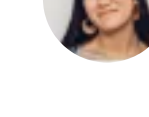


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LA FEATURE

Give Up Pad Thai? Anajak Says It's Time

I sat down with chef and owner of Anajak Thai to talk his new omakase and stereotyping Thai food as takeout.

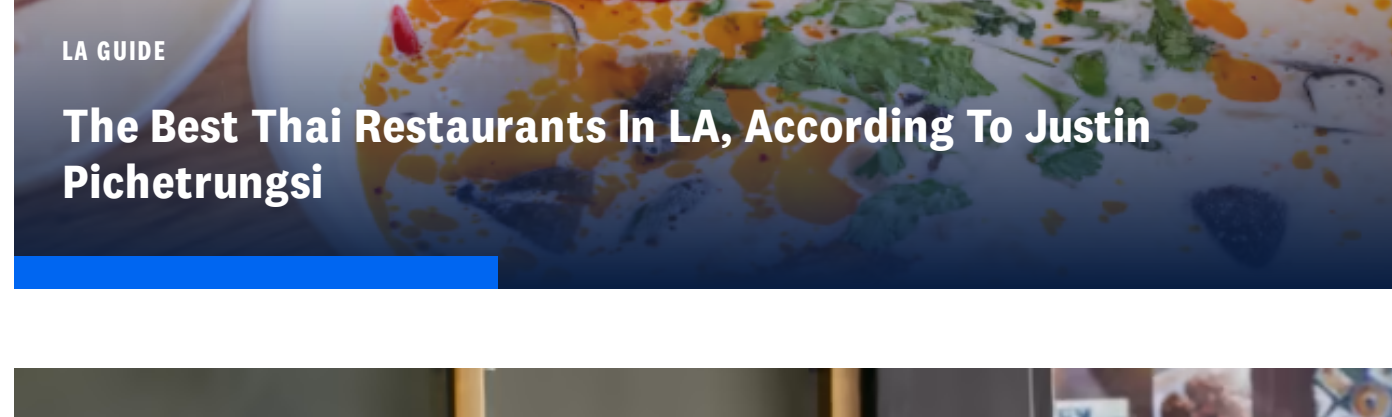


KAT HONG
MAY 26, 2021



It's 7pm on a Friday night, and the dining room at [Anajak Thai](#) stands empty. Gone are the waiters, weaving their way through crowded tables brimming with pad thai, tom yum, and crispy garden rolls. The host station is deserted, there are no glasses of water in need of refills. Instead, what I find at the Sherman Oaks restaurant, now in its 40th year of service, is a modest, efficient crew, quietly packing to-go boxes while a row of delivery drivers waits out front.

"We didn't close for a single day," says Justin Pichetrungsri, the current head chef and owner of Anajak Thai, when asked about the pandemic. "But thankfully, Thai restaurants are known for takeout."



LA GUIDE
The Best Thai Restaurants In LA, According To Justin Pichetrungsri



PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREA D'AGOSTO

There's a whiff of annoyance when he says that second part – half resignation, half genuine gratitude. "Thai food as takeout" is a stereotype that Justin's been trying to break ever since he took over his dad's restaurant in 2019. It's the sentiment behind Anajak Thai's current set-up: to-go orders during the day, paired with a completely new, revolutionary creation at night – The Thai Omakase.

When Justin's father, Rick Pichetrungsri, first opened Anajak in 1981, it was a very different restaurant. At the time, there were only a handful of other Thai spots in Los Angeles, and many diners were unfamiliar with the cuisine. "People didn't know what Thai food was," laughs Justin. "They all thought it was, like, spicy Chinese."

"How many people see Thai restaurants as exceptional?" he asks me. "When most people see Thai restaurants, it's as the first category on Postmates."



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His first target was the wine program. He launched a complete overhaul, personally selecting bottles made by smaller vineyards, like orange skin contacts from Chinon (a small commune on the banks of the Vienne River, once favored by French nobility) and rich, fruity gamays produced in Northern California. Then, he chopped over half the menu – a double-sided, tri-fold behemoth laden with "recognizable" fusion dishes like wonton soup and stir-fried noodles – and replaced them with a rotating list of monthly specials, locally sourced produce, and hand-drawn illustrations.

