

# Chef With A Vision

Robbie Felice of Montclair's Pasta Ramen wants you to pause and wonder: "Is it Italian — or Japanese?"



**The pandemic derailed** many careers, but not Robbie Felice's. In early 2020, when restaurants around the country were ordered to close, he came up with a notion that allowed customers to enjoy luxe dining omakase style (in which it's left to the chef to craft an ideal meal) and a deliciously naughty feeling all at once. His inspiration led to the opening of Pasta Ramen in Montclair this January. Felice, 32, was a 2020 semifinalist for the James Beard Rising Star Chef of the Year award.

**How did you and your partner, Ani Ramen's Luck Sarabhayavanija, start Pasta Ramen?**

I had to close my restaurants [Viaggio in Wayne and Osteria Crescendo in Westwood] for a short time and didn't want to stop cooking. I came up

with this idea to do underground Tasting Tuesday, where I would invite guests into Viaggio, close the door behind them and cook a tasting menu. It was \$295 a person. People loved the Japanese Italian food, but they loved me closing the door behind them and closing the shades. It was like the excitement of, "I'm not supposed to be here." So we were onto something. We traveled with this omakase concept to 12 places across New Jersey, three in Miami, one in Los Angeles, one in Seattle and a few in NYC, and it really generated a buzz.

**You essentially invented this Japanese Italian fusion here in America. What does "Wafu" food taste like?**

I hate fusion. You can't just take two things and smash it together. But Wafu is an actual cuisine

you can eat in Japan. My best description is, if I gave you a dish and told you to try it and then put you on the spot and asked, "Is it Italian or Japanese?" and you had to pause for a few seconds and couldn't tell which it is, that's Wafu.

**Why did you choose Montclair as the home base for Pasta Ramen?**

New Jersey made me who I am—I grew up in Sussex County. And the right deal that fell into our lap happened to be in Montclair, the restaurant capital of New Jersey.

**We know Pasta Ramen is less pricey than your Tasting Tuesdays. Can you explain the vibe you want for the place?**

I learned at a young age that going out to dinner is an experience. Every single thing matters: Was there traffic? What are the views like? What was it like when you walked in? How was the server, the music? Did the bathroom smell? The outside of Pasta Ramen is pretty basic; the windows are tinted; we have a little neon logo on the sidewalk. But it's very speakeasy and secretive.

**It's nearly impossible to get a reservation!**

We are blown away and I still can't believe it. Within 18 minutes of opening our books, we did 4,800 reservations, and when we opened our second month, we did 6,000 reservations within 45 minutes. It's been amazing.

**What are your other favorite dining spots in Morris and Essex counties?**

Ani Ramen, owned by my business partner, is always a staple. And one of my favorite sushi spots is Kim's Sushi in West Orange.

**Do you have any interest in appearing on Food Network, becoming a foodie influencer or writing a cookbook?**

I've always said no to TV and things like *Chopped*. I feel like the right thing for TV is going to come along eventually. As for the book, I'm trying my hardest in my free time to write some sort of book. And do I want to become an influencer? Not really. I feel like Instagram is just part of the job.

**Have you gotten a Pasta Ramen tattoo yet?**

Funny you ask, because I just got one earlier this week. I have my other two restaurants on the front of my ankles and I got the big Pasta Ramen emblem on the back of my calf.

**What do you like to do in our area when you're not working?**

If I take a night off, I'm probably going out for dinner somewhere. I like to go to Fort Lee and get Korean BBQ, and the best pizza is here in New Jersey.

—Haley Longman