



Official Transcript

Season 1, Episode 3

Javier Fernandez: Is Lechon belly the new ramen?

Stacy [00:00:00] Support for this podcast is brought to you by Goat Rodeo, a creative audio agency in Washington D.C. Goat Rodeo helps clients and partners create high quality professional audio content, translating ideas to sound. Find them at goatrodeodc.com.

Javier [00:00:19] Let's go into the kitchen.

Megan [00:00:19] Let's go back in the kitchen.

Javier [00:00:21] Very small kitchen that we got here. Come inside. This is our sous chef, Alex. He's cooking everything for us.

Megan [00:00:29] From ADECIBEL Media. I'm Megan Rummler and you're listening to ADECIBELvoices—a podcast that features intimate conversations with Asian American trailblazers who all have one thing in common—unabashedly pursuing their dreams while transforming the fabric of this nation. From food to business to tech to the arts. This is Asian America. Up close and personal.

Megan [00:00:55] Over the past few years food critics and experts have given Washington D.C. nationwide accolades. It seems the area has officially arrived on the international and national dining scene.

Megan [00:01:07] Back in 2016, Bon Appetit magazine named the area, "Restaurant City of The Year." Kathy Hollinger, the president and CEO of the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington said, "D.C. is truly leading the way as a culinary capital."

Megan [00:01:22] And, leading the way are emerging local chefs that are introducing patrons to exciting new flavors and cuisines. Filipino cuisine is one such trending cuisine and is becoming more sought out.

Megan [00:01:35] Our guest today is Javier Fernandez a 35 year-old L'Academie de Cuisine graduate and chef that's been nominated for this year's rising culinary star of the year by the Restaurant Association of Metropolitan Washington.

Megan [00:01:48] His fast-casual eatery Kuya Ja's Lechon Belly has been ranked number 10 best restaurant in D.C. by The Washington Post's acclaimed food critic, Tom Sietsema.

Megan [00:01:59] Javier Fernandez, welcome to ADECIBELvoices.

Javier [00:02:02] Thanks for having me over.

Megan [00:02:04] I read somewhere that some people define themselves not just in the terms of the food they like but the food they grew up around and know about.

Megan [00:02:13] Tell me about your birthplace in Cebu, Philippines.

Javier [00:02:16] Well, Cebu is the second-largest city in the Philippines. There's over 7,000 islands in the Philippines, so second to Manila. And we're actually known for cooking whole roast pigs.

Javier [00:02:29] We call that the Lechon, which is one of our national dishes over there.

Megan [00:02:31] What was your first memory of food?

Javier [00:02:34] My first food memory would probably be cooking with my mom. She's always coming up with different desserts. Classically Filipino desserts and she would have me basically cook on her side and help her maybe crack some eggs, roll-up some dough flour, all that.

Megan [00:02:50] Do you remember how old you were?

Javier [00:02:51] I was probably about maybe 9, 10 years old.

Megan [00:02:54] For listeners out there that haven't yet heard about or discovered Cebu, Cebu, like you said is a province of the Philippines. And, it's located in the central. Is it Visayas region?

Javier [00:03:04] Visayas region.

Megan [00:03:06] Thank you. Visayas region and it's basically a main island and it has up 167 surrounding islands and islets yes around it.

Javier [00:03:17] Yeah.

Megan [00:03:17] And, for those history buffs, Cebu City was the oldest city and the first capital of the Philippines.

Javier [00:03:24] Yes, that's true.

Megan [00:03:26] What does Cebu look like?

Javier [00:03:29] Basically it's just a straight line, actually. It's pretty much surrounded by a bunch of other islands around it. So, there's a lot of island cuisine in there.

Megan [00:03:37] What color is the water and the sand?

Javier [00:03:39] Oh man. It's basically clear and white. The sand's almost like flour, like sugar. You know, it's so soft and you can see like five feet up above the water. You can pretty much see your feet. So, it's probably the best beaches in the world. My opinion.

Megan [00:03:54] So take us back to your childhood.

Javier [00:03:57] My mother's aunt who was probably the best chef in the family and when I was living in Cebu. Her name is Tita Tata. And, every party we had she would just blow up the whole village with her amazing cuisine.

Javier [00:04:10] When it comes to spaghetti, Filipinos have their own version of spaghetti, obviously the Lechon and all these different seafoods and it was just colorful and vibrant.

