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Interview with Robert Fajilan (Daddy's City Diner)

Robert Fajilan

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Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Robert Fajilan

Interviewers : Karina Baltazar and America Ventura

Date: May 5, 2021

Location: Daddy City Diner. 265 Reservation Rd F, Marina, CA 93933

Collection: Food for thought: Oral histories of California's asain pacific foodways, Spring 2021

Length: 00:20:56

Bio: Robert and Gina are co-owners of a breakfast spot located in Marina. They both work Together to make Daddy City Diner a family friendly place to eat a american filipino fusion meal. The restaurant focuses on a customer satisfaction rate rather than how much money they make or how popular they are. Regardless, Daddy City Diner is popular among the locals and has regulars lining up almost every morning for a hot plate and a cup of coffee. Both Robert and Gina were raised in the area locally and learned filipino cooking from their parents and family. Robert has had two other restaurants in the past and currently runs this establishment with his wife. Both of them like to show their culture of food and family through their work with Daddy City Diner.

Summary of Transcript : (00:00:00) G.F and R.F introduce themselves and get settled with us to talk about their business. (00:01:05) We talked about how the current world pandemic has affected their work and the behind-the-scenes life behind running a restaurant. (00:03:35) Robert talks about what inspires him and helps him and his restaurant succeed. We talk about his goals and what he wants for the place of business. Robert and Gina talk about their challenges and issues and how they learned so much from the mistakes they had to go through. (00:6:25) Advice is given about how to succeed in this type of business. (00:09:00) We talk about how their potential future goals for the location can change depending on customers and regulars. (00:11:12) We talk about the way food can be considered traditional and not traditional, and the culture we live in and what they prefer. (00:12:05) New foods and dishes are mentioned and Robert and Gina talk about business strategies that work and might not work. (00:13:15) We talk more about the owners food favorites and a little more about their culinary history and future regarding food. We even end up talking about Karina's current position in the food industry, baking at Sweet Elenas.

G.F: He'll do most of the talking im just here for moral support.

A.V: Well, it was nice to meet you. My name is America.

R.F: America, nice to meet you.

K.B: I'm Karina. Hi.

R.F: Karina.

A.V: Okay so, Sorry.

R.F: Have you guys wondered, why or why not you want to ask me a question>n

K.B: Yeah we just have a couple of pre-made questions that are pretty straightforward. You can talk as much or as little as you want and I'm just gonna ask the first ones and she's going to go on with the rest and this is just going to be a voice recording so if you're ready we can just get started.

A.V: Would you like to introduce yourself and like the business?

R.F: My name is Bob. This is my wife Gina.This is a family owned restaurant, Daddy City Diner.

A.V: Okay.

K.B: So to just get started, how has this pandemic affected your business and if so, do you have any steps or current plans you're taking to just hope you'll continue as you were before?

R.F: Well the thing with the pandemic is that you go from -laughter- Sorry guys, Before you're making a profit when the pandemic comes and everything gets shut down so you're really not making anything. We shut down for about two to three weeks because of all the concern of the regionals going on nothing was going on back then. And I realize that there's no way that we can open up the you know, open up businesses. So we can kind of sort of got by by just doing to go orders. And the goal there was just to pay our bills to pay the uh our fixed bills which is the rent electricity and all that and the food bills so it turned out well for us and thats that what was the second question to that.

K.B: You basically answered the steps you are taking to recover.

R.F: Got it.

K.B: So, what would you say to go back a little about the beginning of the business what is the first thing you would say made you want to work in this type of business and So what would you say to go back a little bit about the beginning of the business what is the first thing you would say that made you want to work in this type of business and what inspired you to continue to work in the first place.

R.F: My first job out of high school was working at in a restaurant in a Country Club. And just working with people it was fun and everything but being a kid you know you think you can be better than everybody else this and that so in my mind.

G.F: You can touch on how much your dad did too growing up.

R.F: So in my mind is like I wanna own a restaurant one day just to show I made it. My dad was in the service for twenty seven years basically he was just a head chef. Head chef for all different generals out there so that's also my how do I say it that's my my motivation right now is to be like him.

A.V: Thanks.

K.B: Cool. Okay so. What kind of goals did you have when you first opened and kind of like compared to what are your goals now.

R.F: Initially when I first started because you know you have a little vision in your head how you want things to be so you kinda plan towards that but what you learn through the process is that you have to listen to your customers listen look at your client base could basically which you want to be what they want to basically over time your clients your customers kind of dictate the question where the restaurant was going to go to.

And...what was the second? Where we are now?

K.B: Yeah like yeah what are your goals currently now.

R.F: Right now which is to be keep it simple.

A.V and K.B: Okay.

R.F: You know just be a family run restaurant just keep. Don't worry about growth dont worry about you know trying get bigger than that.

