

SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL

In Association With



Thursday, May 19, 2022

In-Person Event:

**The Westin San Diego Gaslamp Quarter
910 Broadway Circle, San Diego
5:30pm - 8:30pm**

TICKETS AVAILABLE at ABASD.org/Event

CELEBRATING ASIAN PACIFIC ISLANDER ENTREPRENEURS

May is Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month. The San Diego Business Journal is pleased to be collaborating with the Asian Business Association to share stories of Asian and Pacific Islander businesses in San Diego County as well as co-host the 2022 Asian Pacific Islander Leaders of the Year awards event. We hope these stories and event will build awareness of the Asian Pacific Islander business community to get the support from the San Diego region.



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President & Publisher
San Diego Business Journal



JASON PAGUIO
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SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL



The San Diego Business Journal and the Community of Business™ proudly support Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month.



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Celebrating Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month

American Soju's Sojourn Hits Restart Button

A Spirited Comeback for Local Korean Vodka

By KAREN PEARLMAN

For those who enjoy vodka, but not the lasting effects it sometimes brings, North County resident **Marc Song** has some good news for you: After a couple of years on COVID-19 hiatus, Song's 2016 creation American Soju is finding its way back into markets across Southern California.

Traditionally made from rice, soju is widely recognized as one alcohol that doesn't cause the kind of hangovers people often complain about, Song said about the type of vodka that has its roots in 13th century Korea.

"I'm focusing on San Diego and getting my soju in markets there as well as looking to help stores create a low ABV (alcohol by volume) section," said Soju, a long-time entrepreneur who owns **Rugged Ranch Products**, a business in Vista that since 2005 has sold a line of products for people with backyard pets and farm animals.

Rugged Ranch designs and manufactures a variety of products including dog kennels, chicken coops, horse feeders,



Marc Song
Owner
American Soju



Bottles of American Soju won several awards in 2018 at the San Diego Spirits Festival International Spirits competition. Photo courtesy Marc Song, American Soju

livestock feeders, bunny houses, different types of carts and a multi-catch trap.

Song's Rugged Ranch Products success has helped finance American Soju, which is currently crafted in Colorado at a private label distillery. Song plans to move the production site to Canada in the near future.

American Soju, which comes in four flavors (original, cucumber, lemon and watermelon), is currently sold at Seaside Market in Cardiff. There, it has a loyal following of established clientele, but Song is working to get the brand back into Albertsons, Vons, Pavilions and other spots.

A handful of Albertsons stores in

Orange County currently carry American Soju, and Song said some bottles may still be found at H Mart San Diego – a Korean market with two local sites – but it is largely absent in San Diego County at the present time.

Most stores in the county where American Soju was selling well before COVID-19 – about 30, Song said – discontinued their stock during the pandemic. The drink was also in some local Trader Joe's for a time, Song said.

"I hired several people who were working on weekends doing demos," Song said. "The only way to promote the product is to have people taste it. When they

taste it, they buy it. But when Covid hit, the demos ended. I've had good success getting into places, but trouble promoting it. We're working to get back on shelves."

Soju is Not Sake

If you haven't heard of soju, you're not alone, Song said. Many people mistakenly make a connection of soju to sake, likening the vodka to rice wine. But Song said that the two types of liquor are very different.

Both soju and vodka are clear, colorless distilled liquors. The main difference is that Song's American Soju has 20 percent alcohol by volume, compared to vodka, which typically contains 40 percent alcohol.

➔ *American Soju page 26*

American Soju



FOUNDED: 2016

CEO: Marc Song

HEADQUARTERS: Vista

BUSINESS: Alcoholic beverage

EMPLOYEES: 1

WEBSITE: americansoju.net

CONTACT: (858) 335-9679

NOTABLE: Soju's history dates back to Mongol invaders bringing the drink to South Korea in the early 13th century during the Goryeo Dynasty, a kingdom originally founded in 918.

Tea for More Than Just Two

PARU Tea Brews Up Special Blends in Point Loma and La Jolla

By KAREN PEARLMAN

If you're a fan of beverages that go beyond merely offering hydration, and you like the idea of sustainable practices, local business owners **Amy Truong** and **Lani Gobaleza** just may be – and have – your cup of tea.

Truong and Gobaleza are the co-founders of **PARU Tea**, a specialty store and tasting room that highlights loose leaf tea and modern blends.



Amy Truong
Co-Founder
PARU Tea

The couple run PARU sites in Point Loma and La Jolla, offering dozens of distinctive teas that customers can learn about and try in-store.

The ultimate goal: Getting people excited about making tea at home.

Gobaleza acknowledged that there "are many fantastic cafés in San Diego" but that she and Truong "really wanted to bring a specialty tea shop that offers a thoughtful and educational retail experience" to customers.

