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Food for Thought: Oral Histories of the Central Coast's Asian-Pacific Foodways

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Interview with Ryan Lama (East Village Café)

Interviewee: Ryan Lama

Interviewers: Rolland Caulkins and Kelvin Chow

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Biography: Rolland and Kelvin sit down with Ryan Lama, the new owner of East Village Café. They discuss the history of the café and the remnants of the old print-house that resides within. Ryan shares his stories of what it takes to bring the 'real east' to the Monterey community, and the compromises he makes to retain Nepalese authenticity. The trio discusses cultural fusion done right through the context of oat-chai, a new hit from the East Village team. A smattering more is discussed, but for that, you'll have to listen.

Kelvin: My name is Kelvin Chow and my partner Rolland Caulkins is interviewing Mr. Ryan Lama of East Village Café in old Monterey for our Food for Thought Oral Histories of the California Asian Pacific Foodways Archive at California State University Monterey Bay.

Rolland: All right. Well, would you tell us your story, like how did you? How did you come to owning and running this place today?

Ryan: Yeah. Well, nice to meet you, Kelvin. And Rolland. Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share the story behind this iconic institution place. So East Village was started. I believe it's around 94 (1994). It was named by a guy named Morgan. So it was hasn't, it's been a coffee shop for the last 25 years. Always. Roll, you might edit some stuff. Yeah. As you can see, it's such a beautiful corner downtown. Nice, always sunny. This place has always been a place where the community comes in. Might be a coffee shop before all the other coffee shops over here. You know, as far as I can remember. Lots of hard music has happened here. It's definitely a community gathering spot. I've always loved it. About 10 years ago, they had to retrofit this building for an earthquake, because this building is about 100 and 101 years old. So they had to retrofit for earthquakes. And when they did that, they moved things around, businesses had to be moved. For all the moves, there was a little section that was left. And I would walk by it. And I was like oh, it'd be a nice place to have a little shop. Like an Asian shop shop, like when you travel to Asia, you see little tiny shops. So because of that I ended up starting a shop and traveling, my sister and I travel and then collect things and then you bring back all the curious or handicrafts from Nepal mostly, or anywhere we traveled. That's how the shop started. And then the shop actually shares a wall with the café.

Rolland: Yeah

Ryan: But during all this time, I've always loved this spot too. So you'd always think, oh, maybe one day I'll you know, it'd be nice to kind of run the café and it'd be fun has always been in the back of my head. So about I think about 15 years ago or so, I actually ended up knowing the previous owner of this café and they used to own a few other coffee shops, they still have three left in town. So I actually used to the marketing for the space for I did it for a few years. So and then such a good place community space. So that the running it only it has always been in the back of you know, the thought of like, oh, it'd be cool to run the space. Or better yet, keep keeper of the space. This place has so many memories, not just for me but for my friends, my family, and their friends. Even before it was a coffee shop this building has many many memories. This building has been so many different things I think The CMC was built. So, you know, my wife's aunt, mother in law signed the paper for the house in this room right here. Yeah, when he was a mortgage company or real estate company, you know, like my wife's grandfather had a car lot right across the street. So there's this. And then there are friends that I know now for a long time. Sometimes you may we actually met here for the first time when I didn't know you. And then their friends that have met him married as everybody has, there are just memories. It's almost like, this is the like, analog archive of people's memories. They leave town, they come back like, Oh, hey, Ryan, I wrote my everything in my thesis, I wrote everything here, man. And now I'm publishing this book. And, you know, this. So so that has always been

there. That's why, you know, I was always interested. And and during the pandemic, it was closed and open, closed and open. So can I have the same same landlord next door also, and I knew the previous owner. So that kind of just came about, and his timing was just perfect for that opportunity for me to be able to not let it go. But to revive it. Yeah. So that's, that's like a basic of how I ended up owning East Village.

Rolland: So you've been a part of the community for for a long time then. You've been around here...

Ryan: 25 years. Yes.

Rolland: Did you grow up in the area?

Ryan: I was born in Nepal. I came here to go to school.

