

# Forbes

## **A Commitment To Community And Good Times At San Francisco's Authentic Lao Issan Restaurant, Hawkerfare**

The Mission District in San Francisco has never been at a deficit when it comes to dynamic, lively restaurants and bars. It's full of life and diversity. One of the best examples of this is Lao Isan Tiki Bar, Hawkerfare on Valencia Street. Bold flavors, creative cocktails and a colorful, fun ambiance make this casual restaurant the perfect place to go out with your crew.

Served in family-style portions, the cuisine is top notch and is packed with the uniquely delicious flavors of

Southeast Asia. Fish sauce, chili, curry, spice and more make each dish here exceptional. James Syhabou, who you may know best as the owner of two-Michelin-starred fine dining restaurant Commis, opened Hawkerfare back in 2015 in a commitment to showcase his appreciation for his heritage and love for Lao cuisine.



“In my resume I submitted to James about five years ago it said, “P.S. I speak Lao,” recalls Dolly Vannarath,

# Forbes

the bartender and general manager.

“Our food is Laotian. Chef James Syhababout and I both grew up as kitchen brats eating sticky rice with lao spicy dip. The inspiration, I believe, is our mothers and their home cooked comfort food.”

Popular starters include the crispy rice ball salad, Nam Khao Tod, which is a crunchy, texture rich salad made with Jasmine rice seasoned with coconut meat and red curry paste, which is then formed into balls, fried, broken apart and tossed with fermented pork, peanuts, cilantro, dried Thai chilies, fish sauce and lime juice. Thai Papaya Salad, Som Tum Thai, is another classic with green papaya, dried shrimp, palm sugar,

tomatoes, fish sauce, chilies and lime, topped with crushed peanuts.



Great dishes to share are the Fried Chicken, Gai Tod, Isaan-style with boneless chicken thighs marinated, fried in a rice flour batter and tossed in Nam Prik Pao charred chili jam; Tamarind Egg Drop Noodle, Mee Kati, with a rich egg drop curry broth seasoned with peanuts, fermented bean paste and tamarind; and the always popular Chicken and Rice, Khao Mun Gai, Hainanese style

# Forbes

with poached chicken thigh served with a ginger and fermented bean sauce, with cucumbers & cilantro over chicken fat rice.



A sharable plate. HAWKERFARE

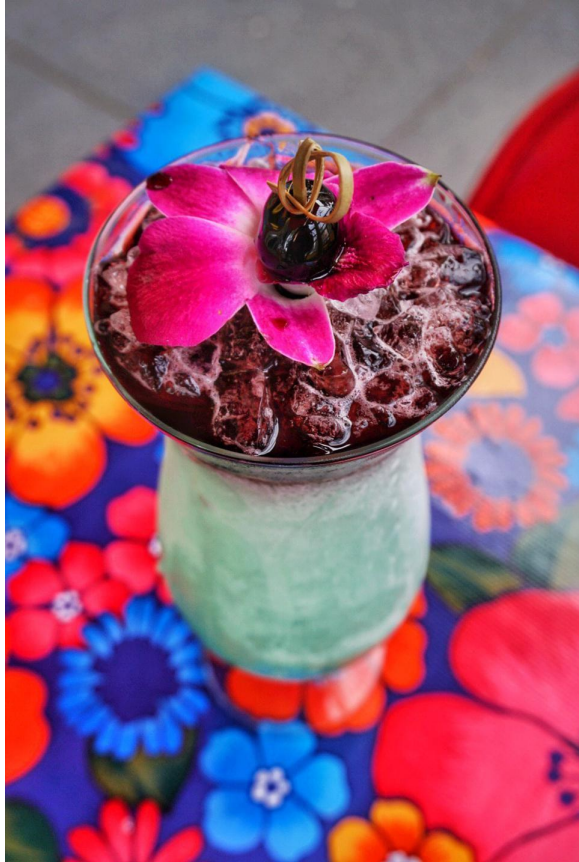
Another winner is the BBQ Baby Back Ribs, Kra-toog Moo Ping, marinated in whiskey, white pepper, coriander roots and garlic brushed with honey and served with Jaew Man Len, a charred tomato chili dip.

Tiki cocktails are an absolute must while here. Favorites include the Zombie with “99 ingredients to bring back the dead”; Painkiller #2 with Hamilton's black rum and pimento dram, pineapple, orange juice, coconut cream; and the Virgin's Sacrifice, with tequila, mezcal, passion fruit pineapple and lime.

Upstairs is Hawkerfare's additional bar, Holy Mountain, which offers a selection of bar bites and more eclectic cocktails. The focus is on local and craft spirits like Corbin Cash out of Atwater and SF Distillery here in the city. It's also where Vannarath hosts cocktail classes, most of which had

# Forbes

been virtual up until recently.



A tiki cocktail. CHELSEA DAVIS

Food aside, Vannarath has done an incredible job standing with the AAPI community, helping to feed those less fortunate and using Hawker

Fare to make the Mission District a better place for everyone.

