

NOVEMBER 2011

# RESTAURANT<sup>®</sup> BUSINESS.

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BELLY SHACK'S BORICUA SANDWICH

# Asian invasion

Sleek, fresh and desserts that aren't made of red beans. Urban Asian is the Next Big Thing.

By Joan M. Lang

**F**resh, accessible takes on Asian ingredients and cooking techniques. Inviting, contemporary décor. Friendly, English-speaking service. Westernized trappings like wine and beer, specialty cocktails and desserts that aren't made of red beans. They're all part of a flurry of openings, upgrades and reboots aimed at wrapping Asian food in a more approachable, mainstream package that combines authentic food with the kind of amenities that appeal to non-ethnic diners.

Some are chain efforts with bold aspirations, chief among them ShopHouse Southeast Asian Kitchen, the much-awaited new project by Chipotle founder Steve Ells. Others are more entrepreneurial: restaurateurs with a fascination for Asian culture that often includes culinary travel or training. And still others are the result of sufficient time-in-grade for the offspring of Asian immigrants.

"A lot of it has to do with the culture," says Michael Wang, a second-generation Chinese-American who opened Fomami Asian Sandwich Bar in Boston after researching the opportunities at Harvard Business School. "Asian immigrants opened restaurants for their own kind here in the United States in order to survive, but they didn't want their children to have to do that. It takes a generation or two for Asian-Americans to adopt a more entrepreneurial mindset and come back into the business with an eye toward innovation."



**SHOPHOUSE  
Southeast Asian  
Kitchen**

**Number of units:** 1

**Headquarters:** Parent company Chipotle Mexican Grill Inc., Denver

The true "Chipotle of Asian concepts" is barely open in the nation's capital and already causing a sensation for its mix-and-match noodle and rice bowls and banh-mi, plus sleek wood-clad interior and founder Steve Eills's ethical approach to sourcing and other tenets. Expect imitators.

**The growth vehicles**

Following in the footsteps of such successful Asian chains as P.F. Chang's China Bistro and Pei Wei Asian Diner with accessible food and mainstream trappings.

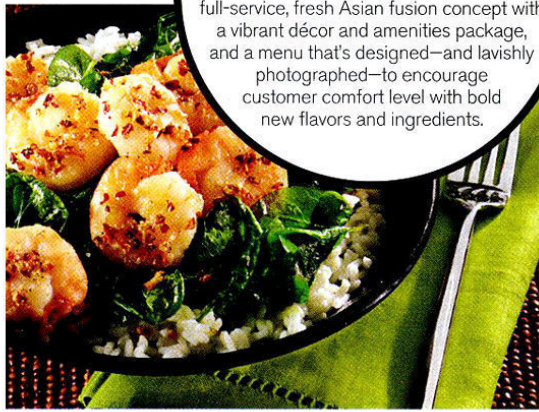
THE SHOPHOUSE LINE

**WOK HAY**

**Number of units:** 3

**Headquarters:** Parent company Ruby Tuesday, Maryville, TN

An existing fast-casual Chinese restaurant has been completely revamped into a full-service, fresh Asian fusion concept with a vibrant décor and amenities package, and a menu that's designed—and lavishly photographed—to encourage customer comfort level with bold new flavors and ingredients.



WOK HAY'S CANTON SPICY SALT AND PEPPER PRAWNS

**MAMA FU'S  
ASIAN HOUSE**

**Number of units:** 13

**Headquarters:** Austin, TX

Since being acquired by Murphy Adams Restaurant Group, the eight-year-old, made-to-order, Asian-inspired "flex-casual" has gotten a new prototype and trendy menu items like Vietnamese banh mi sandwiches in preparation for measured national expansion growth.

**LITTLE SHEEP**

**Number of units:** Approximately 3,000 units in China, plus a handful in the U.S. and Canada

**Headquarters:** Parent company YUM Brands, Louisville, KY

The acquisition of the Mongolian hot pot format brings YUM that much closer to global dominance, as well as an opportunity to introduce more Americans to the iconic Asian tradition of tabletop communal dining.