The problem was pad thai. "Since I started, I wanted to take it off," says Justin, of the dish. It's clear he's spent a lot of time wrestling with this issue. "I mean, it has to be the most ordered dish you've never heard of before, like the infinity blue barramundi he serves at dinner, describing what it tastes like (clean, pure of flavor), where he gets it from ([The Joint](#)), and how it's made (through a five-to-seven-day dry-aging process in which the fish hangs upside down), without coming up for so much as a breath.

When the pandemic hit, all of his big dreams about revolutionizing Thai food went out the window. Pad thai was here to stay. "I could write a thesis dissertation on the state of the economy, based on how our tickets are," chuckles Justin. "When people are threatened financially, all the orders go to pad thai, pad siew, and panang curry. I can sell almost nothing else. No fish, no crab, nothing fancy. Nothing over \$25." He takes a long sip of water. There it is again – his arch nemesis. That old, tired pad thai paradigm, an intricate push-and-pull relationship with the customer and their tastes that both sustains his business and limits his creativity.

So, he created a new structure. This time, made of equal parts takeout and culinary expression.



PHOTO CREDIT: ANDREA D'AGOSTO

Talking to Justin, it's clear he's propelled by a need to create, innovate, and problem-solve in the same way you and I need to eat breakfast or brush our teeth. He'll go on long tangents about fish you've never heard of before, like the infinity blue barramundi he serves at dinner, describing what it tastes like (clean, pure of flavor), where he gets it from ([The Joint](#)), and how it's made (through a five-to-seven-day dry-aging process in which the fish hangs upside down), without coming up for so much as a breath.

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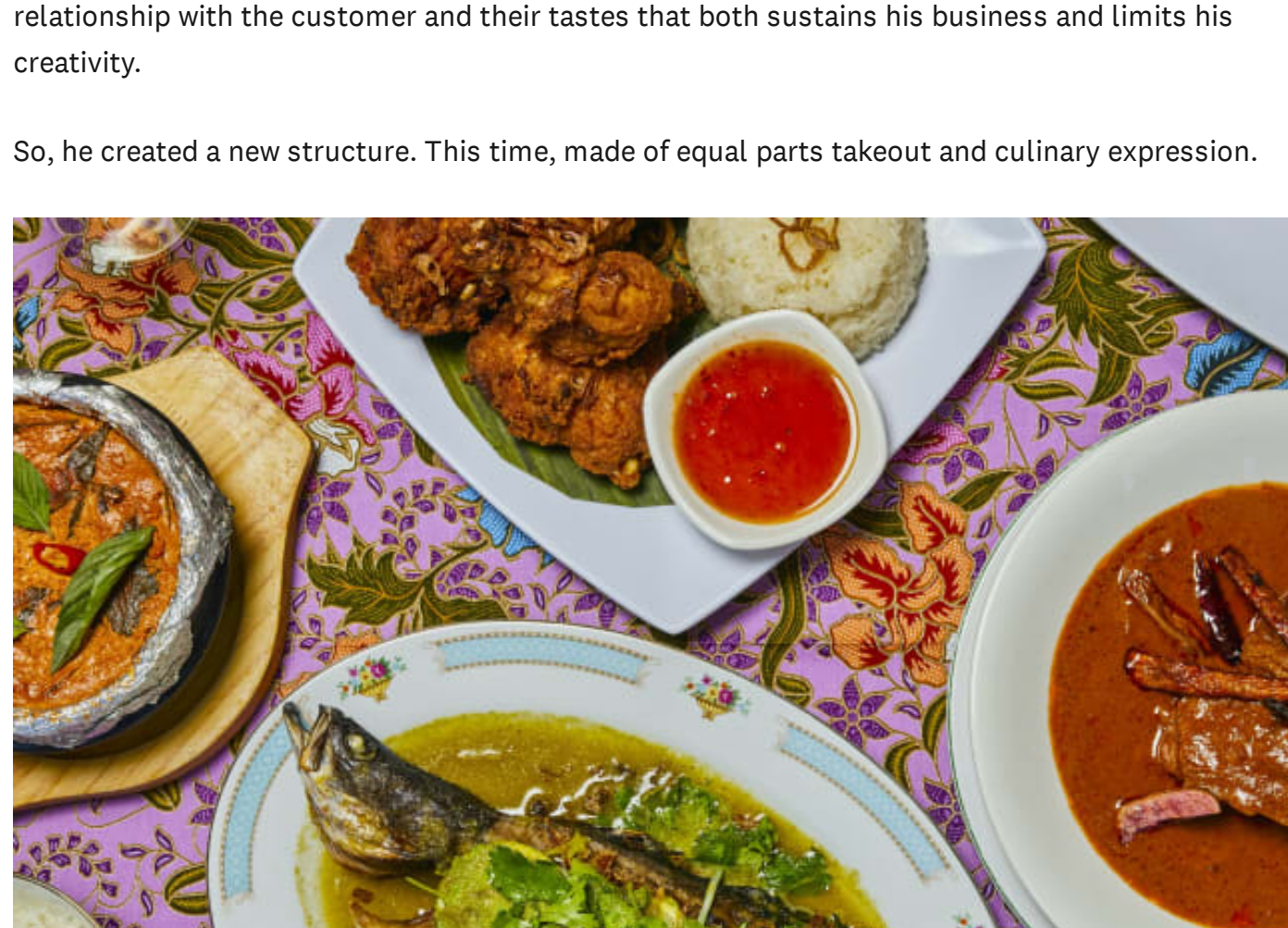