"The more people



Lani Gobaleza
Co-Founder
PARU Tea



Amy Truong (left) and Lani Gobaleza of PARU Tea brew and share some of their personally mixed batch of Blue Chamomile Tea inside their new La Jolla store on Girard Avenue. Photo by Karen Pearlman

do this, the more they'll pay attention to the quality of the tea they're purchasing – where it's from, how sustainable it is and how to prepare it," said Gobaleza, who added that loose leaf tea can be 10 times more sustainable than tea bags.

Both Truong, whose family is from Vietnam and Gobaleza, whose family is from the Philippines, were born and raised in the United States, but the two have traveled extensively around the world, including their ancestral countries. They say their travels helped shape their desire to help connect and support family-owned farms abroad.

Gobaleza, born in Guam and raised in San Diego, is a writer and teacher who studied history at the **University of California at Berkeley**. Truong was raised in Torrance, worked in strategic account development and operations and majored in International Business at **UC Irvine**.

Partners in Business and Marriage

The couple, both 32, married in 2020, a decade after they first met in Japan. They opened the original PARU location on Cañon Street in Point Loma in 2017. The La Jolla site on Girard Avenue opened in November 2021.

"Rather than opening a quick-service café,

which certainly has its own appeal, we really wanted to create a space for individuals who are curious about learning more about tea or deepening their appreciation for it," Truong said.

Truong personally crafts and blends PARU's teas in small batches.

Among their bestsellers are Blue Chamomile, an herbal tea featuring butterfly pea flower from the town of Sa Kao, Thailand; Pandan Waffle, a green tea blend inspired by Truong's favorite childhood dessert; PARU's house-milled matcha called Ceremonial Matcha 32; and black and oolong Okinawa Sugar, with a malty character and a sweet, biscuit-like flavor.

"I personally develop all of our blends in our tea lab," Truong said. "Our blends are mostly inspired by nostalgic memories and my desire to showcase blended cultures. I think a lot of first-generation children can relate to feeling like

➔ *PARU Tea page 33*

PARU Tea



FOUNDED: 2017

FOUNDER: Amy Truong

CO-FOUNDER: Lani Gobaleza

BUSINESS: Specialty teas

EMPLOYEES: 8

LOCATIONS: Point Loma, La Jolla

WEBSITE: <https://paruteabar.com/>

CONTACT: (858) 750-3888

NOTABLE: The married couple first met in 2010 while studying abroad in Japan, when both attended a university in Yokohama.

Celebrating Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month

Comic Book Store Stays ‘Super’ Busy with Loyal Customer Base Comickaze’s Sells Hot Commodities

■ By KAREN PEARLMAN

When the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the livelihood of myriad businesses throughout San Diego County in early 2020, locals came to the rescue of one of San Diego’s iconic comic book stores.

Comickaze Comics & Pop Culture Store on Clairemont Mesa Boulevard, just off Interstate 805, was hit hard by the pandemic and its mandated closures of certain businesses.



Lucky Bronson
Co-owner
Comickaze

Co-owner **Lucky Bronson** said the store wasn’t able to bring in any new products to customers during the two months it was shut down in 2020, and that he and co-owner **Didi Tan** were more than a

little concerned about how they were going to keep the business going.

But before they had time to seriously consider shutting their doors, Comickaze’s vast and loyal customer base heroically stepped up.

“During the shutdown, our customers and community reached out and said, ‘Hey, we don’t want you to go.’” Bronson said. “People were like, ‘What can we do?’ They came to us and said, ‘What can we buy?’”



Lucky Bronson (left) and Didi Tan, co-owners of Comickaze, were busy during Free Comic Book Day on Saturday, May 7. Photo by Karen Pearlman

One customer gave Bronson and Tan \$500, with no questions asked. “He said, ‘It’s for you to take care of any bills. We don’t want you guys going away,’” Bronson said.

“We were doing curbside pickup and delivery in March, April and May of 2020,” Bronson said. “These people literally came by and said, ‘We heard other stores are closing. We don’t want you to.’”

Items at Comickaze, some that had been in stock for years – comic books, graphic novels, art books, action figures, novelty items – suddenly were flying out the door to eager customers.

New comics and other items finally started making their way to Comickaze at the end of May and June 2020. And while customers were

able to return to shopping in-store again, the pandemic taught the co-owners something they had long suspected but now had been validated.

“With the outpouring of support from customers, we saw that this is something that people want and are willing to support,” Bronson said.

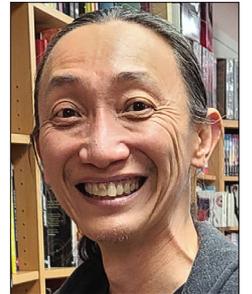
And while supply chain issues presented some challenges in 2021 – and still in 2022 – enough products are moving that the store is in a comfortable position once again.

“We’re getting busier,” Tan said. “We’ve had newer customers coming in the last few months with things starting to open back up.”

