



TEA LYFE

From Horchata to Vietnamese Coffee

In a sea of conventional milk tea shops, Tea Lyfe revels in its differences. Curious about the story behind its fusion drinks, local artwork collection, and open mic nights? Meet Latina owner Candy Gomez Bui and her Vietnamese husband, Caleb Bui. As you settle in to listen to their story, set the tone by ordering a vietchata (Mexican horchata blended with Vietnamese iced coffee) and a coffee churro waffle (Hispanic churros and Vietnamese coffee mixed with waffle batter).

Taste that commingling of cultures? Candy and Caleb embraced multiculturalism before they crafted the menu—and before they’d even met each other. “It’s not something you can avoid in San Jose,” Candy laughs. As your typical poor college student, Caleb haunted the affordable taqueria close to campus. Meanwhile, Candy’s coworkers at her old job bribed her with popcorn chicken and milk tea when they were late for their shifts.

Fittingly, the two met at a multiethnic church that offered English and Vietnamese services. Later, after they were married, Candy noticed an empty unit at the plaza they visited weekly. Situated in Little Saigon’s Vietnam Town and bordering a Latino neighborhood just across the 101 overpass, the location harmonized perfectly with the Vietnamese/Latino drinks she had in mind. “We’re neighbors,” Candy explains. “There should be more unity with the people you live around. They don’t have to necessarily share the same language or look the same for me to feel at home.”

Caleb remembers his initial response when his wife first came to him with the idea of a milk tea shop. “I was a little bit skeptical, but I thought, ‘If this is what she’d like to do, we’ll give it a try,’” he says. “I just really wanted to support her.” He continued working full-time as a software QA engineer at Apple, while Candy managed the shop.

To decorate Tea Lyfe, the resourceful couple recycled weathered wood, succulents, and bare lightbulbs from their wedding (which took place at a Chinese restaurant with chips and salsa and a mariachi band). To further enhance a natural, campground-like atmosphere, they brought in moveable stumps and

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painted their bear logo on the far wall. The camp theme resulted in not only a whimsically woodsy interior design but also established the store as a space for families to come together away from distractions.

“Lyfe,” an acronym for “love your family every day,” celebrates a value that transcends race. “In both of our cultures, family is so important,” Candy says. “My grandma had eleven kids. Whether you get along or not, you always end up together.” It’s why Candy uses a family recipe for her horchata and why she integrated Vietnamese coffee into the menu after finding out her mother-in-law and aunt sold the beverage from a little stand during the ’70s.

Art is another unifying force at the shop. Tea Lyfe opens its doors to local artists, offering up its walls to painters’ canvases and providing space for musicians’ open mic nights. As a musician himself, Caleb was particularly excited about supporting the musical community. “I wanted this place to be a platform for musicians,” Caleb says. “I know it’s really hard to find places where you can display your talent.” Over the years, they have welcomed everything from blues to rock to R&B.

Besides the live entertainment and unconventional menu, Tea Lyfe’s customers come for the quality. This refusal to take the easy way out when it comes to ingredients was first instilled in Candy when she was pregnant and seeking organic, pesticide-free foods at the farmers’ market. “We go against the grain of typical boba syrups,” Candy says. Instead of the typical honey-flavored syrup offered by most milk tea shops, Tea Lyfe embraces local raw honey. Instead of powdered milk, they bring in organic half and half straight from the Straus Family Creamery in Petaluma. They use real fruit and whisk the ceremonial-grade matcha green tea by hand. “I wouldn’t want to create something that I wouldn’t want my family to drink,” Candy states. With customers receiving treatment usually reserved for relatives, is it any wonder that so many regulars consider it home? [C](#)