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Inspired by the family meals he and his kitchen were eating, beginning in summer 2020 Justin launched into a rapid-fire succession of takeout events, ranging from Thai Taco Tuesdays to post-apocalyptic-themed menus featuring waste products like fish heads and guts. Anajak Thai quickly became one of the most exciting places in town to grab a to-go meal, hosting a series of collaborations with chefs like Johnny Lee of [Pearl River Deli](#), sushi and bento specialist [Ai Kennedy](#), the team at [Moo's Craft BBQ](#), Rebecca King of [The Bad Jew](#), and more.

All of which lead to his most ambitious dine-in project yet – the Thai Omakase. At time of writing in May 2021, Anajak is only open for takeout and delivery, with one exception. Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night, two long wooden tables covered in white tablecloths are pulled into the alleyway for dinner service. Candle flames gyrate in the wind, white plates of Thai fried chicken and Northern-style meatballs, or laab tot, fly through the back door. Some combination of jazz, hip hop, or the latest Kaytranada plays from a nearby speaker.

"There's something cool and subversive about not being a sit-down restaurant," says Justin, leaning back in his chair. "The beauty of Thai food is that it's a combination of two things people really want in cuisine – comfort and adventure." His eyes wander towards a of plate dry-aged barramundi sitting on the table. "Once we go back to that, it'll feel like we forgot all this, you know?"