“Asian Americans are a part of the heritage of this great nation,” says Vannarath. “We want everyone to unite. Less hate, more time to celebrate.”

We sat down with Dolly Vannarath, the bartender and general manager, to talk about pandemic pivots, menu inspiration, cocktail program, standing with the AAPI community and more. Here’s what she had to say.

**How has business been throughout the pandemic? Did you have to close or pivot in terms of your business strategy?**

# Forbes

In the beginning, the pandemic hit us by surprise. When we got the directive to close for take-out only. It was hard to tell staff they didn't have shifts and even harder to tell them that I didn't know when they could return. We struggled with updating to go apps. We didn't really invest much in our take-out platform.

Our focus was always dine in where you can eat, drink, and be loud. It got so quiet. An eerie quiet. I believe it was early in April, Easter of 2020, when I started to notice the worry on everyone's face. Staff, ex-employees, neighbors, delivery drivers, and fellow restaurant managers. A random phone call in the middle of the night asking,

"Dolly what do you think? What should we do?"

I thank God for the creativity He sowed in me as a child. The curiosity to always find a way. On Easter I decided to do 100 free meals for Easter. I thought, someone must be hungry and worried. A few of us got together and cooked up something. Jeff Noobs walks in the door, founder of Kativa SF in the Mission, and mentions a program called Food Relief.

It was a program that provided meals to families suffering food insecurity. The program paid the restaurant a price for the meal and we made hot meals. When we first started we were doing 200-300 meals a day. This and along with SF New Deal

# Forbes

Program. We were able to keep our doors open and hire back staff. Little by little we heard the laughter at hawker fare again.

Now we are only doing 80 meals a day. The program is funded by philanthropy and donations.

## **Did any good come out of the pandemic for your restaurant?**

### **Any silver linings?**

The Shared Streets Program that the Valencia Corridor Members put in place was another miracle. Our first parklet was made from wood we used to border up our restaurant. We called it the "burning man tiki lounge." I discovered more than anything that we had fans. Driving by saying hello,

honking their horns. Buying gift cards for the future.

Then came cocktails to go! That was a game changer. From that came cocktail kits and cocktail classes. May second will be our one year anniversary in partnership with Lisa Rogovin of Edible Excursions. She was an amazing partner pre pandemic with food tours filling up our happy hours. Together we have had over 90 public virtual cocktail classes. Still booking today. The relaxing in ABC Regulations is definitely something we would like to keep.

For those that haven't been to Hawker Fare, what are the vibes? What's the atmosphere you hope to welcome your guests into?

# Forbes

I am happy to say it will be just as you remembered it. That birthday, or graduation, that celebration. We're still here to serve you. There may be a little wait as we are still limited staff, but bare with us as we start to bounce back.

You have a unique beverage program! Talk about the cocktails and what you guys have in the works.

We have two bars, a tiki bar highlight rums, mezcal, and tequila, and Holy Mountain upstairs. We try to be as true to tiki as possible. With the idea of DIY. We make all our mixers from house made triple sec, orgeat, hibiscus, and fresh press ginger and basil syrups infused gin and vodka with lychee. We are always working on

making things less sweet and more natural goodness.

A lot of people come for the Tiki-Rita. A tropical Margarita. Upstairs is a profound bar with a focus on local and craft spirits like Corbin Cash out of Atwater and SF Distillery here in SF. That California pride is poured when I am using California Spirits when ever possible.

**How important is it for restaurants to stand with the AAPI community right now? How are you guys standing with the AAPI in particular?**

Definitely standing with AAPI. Being first born in the United states was not easy. Do I inseminate myself into social acceptance or do preserve



# Forbes

my culture? I really thank my parents every day for teaching me tolerance and good faith in the human heart. That's what I would like to tell the world.

We can accomplish so much more with less worry about what we don't have or lose and more gratitude about what we can gain together. We are currently hosting a "Courageous Conversation Meet Up" upstairs in a bar once a month. We are combating racism through storytelling. A speaker tells a story about their experience whether today or in the past. No one in the audience can replay or say a word. They can only listen.

On a table sits three jars. One for Racial Injustices, One for Cultural

Intolerance, and One for Ignorance.

Guests can purchase a marble to drop it into one of the jars. The money collected is donated to AAPI.

Is there anything in the works going forward as we continue to move out of this pandemic?

We are working with a few local artist, friends, and the community to achieve donations to finish the renovations of Holy Mountain. Holy Mt was kind put together with glue and love, but it's time for a makeover. It may not be the most fancy looking bar in SF but it does fill out with the most loyal of fans.

Follow me on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

Check out my [website](#) or some of my other work [here](#).



# Forbes



[Chelsea Davis](#) Contributor

[Dining](#)

I cover food, drink & travel—in other words, all the fun stuff!

Follow

[Chelsea Davis](#)