

◀ ▶ **TRENDING:** Forward and Back

Pot Luck

Flaky crusts embrace everything at Pot Pie Paradise.

By Anneli Star Josselin Rufus | Feb 4, 2009



Theresia Gunawan And A Fresh Batch Of Pies. Credits: Chris Duffey

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17
FRANK OGAWA PLAZA/OAKLAND CITY HALL
DOWNTOWN OAKLAND
FREE ADMISSION!
Music • Food • Booths • Family Fun
Panels • Gaming • Fashion • Cosplay

◀ Share ▶

One spring night two years ago, Theresia Gunawan had a dream in which she saw herself selling pot pies, passing the golden treats to strangers in exchange for cash. She woke up baffled. Although she'd been in the food-service business for years as a chief cook at Mills College, Gunawan had not only never made a pot pie but wasn't entirely certain what they were. She could have dismissed the dream as just another random sequence of nocturnal neurosignals, but it felt so real, so strong.

A Medicare health plan rated 5 out of 5 Stars in California for 2022*
Connect with your KP Medicare specialist to learn more
Connect
KAISER PERMANENTE.
*Every year, Medicare evaluates plans based on a 5-star rating system.

East Bay Events

SAT 16	Oakland's Magic Kitchen at Childre... Children's Fairylan... Oakland, CA
WED 13	Baba's House presents: Ka-La-Ok ni... Baba's House Oakland, CA
WED 13	ALIXIR DANCE ecstatic dance Lake Merritt Dance ... Oakland, CA
WED 13	Celebrating Everett and Jones Barb... Oakland Asian Cultu... Oakland, CA
WED 13	Berkeley Dance Project 2022: Two ... UC Berkeley Berkeley, CA
WED 13	College Night at Tippy Putt Tippy Putt Emeryville, CA
WED 13	Coco noir events Coco noir Oakland, CA

📅 WED 13 THU 14 FRI 15 SAT 16 SUN 17 MON 18
🔍 See all events + Add your event

She'd had other vivid dreams while growing up in Indonesia, studying medicine in Germany, emigrating to the United States, raising children, and pursuing a cooking career after being unable to launch one in the sciences. "And those dreams," she shrugs now, "came true."



Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, "I went online to find out: What is a pot pie? Okay, it's basically a one-piece meal. It's a stew or something creamy inside a crust." Perusing the hundreds of recipes she'd created at Mills to see which ones would translate to a pie, she staged a pot-pie party for her family. They urged her to take it farther. Applying for and then acquiring a slot at Oakland's Temescal-district farmers' market a few months later, she sold out her entire stock that first Sunday. Although she still has booths at the Temescal and Castro Valley farmers' markets, Gunawan moved her operations in 2007 from a small Oakland kitchen to a large one adjoining a deli counter and dining room at the far fringe of Hayward, in an industrial park fronting the grassy flats of Eden Landing Ecological Preserve. There she sells pies oven-hot, with side salads, or frozen to go.

What started as a five-filling repertoire has expanded two dozenfold: "I get bored if I have to make the same things every day. People suggest things to me, and I experiment." The results span the globe: Fricassee pie. Tikka masala pie. Tempeh pie. Gumbo pie. Goulash pie. Chicken-cacciatore pie with rice-shaped orzo pasta. Osaka-beef pie with soy sauce and sake. Beef-and-egg-



This Week's Issue



VIEW THE LATEST E-EDITION



f 19,045 Fans LIKE

@ 14,343 Followers FOLLOW

t 61,992 Followers FOLLOW



FREE STUFF!  **HERE**

noodles pie. Lime-lamb pie. Raised outside the West, Gunawan labors under no cultural conviction that flaky Western-style crusts nestled inside Western-style metal pie pans are obliged to contain peas, carrots, and chicken chunks — so her oeuvre is an ever-shifting crust-encased It's a Small World.