Javier [00:04:19] It was island cooking, you know. And, my aunt did that for me. And then when I left the Philippines, I kind of miss that, pretty much. And, that was basically my aunt who influenced me when I was younger.

Megan [00:04:30] Do you have any memories with Tita Tata? And if so, what do you remember? You were quite young.

Javier [00:04:35] Most of the memories were just when every time we had a gathering, it was just her, her cooking. Like when I go to Cebu, I expect her cooking and that's what I look for. Especially today when I cook, those are the memories I have that stuck to my head.

Javier [00:04:49] The flavors that she cooked with and that's kind of what I try to cook for. Especially with the Lechon that I came up with here in the States. It's all just memories that I've had growing up over there with her.

Megan [00:04:59] Describe some of those flavors.

Javier [00:05:02] A lot of different aromas, a lot of different spices. Lemongrass, green onions, a lot of garlic and it's all fresh. You know you don't really have, like, some of these big purveyors here in America where a lot of it's not organic.

Javier [00:05:13] Over there you can find it in your backyard. Some of the ingredients, it's just right off the trees, you can pull down and that's what I miss most.

Megan [00:05:21] You said that you and your family immigrated to America when you were seven on the cusp of eight. What city did you land in and what made you come?

Javier [00:05:29] I landed here in D.C. I actually grew up in D.C. since '91 when the Redskins won the last Super Bowl! I was a big, big sports fanatic when I was a kid. Yeah. My parents had been working. My dad's a personal chef and my mom's a housekeeper for that same family. They've been working for the same family for over 30 years. Coming from nothing. Knowing that the Philippines is a third world country, they helped us grow and gave us opportunities here in D.C., the nation's capital.

Megan [00:05:55] Your father was a personal chef. Your mother started her own pastry business in the basement. Now your mom has a thriving bakery business called, Gwenie's, which is your mother's name. At any point growing up had you considered any other occupation aside from cooking?

Javier [00:06:10] I grew up playing soccer also basketball and a little bit of baseball. I thought I was gonna be somewhat of a professional athlete but I've always had cooking in the background in my head.

Javier [00:06:20] Like I said, when I would come home I was always helping my mom cook. As an Asian American, probably one of first things you've got to learn how to cook is rice. If the rice isn't ready, you're in big trouble.

Javier [00:06:31] A lot of Asian Americans can relate to this.

Javier [00:06:35] But, yeah, I'd started off with that and culinary being in the back of my head at all times. So, that's when I kind of pursued it later on in college.

Megan [00:06:43] Javier, what did you think about your father's occupation. You know, being a personal chef for a family now and it's over 30 years and your mother's entrepreneurship?

Javier [00:06:53] Well, it didn't really come to full circle until when I pursued culinary when later on in college. That background definitely helped me push into my culinary career. My mom on her side job, she would do a lot of baking and catering on the weekends and that's what started it all.

Javier [00:07:11] We actually started a pop-up at my sister's bakery or my mom's bakery about three years ago and that definitely helped as well. And knowing that my dad is a personal chef, every time I would come up with a recipe here or a dish, I would have to go through him first and just ask him what does he think and then I would change it up a little bit and try to modernize it a little bit. But it definitely helped out a lot growing up.

Megan [00:07:34] I think everyone knows now about the recent college scandal that's been in the news. You know, college isn't for everybody.

Javier [00:07:42] I don't think it is. Some people can go either way.

Megan [00:07:46] Did you decide to go to college?

Javier [00:07:49] When I chose to go to Johnson & Wales, it was because Johnson & Wales at the time was a top culinary schools in the country next to the CIA.

Javier [00:07:56] It was always in the background where my mom was pushing me to go to culinary school. But I wasn't really sure about that at that time when I was coming out of high school. I still wanted to play soccer. I still wanted to do something with sports.

Javier [00:08:08] I chose to go to Miami because it was closer to the beach and it reminded me of being back in the Philippines. And, just to get away from everything because at that point in my life I was just confused with what I wanted to do in life.

Javier [00:08:19] Two years just leaving Maryland, I just missed family. I came back home and I was like, you know what, I can't take leaving family for too long. So I moved back to Maryland, decided to go to the UMBC and that's actually where I met my wife today.

Javier [00:08:33] And, after a year of doing that I was just like I still didn't know what I wanted to do. I sat down with my mom and my dad, and I was just like, I'm confused with life and I don't know what I want to do and we were all crying.

