

The MacGyver of the Vegan World

By Carole Audet



Ted Lai

is Vice President of Student Services and Success at Calbright College in California. But his accomplishments and occupations—the activities that fill his days—don't end there. Food has been a lifelong passion, and his creativity with it is limitless.

Among his many jobs throughout his career, Ted Lai has worked in food services, for Cartoonists Across America doing educational comic books, as an elementary and middle school teacher, followed by a stint as a trainer in higher education. He even spent time working in management for Marriott Corporation—after they sent him to management academy, however, he preferred to push food not paper. “When you love food, you generally don't get into it for the management, you get into it to be a chef, to create. That was one of the reasons I ended up leaving food service as a full-time profession because the money is in managing, but not the passion.”

A vegetarian for many years, becoming fully vegan happened out of necessity for his family. “When our younger daughter, Genevieve, who's now 22, was about three, we found out she was allergic to dairy and eggs. I chose to go vegan with her because I didn't want her to feel she was different. It was the direction I was going in already and

Plant Alchemy cheese board



Plant Alchemy Tofu Benedictus | Photo by EyeRecap



Plant Alchemy Panuozzo | Photo by EyeRecap



I thought, if it's Daddy and Genevieve's thing, then she doesn't feel unusual, and I get to move towards what I wanted anyway. I'm the cook of the family, so everyone went vegan whether they wanted to or not."

The elimination of dairy and eggs had a side benefit for Ted's wife Trang: psoriasis that had covered her back for years all but disappeared. "When that's the only thing you change, it's hard not to point at that as the reason. My cholesterol went down. Our older daughter's asthma was more manageable. I saw pretty clearly that Genevieve needed to be vegan, but the rest of us benefited as well."

While Ted was working at the Marriott, he was sent for basic culinary training, then went on to get his chef certification through Rouxbe. He took what he learned and began dabbling in side ventures, one of which was Plant Alchemy, a pop-up at a weekly farmer's market that ran for five years. While they started out making and selling mostly vegan meat, within two years that had transitioned to making and selling mostly vegan cheeses because there was already a lot of vegan meat options on the market.

They closed Plant Alchemy two years ago because of the pandemic and they no longer had access to a

commercial kitchen. Another issue was that this side venture was run by Ted and his youngest daughter, Genevieve, who acted as his sous chef. While Genevieve managed the kitchen expertly in Ted's absence, running a commercial kitchen with only two people doing the cooking is challenging.

They hired folks to help, but some were completely inexperienced in food service, and others were not accustomed to batch cooking, which meant the labour costs were high because of the training involved. All these factors combined led them to pause Plant Alchemy.

"I'm proud of what we did. We were able to create a brand that people liked. People still call me asking if we're going to start up again. Maybe eventually, but I'm always looking for other things. I think my mind gets restless and I'm always looking for something else. That's why when I was travelling and working for Apple I started Vegan MacGyver."

Frequently staying in hotels due to business trips and Genevieve's ice hockey tournaments, Ted began to 'cook' meals in his room where vegan restaurants were rarely available. He purchased plant-based food items at local grocery stores and started

experimenting with 'cooking' them with what's available in most hotel rooms—think irons and blow dryers.

"I thought, let's showcase how easy it is to be vegan by cooking in a hotel room with an iron, a hot water pot and a blow dryer. We would get parchment paper to protect the equipment and the food, and we started with simple things like grilled cheese sandwiches. Then I wondered what else we could do, and it became prepared meals."

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Vegan MacGyver composed polenta stack

He was approached by Vegan Food Share and Pollution Studios and ended up shooting about 10 episodes which were published on YouTube. After that, he collaborated with Vegan Outreach on Facebook where his videos garnered even more views, getting to the point that people were recognizing him as Vegan MacGyver during his work trips.

Beyond Meat sponsored him to create something with Beyond Burgers. "I didn't want to do just a burger, that'd be too easy. I made nachos. I figured out a way to break up the Beyond patty and spiced it up with some chili powder, cumin, and coriander, then grilled that with the iron, cheese in a hot water bath, tortillas, of course. I think I even grilled the green onions that I chopped up and put on top."

