

The New York Times

Where the World's Chefs Want to Eat

Yardbird, in Hong Kong, mixes the polish of Tokyo's favorite restaurants, the warmth of Sydney's and the glamour of New York's, with results that draw chefs from all over the globe.



By **Julia Moskin**

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HONG KONG — Yardbird is not the world's best restaurant.

But if you were to pool the world's best modern restaurant trends and traits — the polished technique of Tokyo, the sophisticated warmth of Sydney, the design acumen of Copenhagen, the nose-to-tail ethos of San Francisco, the tattooed bartenders and strong drinks of Berlin, the beautiful people of Los Angeles and the global culinary mix of New York — Yardbird is pretty much the restaurant you would end up with.

That is why, eight years after opening, Yardbird remains one of the most popular and influential restaurants in Hong Kong, a city with no shortage of amazingly delicious food.

Chefs from all over consider Yardbird their clubhouse when they visit the city: It's a place they often say they wish they had opened themselves.

"It occupies that rare sweet spot," said Corey Lee, the chef at In Situ in San Francisco. "It's just progressive enough, just traditional enough and just affordable enough that it satisfies a huge range of diners."



Matt Abergel and Lindsay Jang, both Canadians, opened Yardbird in 2011. Nicola Longobardi for The New York Times

The two owners — Matt Abergel, the chef, and Lindsay Jang, the business manager — grew up in Canada. Like droves of other expatriates, they are entirely at home in this multinational city, where both Chinese and English are official languages and the food is multilingual.

Later this year, the partners will expand to the United States, opening a Yardbird spinoff in Los Angeles, a city that has proved itself as an early adopter of Asian dining trends.

On its face, Yardbird is a chic and modern Japanese-style izakaya — a casual restaurant where drinking is as central as eating — with a specialty in yakitori, charcoal-grilled chicken skewers. (The same combination is easy to find in Japan, at places like Toridori in Tokyo and the Michelin-starred Torisho Ishii in Osaka.)

But in other ways, it's a restaurant that could be anywhere — and be cool anywhere — right now.

It has a crisp, black-and-blond visual identity, from the custom-designed chairs to the labels on the house line of Japanese whiskey. The partners have collaborated with streetwear brands like Vans, Carhartt and Stüssy. Staff members gather for yoga stretches before the dinner shift. There are Mexican-style beer cocktails and Korean-style fried cauliflower. On any given night, the servers, cooks and customers have arrived here from all over the world.

As at other modern classics like the Momofuku restaurants and Relae and Joe Beef, the food is unfussy, the room is bustling and there is not a tablecloth or chef's toque in sight. (Mr. Abergel usually wears shorts and a T-shirt in the kitchen; the six-foot-long grill filled with binchotan, Japanese charcoal that burns bright red and superhot, is relentless.)

The restaurant's quirky philosophy includes communal yoga stretches before shifts.
Nicola Longobardi for The New York Times

“The secret is that it created a community that everyone wants to be part of,” said Richard Ekkebus, the Dutch-born head of culinary operations at the elegant Landmark Mandarin Oriental hotel in Hong Kong. “The vibe is addictive, the food is delicious and unpretentious, and who doesn't like grilled chicken? But it's all done with a high level of technique.”

Mr. Abergel's signature dishes nod to international classics: a cool tomato salad with tofu skins and shiso leaf that is a play on the ubiquitous Caprese; French-style chicken liver mousse with toasted Japanese milk bread; a Caesar salad seasoned with dried seaweed, miso and fried baby anchovies.

But in the realm of yakitori, grilled chicken skewers, he hews strictly to Japanese tradition. Every part of the bird, from Achilles' heel to soft knee bone to neck, is used, each one butchered, skewered and seasoned in a specific way.

"You can train someone to use a knife, but it's hard to train someone who doesn't have heart," the chef Masayoshi Takayama wrote in an email. Mr. Abergel worked for him at Masa, in Midtown Manhattan, New York's most elegant sushi temple. "Matt understands that it's important to dig into tradition, to know why something needs to be done a certain way."

