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Interview with Kevin Hum (Poke House)

Brooke Banuelos

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Brooke banuelos 00:00

Okay, so this is for Japanese 317. I am Brooke Banuelos interviewing Kevin Hum for poke house at Del Monte shopping center. So once again, Kevin, thank you so much for doing this interview with me, it's really important that we get some insight and some voices from the local Asian community, especially after everything that's happened and as we get closer to AAPI month. So what made you decide to become the general manager of Poke house and just wanted to go into the restaurant business in general?

Kevin Hum 00:32

Well, for me, like I had a have a passion for food for like a very long time. It's mainly like food, just kind of like one of the things that connect people like together. I feel like it's one way to share our culture and also share like, maybe experiences or something like that. Food is something that is a very powerful connection seems like most people, so yeah, like food is like, you know, something that you eat every day. And it's like something you can commonly share with like most people as well,

Brooke banuelos 01:01

of course, of course, and then has COVID-19 affected your business at all, or to your knowledge Have you started after it happens?

Kevin Hum 01:10

Mainly just like, like, probably dislike labor shortages, as you know. And then like, probably like, as, you know, like, price increases, like everywhere. Everything's like short and supply. But of course, like, you know, we always tried to bring like, the best quality food as we can to, like, tell our customers and like, just like try to give them the right pricing as well. It's been pretty difficult since COVID. Started, but we're just trying our best to do.

Brooke banuelos 01:36

That's always good. And especially since I see you guys have the sustainability model happening with the fish, how's the quality of the fish gone down at any point? Or do you see any kind of like people not wanting to be here as often because they're afraid that the prices are going to be higher since you're not buying it from fish farmers?

Kevin Hum 01:53

Well, for the for the, for the price changes. It's like... I wanted to say no, people still do come through, like just so come by to go buy poke for every, every now and then. But it's just a come less frequently because of the rising cost. As for the quality of the fish, the quality of the fish never changes at all. If anything, like either it'll increase or stay the same quality. But you know, like, again, like we're just trying to bring the best like quality food and at the most like sustainable farm.

Brooke banuelos 02:24

Perfect, then that's good. And then what is your favorite dish on the menu? If you have any?

Kevin Hum 02:27

My favorite dish? I want to see the house salmon. It's a very, yeah, the house salmons a pretty good bowl. It's a very simple bowl of a few ingredients, but I'll feel like it represents like a good Poke bowl I would say like very few ingredients, but also a very good tasting bowl.

Brooke banuelos 02:46

That's good then. And then has poker played a big part of your life. Have you grown up eating it? Or have you just started eating it recently?

Kevin Hum 02:53

I wouldn't say like poke was like in the very beginning, when I first tried it, it was very unfamiliar for me, an area I grew up, we didn't have poke at all, but then was one poke chain that started up. And when I had poke for the first time, it was a really good like, meal I would say and like you know, like everything was fresh. I think it's like really delicious as well. Of course, like the price is like kind of like hefty, but it's hefty for reasons because like the product like all the

proceeds to bring to the table costs like quite a bit as well. But for the most part, like I think like poke is a good way to start eating healthier as well because I imagine that people would go for like fast food or something like, like McDonald's, McDonald's or like Jack in the Box or something. But I feel like pokey is a good way to also have fast food but eat it at a much healthier pace or have healthier mindset basically.

Brooke banuelos 03:47

If you don't mind me asking Where did you grow up?

Kevin Hum 03:50

I grew up in like, Southern California.

Brooke banuelos 03:52

Oh what part?

Kevin Hum 03:53

Like Rosemead, Pasadena area.

Brooke banuelos 03:56

I'm from Pasadena.

Kevin Hum 03:57

Oh, really?

Brooke banuelos 03:58

Yeah. What high school did you go to?

Kevin Hum 03:59

I went to Rosemead high.

Brooke banuelos 04:00

Oh, I went to San Marino.

Kevin Hum 04:01

Oh, San Marino.

Brooke banuelos 04:02

Yeah, so San Marino. Like so literally I work at the Santa Anita mall in Arcadia.

Kevin Hum 04:05

Oh, yeah.

Brooke banuelos 04:06

I feel that. Wait which is the poke house that opened up near you.

Kevin Hum 04:10

Ah, it was called. But it was opened up by one of the teachers like back in Rosemont High School.

Brooke banuelos 04:16

oh Wow.

Kevin Hum 04:18

But I think it's like poke go or something. I don't know.

Brooke banuelos 04:20

Okay, cool. Oh, ? And then what inspired you to try to kind of bring or did you help open up this branch? Or did you or did you just join after it was already opened.

Kevin Hum 04:36

I joined shortly after open and I was working closely with the the owner basically. And he kind of like he kind of had the same passions that I do where like, you know, to have really good food and also to kind of like bring a little bit of culture to like places that don't really have this type of food. And yeah, that's, you know, that's pretty much where I stemmed from

Brooke banuelos 04:59

Oh good, thats good then. And then do you feel like you have to Americanize your food or change your recipes for the American clientele or people who haven't been familiar with poke before?