Rolland: Okay.

Ryan: So it's like you guys came here to go to school? Yeah. And I fell in love with this place. And now this is I've lived here longer than anywhere else. Okay. Yeah. Thank you.

Rolland: For question. Should we ask?

Kelvin: When Edible Monterey covered? Oh, Edible Monterey Bay covered your business reopening the report said you wanted to bring the real east to your restaurant? What is the real east to you? And why is that important?

Ryan: Well, many things can get lost in translation. So, and the name of the coffee shop was café was already East Village? Yeah. We, you know, before we launched, and we thought of like, okay, different many different names for the, for the space. And, and kind of came to the conclusion that you know, east is where, because because of the shop that we have next door, and all the travels and all these collections of Eastern things. The name is just just perfect, you know, yeah, it's like, it'd be nice to change it. But then again, it is already there. So, so we just East Village Coffee Lounge was the former name. We couldn't keep the same name. So we had to call it East Village Café. So it's a different entity. It sounds similar.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: It's a different entity. And even if I had changed it to something else, people still call it the old East Village. Yeah. So we jokingly I was, I wish to call it The Old East Village. You know, people still...

Rolland: Yeah

Ryan: People will still say, oh, yeah, the old East Village, you know. That's how, and the name was already there. So the East was already there.

Kelvin: Yeah

Ryan: And it, it felt like it was a great opportunity to bring real in a sense more like authentic styles and flavors and the vibe and the energy. That's, you know, the real east as in. Does that make sense?

Kelvin: Yeah

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: Yeah. So bringing the real East is to bring the the experience and knowledge of the understanding and what the real East is, and share that here.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Ryan: That's so so there's less loss in translation. In what? East? [inaudible]

Rolland: Yeah. So with your personal background, you're able to come in and bring authentic Eastern coffee house. This isn't the Panda Express, you know?

Ryan: Yeah, it's still east. Yeah. And I'm pretty sure somebody that started that had the real authentic east. But sometimes when we have different reiterations, yes, it can get lost in translation?

Rolland: Do you have to balance authenticity, and, you know, desirability, you see people coming in, and they're not getting the flavor that they want? Do you have to make that kind of balance?

Ryan: Yes. Yeah. Every day. Every day, it's, it's, it's a challenge, but it's more of an opportunity to share the story and, and be able to, you know, also share the experience of what and when and how to be authentic. So for an example, for that. We, I grew up drinking tea, which is known as chai tea here, or because chai is an Indian word. But in Nepali, we call it chia. But it's basically the same ingredient. done differently, you know. So I grew up drinking chai.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: And to get a real Chai, you'd have to go home and make it. And that was the only option in town, and that still is the only option, I think. So when we're at the shop next door. And my sister and I would be like, oh, I want some chai, and then we would drive home, make some Chai bring it home from home, and then drink it. And we'd share with friends and family that would come into the shop also. And always thought, wouldn't that be interesting? You know, it'd

be so cool. Amazing if the coffee shop actually sold real Chai, but it's difficult, it's a different kind of operation you know. So for that, we make the chai, from scratch.

Rolland: Okay.

Ryan: Like all the spices that, you know, we put in there, and it's brown, you know, like the authentic way we do it. And then we don't use syrups or mixing, which is how it's sold in many places. It's very sweet.

Kelvin: Sweet.

Ryan: It's basically just sugar. It's tasty sugar, and people like it. And that's what kind of sells most of the time you know. So when somebody comes in, as they are like I'll take a chai, or, or I'll take a dirty Chai, which is basically a shot espresso on the chai. So we would go have, have you tried a Chai before? They would all be like no, I have not tried a Chai. Okay, so basically, I would go, these are the spices, we make our Chai from scratch the authentic way by boiling and everything. So it's not, it's not mixing up syrups it's not going to be sweet or sugary that you expect, at most places. So, if you really didn't like Chai or that taste, I would recommend you try it without the shot of espresso and making it dirty. And if you like it, we can always add the shot espresso. So So process like, you know, taking, sharing what it is and how it's done. So that's an opportunity. Yeah, so that's just one example of one item.

