

Peter Chang celebrates reopening of NiHao

Christina Tkacik 2/9/23 11:57 a.m. EST



Chef Peter Chang receives a citation signed by Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott at the Feb. 8 reopening of NiHao, his restaurant in the city's Canton neighborhood. (Christina Tkacik)

Peter Chang came to Baltimore Wednesday to celebrate the reopening of NiHao, his restaurant in Canton.

But Chang, a finalist for last year's James Beard Award in the outstanding chef category, wasn't just there to mix and mingle. Dressed in his chef's toque and jacket, he carved smoked duck for guests before receiving a special citation from city officials.



Chef Peter Chang carves duck at NiHao at an event celebrating the restaurant's relaunch. (Christina Tkacik)

The appearance marked a turning point for Chang's first restaurant in Baltimore. His daughter and business partner, Lydia Chang, is stepping away from the business, while he plans to take on a more active role. A new chef will take the lead in the kitchen.

The decision to relaunch the well-regarded NiHao with a new concept came as a surprise in Baltimore's foodie community. The restaurant was named one of Esquire Magazine's "best new restaurants" after it opened in 2020, with help from pastry chef Pichet Ong.

Ong, a longtime family friend of the Chang's now leads culinary operations at Chang Chang, their first restaurant in Washington, D.C. Lydia Chang is the owner. Lydia told The Baltimore Banner that despite its accolades, NiHao had been underperforming for its investors.

Now, the restaurant has a new partner: Karina Hou of Montgomery County, an artist, philanthropist and prominent figure in the area's Asian American Pacific Islander community.

"I am so honored to be partnering with Peter," Hou told guests at the restaurant Wednesday. After first eating his food many years ago at a charity banquet, she said, "I became his biggest fan and followed him around everywhere."



Chef Peter Chang and investor Karina Hou at the relaunch of NiHao.
(Christina Tkacik)

Chang's second Baltimore restaurant, Dim Sum by Peter Chang, is scheduled for a May opening. Hou is a partner on that restaurant as well, and said if all goes well, they could look to open a third restaurant, this time in Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Hou also recently became a partner at his Q restaurant in Bethesda.

In its next chapter, Hou said NiHao will offer guests an opportunity to taste upscale and authentic Chinese food "instead of traveling all the way to China."

Moving forward under the leadership of chef Dong Liu, the restaurant has a new menu and new wine program. Liu is a master chef from China's Sichuan province who was previously working in New York City. Together with Chang, Hou said, "They want to bring the Chinese food to another level," and showcase the country's 5,000-year culinary history.

Through a translator, Chang told guests he won't bring "the typical lo mein" to Baltimore diners.

The eatery is also in the process of getting a makeover; Hou revealed a third-floor private dining room with elegant shelves displaying traditional Chinese tea and calligraphy sets. Known for a somewhat casual vibe in the past, the restaurant will feature tablecloths and be geared toward fine dining.



The third floor private dining room at NiHao in Baltimore's Canton neighborhood. (Christina Tkacik)

Hou is active in Maryland's political circles, and invited several luminaries to help mark the event.

Maryland State Delegate Chao Wu told guests that Chang's restaurants represent more than just Chinese food, they represent Chinese culture. Baltimore City Councilwoman Phylcia Porter said in a brief speech the city encourages "this type of cultural tradition ... we encourage this type of great food."

And city officials Catalina Rodriguez and Paul Taylor presented Chang with a special citation from Baltimore's mayor.

That recognition, coupled with the relaunch, was "a big deal" to Alexandria Liu of Baltimore, who worked with Hou to help coordinate press for the evening. While Peter Chang's restaurants are mostly located around in the greater D.C. area, Liu called his move into Baltimore as a reflection of the city's "growing diverse good scene" when it comes to food.

Chang's Columbia eatery opened in January.

"Peter Chang is a highly-respected chef, not just in the Chinese community, but in the culinary world as well," she said. She credited him with helping elevate American's appreciation for the nuances of China's thousands of years-old cuisine. "There's a very flat understanding of what Chinese culture and Chinese food is."

An earlier version of this article provided the wrong surname for Paul Taylor.

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