

KICKING THINGS UP

A NOTCH



Words by Hanna Pham



*The Asian diasporic entrepreneurs
infusing chilli oils with the
flavours of home*

NOWADAYS, ASIAN CHILLI OILS – A FIERY CONDIMENT INFUSED WITH CHILLI PEPPERS AND VARIOUS SPICES – ARE UBIQUITOUS IN ANY FOODIE'S PANTRY. IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH SCROLLING THROUGH INSTAGRAM TO SEE A FOOD INFLUENCER TOUTING THE SPICY VERSATILITY OF LAO GAN MA, THE FAMED CHINESE BRAND THAT'S PROBABLY WHAT FIRST SPRINGS TO MIND WHEN DISCUSSING CHILLI OILS. IT'S GAINED A CULT-LIKE STATUS AROUND THE WORLD. WHAT'S MORE, OWNER TAO HUABI'S WORTH IS ESTIMATED TO EXCEED \$1BN. PLUS, ACCORDING TO MARKET RESEARCH, IN 2023 THE CHILLI OIL MARKET WAS VALUED AT \$2.3BN AND IS EXPECTED TO GROW AT A RATE OF 6.20% UNTIL 2030.

There's no doubt that Lao Gan Ma is delicious, it's often the benchmark that other chilli oils are compared to. However, a new force of Asian diasporic entrepreneurs is kicking things up a notch with their personalised variations of spicy chilli toppings. The Asian diaspora is asserting its culinary presence on supermarket shelves, offering innovative chilli oils that feature the bold, unapologetic flavours of their childhood foods in each bottle.

Feeling creatively blocked with her corporate job, Teruni Jayawickrama, a first-generation Australian born in Melbourne to Sri Lankan parents, created her chilli oil brand Gini Maya in late

2023. "I've always been inspired by my mum's Sri Lankan cooking as a kid and the traditional spices you would find in a Sri Lankan curry. I decided to experiment with those flavours in one of my favourite things to eat – chilli oil," she says.

For Emily Yeoh, the co-founder of Two Hot Asians, her sambal¹ is more than a condiment – it's about connection, heritage and sharing stories through food. Growing up around London's Chinatown in a British and Chinese Malay household, her upbringing was always centred around food. The epicentre of her culinary memories was her dad's homemade sambal. Yeoh and her dad always talked about





sharing their family's recipe with the world, but he passed away from cancer before they could do it together.

Without a written recipe, Yeoh concocted her version based on the sambal she spent a lifetime eating. Though it took some trial and error to get it right, she always prioritised keeping her dad's original flavours. Since founding Two Hot Asians during lockdown, Yeoh has added a vegan variation to her line-up due to popular demand, swapping out the traditional shrimp paste for brown miso, bringing the flavours of home to an even wider audience.

Like Yeoh, Crystal Ung – who grew up in Southern California with an ethnically Chinese dad who emigrated from Cambodia and a Laotian mother – revitalised her love for home cooking during the pandemic. When using the bottled sauces she grew up eating, she noticed they were packed with sodium and preservatives. Inspired to adapt her family recipes and traditional sauce techniques into new, healthier versions of her childhood staples, she launched her chilli oil, Bowlcut in 2022.

“Bowlcut represents Asian American flavours in two ways: we design our sauces with modern consumers in mind – a new generation of thoughtful eaters who

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EMILY YEOH

want nutrition as much as flavour. Second, we are interpreting traditional flavours, based on family restaurant recipes, and adapting them through an Asian American perspective," Ung explains.

According to Yeoh, the rise of chilli oils can be attributed to people becoming more adventurous about food. "Social media has also played a big part in the chilli oil explosion. People love seeing vibrant, punchy sauces in action, and it inspires them to give it a try," she says.

"Consumers these days are all about convenience and flavour, and Asian chilli oils hit both marks," Jayawickrama adds.





Coupled with the rise in popularity of Asian foods, chilli oils are a great vehicle for people to explore different types of Asian cuisine.

The pandemic also played a big part, according to Ung. The lockdowns led to a big rise in home cooking, and a desire to have global flavours at our fingertips – the likes of which are accessible through chilli oils created by entrepreneurs like Ung, whose widely available products are not only a comforting new take for other diasporic Asians, but offer up a novel way to spice up foods for anyone condiment-curious.

Footnotes

¹A Southeast Asian chilli paste with a powerful garlic punch.

From drizzling it on to avocado toasts mixing it in mayo or even just heaping it onto fried eggs, these chilli oils are more than just a moreish, tableside condiment.

BEYOND ITS ABILITY TO ADD DEPTH AND HEAT TO ANY DISH, EACH SPOONFUL INVITES EATERS TO TASTE AND APPRECIATE ITS FOUNDERS' STORIES, HERITAGE AND BE-LOVED CHILDHOOD FOODS FROM THEIR MOTHERLANDS.

The possibilities for using chilli oils in meals are endless, and at times unconventional. "Someone told me they loved it drizzled over vanilla ice cream, says Jayawickrama. "Maybe chilli oil on ice cream will be the new olive oil ice cream trend!"