When asked about his most complex MacGyver-style creation, Ted shares about a dish using polenta. "It was rounds of polenta that we grilled and stacked with Beyond Breakfast Sausage and pesto. It was this beautiful, composed plate. I remember that getting a lot of views and people commenting that what I'm doing in a hotel room is a hundred times better than what they're doing at home."

The most recent thing this restless creative has been working on is handmade chocolate, a venture into which he incorporates his Asian Pacific Islander pride. While most craft chocolatiers make high-quality

chocolate, Ted goes beyond that; he estimates he pays three times more for his beans than chocolatiers who simply incorporate fair trade standards. "What I'm looking for are beans that are from Asian Pacific islands. There are a lot of beans that are gaining popularity from South America, Central America, the Caribbean, and Africa. Tanzania has amazing beans, and so do Dominican Republic, Peru, and Guatemala."

Ted wanted high-quality beans that were not frequently sourced, and he eventually found small cacao bean fermenters in countries like Vietnam and Papua New Guinea. "It's not just that I'm using these beans from the Philippines, let's say, but what other flavours from the Philippines can I integrate into this chocolate bar? It's not just vegan chocolate, it's capturing the spirit of the country."

He sources his sugar from Brazil's organic Green Cane Project—a practice of allowing cane to grow in its natural environment, which is a common source of sugar for craft chocolatiers, albeit a more expensive one. It's the only ingredient he sources outside Asian Pacific islands.

At the moment, Ted's chocolate bars are not available commercially. He's given the idea a lot of thought, but it's an undertaking he wants to consider carefully before jumping into a new side venture while working a full-time job. He admits that, as he gets older, he doesn't have the energy he once had to spread himself too thin.

Plant Alchemy crunchy chocolate





Plant Alchemy Mango Raspberry Bon Bons

A project Ted's passionate about and happily makes time for is the Asian American History 101 podcast he produces with his daughter. "Genevieve and I have often thought about different writing projects. As we were going through ideas, the one that came to fruition the fastest was the podcast. What we're aiming for is teaching about the Asian American history that's not in our textbooks in the U.S."

While episodes are primarily solely Ted and Genevieve sharing the lived experiences of the people they've researched, they have brought on guests. "One of our favourites was filmmaker Diane Paragas; she is the writer, director, and producer of the movie *Yellow Rose*, an award-winning film about an undocumented Filipina woman who wants to be a country music star."

Published weekly, the podcast has been running for a year and a half, and they continue to attract new listeners, particularly after being featured as one to listen to on the Apple Podcasts directory about six months after they launched. Then earlier this year, they were featured in a piece called "15 Best Podcasts From AAPI Creators to Add to Your List" on Good Housekeeping online. This exposure led to a spike in listeners, and they are now approaching 100,000 downloads.

That's an amazing statistic for a podcast that they originally thought they were creating for family and friends. "We get wonderful comments on social media and email. We think it's resonating partly because it's a daughter-father team. We come at it with this great relationship and rapport, but also from different generations. Although we agree on things, our insights, our comments will always have a different frame of mind."

Ted is proud that educators listen to the podcast as it provides them with an alternative way to teach Asian American history. And he points out that they often feature people from outside the U.S. borders, such as Canadian Larry Kwong, who was the first player of colour in the NHL.



Larry "King" Kwong (aged 23) shows his ice form while wearing a New York Rangers jersey. Larry Kwong was the first Chinese hockey player ever to represent an American NHL team. Date: Oct 21, 1946 | Courtesy: Museum and Archives of Vernon -No. 25056.

At this point Ted and Genevieve are exploring their options for the growth and future of the podcast; they are open to taking their presentations offline and speaking in front of live audiences.

In the meantime, we anticipate that Ted's restless, creative mind will come up with another vegan food sideline soon. ●

If you'd like to learn more about Ted, his YouTube videos or his podcast, find him online at AsianAmericanHistory101.libsyn.com.



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