**BIG BOWL'S BEEF WRAP**

**LEMON GRASS/  
STAR GINGER**

**Number of units:** 3

**Headquarters:** Sacramento, CA

One of the first to understand the value of marrying authentic Asian to a modern concept, Mai Pham has been rewarded with success not only at her original Lemon Grass Restaurant (opened in 1991) but also with the more casual Lemon Grass Grill and Star Ginger Asian Grill & Noodle Bar.

**BIG BOWL**

**Number of units:** 8, plus 14 Big Bowl Chinese Express locations in supermarkets

**Headquarters:** Parent company Lettuce Entertain You, Chicago

The 20-year-old "fresh Chinese and Thai" midprice concept has become increasingly driven by green and sustainability principles, with a sophisticated, seasonally focused menu that is often sourced at local farmers markets by each location's chef.

**Ahead of their time**

These are the hot new concepts we were talking about years ago, only now the rest of the industry has caught up to their ground-breaking menus and prescient marketing positioning.

**ROCKSUGAR  
PAN ASIAN KITCHEN**

**Number of units:** 1

**Location:** Los Angeles

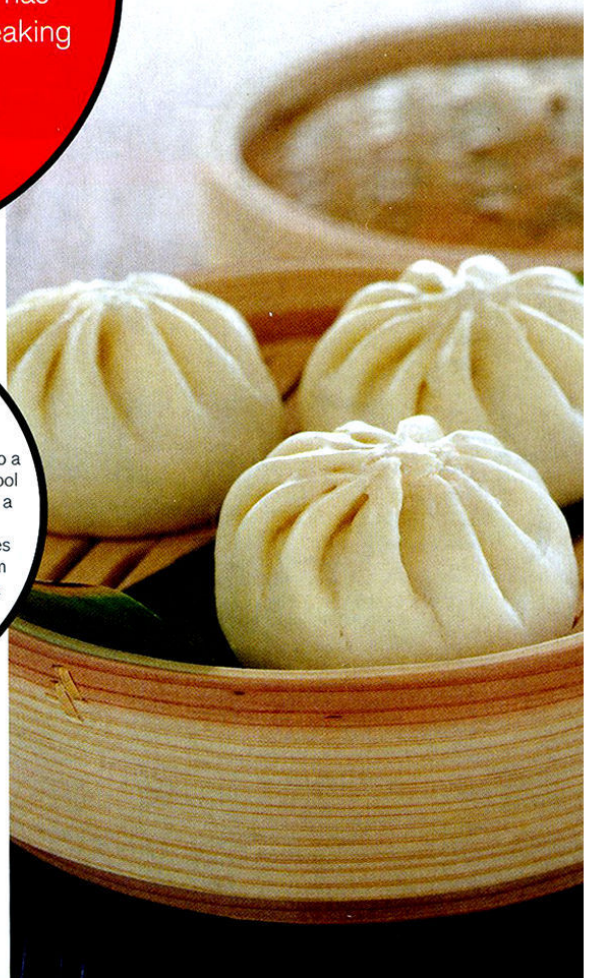
Originally funded in 2005 by Cheesecake Factory founder David Overton as a showcase for Singapore-raised, Manhattan-trained chef Mohan Ismail, RockSugar features one of the earliest iterations of authentic Southeast Asian flavors and ingredients in an upscale environment with a full wine list and specialty-cocktail program.

**WOW BAO**

**Number of units:** 5

**Headquarters:** Parent company Lettuce Entertain You, Chicago

Eighteen years after turning dim sum into a mainstream fast food snack, the supercool "hot Asian buns" specialist has become a cult phenom thanks to smarty-pants Twitter avatar @BaoMouth, who reaches out to fans directly with everything from offers for free bao dumplings to snark about the Emmy awards—part of a multi-level social media strategy that's totally ahead of the industry.



