner's Noodle Theory in Rockridge and Noodle Theory Provisions in Oakland/Emeryville, are the reason people in Lamorinda will be smiling come July. Kao, a Moraga resident, will open Noodle Theory's third iteration in the 1,200-square-foot space in the Rheem Shopping Center in Moraga after Graze closes in June. The exact hours and menu are pending; the restaurant will be open six days a week, closed Tuesdays.

In an interview, Kao is an affable, low-key fellow whose restaurants seem to be to him a happy surprise as much as they are to customers. He grew up in Palo

Alto in a family that always owned food establishments—a Chinese restaurant was constant, but there was also a burrito shop, a 24-hour diner, a burger-shake-soft-serve ice cream Fosters Freeze and more.

Although he learned to cook instant ramen and flip burgers, he says he had stereotypical tiger parents who pushed hard for their three sons to achieve. Semi-resistant, he complied to the pressure by enrolling in UC Berkeley, but his major-and his focus-were undeclared.

It wasn't until he and others formed an Asian charter of a fraternity that he "branched out to cooking real food" and, unbeknownst to him, began his journey to chef and restaurant owner. "At Cal, I started cooking chicken wings. I talked to my dad and by learning from him how things should be done, I finally made a better connection to him."

Taking a job in the kitchen at The House in North Beach, Kao made sauces, appetizers and other simple items, gradually progressing to more sophisticated dishes during a 10-year period. Meanwhile, after "having too much fun" at UC Berkeley, he dropped out without graduating. Several years later, he attended the Academy of Art University in San Francisco. Intending to become a computer animation artist but ultimately lacking confidence that it was the right path, he departed during his final semester. It's fair to say Kao was still searching, but for what, was uncertain.

Leap to 2007, the year Kao opened the first Noodle Theory that quickly became a hot spot due to the menu's Asian-with-a touch-of-California sensibilities. The much larger 3,000-square-foot Provisions followed in 2016. Customers appreciated the attention to quality meats, locally sourced produce and flavors that mirror the rich, tender qualities of French cuisine but include the sharpness of South Asian flavors like lime juice and chilis. "I love French food. I still remember a mushroom omelette I had in France. It was simple, but transformative, like nothing I'd ever made or tasted before," he says. "At home, I love to cook braised chicken thighs, made with shallots, butter, a little white wine or vermouth. French cuisine is romantic."

Postino in Lafayette is a local restaurant he favors. "I go out for decadence, the more the better," he says. "I don't go out to eat salad. There, the food is hardy and classic. The crabs, hand-torn croutons, mashed potatoes with horseradish cream on the side ... I never leave hungry."

Kao prefers kitchen staff who are hard working and quick to react, if less personable than front of house staff. There, interacting with customers, professional presentation and "regarding the customer as the be all and end all" is imperative. Recognizing that foot traffic and building a customer base in cul-de-sac Moraga will be a challenge, he says, "We'll see how it works out. As a resident, I want to see growth, areas that are more up-to-date."

About the licensing and approval process he must complete before opening in mid-July, he says the environmental health inspections are completed and passed; what remains is signage and other items that by now are familiar stepping stones. "I've heard the town council can be slow because they try to please everyone," is the closest he gets to worry. "Every restaurant I've opened has been different from the start of construction to when you open the door. But some things stay the same: you want people to come in, have a good time, enjoy the food. And me? Until it's fully staffed, I get to play for six months in the kitchen."

To learn more about Noodle Theory, visit [www.noodletheory.com](http://www.noodletheory.com).

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[back](#)

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