Rolland: Yeah, thank you. That's awesome. So I guess like do you have how do you get the ingredients for like your, your Chai? Do you have like a wholesaler?

Ryan: We for now I'm just using all the resources that are available already here in Monterey Bay is very there's a lot of resources for Asians because there are the Asian markets that I could get it from, you know, I mean, you can go to Whole Foods and get all of it, perhaps it's gonna cost you so we get that from there. Eventually, we'll probably you know, get it directly from the sources.

Kelvin: Exporting it?

Ryan: Yeah, importing it here. I have because of them we have, you know, My dad started importing, exporting in Nepal back in the days in the 80s. So that kind of has always been there. Nepal is always known for handicrafts. And so we have that connection. So eventually, needed, then we'll probably source things directly. It's very challenging and difficult to do. But, locally, I source some here and if there are available. If not, then I'll you know, online. Get it shipped.

Rolland: Yeah, shipping is a bit of a nightmare.

Kelvin: So since we're on the topic of food and tea, what makes a dish authentic to you?

Ryan: Yeah you know, authentic. It's like having the knowledge of why, who, and when, like, why was it made? Who made it? Right? When was it made? Who came up with Chai? Somebody

did that at one point, right. So knowing that and then having that having it done in the traditional way. It gives you the knowledge and the experience. So doing things authentic way, or knowing things done authentic way. It, helps you. If and when somebody wants to take it further, it helps you do that like you can do a fusion of it, if you know where it came from.

Rolland: Okay.

Ryan: You know, so being authentic and doing things authentically, is very vital in that sense.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Ryan: And learning. So, Chai, we do we call it the authentic Chai when we sell them. So, most of the time, you know, Indians and Pakistanis they don't agree on a lot of things or Bengalis' you know, there's, there's kind of like, this conflict in a sense, you know, but I've had people visit, and they're like, oh, you know, oh, this is good Chai, Oh where are you from?, Pakistan. Good Chai where are you from? I'm from India. Oh, it's good. I'm from, I'm from Bangladesh. So this Chai is really good. This Chai is really good. And this Chai, like when I went to India, and like, this tastes just like that. You get all these compliments? You know, from?

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: All these people like, Okay, that's great. And what has and so that authentic experience and the knowledge is very important. That has helped me make a crowd favorite item. Yeah. Oat Chai. Because it's always done with dairy. Right?

Rolland: Yeah. It's Oat Milk.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Ryan: Because Oat Milk is such a new thing. The Swedish guys did it. And it's all over the world now.

Kelvin: It's very popular.

Ryan: But it's very popular to want an alternative, especially in California and more Monterey. Oh, so for the last year, we've like tried so many different ways to make our Oat Chai taste as good. And, you know, many, many, many, many. Experiment, right? Yeah. Now we finally got to a point where like, Okay, this is good. One of our crowd favorite Oat Chai is, so being authentic or having that authentic experience, and the knowledge has helped me make or create this Oat Chai.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Ryan: So that's why it's important. I think, being authentic, you know, having that authentic knowledge or experience.

Rolland: Yeah. That's awesome.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Kelvin: So in addition to that, has your definition of authenticity, changed with living and moving to the Monterey area?

Ryan: Definition per se, it hasn't changed. But it has. And this interview has helped me for being having that authentic knowledge is good to have.

Kelvin: As the basis.

Ryan: and the physical experiences are even better to have. So it has helped me in. And I think it's always good to have that. That's what we travel.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: Because you get that experience. You can read about it. You can watch YouTube, and we can travel the world watched, but when you get there, the smell of it.

Kelvin: It's completely different.

Rolland: So yeah, and that's, that's awesome. I love that's like one of my favorite things about working in a restaurant is just the people coming up to you like this is great. It's just a huge confidence boost.

Ryan: Yes, yeah, yes. And, you know, kind of coming back to that challenges like in instances where people might not have enjoyed the chai. It's because 99% of Chai out there is basically just sugar.