G.F: For me out here I'm front of the house he's back there i want, my goal is to make anyone who walks through that door feel like family that's huge for me.

R.F: And the great thing about it is right now is that at this stage in our lives kind of giving back to the community.

A.V and K.B: Yeah.

G.F: That's huge for us, more so than fattening our profits. We wanna give back thats huge for us.

K.B: So do you think so far that you're achieving these goals that you have like are you- Yeah? -laughter-

R.F: A hundred twenty percent.

K.B: Okay now that's great.

R.F: No, no! People love us you know. We have a great following so we...there's not much we have to do nowadays but just be consistent.

K.B: Okay. So to talk about a little about like the challenges you have to go through what is one maybe there's more but like what us one You wanna talk about what is one of your greatest challenges you had overcome when you first started and how did you overcome it.

R.F: Well I took over the restaurant back in two thousand two...there's a lot of turnover it's...just a lot of staffing.

G.F: Two thousand two?

R.F: Two thousand two. So it's just a matter of when you come in. Everybody's scared everybody's can you think no I think that's better. so it just takes time to, you gotta build that relationship you gotta build communication. Basically set the ground work. It's like talking to a teenager. They know everything. But eventually in the long run they realize that you have the best interests at heart.

G.F: And that was pre, he had a restaurant before. We opened the store together. He was in Seaside.

R.F: That plus a big business in San Jose. The restaurant was more like a second business.

K.B: Okay so would you say you learn from that great challenge.

R.F: Basically like you learn how to listen. And you know you learn how to lead by example. Listening as you listen to your customers.

R.F: You know like right now days I wont even come out here because it's not my responsibility you allow others to step up and do what their jobs are.

K.B: Yeah. So What are some...so maybe this could be a little advice to people who are young and trying to start what you're doing, so what are some skills that you learned when you were young that helped you in your business today like what would you tell someone, again, whos young what should they be doing now to get ready.

R.F: What I've learned is that every business is around the same way, you have your department you have your responsibilities, you're accountable. Basically if a youngster wants to learn something, learn everything that you can. Because they're paying you to learn it's like going to school they're still paying you to learn so you're not helping yourself if your not learning everything because once you learn everything you can either branch out or you can make the place you work at better. It's all helping each other out.

K.B: Okay.

R.F: And also give a hundred percent it's like I mean if you're gonna go to college I tell everybody, college is hard, because there's too many distractions if you were to do something give a hundred percent because what the bottom line is it's gonna be how you feel about yourself.

K.B: Yeah. You kinda answered this question but you can go you can go into more detail if you want, so what advice would you give someone entering the restaurant industry right now and would you would it be something you advise strongly.

R.F: Well I always I'm always real with people if you're gonna start something ill them all the bad things about it. The hard work, long hours...low pay. There's no satisfaction you have to wanna do it...

G.F: There definitely has to be a passion.

R.F: I mean you just can't just you know wake up in the morning then just otherwise you're not going to be happy the rest of your life. If they're still interested I'm not going to stop someone's dreams but if you're gonna do something learn as much as you can. Prepare yourself. Understand the risk and what works. And calculate your risks because a lot of people will start a business and they think they can do it it's easy. But usually it takes a lot more money than expected it takes a lot to get your face out there and recognized out there so you know there's some people almost quit much too soon.

K.B: Yeah I agree.

R.F: We're almost done already.

A.V: Ummm..sorry.

R.F: Dont worry about it.

A.V: Well you guys already answered this question. I don't think you guys plan on doing something different, you guys said keep the family tradition but-

R.F: It all depends on the stage of your restaurant.

K.B: Yeah.

R.F: If you're just starting right now then yeah you're going to go out there and do the marketing, you're going to do all that how do you call it the internet. Instagram all that stuff.

K.B: The trends.

R.F: Once your established.

G.F: We want to give back.

R.F: You know we don't do anything and that's on us that because we are happy.

K.B: Yeah.

R.F: Where were at. We are more than surviving.

A.V: Hmm

R.F: So the problem is when you keep going up the ladder your increasing more stress, more responsibility.

A.V: Ohhhhh.

R.F: That's the reason why.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: So when you've been in business for a long time, not so much that you're comfortable you're in your lane. You don't want to derail from your lane.

G.F: Sorry I'm trying to print that waver we need to sign.

K.B and A.V: Oh it's okay.

A.V: Well, I noticed that you guys have a Filipino breakfast on your menu.

R.F: Umm.

A.V: So um what made you decide to add that to the menu and are there other Filipino dishes on the menu?

R.F: There's umm well I listen to a lot of my friends because-

G.F: I'm trying to get him do an adobo omelette.

A.V: Ohhh!

R.F: I mean-

G.F: But he's not listening to me.