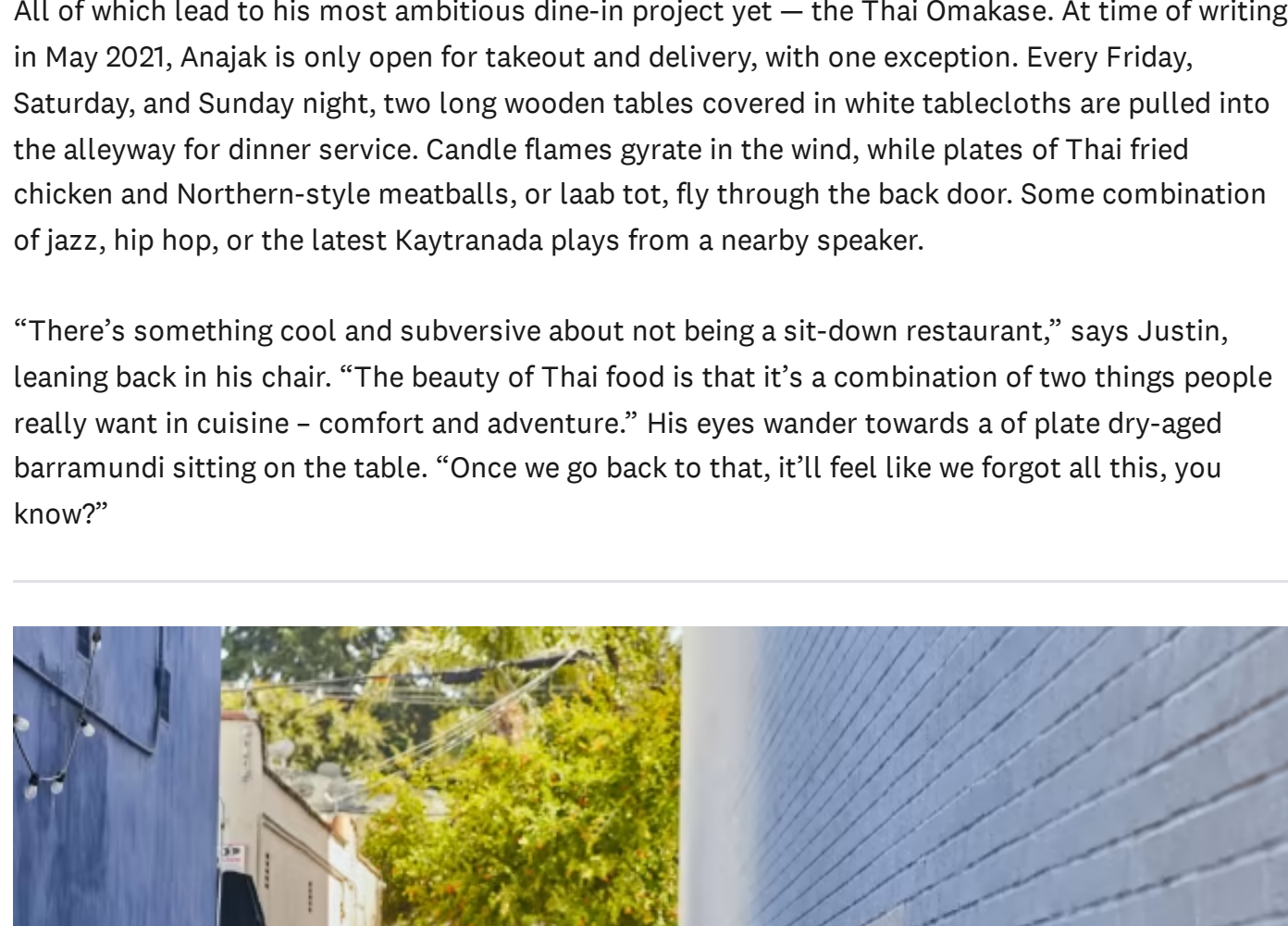


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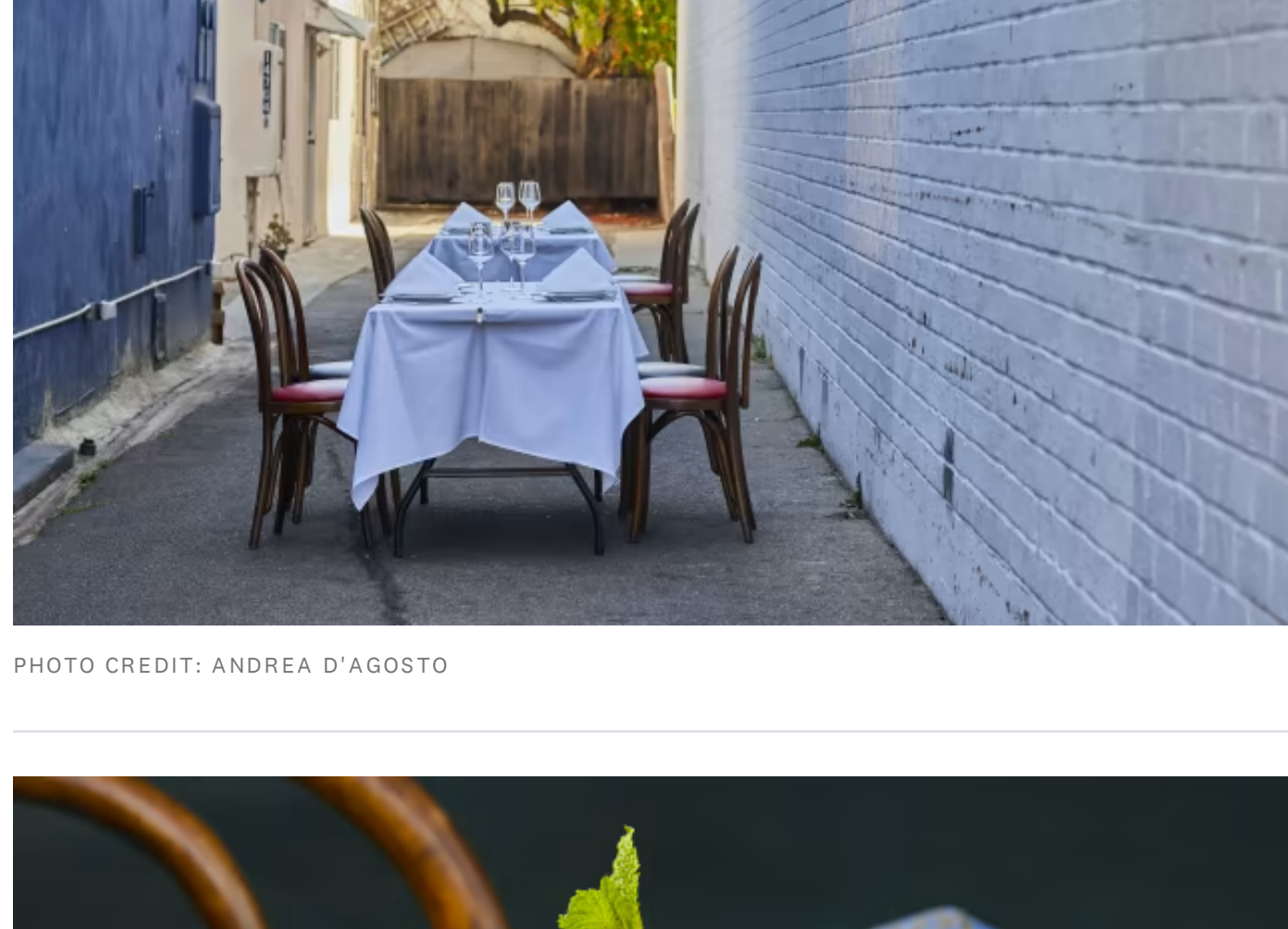