Kelvin: Yeah.

Rolland Yeah.

Ryan: Oh, this Chai is watery, or whatever their experience is, and that the disappointments that that I will hear once in a while. It's like a hickey. This is what it is. And I know that's the Chai that you've been drinking since you grew up in Starbucks, or wherever it is. But this is what chai is, this is how authentic Chai is.

Rolland: That's awesome. So, I mean, you spend a lot of time in Nepal, are there a lot of coffee houses there? And like how is coffee culture, they're different than it is here?

Ryan: I think the coffee culture outside the US might be exploding more and more rapidly. Faster than in the US.

Rolland: Faster?

Kelvin: Faster?

Ryan: I'm not sure but it feels like it. Technology, the internet, and social media have made huge impacts but the results still need to be figured out. But you can walk you can go into Kathmandu and you start seeing you know coffee shops, every corner.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: Some of the few top baristas in the world that have won barista competitions are Nepali.

Kelvin: Oh!

Ryan: Yeah. I didn't realize until I kind of had to do it. And there's one guy in England. He's like he's won so many championships. And there are few like many in Dubai in Australia, like most the coffee shop. One of the stories that come to mind, is one of my friends from here locally. She and her husband now. They ended up going to Melbourne I think for a few years for two years. And the first thing she messaged me when she got there, she was like I can't get away from Nepal people. I'm working at cafes and then run by Nepali and it's Melbourne.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: So coffee culture in Nepal is big. I believe. Chai is still strong there. But chai is getting stronger here...

Kelvin: It is.

Rolland: It is.

Ryan: ...that it's there's a lot of health benefits to it to both of it in a different way. It's two different beans, you know, one so the coffee culture in Nepal is I think very strong...

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: ...because of the altitude shade grown high altitude coffee from Nepal is very desirable is it's hard to grow in. There's not much land to grow. About 10 uh 15 years ago, I imported coffee from Nepal, local beans, and brought it here we roasted some in Carmel Valley, and I sent two samples one to one of the two of the biggest importers of coffee in the state one in Southern California one up in the bay area for them to [say] Hey, I got this coffee, check it out. So they roasted their tasting and it actually I believe that more than 90 plus rating.

Kelvin: Wow!

Ryan: So so that was me before running a coffee shop. Yeah, or a café. And we've hosted locally through Carmel Valley coffee and we sold it through their outlets. I was doing marketing. We sold it for a pretty premium price. It was pretty expensive to get it here, to begin with.

Rolland: I can imagine.

Ryan: So coffee demand in Nepal is growing, productions growing, and the knowledge is being transferred. It's getting better day by day. And once we once the new vibe of this place get settled a little bit more. I'm already looking into importing organic green shade-grown coffee beans from that altitude, and then maybe brewing and sharing with the community here.

Rolland: Yeah. So you said the vibe here isn't settled. What, What are those next steps that you see happening to make it settled?

Ryan: Settled in a sense that this corner is, I feel like I'm still learning about what, what the customer profiles are like, who is the what, what do they crave? And what Why'd they come here in? So settled in the sense that I'm still taking a lot of input.

Rolland: Okay.

Ryan: And pandemic-wise. We haven't had that much. Because it was close for a few months.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: And so that people change their habit, you know. And since it's, I believe it's 80% Local locals are barely starting to, you know, move around, because last week, I had somebody come, oh, it's good to be back. I haven't been here since the pandemic, that's two years ago! So you know, so people coming back, so. So I feel like I'm in I'm at a point to take more input and process that. And then, oh, I love it. I love I love the vibe. Okay, I like it. So just getting more input is, what I mean by it's not settled.

Rolland: Okay

Ryan: So I'm taking as much input as I can, and, and tweak it. So it just amplifies the energy of a typical cafe or coffee shop that we would go into in the US. Does that?

Rolland: Yeah, yeah. That's awesome. I'm just checking the time. So we've been here about 20-25 minutes now. Is there? Is there anything else that you think would be important to mention or put on the archive? Anything you'd like to talk about?

Ryan: I'm here to answer your questions.