Mr. Abergel's tomato salad with tofu and shiso is playful and unconventional. Nicola Longobardi for The New York Times

His chicken "meatball" skewer with egg yolk "dressing" comes straight from Japanese tradition.
Nicola Longobardi for The New York Times

Most important to local customers, the birds are the famously fatty Chinese breed called "three yellow" (skin, beak, feet) that arrive, alive and squawking, each morning at the nearby Sheung Wan wet market.

Since most Hong Kong cooks and chefs shop daily and expect extremely fresh ingredients, the city has multiple hubs for vendors who sell — and butcher and trim and chop — produce, fish and meat on site. (They're called "wet" because the sidewalks and floors are constantly hosed down to remove scales, leaves, blood and other debris.)

"Until Yardbird opened, expat chefs would come here and dismiss the quality of local products," said the chef Jowett Yu, who runs a similarly informal restaurant nearby with a Taiwanese-inspired menu, Ho Lee Fook. "But philosophically, Matt just didn't believe you had to fly in frozen chickens from France that took two days to arrive, instead of using fresh chicken raised 30 kilometers from the restaurant."

Mr. Abergel and Ms. Jang have a strong restaurant philosophy, summed up as excellence without pretension. They arrived there after decades of restaurant work, both together and separately.

Growing up in Calgary, Alberta, Mr. Abergel said he absorbed a taste for chicken fat from his Russian-Jewish grandmother, and a love of grilling from his Moroccan-Israeli father. He started working in restaurants when he was 14.

Ms. Jang grew up working in her family's restaurant in suburban Edmonton. Her father immigrated from Hong Kong, and her mother was a seventh-generation Scottish-Canadian; she grew up at a time when the population of Canada was far less diverse than it is now. "I was the only Asian person I ever saw during my childhood who wasn't in my family," she said. When her father was laid off from his job as an engineer, the family bought Golden Capital, a Chinese restaurant, in 1984.

By their late teens, both Mr. Abergel and Ms. Jang were done with school, heavily into skateboards and knew their way around a restaurant. They landed jobs at the same skate shop in Calgary, The Source, around the year 2000, and have been together, in one form or another, ever since.

They have been life partners, business partners, and occasionally both. They are raising two children (though they live separately); own another restaurant, the smaller, seafood-focused Ronin, nearby; and share a bracing irreverence for fine dining.

The grill built for Yardbird's yakitori is more than six feet long, and burns a super-hot hardwood charcoal called binchotan. Nicola Longobardi for The New York Times

Instead of going to culinary school or college, Mr. Abergel spent months traveling in Asia, then did a long stint at an izakaya in Vancouver, British Columbia. Ms. Jang was drawn to the service end of the business; she was working as a captain at Nobu Fifty Seven in Midtown when she persuaded him to join her in New York. They spent their nights off eating yakitori and talking about the different kind of restaurant they would open someday. "When I left New York I never wanted to work a restaurant again unless it was mine," Ms. Jang said.

They ran out of time on their United States work visas around when Ms. Jang was pregnant with their first child, so when Mr. Abergel was offered a job running a vast restaurant in Hong Kong's swankiest mall, he took it, and they moved here together. But the corporate feeling of the place didn't work for him.

"I knew that there could be a restaurant that was fun," he said. "Even if I had to build it myself."

He was right. Yardbird was an instant hit in 2011, stayed popular, moved to a larger space last year, and has proved surprisingly influential.

"Yardbird has really changed the way front-of-house works in Hong Kong" said Mr. Yu, the chef, who is originally from Taiwan. Before, he said, service here was stuck in an old-fashioned mode: either too deferential and formal (at expensive restaurants) or indifferent bordering on neglectful (at cheap ones).

"Yardbird was the first restaurant that made you feel like going to someone's house party," he said, "where the waiters call you by your first name and give you a high-five and a hug."

Another regular, the British chef Daniel Calvert of Belon, said that Yardbird is so popular among visiting chefs that he wonders if Yardbird is now creating, not following, food trends.

"Maybe it does reflect the way the whole world wants to dine," he said. "Or does the world reflect how Yardbird wants us to dine?"

Yardbird, 154-158 Wing Lok Street, Sheung Wan, Hong Kong, yardbirdrestaurant.com/info.

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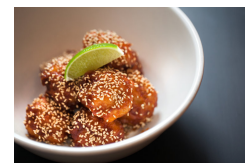
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