**WAO BAO'S SIGNATURE DUMPLINGS**



**CHINESE COBB SALAD (LEFT) AND SPROUTS AND TOFU SALAD FROM FOUAMI**

**The new wave**  
 Authentic ingredients and recipes combined with Western style branding and amenities characterize a new generation of hip Asian concepts.

**FOUMAMI ASIAN SANDWICH BAR**

**Number of units:** 1  
**Location:** Boston

Combining hot trends (premium sandwiches and a fast casual format) with age-old cooking techniques (Korean-style barbecue marinades and the flaky Northern Chinese bread known as bing) in a tightly branded package by second-generation restaurant-family scion Michael Wang, this breakfast-and-lunch spot is wowing busy, affluent Financial District denizens.

**PL8**

**Number of units:** 1  
**Location:** Barrington, IL

Shawn Li and Ed Culleoney (of Lettuce Entertain You's shuttered Ben Pao) have opened this Chinese-Japanese small-plates concept that features the greatest hits of both cuisines, from sushi rolls and nabeyaki udon to kung pao and pork with Chinese chives.

**REDFARM**

**Number of units:** 1  
**Location:** New York City

Greenmarket sensibility meets modern and inventive Chinese food (especially dim sum) in an urban-rustic atmosphere (farmhouse communal tables, dry goods on open shelving), new from the owner of the hip Chinatown Brasserie and Shun Lee.

**BAMBOO ASIA**

**Number of units:** 1  
**Location:** San Francisco

Responding to a dearth of healthy lunch options in the immediate neighborhood, co-owners Anjou Ahlborn and Sebastiaan van de Rijt created a trio of separate stations dispensing custom-made versions of Japanese, Indian and Vietnamese bowls, salads, sandwiches and sushi, all wrapped up in a sleek, minimalist décor package.

**TAKE A BAO**

**Number of units:** 1  
**Location:** Santa Monica

Serving up "righteous rice bowls, savory salads, slurpalicious noodles, tempting sides and delectable desserts"—plus the namesake bao steamed buns stuffed with everything from panko crusted fish to pomegranate steak—has fans thronging to the self-service display kitchen set-up in an upscale mall food court.



THE BELLY DOG AT BELLY SHACK

**BELLY SHACK**

**Number of units:** 1

**Location:** Chicago

The second concept of Bill Kim, the Korean-American chef-owner of Urban Belly, combines the cuisine of his own culture and that of his Puerto Rican wife, resulting in such multi-culti riffs as Quinoa Ssam Salad and Hot & Sour Soup that incorporates elements of Latin tortilla soup.

**The chef showplaces**

With due respect to wunderkind chef David (Momofuku) Chang, the cooking skills of these innovative young chefs are totally on-trend for the current foodie zeitgeist.

**SHANG**

**Number of units:** 1

**Location:** New York City

A new boutique hotel on Manhattan's Lower East Side is the stage for star-chef Susur Lee's luxe menu of reinvented classic-Chinese and Asian-fusion cuisine.

**HAWKER FARE**

**Number of units:** 1

**Location:** Oakland, CA

Street-food-inspired dishes from Laos, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore give chef Justin Yu and owner James Syhabout (who made his bones at the upscale Commis) an opportunity to play in the under-\$10-a-plate ballpark, patterning the new restaurant after a Southeast Asian rice bowl shop.

**PUBBELLY**

**Number of units:** 1

**Location:** Miami Beach

Billed as an Asian-inspired gastropub, Pubbelly mashes it up with impunity: charcuterie and salt-and-pepper squid; steak frites and mussels steamed in sake; pastrami and sauerkraut filled dumplings. The beverage program is equally globe-trotting, as befits the backgrounds of chef-owners Jose Mendin, Sergio Navarro, and Andreas Schreiner.

**NORTH BY NORTHEAST**

**Number of units:** 1

**Location:** Cambridge, MA

Contemporary Chinese-style food made with New England ingredients, courtesy of French-trained chef Philip Tang: rabbit sausage congee, apple and honshimeji mushrooms with mizuna; homemade thick cut noodles with beef shank, zucchini, grilled scallions, tomato, spicy beef broth.