Comickaze keeps about 250,000 items in stock and has a subscription service that lends itself to familiarity with their regulars.

Bronson said that many comic books are done in series, coming out with new issues on weekly or monthly bases, and that he and Tan have gotten to know more intimately some of their shoppers because of that.

“The store is about 2,500 square feet,” Bronson said. “We’re considered a small to midsize store. And while we’re definitely not the biggest, we have a really loyal community around us.”



Didi Tan
Co-owner
Comickaze

➔ *Comickaze page 33*

Comickaze Comics & Pop Culture Store

FOUNDED: 1992
FOUNDER: Robert Scott (died in 2019)
CO-OWNERS: Lucky Bronson, Didi Tan
HEADQUARTERS: Clairemont
BUSINESS: Comic books and pop culture items
EMPLOYEES: 3
WEBSITE: Comickaze.com
CONTACT: (858) 278-0371
NOTABLE: Comickaze gave away nearly 700 free comic books on Free Comic Book Day on Saturday, May 7.

California Cuisine and Much More at InsideOUT Catering to Hillcrest’s ‘In’ and ‘Out’ Crowd

■ By KAREN PEARLMAN

Native San Diegan **Paris Quion**, who started her career in the Hillcrest LGBTQ community as an entertainer and volunteer, is now general manager of one of the area’s top restaurants.



Paris Quion
General Manager
InsideOUT

Born into a family of Filipino immigrants with strong business backgrounds, Quion said that from a young age, she felt drawn to creativity, but that in her culture “at times... creativity is looked at as a hobby and not a career path.”

During high school, she found a niche making homecoming and prom dresses for friends, which led to her attending design and business school **Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising**. But Quion said she didn’t feel that was her best future path.

“While I found a great way to merge both worlds of creativity and business, I did find myself still missing other aspects I needed in what my career would be,” Quion said. “I was missing the social side of myself, and the ability to lead but also the experience of being with a team and work collaboratively.”

Now as an adult, Quion has found a way to allow her creativity to mesh with her business know-how and need for teamwork.

Well known as a drag star throughout the LGBTQ community, Quion helps operate



The elegant interior at InsideOUT. Photo courtesy InsideOUT

InsideOUT, a restaurant and lounge that opened in April 2018 in Hillcrest’s **Eitol Towers**, upscale apartments on University Avenue.

InsideOUT is a casual but elegant restaurant and lounge with food and cocktail menus that are updated seasonally.

“I began my career in the Hillcrest LGBTQ community in entertainment and volunteering,” she said. “This community raised me from pretty much the time I came out as a gay person in middle school and then eventually a transgender woman, so giving back was the initial goal. Little did I know, it would actually end up as my career.”

Quion said she started performing as a drag entertainer when she was 18 “in pretty much every venue we have within our community, which helped get my name out there.”

She said she then started booking entertainment and assisting in the production side of different shows, and from there came

opportunities to work as a server and bartender, all of which eventually led to management.

Quion said that **Chris Shaw**, co-founder of the largest LGBTQ restaurant group in Southern California, **Mo’s Universe Restaurant Group** and “well known for his love of creating ownership opportunities for his managers” helped tab her for a new role when InsideOUT was opening.

“(Shaw) has created four vibrant and unique locations along with managers that he’s moved up into owners prior to InsideOUT so when (owner) **Matt Ramon** got his opportunity to build this new concept he brought me along for the ride,” Quion said. “At this point, I saw that everything personally and professionally was well aligned to take this step.”

Part of Mo’s Universe

Mo’s Universe Group operates InsideOUT as well as several other establishments -- **Urban Mo’s Bar & Grill, Baja Betty’s, Barrel &**

Board, Salad To Go Go, Gossip Grill and Hillcrest Brewing Company.

One of InsideOUT’s most unique offerings is an open-air atrium with an “urban oasis” feel in an area that includes a switchback walkway with seating nooks near water features.

Quion said that the venue began with a Mediterranean menu concept, and that eventually evolved to “California Cuisine,” because, she said, “much like California, our menu is a beautiful mix of different influences from multiple cultures, styles and backgrounds.”

Quion said she is proud of her Filipino heritage and “in this industry I’m so glad to be from a culture that prides ourselves in our style of hospitality and sharing our good vibes anywhere we go. We aim to make everyone feel at home no matter where we are and that has taken me so far in this industry. To me, that is priceless.” ■

InsideOUT

FOUNDED: 2018
OWNER: Matt Ramon
GENERAL MANAGER: Paris Antonette Quion
HEADQUARTERS: Hillcrest
BUSINESS: Restaurant and Lounge
EMPLOYEES: 56
WEBSITE: insideoutsd.com
CONTACT: (619) 888-8623
NOTABLE: GM Paris Quion says the establishment’s name speaks for itself: “Once you step ‘in,’ you’re welcomed back ‘out’ but when the definition of ‘out’ is up to you.”