

The Pig and the Lady: Honolulu's Best New Restaurant

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It takes a village to raise one of Honolulu's best restaurants.

By Martha Cheng

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2015 Hale 'Aina Awards: Best New Restaurant, Gold — The Pig and the Lady

In 1984, HONOLULU Magazine established its Hale 'Aina Awards as the Islands' first local restaurant awards. Over the past 30 years, the Hale 'Aina Awards are the most prized dining awards in the Islands. [Click here to learn more.](#)

First, it was the pop-up with the memorable name: The Pig and the Lady—the pig being the chef, Andrew Le, and the lady his mother, Loan Le (pronounced “Lay”). Then, it spun off into a wildly popular farmers market stand selling Vietnamese sandwiches and noodles far beyond the usual banh mi and pho. Last year, it materialized in bricks and mortar on King Street in Chinatown, and the crowds followed. The Pig and the Lady quickly started getting press in national publications, and in November, *The New York Times* came calling. Most of the attention is focused on the Pig, and sometimes the Lady gets a mention. But The Pig and the Lady should really have been called The Pig and the Family.



Photos: Olivier Koning

The manager



The Manager: Alex Le

Andrew and his older brother, **Alex**, look enough alike that customers often get them confused—which makes it seem like Andrew can be everywhere at once: delivering catering orders around town (actually Alex), running dishes and clearing tables (Alex), saying hi to regulars in the dining room (Andrew and Alex), bringing out a roasted pig's

head or slabs of porchetta (Andrew), assembling noodle soups and sandwiches under The Pig and the Lady's five farmers market tents across the island (Alex). All while running the restaurant kitchen and cooking (Andrew).

Alex used to manage the family business, Toys N' Joys. The Les closed it and sold everything to make money and time for The Pig and the Lady. In the transition, Alex pulled in former employees, ones that used to sell games and toys to insatiable fans of Pokémon, teaching them to prepare banh mi and noodles for a new clientele with a different addiction. (At the farmers markets, The Pig and the Lady draws the largest crowds of any booth; outside the restaurant, a group finished with its meal tells others who still have an hour between them and a table: "It's worth the wait.")

Alex is always sweating. Maybe because he's constantly moving. Six days a week, he starts his Pig and the Lady errands at 7 a.m. (3:30 a.m. on KCC market days) and leaves the restaurant at 1 a.m. He has glasses, but only wears them about half the time—because either he's lost them somewhere between the restaurant, the farmers market or the van, or because ladling all that hot broth at the markets makes them foggy.

"We need to find him a girlfriend," says The Pig and the Lady's pastry chef, Rachel Murai. "But she has to work here so they can actually spend time together."

"I'm used to the schedule," Alex says. "I wouldn't do it if I didn't like it. Honestly, it's still fun for me. And it's all worth it for Mama to relax at the market and watch people eat."

The Lady



The Lady: Loan “Mama” Le

Everybody calls her Mama. Before 2011, when you looked at **Mama Le**, you could see where her sons got their energy. For Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, attended by 30-some people who’d stop by throughout the night, she would single-handedly prepare the Vietnamese version of a tasting menu: seven courses of beef that included bo la lot (grilled ground beef wrapped in betel leaves) and thin slices of meat cooked tableside, fondue-style. When The Pig and the Lady started as a pop-up in Hank’s Haute Dogs, she was there for every dinner, plating dishes alongside Andrew.

I know all this because I was there—for the Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, for the early days of the pop-up. My husband and I had moved to Hawai'i from California, and with no family here, the Les invited us to their table for the holidays. It was an invitation we always accepted.

The dinners stopped in 2011, when Mama Le had a stroke. Plans for a brick-and-mortar restaurant were put on hold. Now, at age 65 and one year into the restaurant, she's back in the kitchen, just a little slower and with more sitting breaks in her day. She still oversees all the traditional Vietnamese dishes on the menu.

Mama Le didn't actually know how to cook when she lived in Vietnam. In 1975, at the end of the Vietnam War, she fled the country with her husband, headed for a refugee camp in Arkansas. They never made it. She went into labor on the plane and gave birth to her first son, Anderson Le, when the plane stopped to refuel in Honolulu. They decided to stay. (If that name sounds familiar, it's because he's the programming director for the Hawai'i International Film Festival.)

With the family alone in Hawai'i, and knowing how much her husband loved Vietnamese food, Mama learned to cook. At first, she relied on recipes her sister had given her, writing her letters for clarification and advice. Forty years later, she knows all the dishes by heart.

Mama wanders through The Pig and the Lady's disjointed kitchen, separated into a main kitchen hot line and three prep areas. She instructs her prep team on how to char the ginger and onions for pho in one room, demonstrates how to wrap bo la lot on the other side of the wall, tastes the curry at her makeshift stand next to the hot line, and pours to taste fish sauce and sesame oil in the seafood rice soup cooking in the hallway. A cook helps her add a bag of chopped clams because she can't reach the tall stockpots; standing next to them, she's about eye level with the top. "I'm lucky I have a lot of young people to help," she says.

"Thank you," she tells the cook.

"You're welcome, Mama," he says.

The Pig



The Pig: Andrew Le

If Mama is the foundation and Alex the manager, then **Andrew** is the artist (though he, too, puts in long hours at the restaurant—Wednesdays are his days off, which means he gets there around noon instead of 10 a.m.).

