

RESTAURANTWARE

— From the Inside Out —

by Heidi McKenzie





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1 Il Covo's sea bream recipe shown on Patrick Yeung's plate, 9¼ in. (24 cm) in diameter, stoneware, glaze. Photo: Maria Giuliana. 2 Patrick Yeung in his Toronto studio. Photo: Rick O'Brien. 3 Fermentation crock, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, stoneware, glazes, 2018. 4 Butter dish, 6¼ in. (16 cm) in diameter, stoneware, glazes, 2018.

When I asked Ryan Campbell, owner and chef of Il Covo, a relatively new addition to Toronto's Little Italy restaurant strip, if there was anything he would like to add about the potter, Patrick Yeung, who exclusively supplies his restaurant, he offered without hesitation, "He's pretty damn refined, super crafty, and a hard-working guy who does an amazing job for everyone I know that he works with—a definite ten out of ten." High praise, and after speaking with Yeung, I was able to parse out the underpinnings of Campbell's ringing endorsement.

Pursuing a Passion

Yeung grew up in an upper-middle-class, Euro-centric neighborhood of Toronto, Canada, the son of two Chinese/Hong-Kong immigrants, who never wanted anything less for their son than a career in finance or the sciences. Such is the burden/birthright of the second generation non-white Canadian. Yeung himself describes his mother as the "stereotypical tiger mom" who pushed hard to dissuade her son away from a career in the arts. Yeung's aptitude for the visual arts and design took shape during high

school, while at the same time he nourished a second passion for food, the culinary arts, and food history.

At the age of fifteen, he began working in his father's friend's Chinese restaurant, which might have sparked his interest in the food industry. After high school, he took time off to assess his life choices and continued to work in the food-service industry full time in order to earn the resources he needed to pursue one of his passions. He eventually shifted from front-of-house service to the kitchen, then back to the front of house, fueling his keen interest in various aspects of the food industry. During those years, Yeung began taking night classes in drawing at Sheridan College, in Oakville, Ontario, Canada, with an eye toward building a portfolio for graphic design. Like so many potters, Yeung chanced upon clay: he decided to take a handbuilding course, given his proclivity for tinkering and taking things apart. He loved it. The next year he took wheel throwing, and recounts that it took him the whole semester just to master the basics of centering—but, by the end of the term, he was hooked. By 2003, Yeung had enough money and courage to face his parents and pursue higher education. He applied for and

was accepted into both the ceramics program at Sheridan and the culinary arts program at George Brown in Toronto, Canada. He put both acceptance letters in two blank envelopes, shuffled them, and let fate decide his destiny.

Finding Connections

Reflecting on his youth, Yeung recalls having a difficult time embracing his Cantonese heritage. Born in the West of Eastern descent, he grew up torn between two vastly different cultures. He points to the difficulty in “finding a balance between the silent tradition that exists in my Cantonese home life and the dynamic and pervasive pull of Western ideology.”¹ Yeung’s grandfather collected Chinese ceramics, and they were ever present in his home. Just being around Chinese ceramics and living in a culture where being Chinese was often tied to the ubiquitous “chop-suey nation” of North American bastardized Chinese restaurants provided an entry point for Yeung to regain a connection with his Chinese heritage.

Post college, Yeung spent two years apprenticing with one of Canada’s most well-known production potters, Scott Barnum.

Yeung found the transition from working for himself to throwing someone else’s forms a difficult one. He set up a small studio in his one-bedroom apartment near Barnum’s studio and continued with his own work after hours. He was surprised to find that within six months of working with Barnum he had moved more clay than he had in his three years at Sheridan College. Admittedly, he owes a great deal to Barnum: it was under his mentorship that Yeung learned how to set up and run a profitable studio as a production potter. And he has flourished in this endeavor, where many have failed.

Yeung’s standard production ceramics line boasts strong, masculine forms with clean lines and a monochromatic palette of magnesium black and off-white to gray, satin-matte glazed interiors. Yeung postulates that growing up surrounded by an urban landscape, the hard angles of the modern architecture influenced his aesthetic. He also looks to such classics as Le Creuset, metal oil cans, bamboo steamer tiffins, and Chinese sandpots (pots made of a loose ceramic material able to withstand the thermal shock of a stovetop). While at Sheridan, Yeung developed an aesthetic and vocabulary that he still references today—although he shifted from atmospheric salt firing to gas reduction.



