

A taste for the exotic

• BRING THE OVERSEAS HOME •



Durian Fruit



Cactus leaves and other fresh produce



Thai prawns in spices

By Henry Verden



From the outside Yue-Wah Oriental Foods on Madison's South Side isn't particularly easy to spot. It's down at one end of an older shopping mall, with a single front door and two unremarkable windows blocked by merchandise stacked inside. However, when you step through that single door, prepare to be surrounded by a rich, enticing smell that tells you you're in for something special. You'll also realize that first impressions can be delightfully wrong.

Kien Ma is a University of Wisconsin graduate who, in 1983, was working as a Metallurgical Engineer for Caterpillar in Illinois when he heard there was an Asian market for sale in Madison. "I thought it would be a challenge," explained Ma, "and I thought I could make more money than in engineering, at least in theory."

The modest exterior of Yue-Wah doesn't showcase the size of the store. The interior is huge, the result of steady expansion since Ma took over. He started out with two lines, Chinese and Thai, but as the store expanded so did the goods, until there are now an impressive number of cuisines represented. "We carry a lot of Vietnamese and Thai products, as well as Filipino, a little bit of Malaysian, Korean,



Kien Ma

Indonesian, and Chinese. We've also expanded to include Middle Eastern, Indian, and Hispanic products," said Ma. He went on to say, even though they are an Asian market, they sell more Hispanic foods than anything else.

The store is laid out so that each nationality has its own aisle, if at all possible. The variety of products can be a little daunting because Ma believes that any brand his customers want should be available.

Soy sauce is a good example. "Every country uses soy sauce and favors unique varieties by multiple brands. For example, we have a shelf over 40 feet long just for the many, many different brands of Chinese soy sauce. But that's not your only option; there are many additional brands of soy sauce on the shelves for each of the other cuisines."

One of the more unusual items Yue-Wah carries is durian fruit. Durian is known for its delicious flavor, if you can just get past the smell. "There's a lot of interest in durian. A lot of people have heard of it and want to come to look at it and try it," said Ma. "It's a challenge for a lot of people because they've heard about the reputation of stinky fruit. Half of them love it and half hate it." The store offers whole frozen fruit as well as durian popsicles and durian-flavored cookies.

Yue-Wah is a one-stop shop for folks who frequent foreign food stores. Whether you're looking for garam masala (an Indian spice blend), halo-halo (a Filipino dessert), fresh cactus leaves, or exotic packaged sauces, you can find it at Yue-Wah. They offer approximately 50 types of rice and hundreds of spices and mixes to let you cook your favorite cuisine from scratch or by just opening a package or jar. You can buy the perfect rice or that exotic fresh fruit or unusual vegetable you can't find anywhere else. Rice, tamarind, fruit, and other candies abound. Hot sauces, chutneys, and dried fish of all stripes are there in plentiful amounts. Plan on

spending more time than you anticipated because you're going to find more to look at, and more to purchase, than you thought you needed. Don't forget the durian.

• IF YOU GO •

Yue-Wah Oriental Foods
2328 S Park St.
Madison, WI 53713
Phone: (608) 257-9338

From grass jelly to mangos to bok choy, Yue-Wah sells unusual canned, packaged, and fresh products.



Canned jellies



Mangos ready to eat



Baby bok choy

Food History

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