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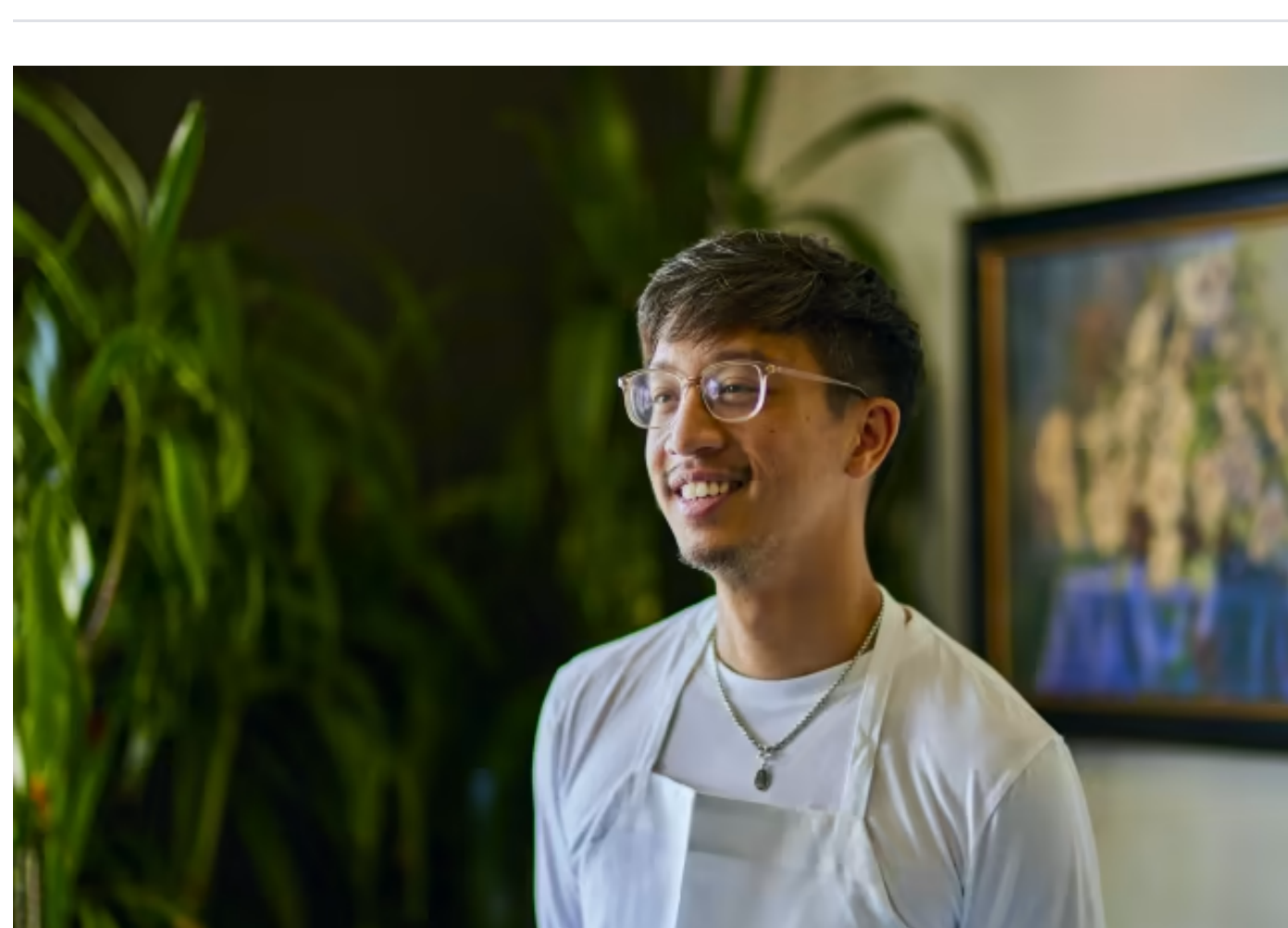