Building a New Relationship

Yeung recently moved into his own studio at the north end of the city with an enviable 1200-square-foot working space, with an additional 200-square-foot sales/showroom. This transition happened at about the same time that Ryan Campbell managed to track Yeung down, during the spring of 2018. And track he did: Campbell had put in his time internationally and locally as sous chef and chef de cuisine. He had also spent enough time in Italy to know that this cuisine was his true calling. Campbell always knew he wanted bespoke dishes to compliment his artisanal menu. Yeung’s ceramics were on his radar from the beginning, having seen them in places in Toronto like the ultra high-end, quintessentially Canadian, downtown restaurant Canoe, and West-End niche restaurant Actinolite. Campbell hounded the chefs to give up Yeung’s contact information. Yeung is choosy about who he will and will not work for. After many attempts, Campbell made contact and the two found their core values aligned and complemented one another, so the relationship took flight.

Campbell knew what he wanted: light tones, flat finishes, nothing that even remotely resembled mass produced. He had fallen in love with some plates in Copenhagen, Denmark, showed Yeung inspirational images of what he was going for, and Yeung went to work developing prototypes. The initial order was 300 serving dishes in 12 different forms.

Campbell says his breakage with daily use of Yeung’s dinnerware in the restaurant is virtually nil—except when he’s training a new server. He has Yeung’s





5 Pasta dishes, 11 in. (28 cm) in diameter, stoneware, glazes, 2019. **6** Plates, to 10¼ in. (26 cm) in diameter, stoneware, glazes 2019. **7** Coffee pour over and coffee mug, 7¾ in. (11 cm) in height (stacked), stoneware, glazes, nichrome wire, 2018. **8** Berry bowl, 7¼ in. (18 cm) in diameter, stoneware, glazes, nichrome wire, 2019.

hard work and dedication in the trenches as a server to thank for designing dishes to be durable enough to withstand the stress load of restaurant usage and industrial dishwashers.

Yeung talks about having really learned the nuances of making restaurant ware from the inside out from his earlier experiences working in restaurants. These included knowing just how high to angle a rim so that the server cannot fumble the plate; understanding how to create the right sink hole to properly showcase a sauce; recognizing how high and at what angle to throw a foot ring so that the plates can be handled with the utmost elegance; being intimately aware of the configurations of industrial dishwashers and what will and will not fit into the racks. As such, he takes special care to round his rims to minimize the possibility of chipping, and respects and listens to each chef's desires, needs, likes, and dislikes around the degree of potter's swirl (traces of throwing) versus flatness on the face of a plate.

Yeung generally uses different glazes for the different restaurants he works with. For Il Covo he changed up his clay body to one with slightly less iron content to achieve the desired brighter white, and coaxed the kiln into slightly less reduction, firing to cone 9 versus cone 10. One notable exception to his customization for restaurateurs is Arvo Café in the hipster East-End Historic Distillery District. At Arvo, his standard production perfectly suited the café's aesthetic. It was a mutual decision to use Yeung's standard ware virtually unchanged, made with the addition of the café's logo.

Yeung estimates that he spends about 20 percent of his time filling orders for restaurants. That 20 percent is part of a regular 60- to 70-hour work week in the studio, and that's not includ-

ing the 2 nights a week he still eases into his alter-ego world as a bartender and server.

Yeung is in the driver's seat: his skills and acumen are in high demand. His personality, which can only be described as low-key, has to suit the chefs with whom he works. It actually took some arm-twisting and dogged persistence on my part to get Yeung to agree to this article. He's not a fame seeker. He's a hard worker. He flies under most radars. Campbell was surprised I had even heard of Yeung, but I had. He's out there selling his wares at the local trade shows and fairs. He prefers the personal one-on-one contact with his customers to selling retail, and keeps his stockists occasional, to a minimum of his total earned income. I have arrived where I began, affirming Campbell's 10 out of 10 rating of Yeung. Patrick Yeung, as a production potter and restaurant supplier, is 100 percent the real deal.

Yeung supplies the following restaurants/café's:

- Actinolite, Toronto: actinoliterestaurant.com
- Canoe, Toronto: www.canoerestaurant.com
- Est, Toronto: estrestaurant.ca
- Il Covo, Toronto: ilcovo.ca
- Mineral, Toronto: mineralto.com
- Pearl Morisette, Jordan Station: pearlmorisette.com/therestaurant
- Arvo Café, Toronto: arvocoffee.com
- Cumbrae's, Toronto: cumbraes.com.

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¹ Artist Statement, Patrick Yeung, 2019.