

Green Leaf Asian Bistro and Café

In a world where Chipotle has made “fast casual” the culinary It Girl, Ray Tom has crafted a restaurant built for lingering. At Green Leaf Asian Bistro and Café (at 865 Middlefield Rd., a.k.a. Theater Row), fresh ingredients blend into a fusion of Chinese, Vietnamese, and Taiwanese cuisines, served in a communal space akin to a living room. This is the foundation of Green Leaf, what Tom refers to as “modern comfort food in a comfortable space.”

Green Leaf is named for the Columbia, South Carolina, street on which he grew up, and Tom’s goal for it is to capture the food-and-community-focused energy that filled his childhood home. The fusion of Asian cuisines is also personal, inspired by his Chinese-American heritage and his wife Cindy’s Vietnamese culture. The Taiwanese flavors and dishes are inspired by Tom’s life as an international businessman in Taiwan, during which he fell in love with the food. “When I look at the menu, I see moments of my life, places I have been,” Tom said.

On Green Leaf’s menu, those moments take shape in the form of spring rolls, thick with pickled carrots and fried shallots, dotted with basil and mint. There are also hearty rice and noodle bowls; simple and comforting, they are filled to the brim with a medley of herbs, vegetables, nuts, and meat. Even the Shaved Snow, a feathery, ribbon-like ice cream dessert, transports Tom back to Taiwan.

A self-described Renaissance man with a love for all things creative and innovative, Tom shared his motivation behind the culinary mash-up. “I love blending tradition. That is where the magic happens.” Tom was also inspired by his parents, who owned three Chinese food restaurants in their hometown.



Ray Tom

“My parents, but especially my dad, taught me to take risks.” Tom’s mom, on the other hand, taught him to make her sticky rice. Only at Green Leaf, Tom has updated her recipe with a few modern twists. Instead of ground pork, Tom uses the succulent cubes of the ever popular pork belly. Where his mom adds dried shrimp, Tom does not. His reasoning is simple: “Not everyone loves the idea of powdered shrimp,” he explained with an understanding smile and shrug. After all, for Tom, tradition is meant to be tweaked.

In 2004, Tom met his wife in San Francisco. She is the daughter of Vietnamese chefs, and he fell in love with her family’s food as much as with her. “I love that clean, fresh base of Vietnamese food,” Tom shared. That love helped chart the path towards fusion food. “I said to my wife, ‘What if we took your food and my food and combined them?’”

To get started, Tom developed his recipes the old-fashioned way – experimenting in the kitchen. As he tested and tasted,

the focus was always on comfort and quality. “I love eating and trying new things, but I don’t love over-fancy food -- and being charged a lot for it. The menu reflects what Cindy and I would make for family and friends,” he explained.

Tom grew up in the trade and married into it as well, so it’s only natural that he would find himself pulled into the culinary world. But creating and serving delicious food is not a stopping point for Tom. “I want Green Leaf to be a place where people can come and be nourished – body, mind, and soul,” he said.

Part of that nourishment is offering a space where people can relax and be creative. This is where the lingering happens. Leaning forward in one of the overstuffed leather couches that hugs a corner of the restaurant, Tom explained “spontaneous karaoke.” Instead of a structured open mic night, he has a karaoke set-up so at any moment a customer, a staff member, or even Tom himself, can belt out a few tunes.

“I love sharing, and creating experiences for people, and there is nothing better than seeing a little kid come up, and get over their fear (of singing in public),” said Tom.

If karaoke doesn’t sound enticing, there are board games and big screen TVs to watch the latest sporting event. There is even a “wooden man,” an apparatus used in Wing Chun Kung Fu, a form of martial arts of which Tom is a practitioner. “It’s fun to see people react to the space, to get comfortable and play,” said Tom.

Just as he blends cuisines and traditions, so has Tom found a way to weave fast casual dining with the ambiance of a family living room, and that place is Green Leaf.