R.F: Its weird everybody wants to own a restaurant but they don't want to own a restaurant.

K.B: Yeah.

R.F: So they tell you so you'll listen and just because we kinda bring back your heritage it's a more kinda Hawaiian based you know. A filipino it's a homage to my parents, it's a homage to my heritage. But it's more as you would say tapered down to American palette.

10:32

A.V: Ymmm.

R.F: You know. You guys born and raised out here or?

K.B & A.V: Yeah.

R.F: So you understand, I was born and raised out here in the United States too.

A.V: Ummm.

R.Ft: It's different.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: My parents used to feed me often that was like you know umm you know how that goes. You kinda make everything Americanized for customers out here.

A.V: Well you just touched on the next question.

R.F: Fantastic.

A.V: Um in class we have been discussing a lot about Americanized dishes and um speaking about the Filipino breakfast specifically, can you tell us what makes it americanized and what makes it traditional?

R.F: Well basically, I mean to make it authentic you put a little more spices you put a little more umm.

G.F: Well all that fish stuff.

R.F: Yeah you make it more umami you put a lot of fish sauces you put a lot of. Yeah american palette aren't used to that.

K.B & A.V: Yeah.

R.F: You know what I mean just make it simple, hamburgers and hot dogs.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: And that's the reason. It's because you're trying to create a whole crowd, you're not just trying to serve a little section. A whole group of people and right now I think our Filipino breakfast is one our top 3 sellers.

A.V: Oh really.

R.F: Which I'm surprised too. But basically what it is is marinated meat.

A.V: Well I think your wife just touched on it about the adobe omelette but have you decided like have you thought about adding it to the menu.

R.F: It's-

G.F: I think you guys should pressure him.

Everyone: (laughs)

R.F: It's kinda like um, whenever I try something new it takes a lot for it to take off.

A.V: Umm.

R.F: Cuz our regulars most of them just, they already know what they want. They get the same thing over and over and over.

A.V & K.B: (laughs)

R.F: So whenever, we used to make eggs benedict on the weekends but we didn't, it was not worth making it because we weren't getting enough sales.

A.V: Oh okay.

R.F: Because people don't want to change.

G.F: But don't you agree that chicken adobo omelette like once a month.

R.F: I mean if we started a food truck or something.

G.F: Have it for a couple a days then bring it back.

R.F: But then-

A.V & K.B: Yeah.

R.F: I know I know.

G.F: To me it sounds good.

R.F: It's just, were comfortable.

13:02

A.V: And this is the last question. Just want to talk a little bit more about you guys but umm. You guys have like this is just Filipino base do you have any traditional Filipino dishes, you like specifically and you tell us a little bit about them.

K.B: There's no right or wrong answer yeah it's just to get to know you.

G.F: Not me because I quit eating meat.

R.F: For me personally I haven't really had a good meal.

A.V: Umm.

R.F: Since my parents last cooked for me. There's nothing like your moms cooking.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: My dad was up there cooking wise. So basically to me everything is. If I can't get it to the level like that I'd rather not pursue that direction.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: Like I mean I'll do it for us personally.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: For family.

R.F: Like I cooked a lot of vegan food in the past but that's just for us.

R.F: Especially I always thought about doing a vegan restaurant, not vegan restaurant, but vegan menu.

R.F: Which will really kick off good, it's just um, it's just a matter of getting it done, that's all. Yeah.

R.F: Cuz you dont want to add too much stuff to you menu, when you're limit on staff and-

A.V: Umm.

Background noise (employee) : Have a nice day.

R.F: That's the reason.

R.F: Try to keep it simple as possible.

A.V: And when you think back is there like, to your parents cooking, do you have a specific dish that like pops out to you.

R.F: Well all them really because they were Americanized cooking for me and my brothers and sisters because they'll do, I don't like liver, I don't like what you call it the template and stuff. So they would always make another for me.

R.F: But it's just, their cooking is from home.

A.V: Aww okay.

R.F: So because of that it's like you can't you, don't get that out.

R.F: It is not authentic.

G.F: Yeah what about the scampy she used to cook for you, like that fish head stuff.

R.F: Yes. Yeah that's that's my favorite yeah. Yeah I mean. We could do that but then again it's like you look at your clientele.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: I mean there's a Filipino restaurant a couple stores down. So we only have a few Filipino dishes, a few nicer dishes. It's it's, it's just taking what I wanna do is give a full menu so that everybody who comes in here everybody is going to be happy.

A.V: Okay.

A.V: You have any questions to add?

K.B: Umm.

K.B: I would just comment that. Your business has really interesting a lot of the stuff you said. I just started working in the kitchen at a bakery so I kind of. I feel like I some of that sounds familiar but I haven't been working too long there yet but I can see um.