Rolland: All right. I guess one of the most distinctive features of the place as you brought in a rickshaw, just put it in the center of the space. I mean, talking to hearing from a girlfriend that how important it is to have like seating space for customers. That's a choice, you're giving up seating space for that. Why? Why is that? Why that?

Ryan: Rickshaws happened. I had the rickshaw out before I had the contract.

Rolland: Alright.

Ryan: So so. So in this whole process, one of the phrases that I use most of us day by day. So I'm personally also learning to go with the flow, and enjoy. And like I said, taking input and see where it goes, you know, like processing. So because of the import-export business that we've been involved with, in the last 10 years. Before that, I was I went to school for software engineering.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: So we were importing in containers. So container, we could put as many things as we can fill up to a certain weight. Yeah, so we will travel and the rickshaw was always the fun part of travel, you know, how should this important get some rickshaws to see if we can ride around town?

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: So my sister said yeah, let's order two so we actually [got them] handmade so we got two of them in the shipment of our last container that came in, and it came in March 16th 17th. Right when the lockdown started, the container was here. So we had to load the container. You know the whole thing and the rickshaw is here. My great friend has always traveled and he actually used to own a huge antique shop in Carmel Peterson Conway was so generous enough [to] restore the rickshaws. It was still in the box. So we drove the big truck there and I left it there. And then the coffee shop stuff was coming about and I was like and at that time it was only to go you couldn't have anybody sit inside. It's COVID time. So I was like oh, I can park my rickshaw here. Ryan, I need to move the rickshaw like Oh I have a space now! So, so two rickshaws I brought in I've had here and the other rickshaw I actually sold it to a friend who opened an Indian restaurant in Saratoga, California. Okay. So the rickshaw came. It was meant to be, and it's always been there and people love it. And rickshaw stayed sacrificing the space. I understand like seating, you know, restaurant, but those are I guess that is kind of like trying to bring Authenticity. There's a balance, right. Okay. I could sit for four people there. It could be a four-top. But really, it's about its the essence.

Rolland: Yeah you're bringing more than the four top worth of smiles.

Ryan: Yeah. So the essence is important. You know, numbers are important too.

Kelvin: Pictures for social media with the rickshaw as well.

Ryan: Yeah, but eventually we're going to have more rickshaws. And want to start a pedicab.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: So I'm working with bikes or two. So again, the essence. So this is how the original is right?

Kelvin: Yeah.

Ryan: So we had to tweak that thing because any uphill doesn't have any gears. You'll be struggling, you know? Yeah. So it doesn't fit in. So we're gonna tweak it and maybe kind of like the Oat Chai, you know, you have a newer version of the rickshaw and then have an electric assist.

Kelvin: That's cool!

Rolland That would be really cool!

Ryan: That's where the rickshaw story came about and headed towards.

Rolland Yeah, that's cool.

Kelvin: That is really cool!

Rolland: I wonder if the area you think is going to become more bike-friendly? In the future?

Ryan: I believe so. We have the city of Monterey, we have great city planners. He's like, they know what they're doing. You know...

Rolland: That's good.

Ryan: ... think in the grand plan there, all those things are part of it. And I think pandemic kind of changed that too. So a lot of people riding bikes and Monterey is already we have the bike, plan. I mean, now we're blessed.

Rolland: From Davis, and Davis. Everyone has a bike. It's, um, there are chunks of downtown that are only accessible by bike like...

Ryan: Yeah.

Rolland: ...like that rickshaw would fit. Awesome.

Ryan: Yes, I believe, you know, our city planners, and she's, they know what they're doing. I'm pretty sure it's coming. And I hope

Rolland: Yeah, that'll be cool. Well, I think that's about 30 minutes. Since the time that you set for us, are there any last comments from you, Kelvin?

Kelvin: I'd still like to hear where would you plan to take your business in the coming years? Sounds like a good wrap-up for this interview.

Ryan: Yeah. Let's see where it goes.

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: We have, we have a lot of plans. It's easy to kind of have plans. Mike Tyson said, "everybody has a plan until you get punched in the face".