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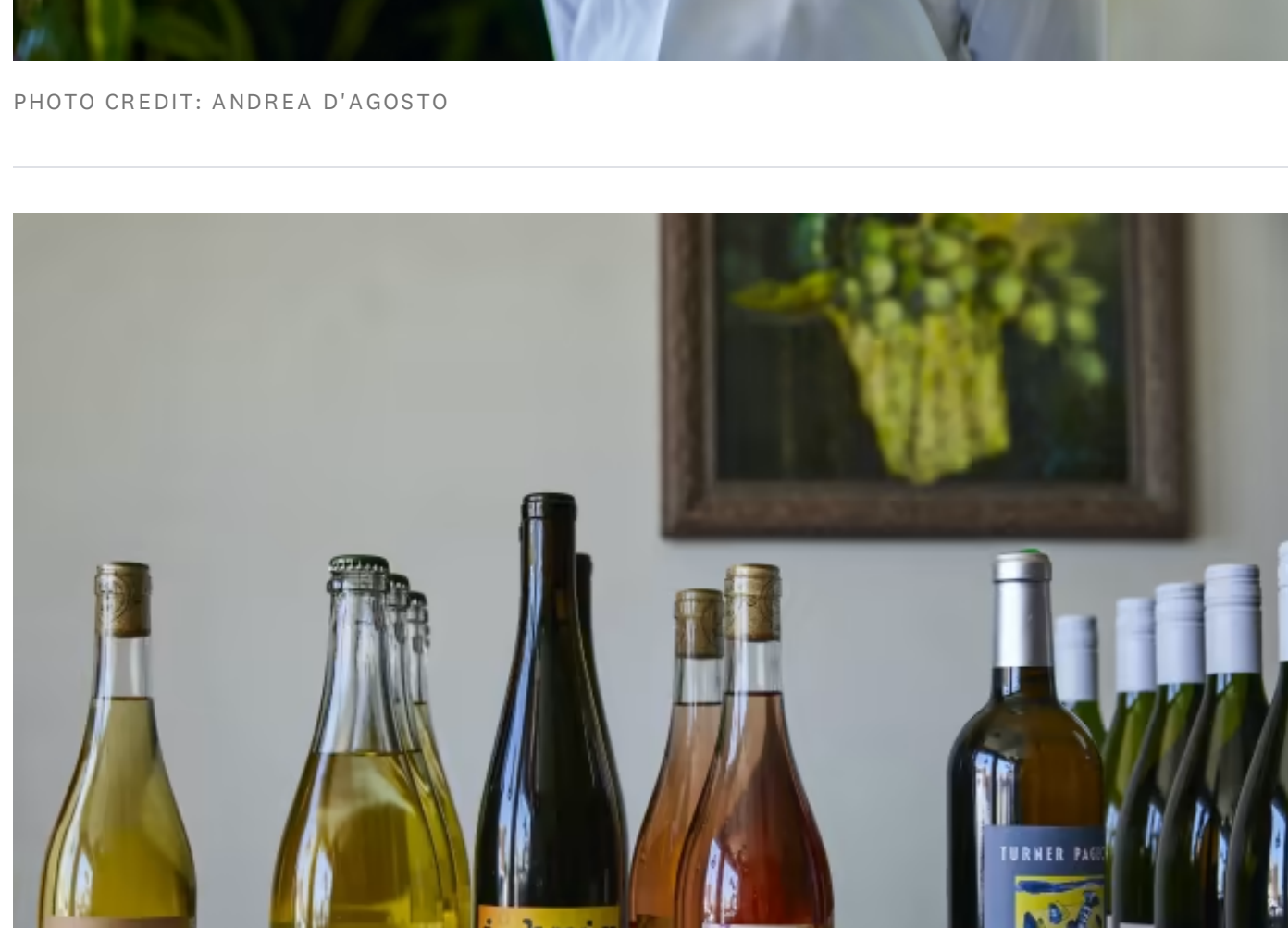