K.B: How kind of relatable it is but also how different it can be depending on the kitchen and how emotionally connected you are.

R.F: Yeah I mean bacon tough cuz you gotta get your slice.

R.F: Sign here? Well you guys have Gina's phone number right? Soif you have any questions just text her.

G.F: How do you know they're done yet?.

R.F: Well they just said it's the last question.

A.V & K.B: Oh yeah.

R.F: What if I'm done with them.

Everybody: (laughs)

K.B: Unless there's anything you guys want to add if you guys wanna say anything.

R.F: What class is this for?

K.B: So this is for our Pacific cuisine class.

K.B: Yeah.

G.F: You guys come in and have breakfast any time or lunch.

A.V & K.B: Okay thank you.

R.F: So your goal is to hit up Asian restaurants?

A.V: Yeah we. I don't know if you know Kayla? She said that her uncle owns this restaurant.

R.F: Kayla?

A.V: Kayla.

R.F: That's my niece.

A.V: Yeah, she said, I mentioned.

R.F: How do you know Kayla?

A.V: Iris. Her cousin

R.F: Iris? Oh okay got you

A.V: I'm friends with Iris.

G.F: Iris!

R.F: Iris is cool.

G.F: Okay got it got it.

A.V: I mentioned it to Iris and Kayla was there and was like oh my uncle owns this restaurant and I was like oh okay. Because she heard that I was struggling with this project, so.

R.F: No yeah I wish my mom was around because she always wanted to have a restaurant. She would be back there making all the Asian dishes.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: It's like bacon you can't bake everything.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: So you have to bake whatever.

G.F: What bakery are you at?

K.B: Sweet Elena's in Seaside.

G.F: Oh okay.

K.B: Yeah.

R.F: I like that place.

K.B: Me too.

G.F: The cookies

R.F: Well no.

G.F: Which one of these do we need to?

R.F: Is the boss lady nice? She seems nice to me.

K.B: She's nice.

G.F: *points at the phone*

A.V: We could edit this part out.

R.F: No its just, she just.

K.B: She is, she works so hard.

R.F: Yeah she does.

K.B: She does everything.

K.B: *trying to figure out paperwork* Umm which one is it?

R.F: I mean I love your guys.

A.V: I think you have to do.

G.F: All of them?

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: I love your guys Bascin?

G.F: Oh but it says I do not wish. It says I do not wish.

K.B: Oh that's only if-

G.F: So I got to do these?

K.B: Yeah.

G.F: The bottom one.

K.B: Yeah that one was.

R.F: Well learn as much as you can from her because she's got you know.

18:20

R.F: What do you want me to do?

G.F: Not that one.

R.F: What do I need to do?

G.F: Put an initial what ever you don't want.

R.F: I mean so, so basically for Asian class or whatever, cuisine. So what are they trying to get you guys to accomplish?

K.B: And just to find out more about the cultural places in our community, he mentioned how there's just so many. Places that hold so much more than we think, how our local businesses we should just explore them and I think the end result is he wants to have like a library of everyone's projects to just, kind of be like so other people can see the places in the community we have here relating to Asian culture.

R.F: It's amazing because Marina has probably over 80% restaurants out here, Seaside like, Yeah it' the direction.

A.V: Umm.

K.B: Yeah.

K.B: Um I don't have anymore follow up questions if you, do you?

A.V: Um no I just.

R.F: You can always text Gina.

A.V: Yeah.

G.F: Yeah sorry I rarely check my email so just text me please.

A.V: Yeah Okay.

G.F: If you need more in depth just, I know we just kinda rushed with time.

K.B & A.V: That's fine.

G.F: Funeral coming up and all that stuff.

G.F: If you need more just text me.

K.B: No I think that's good.

G.F: Funeral friday, Saturday is going to be a rough day for us.

K.B: Yeah.

G.F: But after that were good.

K.B: Everything was actually really good.

G.F: Yeah.

K.B: So I think that's all the questions we have. I think it was super good.

G.F: If you need more more details we could definitely get into that.

R.F: See filipino food is hard to, not so much hard but not too many people know about it.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: But if you put Hawaiian there.

G.F: Everybody knows adobo, papaitan and lumpia.

A.V & K.B: Yeah.

R.F: There's, yeah.

G.F: No yeah I know.

R.F: That just the basic.

G.F: That's the whitewashed.

R.F: Everybody knows.

K.B: It's more recognizable.

A.V: Yeah.

R.F: Now Vietnamese is the-

G.F: Better.

R.F: Yeah and the cost of everything, Chinese restaurant have been.

K.B & A.V: Yeah.

R.F: Good ladies?

G.F: Yup.

R.F: Thanks sweetheart.

G.F: Let us know.

A.V: Thank you so much.

K.B: Thank you.

R.F: No worry.