

Xiao Bao Biscuit has harmonized the dining experience. Inspired by select dishes from China, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam, they've balanced bold flavors – funk, heat, acid, salt – with simplicity.

“A menu is like a record – everything needs to have its place,” says Josh Walker, co-owner of Xiao Bao Biscuit. “You need different types of cuts on there to make a perfect album.”

Xiao Bao Biscuit: On Finding The Right Vibe

To Walker and his co-owners, wife Duolan Li and friend Joey Ryan, a restaurant is a place in time.

“We wanted a place that was all about comfort and vibes,” says Walker. “[At the time] a lot of people were just looking on King Street. We knew what we wanted was going to be different in the sense of so many things.”

Comfort and vibes is at the core of their establishment. Inspired by the foods they craved after a seven month honeymoon throughout Asia, Walker and Li knew there was nothing like what they wanted to do in Charleston.

“We wanted people to have this experience of family style eating. The idea that food is meant to be shared that's so common in Asian, and so we emphasized that from the beginning and since it's become way more popular. I think that's because it's fun,” says Walker.

They opened their first brick and mortar spot in 2012 after two years of operating as a successful pop-up restaurant. Their location found them.

On their way to see the band Body Language play live in downtown Charleston, Walker and Li parked at the abandoned gas station that eventually became their restaurant. “It just clicked,” says Walker. “It was one of those things.” Off the beaten path and full of character, they've created a destination restaurant for locals and visitors alike.

Try Something New At Xiao Bao Biscuit



Xiao Bao Biscuit Interior

Xiao Bao Biscuit encourages you to wander outside of your comfort zone. “We design the menu around food that doesn’t get much air play,” says Walker.

While ordering a few dishes for the table, the owners encourage you to try something you’ve never had, or possibly never heard of before. “Branch out and take a chance,” says Walker. “It’s my philosophy when I go to a restaurant. I look for something I haven’t had. I might not like it, but just to try it. You’re doing it just to have that experience. It becomes a valuable thing in and of itself.”

So what can you expect from their menu?

“The thing I love about Asian food is it’s all about balance. It’s big bold flavors...I’ve seen people that, once they cook this style of food, they can’t go back,” says Walker.

Their online menu specifies no modifications or changes, expertly guiding diners to a balanced palate. “With food, it [balance] comes from funk, from heat, acid and salt – all

these flavors that coexist,” explains Walker. “Sometimes that means simplicity. You can have these super complex ingredients but it becomes a simple cooking process. The flavors build up a whole that’s bigger than everything.”

With a heavy focus on balance, the Xiao Bao Biscuit kitchen also has a ‘waste not, want not’ mentality. “You can’t run out of rice if you’re an Asian restaurant,” says Walker. “We go through 1,000 pounds of rice a week. There are always leftovers, so what can we do?” The clear answer was to turn the leftover rice into fried rice, a comforting staple that nearly every diner is familiar with.

“Comfort foods often have origins and practicalities,” says Walker. “That’s the beauty – you take something that could have been wasted, and you make it into your new favorite dish.”

Make Xiao Bao Biscuit At Home

If 2020 has taught us anything, it's adapting. "One of the things that was important to me that I'm proud of, was that we were able to provide jobs and keep them [our staff] paid, looking to the past year to make sure their pay was the same," says Walker.

Like many other restaurants, Xiao Bao Biscuit shifted to take out, providing frozen Okonomiyaki kits for people to take home and reheat. "Most people have not had that dish in the style that we do it. So many were nostalgic and missed it. It was a great way to connect with people."

The inspiration for their unique savory Japanese pancake came from Walker and Li's experience farming in Japan.

"We were on a farm that had a lot of cabbage and were making this style that was more veggie heavy than the typical batter heavy version. Being cabbage based, it's almost like a hash brown," explains Walker. "It's great because it's like a one pot rice dish, where you can use it in a respectable way."

When they heard about Gold Belly, it was an easy partnership. Their Okonomiyaki + topping kit is available in a three pack or six pack, and can be shipped nationwide. [Click here to order]



Okonomiyaki with an egg

Breaking Rules To Reach New Heights

While their menu originally stayed very true to authentic Asian cooking and how Walker and Li had originally experienced the dishes, a trip to Tokyo changed everything.

"We went to this one place, and they're doing a tomato ramen because it's late summer – and it just clicked," says Walker. "Chefs in Japan – [coming from] one of the least irreverent societies that is very much about tradition – were comfortable doing their own spins on 'sacred' dishes."

In that moment, Walker learned an important philosophy that has become a large part of Xiao Bao Biscuit: learn the rules and fundamentals. Then break them.

As they reach their 8 year anniversary this month, Xiao Bao Biscuit is prepping to open a second location in Charlotte, NC – minus the biscuit. "Xiao Bao is my nickname for my wife.



Xiao Bao Biscuit's Yuxiang

We thought the whole 3 sounded great together. Biscuit was a representation of being in the South,” explains Walker. “Charlotte is a much different place geographically. Biscuit just didn’t translate to Charlotte.”

As they prep the new space, Walker says “Congratulate me when it’s actually successful. Restaurants take so much, and when you’re at the starting line that’s an important mindset. You work really hard just to get in the race, but you still have to work really hard to win.”

Xiao Bao Biscuit is currently open with outdoor seating, to-go and delivery options Monday through Saturday, from 11am to 9:30pm.

By Samantha Paternoster | November 16th, 2020