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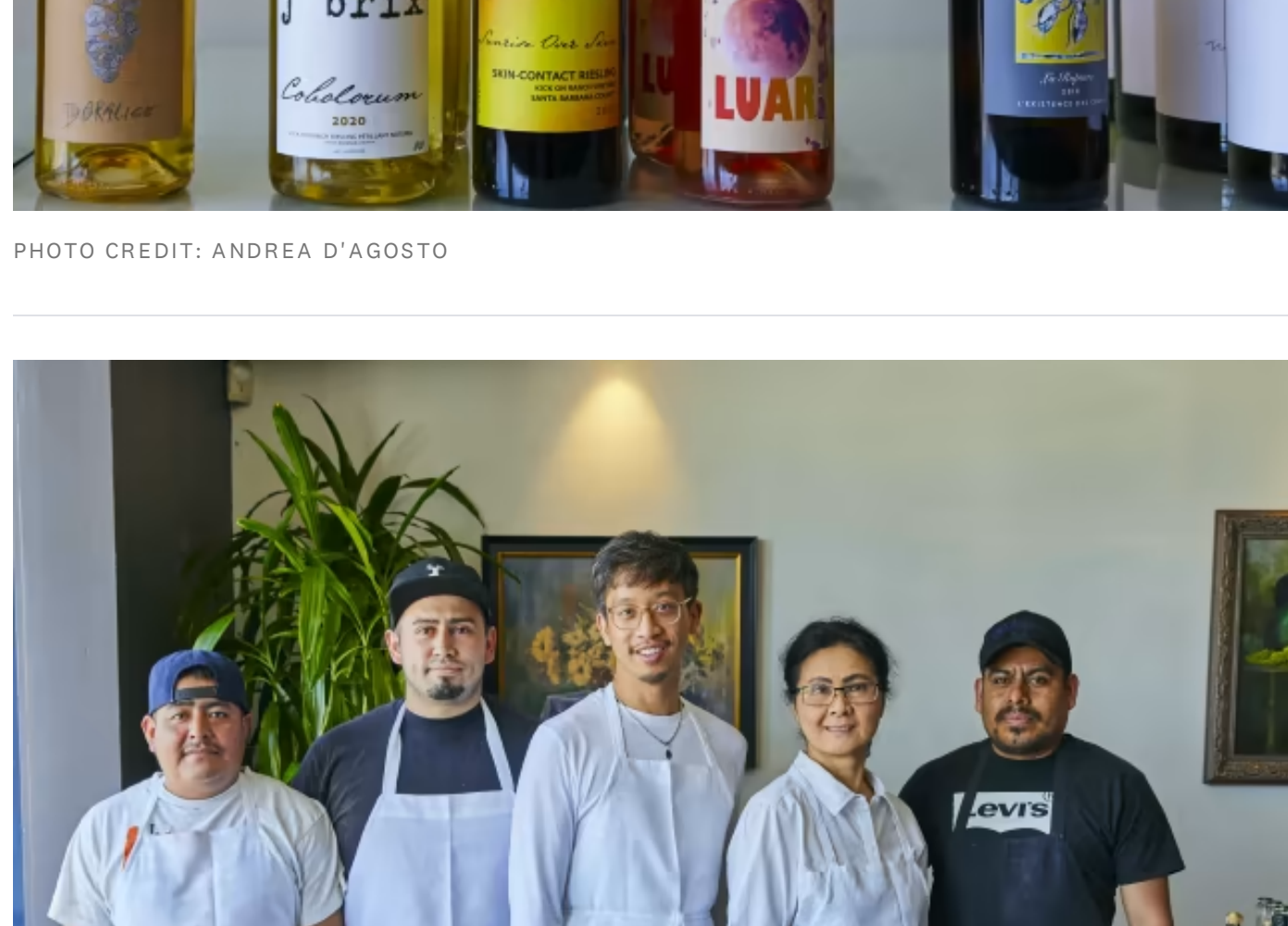


