

From bytes to BBQ

Chinese immigrant opens Korean eatery in Westborough

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WESTBOROUGH – Lacheng 'Mike' Li worked as a software engineer at Microsoft and Thompson Electronic for years. When he lived in China, he worked in business development and investment.

Li, a Xi'an, Shanxi Province native, loves that he can always explore new opportunities in the U.S. In China, there are limitations and constraints on what he can say and do, Li said.

In 2019, Li bought the restaurant Sapporo Korean Barbecue & Sushi Restaurant on Main Street from its original Korean family, who opened the restaurant around 16 years ago.

'The professional career as a software engineer was very successful, but I put (myself) as a risk-taking kind of a personality, always trying to explore new opportunities, which I see I can make something or make a contribution or impact,' he said.

'If I hadn't taken the restaurant, I would be enjoying (doing software development) as well. For me, I realize I don't know how much time (I have) during my life for exploring new things, and also my entrepreneurial spirit is always in my heart,' he said. 'I love to get into a restaurant business because I love people. I also love food because I believe good food makes people live better and healthier.'

In 2001, Li and his family immigrated to the U.S. at 36 for his master's degree in computer engineering at Purdue University in Indiana.

When he worked in investments in China, Li had the opportunity to visit several countries and that opened his eyes to new opportunities in the U.S. Like many international students and immigrants who wished to pursue the American dream, Li took the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and applied to graduate schools.

Before starting his restaurant business, Li moved to Massachusetts in 2008, where he worked for Microsoft in Cambridge. While working as a software engineer, he was excited to build artificial intelligence and security cameras and make an impact in his specialty area, but he felt something was missing — an entrepreneurial spirit in his heart and his love of interacting with people.

Last year, Li sold their house in Boston and now the family lives in Marlborough, closer to the restaurant.

When Li thought about opening his own restaurant, he researched the area. Though there were already many decent Chinese restaurants nearby, he said, in his mind Korean food is healthier, less greasy and unique.

When Li took over the restaurant in 2019, he didn't change the name, logo and menu of the restaurant as he hopes to continue its Korean legacy yet plans to offer something new, such as a karaoke night.

'We carry on the Korean legacy, but we don't just stop here,' he said. 'We keep renovating and inventing new things and new dishes.'

Entertainment is also a part of his restaurant. Starting in February, Li added a karaoke night to Sapporo since he is also a karaoke lover.

While sitting at their table having dinner, guests can also grab a mic and sing after an exhausting day at school or work. He said he just wanted to simply create a relaxing ambience for his customers.

In addition to karaoke from 8:30 to 11:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Li plans to launch a kids/teens karaoke from 6 to 9 p.m. Sunday and senior karaoke from 11:30 a.m. to 5:30p.m. Tuesday through Thursday. He also plans to host a karaoke competition at his restaurant.

Li and his wife own the restaurant. The couple have a daughter who is married and lives in Texas and a son studying at Northeastern University in Boston.

The restaurant is open 11:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday, from 11:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Friday, and from noon to 8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. It is closed Monday.

Mike Li is owner of Sapporo Korean Barbecue & Sushi Restaurant at 50 East Main Street. Allan Jung/Telegram & Gazette



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