Javier [00:08:43] I think my parent's boss got involved as well where they would sit me down and would, like, try to figure out what I wanted to do. I did North Carolina Outward Bound, which is where you try to figure out what you want to do in life.

Javier [00:08:54] And, it taught me about like leadership and just trying to figure out what I want it really want to do and what my niche was.

Javier [00:08:59] And, I applied to L'Academie not thinking if I was going to really pursue it. And I got in there for the first six months and then I fell in love with it. That's when everything just came, into full circle. I couldn't wait to wake up the next morning and just do it all over again.

Megan [00:09:14] We'll be right back after this word from our sponsors.

Stacy [00:09:18] This podcast is brought to you by our sponsors. 8 Media Group, a Washington D.C. area video production company whose mission is to create, collaborate and resonate. Find them at 8MediaGroup.com.

Megan [00:09:30] If you're just joining us, we've been talking with Javier Fernandez owner and chef of Kuya Ja's Lechon Belly, a fast-casual eatery in Rockville, Maryland. Inspired by his heritage, Kuya Ja's Lechon Belly specializes in Filipino cuisine.

Megan [00:09:46] Explain the name of your restaurant.

Javier [00:09:49] My restaurant is a fast-casual Filipino restaurant. It's called Kuya Ja's Lechon Belly. Kuya Ja's means Big Brother.

Javier [00:09:56] Kuya means Big Brother and Ja's is actually from my first name which is Javier.

Javier [00:10:01] Some of my close family friends will actually, my nickname is Jaja. But, basically only close family friends will call me that.

Javier [00:10:08] It was around the time when the first female president in the world, Corazon Aquino, came up with a saying "Justice for all, justice for Aquino." And, my dad came up with that nickname Jaja back then.

Megan [00:10:19] Can I call you Jaja?

Javier [00:10:20] Yeah, yeah.

Megan [00:10:23] It's been widely reported that Asian Americans are the fastest growing ethnic group in America. There are almost 22 million Asian Americans in the country and a third of that population is Filipino according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Megan [00:10:36] In the D.C. metro area alone. There are over 76,000 Filipinos. But some say this figure is much higher.

Megan [00:10:44] How are innovative chefs like yourself changing the way America thinks about food beyond just hotdogs and hamburgers?

Javier [00:10:52] Well, when it comes to Asian cuisine it's just pretty much all over the place. It's one of the hardest cuisines to really market. Especially, when you're introducing it to a different crowd, when they don't know what ingredients they're eating.

Javier [00:11:03] Like the Philippines itself, it's almost like a melting pot just like America. You've got the Spaniards in there. You've got the Chinese, you've got the Malays, you've got the Indians who have influenced the Filipino cuisine so much.

Javier [00:11:15] That's why when they come to America and try to introduce Filipino cuisine it's so hard to really market. But other Asian cuisines have really done it successfully because they do it one dish at a time, kind of like what I'm trying to do with my Lechon.

Javier [00:11:28] The Japanese have sushis and then now they have they're coming out with all these ramen spots and that's just one dish that you can really talk about. Not trying to do the whole cuisine at once.

Megan [00:11:39] So having heard you say that Filipino cuisine is hard to market especially in the United States, as a person who is deeply rooted in food, food culture, and its trends, what does this recent interest in Filipino cuisine say to you against the backdrop of an ever-increasing Asian American population? Does this mean the American palate is shifting? And, if so in what ways?

Javier [00:12:03] I think it definitely is shifting. Especially in the millennials crowd. Now they're more open to all these different ethnicity cuisines and it's evolving and everyone's loving it especially in the DMV area.

Megan [00:12:15] So for somebody that's never eating Filipino food how would you describe it to them? What can they expect?

Javier [00:12:22] When somebody hasn't had Filipino food, it's a lot of island flavors and a lot of it has to do with the different herbs that we have. It's very similar to a lot of Thai cuisine.

Javier [00:12:33] You know like I said, it's a melting pot country. So, you get a lot of different flavors that you've probably already have and some of it has a little twist to it. Filipino cuisine has a balance of saltiness, sour and sweetness.

Megan [00:12:46] Your specialty is Lechon. For our listeners that don't know, Lechon is a famous pork dish that begins with a suckling pig that is roasted over charcoal.