Rolland: Yeah.

Ryan: So there are many, many plans. I'm just taking it day by day, trying to learn as much as I can about coffee and tea. And we'll definitely be adding spices and in all those things, and tune, tweak our retail.

Rolland: Yeah

Ryan: So this whole building is connected because it was part of the Monterey Herald Printing Press, there are doors that connect all of it. So yeah, so actually, there's a door that connects to the bike shop, but it's all closed. But my gift shops connected. So we're gonna probably connect that retail for the people that come in. And then we're working on lots of plans. Work goes regardless of how it goes, grows, and goes, I think it has always been a place for people to come in, meet and gather in, like Saturday morning, you guys were are earlier, you see all the bikers that come in the people that come in every day, there are local, Sicilian guys that come in every day. And as long as I remember, as long as the place has been. So it has, it has that.

Kelvin: Essence of Community.

Ryan: Yeah, in a sense, it's an essence of this community. So regardless of how much we grow, and where we end up the essence, my goal is to keep the essence alive.

Kelvin: To keep the community together

Ryan: Yes. And last year, we, the old Monterey Business Association, also gave us an award for the best meetup space in downtown.

Rolland: That's awesome!

Ryan: So keep the essence alive, and the authenticity. And hopefully, you know, we can evolve into a better fusion spot. There are so many ideas, so many opportunities for now. Taking it taking the input, day by day, improving it, learning it, making sure all the lights are on. And I've changed all the light. So yes,

Kelvin: Yeah.

Rolland: All LEDs?

Ryan: Yeah, I've, we've switched all the LEDs. Finally, almost done programming all the lights, in that sense. And then because the displace, has always been full art and music. We haven't brought the live music back yet. Because we close early, we're starting to slowly do private events in the evening. So it's still, you know, kind of safer in everybody's, you know, if, if we'd say, Hey, we're gonna do an open mic, I'm pretty sure this place will be full. I don't want to be the one. Like once things get back to normal, in this post-pandemic kind of situation, we'll see where it goes. But slowly, we're starting to do private events, people renting it out for their birthday parties, or just hanging out or meetings. Things like that. And then for art on the wall and stuff, I have a few that are already because of all the travel, so we have all these eastern art. So that kind of just the art was there before the place was and it was meant to be for that, you know, so. So and then local shows local artists that have traveled. So it's more of a global spot in that sense, you know, and my team that we have, I'm so blessed. You know, it's a global team. It almost feels like a misfit. You know, like us, you know, typical trendy coffee shop. Barista looking kind of versus you walking. Oh, you know, she looks like you know, she doesn't look like a typical barista, you know, so but yeah, I'm so lucky to have good people be part of my team and then I think now the university's physically open so we have we just hired somebody that's training right now she's she goes to CSUMB Environmental Sciences, so we'll have more people and yeah...

Rolland: That's awesome!

Ryan: ...it's building day by day, you know, one kimbap roll at a time, you know, that, you know, like, little bit of Korean food and then when you traveled to Japan, like all these chickens getting in a vending machine, you can get all these little tasty like savory snacks, you know, not just all loaded with sugar. So, day by day, we're doing that we're working on things but like, it's like, you know, all the plants who just don't want to get punched in the face. Food-wise was, yeah, we're gonna slowly do that.

Kelvin: Yeah, that answers everything.

Ryan: Direction. Yeah, so directions like it's global universal direction. Who are just happy to be here in enjoy Monterey, keep the essence alive. That's the goal right now. Keep the essence alive and I have a great landlord. They're there. They're very nice. It's almost like a partner. You know?

Rolland: That's fortunate.

Kelvin: That is very fortunate.

Ryan: Hey, when are you going to change this? Like I'm working on it day by day! Like people that come in and share their stories. It's, it's, it's an amazing space. And that's how I feel. That's how all my team fields and they love it. Like it is day by day.

Kelvin: Take it slow.

Ryan: So, yes.

Rolland: Well, thank you. Thank you so much for spending the time to help us out.