He trained at the Culinary Institute of America and rose to become a sous chef at Chef Mavro. His dishes start as sketches on paper and emerge as liliko'i and pork over pappardelle; coffee-can bread with chicken liver pate and Asian pears marinated with jasmine. Mama's realm is the noodle soups and the straight-up Vietnamese flavors; Andrew's synthesizes her traditional approach with his experience in professional kitchens. Or what he calls "the crazy wacky stuff."

He changes the menu every few months. But coming up with new dishes and cooking are only parts of his job now. The day I catch up with him, he's coming from a meeting with an architect to design the new dessert bar, and on his way to learn about a new point-of-sale system. And maybe because he's about to be a father, he's constantly thinking about the next generation.

For all the cooks, "we ask them: What are your dreams?" he says. "We ask them to give everything and it's only fair we give them everything as well. Everything: knowledge and work and help. Just what family would do."

The extended family

Teri Fukuhara, Andrew's 8-months-pregnant fiancée, materializes in the kitchen with a list of Thanksgiving preorders. Teri takes care of the office work for The Pig and the Lady. Even at 4-foot-10, she's clearly the grownup in the kitchen. Others rush around her, swept into the vortex of day-to-day duties, while she projects calm ... with a little bit of exasperation always mixed in, like when she says Andrew wants to name the baby "Lucky."

"Lucky Le!" she says, rolling her eyes.

The baby is due on Christmas Day. They've been meaning to get a marriage certificate before then, but so far they haven't had the time. Instead, they've been doing things for the restaurant like checking out pottery at a Zen temple in Kalihi.

Teri also designs the graphics, such as The Pig and the Lady's logo with an ampersand shaped into a pig with a curlicue tail. Her sister, Dara, handles the PR for the business, and her husband, the photography.

But The Pig and the Lady family isn't just those related by blood or (soon-to-be) marriage.

It also embraces its entire staff, like **Kristene Moon**, one of the PM cooks. When I talk to her, she's breaking down a whole side of pig, which comes in weekly. "You go, girl!" says one of the servers passing through.

“Why you? Get the boys,” says one of the older female prep cooks.

Three crews make up the restaurant’s kitchen staff. One, the AM crew, is a young, all-female lineup working the lunch shift, which tends to be a quick-paced, high-volume service churning out primarily sandwiches and noodle soups. The second crew works dinner, plating more intricate dishes for fewer diners who have time to linger. Kristene is the only female PM cook. The prep team, which works primarily with Mama Le, is mostly older women, some who have been with her since the farmers markets started, and some who participate in a work-training program organized by the Pacific Gateway Center, a nonprofit group that provides assistance to immigrants, refugees and low-income residents.

Kristene sets a timer. It used to take her one-and-a-half hours to break down the pig. Now, it takes her 30 minutes.



Gather 10 friends for the primal offering at The Pig and the Lady, voted Hawai‘i’s best new restaurant.

Photo: Steve Czerniak

“Andrew taught me everything I know,” she says, as she saws off a foreleg that’s twice as thick as her arm. “Everything” includes separating a pig into shoulder, shank, chops and belly cuts as well as staying organized and making a timeline and prep lists. “He also taught me how to take care of myself. Before, I never went to the doctor. He’s the best chef I’ve ever worked with. You know when you get pissed at someone and you say ‘the little sh--’? I can’t even bring myself to say that about Andrew.”

About once a month, Andrew gathers the kitchen staff for a meeting. They don’t just talk about work, but also what’s going on in their personal lives. Some of sous chef **Brandon Lee**’s troubles that surface: depression about selling his car (which his Instagram account is named after, orangelement), and “normal single guy issues. Like that we’re single.”

“It’s so we’re all on the same page,” he says. “So if someone storms into the kitchen, we know what’s going on [in his head]. The kitchen is a big family. We want to let [the employees] know that whatever they’re dealing with, they’re not dealing with by themselves ... we’re normal people, we’re not just mindless kitchen robots.”

Mama Le’s feasts at home stopped a few years ago. Surprisingly, I don’t miss them that much. I guess it’s because everything I loved about them—the family, the food, the conviviality—I still experience every time I go to The Pig and the Lady. It’s there when I’m pulling up a plastic chair to the communal table at the farmers market. I usually come alone, but I rarely end up alone, because there’s Mama sitting in the corner, just to the side of the steaming hot pots, content to watch people eat her food, and there’s Alex, forever cheerful. There are strangers excited to share their thoughts on tasting this food for the first time, and there are regulars who have come every week for the past three years since this Vietnamese-street-vendor-in-Honolulu started, offering me hot tea from a Thermos on a particularly cold winter night.

It’s there at the restaurant, when friends convene for no specific celebration at all, except to enjoy the primal dinners, centered around a pig’s head or pork shank, which Andrew usually brings out with all the gravity and excitement of a bride walking down the aisle. There are fixin’s—daikon pickles, oysters, lettuce, *nuoc mam* and Assmaster hot sauce—that require everyone to reach across each other, to pass the sauces back and forth. To get messy, to forget our manners. To eat with the abandon and joy of being with family.

83 N. King St., 585-8255, thepigandthelady.com

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