Megan [00:12:55] Lechon is the national dish of the Philippines and Puerto Rico, and Cebu is considered to have the best Lechon on the islands of the Philippines.

Megan [00:13:03] You describe that the restaurant is Cebuano style of cooking. What does that mean?

Javier [00:13:09] Cebuano-style cooking is a lot more sweeter and a little bit less acidic compared to the Pampanga cuisine, which is one of the food capitals of the Philippines which is closer to Manila.

Megan [00:13:20] Can you describe what else is on your menu and what customers can expect from the food there?

Javier [00:13:25] We have other dishes not just the pork dish. We have our chicken Adobo. We have our traditional lumpia which is our Filipino version of an eggroll. And, we also have another pancit dish which is our version of a noodle dish. It's basically a stir fry with chicken, shrimp, mixed veggies and those are basically some traditional dishes that every Filipino household will have if they have a party or what not at their house.

Megan [00:13:51] When you're at home alone in your family kitchen, what is your favorite dish to make?

Javier [00:13:56] Oh, my favorite dish to make when I'm home with my kids is probably just a chicken adobo. My wife is Chinese so she can relate to the same dish. I would just add a little bit of star anise in there but adobo is basically just a marinated protein dish.

Megan [00:14:15] Everybody pretty much knows that the path to success involves failure.

Megan [00:14:19] Talk to me about the time when you quit your job to travel back to the Philippines to study and master cooking Lechon belly.

Megan [00:14:27] How old were you and what inspired the move?

Javier [00:14:30] Well after 10 or 12 years of just cooking French cuisine I kind of just wanted to find that niche again of what I really wanted to introduce to the city.

Javier [00:14:39] The Filipino background just kept coming back to me and that's something I just love cooking and something I really love to eat.

Javier [00:14:45] When I cook French cuisine, I liked learning the techniques but I wasn't so much into eating it. It was just too heavy for me. I missed the rice. I missed the flavors of the Filipino cuisine and that's when I moved back to the Philippines for about six months and that's when I just try to go back to my roots and really try to learn traditional ways of cooking Lechon, trying to master it and bringing it back here to D.C..

Megan [00:15:08] So how old were you?

Javier [00:15:10] I was about 29.

Megan [00:15:12] What did that decision look like for you at 29-years-old?

Javier [00:15:16] Well, basically I just wanted to come up with a business plan where I had a vision of really introducing or marketing the cuisine itself here to D.C.

Javier [00:15:24] And, I just woke up one day and I just I told my parents, I was like, I want to go back to the Philippines and really find the roots of learning this Lechon thing. And I think American's would love it because they love they love barbecue and it's almost the same thing.

Megan [00:15:37] Describe a day of the life of mastering Lechon belly.

Javier [00:15:43] Well, in the Philippines is it starts early at dawn. We weren't close to the beach. We were actually towards the city where we would just pick up a suckling pig.

Javier [00:15:52] It was a whole process in the morning where you had to actually butcher the whole hog itself and it was towards like the afternoon when you started roasting it. By dinner time it would be ready.

Megan [00:16:02] Paint me the picture of what the roasting scene looks like. Is it over charcoal?

Javier [00:16:06] Yeah, it's over charcoal. And some people use the metal poles. We manually rolled the pig around for about three hours.

Megan [00:16:15] How did you know that you mastered it?

Javier [00:16:20] I mastered my Lechon belly which is the pork belly version of it.

Javier [00:16:23] For me, my opinion is the belly is the best part of the pig. It's the fattiest, it's the juiciest. That's where you can get the really crispy skin out of it. There's no bones. It's boneless so you don't really have to pick off the bones or ribs or anything. So, it's all just meat and a little bit of the skin.

Javier [00:16:38] I mastered the belly here at my house actually cooking in my ovens and trying to play with different temperatures. Took me about a year. I had a fan base on Facebook where I would post pictures and people would just comment and try to order some every week.

Javier [00:16:55] And, it was like a weekend thing because I still had a full-time job at the time as well. I didn't plan on opening up the restaurant right away when I mastered the belly. I was lucky enough to have my sister let me borrow her kitchen during weekends where we'd hosted a pop up for about two years.

Javier [00:17:10] And, we did that for about two years every weekend. And, it was there was lines out the door starting when you open up at ten o'clock up until six o'clock when we close. And, we had a great turnout. And, that's when it started.

Megan [00:17:23] So, you were on to something.