Kevin Hum 05:10

Just a little bit, I would say most of its like pretty traditional. There are some things that are more American as where we have like more options like definitely like, definitely, like we have to like change up, like some of the foods based off location as well. We try to work with more like local products that way we can like, kind of bring like a little bit, you know, to like lower the cost of food as well as like to bring like when we grow here like in California?

Brooke banuelos 05:35

Of course, of course. And then was it easy for this branch to build clientele? Or was there a little bit of skepticism from the people when you first opened up?

Kevin Hum 05:46

That I'm not sure because most of the people that come by to poke house are familiar with poke, there are a couple of people because of the area. It's like, there's a lot of tourists coming in.

Brooke banuelos 05:57

Yeah

Kevin Hum 05:57

that are kind of curious about it. And we're very friendly with like new people coming in to try poke And we try to give them the best experiences possible. So they would come back and try it again. Or they would go back to where they live, then how poke where they live or something.

Brooke banuelos 06:13

And then what are some secret tips, to successfully helping manage this business? Or is there anything you can kind of give as an insight that you've done that might have helped increase the customer service when it comes to here?

Kevin Hum 06:28

Well, definitely a lot of caffeine for sure. Like that's like top of the list, you always have to be like on your feet, and kinda like adjusting to like day to day like craziness or things that happen. Everything is a little different, like it's really unpredictable. But you just have to be really adaptable to your environment and situation that happens. Like time time organization is also very like important as well. Because if you're kind of all over the place, it's really hard. Just anything, basically, but if you have good time management and like, good organization, you will be able to do well,

Brooke banuelos 07:04

of course, and then was there a special dish that helped bring in clientele when you first open or one that seemed to be more popular than the others?

Kevin Hum 07:10

Um, not really like everything, like kind of just kind of random, I would say because a lot of people like to build their own bowls, because they get to choose what they want. And also like for people who come in for the first time, they would get like a signature bowl or something like that. It's all very different. But I think it's just based off like how

comfortable people are trying to do things and or like, how comfortable they are with like, building their own bowl and kind of going into going to the dark kind of thing.

Brooke banuelos 07:38

Was there any dish that you guys created afterwards, due to high demand from clientele, or as from seeing what the most popular item was, or more commonly asked for?

Kevin Hum 07:51

No dishes in particular, but maybe just a couple like items. I know, there's a demand for our traditional shoyu tuna. And so we brought it back because people have been asking for it. So it was like something that so it's something that like we you know, will be the kind of like, listen to our customers about and then we also like, bring it back. You know, because people just really love it as well.

Brooke banuelos 08:14

And then where do you see the business, And specifically the shop going from here? Like what is your what are the goals or the outcomes that you're hoping for in the next upcoming year?

Kevin Hum 08:25

Definitely just see, like, probably definitely to, like expand more to like different areas around the Bay Area. I feel like the Bay Area doesn't have a lot of poke places that are like very good. So we do want to, once you like have a really good pokey business like well, as well as like, you know, serving the highest quality like food as we can.

Brooke banuelos 08:43

Yeah, as a customer, I can absolutely see that happening. And I have noticed that too, like coming from where we're from there's at least now there was a ton down there and then coming up here and not finding any. So I will say it was very, very welcomed when I found this place. And then I do have a little bit more of a serious question. Has the reason racism towards Asian or Asian Americans been affecting the business during COVID-19? Or have you? Or has the shop in general been like the victims of any of this type of anti Asian racism?

Kevin Hum 09:14

Not not poking house, Like I haven't heard anything about Asian racism or like hate or anything like that. But I mean, I do. I just I definitely keep up with the news myself. And like, it's pretty sad about what's going on. And

Brooke banuelos 09:27

absolutely,

Kevin Hum 09:28

I really couldn't do it. Like all those like, you know, that news happens with all those actions that happen. And I just wish that you know, like, because like talking about it more or like, you know, find a solution or some common ground. No hate would happen, you know?

Brooke banuelos 09:44

Oh, absolutely. But it's good the fact that the business and you guys haven't been victims or targeted due to this, and then do what do you think would have happened if COVID hadn't happened? Like do you think the trajectory of the store would have changed? Do you think that you guys would have been able to open more businesses since then? or anything like that?

Kevin Hum 10:05

I definitely think maybe more businesses for sure. Well, I mean, like, I mean, like, I think like, what our mission was to do is just, like spread as much as possible. And like, you know, trying to spread like, our mission to, to bring like, like our like, take on, like, Hawaiian poke a to, like, the Bay Area. I don't think COVID has stopped us that much. So we're still trying to like, we're still going like really fast towards our goal.

