



The Tofu Disruptor

Minh Tsai is on a mission to make you think differently about soy. By Rebecca Flint Marx

Seated on a lime-green couch in the West Oakland headquarters of Hodo Soy, Minh Tsai is contemplating tofu nuggets. “They’re an innovative gateway,” he says of the wrinkly blobs of fried and braised tofu that are made one story below where he sits. “We want to have as many gateways as possible to get people to think about tofu as an ingredient.”

Thus, the nugget is no mere nugget: in Tsai’s eyes, it has the potential to be tofu’s version of the California roll. In the ‘80s, Tsai explains, “the concept of eating raw fish was so foreign. There was an interest in sushi, but if no one had innovated the California or tempura roll, I don’t think Americans would have taken to it.”

Sure, it’s true that in most parts of the country, tofu is now as common as, well, sushi. But it lacks, shall we say, sex appeal: To most Americans, it’s still something of a vegetarian punch line. Lots of people eat it, but far fewer love eating it. And that, says Tsai, is why “tofu needs a champion.”

And so, last September, the founder and chief executive officer of Hodo Soy staged the first Tofu Disruption: a one-day event targeting the people best suited, in Tsai’s opinion, to be tofu’s champions: chefs. It included a factory tour and a dinner in which a group of chefs demonstrated the innovative potential of soy.

It was a very Tofu 2.0 evening. Brandon Jew, of the forthcoming Mr. Jiu, made “burrata” from nama yuba (young, creamy yuba, or tofu skin), pairing it with Thai basil and tomatoes; Spruce chef Johnny Madriaga served braised firm tofu with pork belly; Wayfare Tavern’s Omri Aflalo incorporated both smoked tofu gel and puréed silken tofu into a kampachi crudo; Kim Alter, of the soon-to-open Nightbird, employed okara, or soy pulp, to create a smoked porridge garnished with fried yuba, black cod, and beef jus; and for dessert, pastry chef Bill Corbett partnered vanilla-soy parsnip mousse and soy-milk jam with parsnip cake. The dinner proved such a success for both chefs and diners that Tsai is planning a second Tofu Disruption in New York this April.

“Minh wants to break the stereotype that tofu is boring,” says Alter. “That’s why he likes working with chefs—they can bring ideas to the table that he wouldn’t think about.”

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Tsai, in other words, is aware that he can't conquer by nugget alone. But while he's eager for chefs to help him spread his gospel, he's doing well getting the word out on his own. Later this year, Hodo will expand its Oakland factory by 12,000 square feet and open a second facility in Sacramento, more than doubling its production capacity. Over the past six months, the company moved its distribution into Los Angeles, Portland, Seattle, and the East Coast. In January 2016, it celebrated its first anniversary as Chipotle's tofu supplier.

Despite Chipotle's well-publicized food safety woes (which, Tsai admits, have "absolutely impacted our sales"), Hodo is doing better than ever: Since 2011, it has grown over 50 percent annually, pulling in yearly eight-figure sales. "We're plowing through like this," Tsai says, pushing his right hand through the air, "and all these trends, whether they're vegetarian or Asian, are crossing, and at every crossing we're handing people the ingredients to really run with them."

Tsai, who is 45, began thinking about tofu in his late 20s, when he was a banker for Charles Schwab. One night, he bought some tofu to make for dinner, and was dismayed by its lack of flavor. It didn't taste the way it had when he was a child in Ho Chi Minh City, where he had lived until immigrating here with his family in 1981. Growing up in the Bayview, Tsai was the beneficiary of a series of mentorships that led him to a career in finance—but he gradually grew disillusioned with his field. By the time he encountered the lackluster tofu, he recalls, "I was not intending to start a tofu business. I was thinking about how I wanted to get out of the finance business."

Through some members of his extended family, Tsai met and apprenticed with a tofu maker in San Jose. He launched his business at the Palo Alto Farmers' Market in 2011; his first day, he sold out in two hours. Growth was always a goal: As Tsai puts it, "We realized we couldn't just build another mom 'n' pop company." Hodo moved into its current home in 2008 and currently employs some 90 workers.

From the beginning, Tsai realized that flavor and provenance would have to be his product's hallmarks—he wanted to make tofu good enough to eat on its own. So, unlike most of the tofu available in this country, Hodo's is made from certified organic, non-GMO beans grown by the Midwest Organic Farmers Cooperative. And whereas most tofu is made from the soy equivalent of skim milk, Hodo's is high in fat and protein. "The flavor is above and beyond anything I've ever tried," says Alter.

Though there are other independent producers making good tofu, Hodo is uniquely poised to become synonymous with tofu quality: It's still small enough to be considered an artisanal company (and thus justify its products' higher price tags—Hodo's tofu costs about \$1-\$2 more than other brands), but it's large enough that countrywide distribution is a realistic goal. And it benefits from Tsai's desire to make converts out of everyone, not just the meat-averse.

Sitting on the factory couch, Tsai describes his role as, essentially, tofu's Julia Child or Colonel Sanders. But he admits that he's a reluctant spokesperson. "I feel like I still don't know enough" he says. "But I'm slowly beginning to recognize that maybe I do. I know enough to ask the questions, but not to give the answers."

Eric Chou, Hodo's business development manager, comes in to set up a tofu tasting. As he arranges Hodo products on a tray, he and Tsai discuss the challenge of branding their newest creation, mapo tofu—an incendiary Szechuan dish—which is set to debut in March.

"I tried mapo tofu on a buyer in Connecticut, and he said, 'Maybe you want to start with a name that's a little more generic,'" Chou says.

"Can you give me an example?" Tsai asks.

"He said, 'Call it 'spicy tofu,' then—in fine print—'mapo flavor.'"

"Or 'Szechuan tofu, mapo style,'" Tsai says. "That's a good point."

"Or," says Chou, "My wife was saying that the story of mapo is kind of a legend, so why not call it legendary tofu?"

"Legendary tofu," says Tsai. He grins. "That's cool, huh?"