



ART • TECHNOLOGY • HEALTH • TRAVEL

ARRIVE

MARCH/APRIL 2012

"I wanted to give young people the chance to get involved."

The Power of
EDUCATION

President Bill Clinton leads the way to higher learning, problem solving and greater opportunities in an ever-changing world

Michael Wang

An entrepreneur goes back to school and returns to his roots



Clockwise, above: Michael Wang; the chicken katsu sandwich, a customer favorite; the interior of Foumami.

Michael Wang, founder of the hit Asian sandwich bar Foumami in Boston's financial district (and less than five minutes' walk from Boston's South Station), is a third-generation restaurateur. In the 1940s, his grandfather founded the famed Chew Young Roo chain of restaurants in Asia, which his family ran for some 50 years. So when Wang, now 41, began thinking about a new career path, one thing was clear: "I grew up in my family's restaurant, and I've always said to myself that I didn't want to get into this business."

Wang, who moved with his family to the United States when he was 7, learned early that owning a restaurant is an all-consuming lifestyle. So when he graduated from New York University in 1993, he headed in a fairly opposite direction—the fixed-income division at Goldman Sachs. Thus began a varied series of jobs that eventually led him to the realization that he wanted to be an entrepreneur, and that the knowledge and experience to which he had been born was perhaps his most valuable entrepreneurial asset.

And so came Harvard Business School and two years of intense research that led Wang to his winning concept—a "quick casual" restaurant, in industry parlance, that draws on 5,000 years of Asian culinary tradition and the contemporary appetite for novel and fresh approaches to food.

To find the most important element, Wang needed to look no further than his family's ancestral home in China's Shandong province, the birthplace of dough-based products such as noodles, dumplings and—most importantly for Wang's purposes—*shao bing*, a distinctive bread that is crisp on the outside and chewy inside.

"What makes a great sandwich is really the bread," he says, "and I felt that that bread could be the base of my sandwiches."

Wang uses shao bing to encapsulate favorite tastes from China, Korea and Japan. One customer favorite is the Japanese chicken katsu, topped with shredded cabbage, tomatoes and Japanese Worcestershire sauce. Another gives an authentic Chinese braised meat recipe an American twist with marinated, braised beef brisket, accented with scallions, kirby cucumber and cilantro.

To give a name to his eclectic creation, Wang invented "Foumami." It's a portmanteau that combines "umami," the Japanese word for "tasty," with "Fo," the transliteration of a Chinese character that alludes to the parable *Buddha Jumps Over the Wall*, in which the wafting aroma of delicious cooking entices a Buddhist monk to jump over the wall of his monastery.

With plans to expand in Boston and eventually take Foumami to other cities, how does Wang feel about his own jump over the wall of his initial doubts concerning the restaurant business?

"I have to say," he answers quickly, "that I don't have any regrets." —Eric Wybenga