Brooke banuelos 10:37

And then when did the store open specifically?

Kevin Hum 10:40

I think this store opened and I think like 2019 or 20, sometime around that.

Brooke banuelos 10:47

And then why do you think your store out of all the stores around here was able to get through COVID and not end up shutting down or be able to become even more successful afterwards?

Kevin Hum 10:58

I think it's definitely because like, our corporation is pretty adaptable to situations. And also like, it's also comes down to like the quality of our food as well as our quality of our food was in like really good or like up to par, then I'll take the business would have lasted. But because we you know, we take pride in like serving the highest quality like food as we can, like people keep coming back, because it's like one of the only good tasty poke places around here.

Brooke banuelos 11:27

And then how do you ensure that the that the ingredients state high quality is there any procedures you go through, are there any measurements or scales you kind of try to measure it against to make sure that it stays is that quality?

Kevin Hum 11:41

Definitely always like checking the quality of food. Like when it comes in also, like before it goes out to the line itself. doing like a double take just on like quality of the color the food before it goes out is like a very good practice that we do. Because, you know, we always want to be serving like really fresh, like vegetables and like fish and protein as much as we can. And you know, it's just like basic it is as basic food handling procedures as well. And like we just follow those to like the tee basically. I think like for other restaurants, it's like, it's like they don't have enough to follow to the tee. But because we're dealing with like high quality food as well as like, raw food as well. That's something that we have to do like all the time.

Brooke banuelos 12:22

Absolutely. Absolutely. And then what is your favorite and least favorite part of working in the food industry or working at poke house?.

Kevin Hum 12:29

I think my favorite part is just like seeing all the different people that come by this a lot of interesting characters that do stop by pokey house to like, try the food and stuff like that. And I think it's very interesting to see, like, you know, just like, just like the very different amounts of people that come in here. It's like very interesting. Mostly all these the least favorite thing.

Brooke banuelos 12:53

It doesnt have to be poker house, I'm trying to get you fired, so just about the food business in general,

Kevin Hum 12:58

food businesses in general. Um, I want to say, sometimes the food business can be like very unforgiving in a way.

Brooke banuelos 13:06

What do you mean by that?

Kevin Hum 13:09

By unforgiving? I mean, like, because, you know, you know, people come in hangry that have like a really high standard as well. And it's like, although we do need a very high standard, it's like, sometimes just not enough for them.

Brooke banuelos 13:21

Difficult customers and such.

Kevin Hum 13:22

Yeah, it's always it's always like, it's like, you know, people, a lot of people are more inclined to leave a bad review than a good review, like, you know, more bad than good. So it's really unforgiving in that way. Usually, though, it's like the people that do love the food would always be coming back. And that's kind of like what we kind of do, basically. But definitely, like the bad review, like the critics are harsh, basically, or like reviews are harsh as well.

Brooke banuelos 13:47

Yeah, I mean, definitely imagine that. And then do you think your experience as somebody who's Asian American has helped you run this business more successfully or helped and more successfully using your knowledge or even just coming across to customers as somebody who would seem more "knowledgeable"?

Kevin Hum 14:03

I will say well for this business. Definitely not. I feel like everyone that comes here is very knowledgeable. And it's like, you know, all it takes is like, some time and like some research to get to know like, where the food comes from and how to prepare it. So like, I think that anyone could like come and like, you know, manage a poke store. It's just all it takes is just a bit of effort of learning, like what it is and like how it's supposed to be and also like how to serve the best quality of the people as much as you can.

Brooke banuelos 14:36

And then since this Poke is Hawaiian based, are the owners like Native Hawaiian, or did they get inspiration for perhaps visiting Hawaii and opened this branch like this?

Kevin Hum 14:46

They're well they're Asian, for sure. But they definitely do love like the Hawaiian culture and like the love, just like everything about Hawaii and that culture. I think when they opened it up, they want it to spread that sort of culture to like everyone through like food as well so it's like something they could do to spread like the Hawaiian culture.

Brooke banuelos 15:09

That's good then and then how has food in general impacted your life and also how has poke house impacted your life?

Kevin Hum 15:18

For poke house it definitely made it definitely made me see like a healthier way to eat food as well. Because beforehand I was just like eating fries and like burgers and like all the other stuff. But you know, having being at poke house for a long time made me like realize like, hey, there's a lot of other there's a lot of other alternatives you can try to eat healthy while also getting fast food and

Brooke banuelos 15:44

broaden your horizons a little bit. I feel that Yeah, back home. The only thing I need is either hotpot or Korean barbecue so

Kevin Hum 15:52

yeah, Gen, Gen barbecue house haidilao always places.

Brooke banuelos 15:57

And that should be it thank you so much coming for this interview. I really appreciate you taking time out of your day for doing this with me. Thank you so much.

Kevin Hum 16:04

Thank you for having me.