

Interviews with local Korean-owned restaurants in the SF Bay Area

Every restaurant has a unique story to tell. We at KCI would like to share stories of our local Korean & Korean-owned restaurants and celebrate diversity as a core value of our community. Come and hear from our neighbors.

SAMS AMERICAN EATERY

(est. 2006)

1220 Market Street, San Francisco

Jeannie Kim, CEO



Photos provided by Jeannie Kim

What made you decide to open a restaurant? How did you get started?

My family has always been in the restaurant business -- my parents used to own a Japanese restaurant and my aunt had a Korean restaurant -- so there's a history of chefs in the family. Also, I've always loved and appreciated food, all types of cuisine. But I had no interest in the restaurant business for myself. I was pursuing a career as an ordained minister when I unexpectedly found myself as a single mom with three children to raise. I needed to find a way to support my family. I ended up turning a failing cafe into SAMS, which opened in 2006. The restaurant name comes from the first letters of my kids' names -- Samuel, Abigail and Micah. I had planned to go back to my ministry once my kids were out of high school, but food has become my new "mission" in life.

What was your biggest challenge in opening your restaurant? Were there any memorable moments in running your restaurant?

When I took over the restaurant, I didn't know anything at all about the restaurant business. I had worked in churches all my life, so I ran the restaurant like a church at first. Not having a mentor or any information about how to get started (not to mention the many laws that are constantly changing), I mostly learned on my

own, working 14-16 hour days. I wanted to be able to do the job better than anyone else on my staff, so I worked at all aspects of running the restaurant, from tending tables to cooking. It wasn't easy, but my parents were very supportive. Another big challenge was finding good people to work with me. I think running a restaurant is like producing a Broadway musical. The public only sees two hours of the show, but there are hundreds of preparation hours behind the scenes.

Some of the most memorable things for me are the individual relationships. For example, former SF Mayor Ed Lee was a regular and he wanted to support SAMS, so he would often hold meetings there and introduced me to a lot of wonderful, helpful people. We still have a table designated as the "Ed Lee table."

What would you say are the keys to your success?

I have a motto that I live by and that I believe has been key -- "go after people, don't go after money." Running a restaurant is really about learning what people are longing for and meeting their needs, not just their wants. It's not just about food anymore; it's about sitting down with the customers and listening to their stories and building relationships. I also look at my success through my employees, many of whom have worked for me for years.

Visit their website to learn more:

www.samssf.com

My dishwasher, for example, was able to retire back in his native Mexico as a result of having worked at SAMS for 10 years. The third “people” aspect is the relationships I’ve built with local partners -- hotels, businesses, city officials, etc. -- that has been a big part of having a successful food business.

Tell us about your menu and whether you have any specialty items.

We’re known for serving unique as well as healthy dishes, whether it’s American, Hispanic or Asian. One of our “secrets” are my mother’s homemade sauces which she makes all from scratch using natural ingredients. For example, we use honey and different fruits as a natural sweetener instead of sugar. Some of our most popular dishes have been our unique versions of corned beef and hash, a Hawaiian dish called “Loco Moco,” Korean tacos & burritos, and bibimbap. We also make our own kimchi in-house which our customers love! We want to serve healthy and nutritious foods so our customers can live a long and healthy life!

What motivated you to participate in the Senior Meal Program?

I had my first job when I was 13 or 14 years old, with a Korean community organization in SF. My job was to help Korean seniors with their social security and other social service needs. Thinking of those times, and given the current pandemic situation, I wanted to find a way to help. I initially signed up for the city’s meal delivery program, but then I got a call from KCI about the Senior Banchan Delivery Program and it was the perfect fit! It also presented us with a challenge -- to come up with food that would be healthy and authentic, bring comfort to the Korean seniors, and also travel well. My mom helps prepare the menu as well as making the food. Through this work, I feel I’ve come full circle from my first job as a teenager.



Photos provided by Jeannie Kim

How have you adjusted to the challenges of running a restaurant during these difficult coronavirus times and what are your plans for the future?

The majority of our regular customers have been city officials and staff, downtown workers, tourists, and theatergoers. We also used to do a lot of catering for local hotels and other business partners. As a result of the pandemic, we’ve lost 80~90% of our customers. I couldn’t just wait for the situation to improve, so we’ve had to pivot, cutting our menu and offering meal deliveries, as well as food gift baskets. We’ve been delivering family meal sets throughout the Bay Area, and one of the most popular sets is the one with Korean galbijjim (braised short ribs). Looking ahead, I want to continue to focus on serving the community. We are all in this together, so one way is to help small restaurant start-ups, providing them the kind of mentoring I didn’t have. I see this as kind of a calling, building more bridges and helping our community grow.