

YUAN TANG

Rooster & Owl
WASHINGTON, D.C.

by **Liz Grossman**

Ask Yuan Tang about Rooster & Owl and he'll change the subject. Well, not entirely away from his Washington, D.C., restaurant that's gathered accolades since it opened last winter, but from himself. From the name (a nod to the opposite work schedules he and his wife/co-founder, Carey, endured while dating) to the food (a culmination of ideas from his staff), everything at the 50-seat restaurant starts with the team. "I wanted to create an environment for creative people to express themselves," says Tang. "It's not just my ideas, but everyone else's, too. I think that's attributed to our success. We have talented people and we enable them to do their thing." That philosophy led to dishes like his dry-rubbed and roasted carrots with cornbread ice cream—a starter that sparked from a mistake.

"It began as lamb tartare with carrots, yogurt, and pickled ginger, but it just wasn't working," recalls Tang. "So myself, my sous chef, and my pastry chef sat down and said, 'What can we do with these carrots?' Someone said 'barbecue,' someone said 'smoked yogurt,' and someone said 'cornbread,' and it kind of went from there." Three iterations later (and a swap to a vinegar-based Carolina-style barbecue sauce to balance the sweetness of the ice cream) and the dish, now a signature, was ready (recipe, p. 110).

"It's sweet. It's savory. It's tart. It's hot. It's cold—a lot of different elements play together in harmony," notes Tang. "And we also like the idea of having someone eat ice cream at the beginning of the meal, because that's something your parents told you not to do when you were little."

It's not the only childhood memory that sticks with Tang. He grew up in Hong Kong and northern Virginia, where he and his sister would hang out in his parents' Chinese takeout restaurant when the family couldn't afford babysitters. Answering phones was the gateway to light prep work and eventually firing up his first fried rice at age 14, "not because I was made to, but because I was interested in it," says Tang.

The culinary bug came back to bite him after a five-year stint working as a federal auditor. Tang spent some of that time traveling and eating out for work, and says he reconnected with food after visiting restaurants like Chicago's Tru. He quit at age 25, packed his bags, and moved to New York for culinary school. "I figured if I wanted to make a switch, I'd have to do it then, because time is limited and cooking is very physically demanding," says Tang. He gave up on school and went to cook at The Good Fork in Brooklyn instead, later moving on to The Modern, Dovetail, and Jean-Georges. "Every young cook starting

Find out the skill Yuan Tang still wants to master, what he and his staff do on their two days off a week and more at plateonline.com.



Carrots, Carolina-Style
Barbecue, Cornbread Ice Cream,
Yuan Tang, Rooster & Owl,
Washington, D.C. RECIPE, p. 110.



What restaurant is your dream stage location and why?

Sukiyabashi Jiro in Tokyo. I love the idea of learning from someone who has dedicated his entire life to become the master of the craft.

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out thinks they know everything, and I was certainly that way, too. I was very confident and cocky to a certain extent. But the more I was exposed to high-end, fine-dining restaurants, the more I knew what I didn’t know.” He learned French techniques and Asian ingredients from Jean-Georges Vongerichten, the veggie-forward vision of John Fraser, and how to handle the pressure of a high-volume kitchen at The Modern, where he was doing 300 to 700 covers a day. After 10 years in New York, Tang was ready for a change just as Carey was offered a job in D.C. They both wanted to be closer to home while they started a family and their own restaurant.

Tang worked at 701 Restaurant and Rogue 24 until both closed, and then turned to everything from Uber-driving to catering while hosting pop-ups around town. After three years and the birth of their daughter, Nora (aka, the house complaint manager at Rooster & Owl), they settled on a space, with Carey serving as general manager. The seasonal, four-course prix fixe is flexible in that diners can add any dish for \$10. “It’s hard with tasting menus, because everyone’s appetite is different,” says Tang. “For one person, it’s too much food, for the next, it’s not enough. One of my pet peeves is hearing people having to get pizza after spending whatever amount of money.” But with dishes like quail with Cheddar grits, housemade tagliatelle with mushroom Bolognese, and goat cheese bavarois with olive oil cake by Pastry Chef Olivia Green, most guests leave pretty satisfied—or at least happy. And if they’re not, a mignardise of mini chocolate robots usually does it. “We try to put touches like that throughout the restaurant,” says Tang. “We want the food to be serious, but that’s kind of where it ends. We wanted something to put a smile on someone’s face when they’re done with their meal.”

REY LOPEZ