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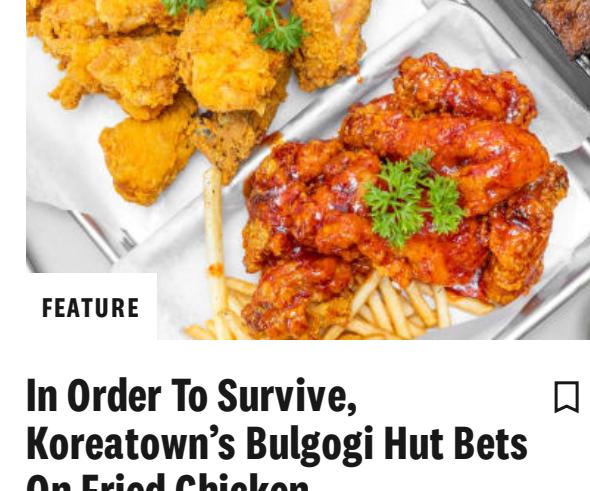
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Checking In With Mama: On Meal-Matching Programs, Merch, & Their Collaboration With Beverly Soon Tofu

An interview with Jared Jue and Alice Han of Mama's Drive-By Kitchen on what the revolutionary pop-up has been up to.



FEATURE

In Order To Survive, Koreatown's Bulgogi Hut Bets On Fried Chicken

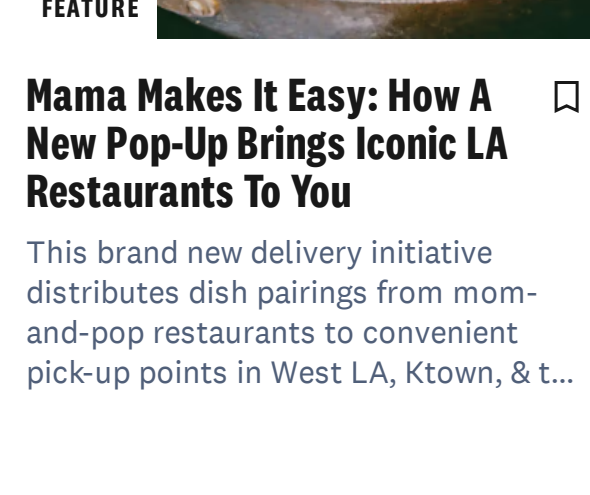
Bulgogi Hut has survived COVID regulations, closed dining rooms, and fluctuating meat prices. Now, it's forced to reboot as a brand-new restaurant.



FEATURE

Meet LA's 'Prince Of Poultry'

We talk turkey (well, mostly chicken) with the man, the myth, the legend: Johnny Lee of Pearl River Deli.



FEATURE

Mama Makes It Easy: How A New Pop-Up Brings Iconic LA Restaurants To You

This brand new delivery initiative distributes dish pairings from mom-and-pop restaurants to convenient pick-up points in West LA, Ktown, & t...

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