

WeChat to Bon Appétit: The Delightful Success Story of Sister Liu’s Kitchen

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Emma “Sister” Liu hadn’t planned on opening a restaurant. In her hometown of Harbin in northeastern China, she worked in sales. But after she came to the United States, she found it difficult to get work.

“I met my husband in China, and I moved to North Carolina for love,” she said. “When I first moved here, there wasn’t really anything I could do. Every job required me to speak English or have a degree.”

However, Liu had another skill she could bank on.

“I make really good dumplings,” she said. “Ever since I was a kid.”

Starting Early

“I remember when I was maybe eight or nine, I was making dumplings and I was always trying new ingredients like carrots or cucumbers,” said Liu. “My family thought it was brave and cool because people from Dongbei (the northeastern region of China) usually stick to pretty traditional ingredients.”



Image courtesy of David Straughan.

After joining some local WeChat groups for Chinese expats living in the Triangle, she learned that there was a big demand for homemade dumplings, which are readily-available staples nearly everywhere in China.

“There were a lot of people in the community who told me that they were either too busy to make their own dumplings, or didn’t know how to make them,” she said. “They asked me to make dumplings for them. And they really liked them. Then I started thinking it was a good idea to start a business.”

Opening Sister Liu’s Kitchen

“It sounds crazy to start my own business in America,” said Liu. “But I was never scared.”

Liu began her operation by offering up her dumplings over WeChat. Word spread quickly throughout the Triangle's Chinese community, and soon she was making bulk orders for students at Duke and UNC. It became apparent very quickly that she needed to grow.

So, she opened her first brick-and-mortar location, Sister Liu's Kitchen, in Straw Valley on 15-501 between Durham and Chapel Hill.



Image courtesy of David Straughan.

“It’s been hard work but very happy work,” said Liu. “My dream is to have my own career and work for myself. It’s very challenging and hard work, but I enjoy the stress and pressure, and I learn a lot from work. I like learning and the whole process just makes me happy.”

Sister Liu's Kitchen Makes a Name for Itself

It wasn't long before Sister Liu's Kitchen started getting immensely popular. Word started to get around outside the Chinese community, and business boomed.

Soon, Liu found her little takeout dumpling shop ranked among Bon Appétit magazine's list of the Top 50 New Restaurants of 2019. Although that prize didn't mean much to her at first.

“I don’t know how they found us,” said Liu. “Probably from online or Yelp or something, I don’t know. I didn’t know there’d be people who would want to write about us. We were very busy at that time, so I didn’t take it too seriously. I had no idea what to expect even when the article got published. We only found out how big they were after our customers told us.”



A rǒujiāmó or “Chinese burger” is a staple street food in China but difficult to find in the United States.
Image courtesy of David Straughan.

If she didn’t know how popular Bon Appétit was, she would find out very soon.

“We got so many customers in the following couple of days,” she laughed. “Our staff almost couldn’t handle the amount of new orders.”

Liu’s new popularity just continued to grow. As more people came to check out the little dumpling shop, she got more media requests.

“The second day, we got contacted by ABC,” she said. “I had no idea who they were either. Then, a friend of mine explained to me that ‘ABC is like [national news network] CCTV in China!’ That was so funny.”

Deciding to Expand

After the success of her first shop, Liu has decided to open a second location in Morrisville. It might seem like odd timing, given the current state of the restaurant industry. However, Liu felt the time and the opportunity are right for her.



Image courtesy of David Straughan.

“The pandemic is hurting local businesses and the local economy,” she said. “It’s pretty stressful trying to open a shop at this time. But a friend of mine told me about this particular place, and I thought the location was too good to let go.”

Liu says the main reason she chose to open a second location was to help make it easier for people in Wake County to get her food.

“My first location is in Durham, so that covers most of the Durham and Chapel Hill area,” she said. “And the second one is in Morrisville. that covers most of my customers in Cary, Morrisville, Raleigh, and Wake County.”

Dumpling Dreams

Liu says she has plans to expand even further. She says she wants to open a food truck and eventually, a big centralized kitchen for all her operations. She’s also working on making her process more efficient.

“We’re importing a dumpling machine from China and currently finalizing the paperwork,” she said. “That machine can make up to 3,500 dumplings an hour. It uses the same recipes and same ingredients as the dumplings I make now. They look the same and taste the same. Hopefully, we’ll be able to keep provide quality dumplings to all of our customers, and we’ll be able to supply wholesale customers like caterers.”

Liu’s plans might sound ambitious, but considering how far she’s come from in just a few short years, her confidence is understandable. She’s just as confident in the area’s economic future.

“[The future looks] good,” she said. “Really, really good. I really like North Carolina. In fact, I find that I like pretty much everything about this place. There are so many trees, it’s beautiful everywhere you go and it’s not crowded. I love living here.”

“I know I will win here because this place needs me,” she laughed. “Everyone needs good dumplings.”

Want to learn more about some of Durham’s best restaurants? How about some of the best eateries in nearby Raleigh? Stay tuned to North Carolina News Daily for more food guides!

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