Javier [00:17:23] Yeah, basically. And, then after about two years me my wife, I talk to my wife, she's also the co-owner of Kuya Ja's. We planned it out, came up with a business plan and then we look for a location.

Javier [00:17:34] Finally, we found that one little tiny spot in Rockville right behind White Flint Mall.

Megan [00:17:38] Did failure ever cross your mind?

Javier [00:17:40] Always. We were definitely scared. Especially in the restaurant industry. It's about 90% failure rate when you open up a restaurant and you don't know what you're doing.

Javier [00:17:50] Given my education in the culinary field I just kind of told her exactly what I knew what we should do with all the plans we should make and it all worked out. And I was putting in over 100 hours a week. It was crazy. I was leaving at like one or two o'clock in the morning. I'd be back at 4:00 or 5:00 o'clock in the morning. But I guess it all worked out.

Megan [00:18:09] What is the most surprising thing a critic has said or written about your restaurant?

Javier [00:18:13] I guess when Tom Sietsema gave us the Top 10 Best New Restaurant in the Fall Dining Guide. I was not expecting that at all.

Javier [00:18:22] I actually assumed he only did full sit down restaurants. We're, as you know, we're a fast casual restaurant and he came by, I think, our opening weekend.

Javier [00:18:31] He called me up the next day and he said he would like to do a phone interview and that's when it all started. I was I was scared. He can basically make or break any restaurant.

Megan [00:18:40] Had you even known he had come?

Javier [00:18:42] I had no idea. I don't know what he looks like. People are giving me like clues to what he kind of looks like. But I had no idea what he looked like so he's pretty much disguised because he'll usually used to wear a hat to kind of cover himself with some sunglasses, I think.

Megan [00:18:56] In hindsight, what would you tell your younger self and anybody that wants to pursue cooking in the food industry as a way of life?

Javier [00:19:04] In the food industry, I wish I could go back in time and actually started a lot younger. I guess learn as much as you can from each chef. Travel the world if you have the chance and just take it all in.

Megan [00:19:16] Ultimately, what does food mean to you and why do you cook?

Javier [00:19:20] Well I cook just to please people. That's why a lot of chef's cook.

Javier [00:19:23] For me it's like self-worth. It's a great feeling to accomplish something that you work so hard on, especially on one dish. And, seeing people like it and smiling about it and talking about it, critiquing it, saying how good it was. It's just the best feeling in the world.

Megan [00:19:39] Javier Fernandez, it's been such a pleasure to talk with you. Thanks for coming into the studio.

Javier [00:19:44] Thank you so much for having me. My pleasure.

Megan [00:19:47] Javier Fernandez is chef and co-owner of Kuya Ja's Lechon Belly, a fast-casual eatery located in Rockville, Maryland and was included in Washingtonian's 26 best things to eat in D.C. in 2018.

Megan [00:20:01] The eatery was also named 2019 Best of Bethesda editors pick. Its web site is Kuyajas.com. Or, you can check out our website adecibel.com for relevant links and show notes.

Megan [00:20:14] On Saturday, September 21st you can find Kuya Ja's Lechon Belly at Baltimore's annual pop up night market called, Charm City Night Market. The market is from 3 to 11 p.m. and is an evening of live performances, food stalls and artists all gathered to celebrate Baltimore's Pan Asian Community.

Megan [00:20:32] ADECIBELvoices is hosted by me Megan Rummler and co-produced and edited by myself and Stacy Yu.

Megan [00:20:42] Be sure not to miss next week's episode because we're talking with the dynamic Alex Huynh, an actor and stuntman who has most recently been in the trilogy action film, John Wick Chapter 3: Parabellum.

Megan [00:20:56] We speak with Alex about his 15-year stunt person career. His optimistic outlook on life and how he sustains his unrelenting and infectious energy. Be sure to tune in.

Stacy [00:21:10] Hey, it's Stacy here. Since we're brand new podcast we need your help. Send us your feedback.

Stacy [00:21:17] We want this podcast to be listener-centered and we'd love to hear from you. What do you like? Not like? Or, wish you could hear more of?

Stacy [00:21:24] Is there an Asian American trailblazer whom you want us to interview. Tell us what you think. Call or text us at 202-599-3318. Leave your full name, contact info, age and where you're from. Messages are recorded, so who knows, maybe you'll hear yourself on our show. Thanks for listening and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.