Tucking into hot pot pies in an industrial park is so surreal. Oldies bounce through the speakers. Artificial orchids, hibiscus, and Impressionist prints battle valiantly against the prefab anonymity of a windowless hangarlike space palpably far from where anyone actually lives. Slit, our pies gush worldly-wise gusts of curry and coconut, feta and couscous, eggplant and Kalamata olive, and that wheaty warmth that whispers *crust*. Which means *pie*. Which, to us, means *home*. Assailed by the synthetic setting, one imagines the nearness of aunties nonetheless.

Our Thai chicken-curry pie boasts green beans, carrots, red potatoes, rice noodles, cilantro, coconut milk, fish sauce, peanut sauce — and chicken chunks, but high-grade breast without even the ghost of gristle. On the spiciness scale, it packs a sinus-draining punch, as does our vegetarian three-bean-chili pie and okra/shrimp/sausage-studded Creole gumbo pie. Crust, chickpeas, peanuts, and tubers are a foil for hotness in the sweet-potato Thai-curry pie, whose ginger sings assertively through creamy coconut. And while my Cheez Whizishly childish palate finds all this a smidge too hot, everyone else at our table embraces all the authenticity. Never dumbed down, Gunawan's fillings arrive intact from their places of origin; her amendments make them heart-healthier but no less aggressive.

“Every filling needs a balance: vegetables, starch, and protein,” Gunawan explains. Keeping trans fats to a minimum and shunning hydrogenated oils, she concentrates on olive and canola oil, with a bit of butter in a few fillings for flavor. She uses half and half for

roux, and degreases meat before using it. Vegetarian and vegan pies are staples here because Gunawan remembers special-diet students at Mills. Arguably her most out-there vegan selection is the Javanese tempeh, which employs cubes of fermented soybean cake mixed with eggplant, tomato, rice, onion, and hot sauce.

“Tempeh isn’t easy to cook,” Gunawan says. “The texture is difficult and the taste is sometimes sour. When I was a kid, my mom always served us tempeh for breakfast and for school lunches — so I remembered how she did it and thought: Okay, this can be a pie.” If a tad dry — at least to gravy cravers — this high-protein pocket satisfies. So does a sunburst-bright butternut-squash pie, perfect for the capsicum-challenged, sporting soybeans, leeks, gouda, and potatoes. It expands in the mouth like a lovely daydream, plying that rarefied border between savory and sweet. Satisfying too is the classic chicken pie that Southern-born Wade likes best of all: Its pea-carrot-meat combo complements a crust that he declares rich and doughy on the bottom, flaky-crunchy on top: “It’s located way, way into the comfort-food realm,” he beams.

He is less thrilled with his Bavarian apple pie. Although he loves dessert, “the things I like about the savory pies work against the sweet one,” Wade sighs sadly. Its very tart apples, sour cream, and brown sugar “don’t meld as well as those in the savory pies,” he laments, and they jar against a rather salty crust.

The piña colada pie is more successful, its fresh pineapple and rum making every bite explosive. An editor at *Every Day With Rachael Ray* telephoned the deli last spring “and told me,” Gunawan remembers, “to create a fruit pie that no one had ever made in America before.” After a few banana-based no-gos, she devised the piña colada, which appeared in the magazine’s August issue. At that point, Gunawan decided, “my dream had come true.”

What is it about pot pies and their foreign cousins — pasties, tamales, calzone — that makes us feel all snugly and satisfied? Tuffy calls it their *containedness*, their confidence as packages, stuffed and sealed, as if to assert: *I'm for you. And I'm complete.* Pot pies liberate their eaters from the brooding tension of the borderless meal, the how-much-is-enough anxiety of the uncontained.

So here at the outer edge of Hayward, this frontier of freeways, ducks, and sky, stands one of those rare restaurants that defines itself not by genre or aura or ethnicity but by the *shape* and *state* of what it serves. Stuffed. Circular. How postmodern is that?



Anneli Star Josselin Rufus

LEAVE A REPLY

Comment:

Name:* Email:* Website:

Save my name, email, and website in this browser for the next time I comment.

Please sign me up for the newsletter Yes No

Post Comment



Previous Article



Next Article

**The East Bay Today:
February 3, 2009**

**State Education Crisis
Worse Than Ever**



Get the Best
Local Journalism
in North
American in your
Inbox

Sign Up Now