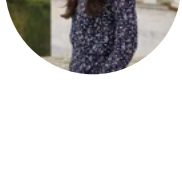


Spotlight

How the pandemic helped Burmese noodle phenom Rangoon grow even bigger



Melissa Kravitz Hoeffner

March 28, 2023



The lemongrass fish noodle soup at Rangoon. Photo credit: Rangoon

What started as a pop-up roving trendy bars and breweries in Bushwick, Williamsburg, and the Lower East Side, soon became a bonafide noodle phenom—and it did it all at the height of the pandemic.

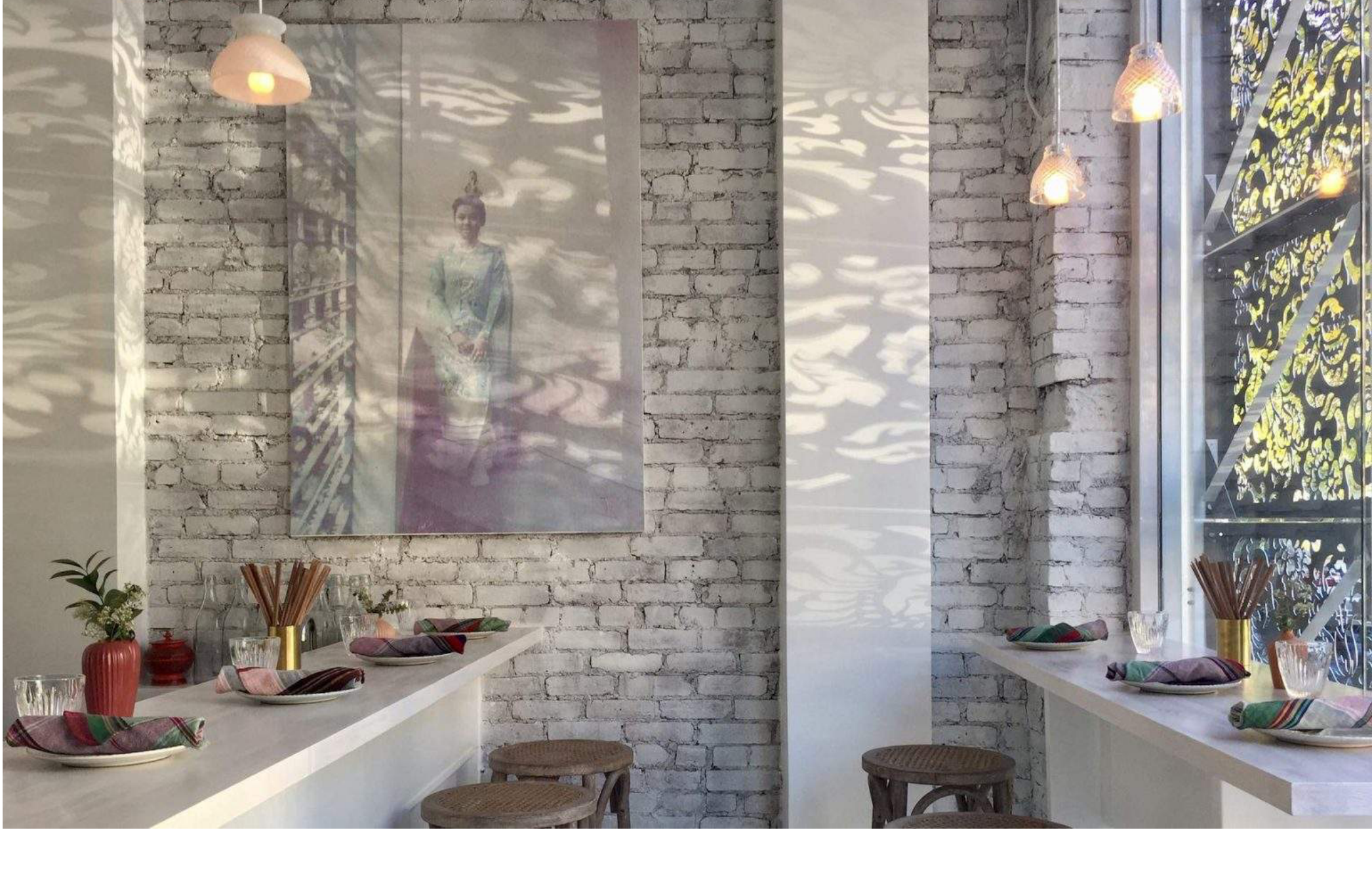
Chef Myo Moe and her husband Daniel Bendji opened Burmese restaurant **Rangoon** in February 2020 in Crown Heights. Shutdown orders followed just a few weeks later, an especially heavy blow for a new restaurant. Moe and Bendji felt both nervous and relieved running a mom-and-pop operation. They were worried their years-long dream of running a restaurant would crumble, but since they hadn't fully staffed up yet, they didn't feel the weight of letting a lot of people go.

The couple pushed through the early weeks and months, getting by on a mix of takeout, delivery, and outdoor dining. **Rave reviews soon poured in**, as did business. "The pandemic changed a lot in the industry's landscape," Bendji says. "We got really lucky and had a lot of publicity."

Just a little more than three years after debuting their Crown Heights restaurant, Moe and Bendji now run a bustling operation in Chelsea as well—a remarkable achievement for a tiny restaurant with no external funding, development group behind it, or big-name chef at the helm. Plus, Rangoon serves a cuisine that's still rare in New York, and it succeeded at a time when thousands of restaurants were forced to close due to the dramatic downturn in business.

Their success is a testament to the couple's hospitality and food. Rangoon didn't just aim to attract a Burmese population eager for a taste of home, but also to introduce the cuisine to a whole new audience—and it worked.

Read on to learn about Rangoon's early success as a pop-up, its restaurant launch in Crown Heights, and its expansion in Chelsea.



Rangoon's original Crown Heights location, which debuted in early 2020. Photo credit: Rangoon.

Pop-up glory fuels early success

After working together in fine-dining restaurants such as Mercer Kitchen in Manhattan, Moe and Bendji opened RangoonNoodlelab as a Burmese pop-up in 2016. Noodle lovers flocked every Wednesday to 1080 Brew, a coffee shop in Ridgewood, where Moe served four noodle dishes. The chicken coconut noodle and tongue-tingling garlic pork noodles became early hits. The menu was delightfully varied, which left regulars vying for a spot to taste more noodles, as well as newcomers eager to get on the Burmese noodle bandwagon.

Opening a brick-and-mortar space had been a dream for the couple since 2018. In 2019, a former deli space on Prospect Place opened up, and the couple jumped at the opportunity. Brooklyn-based SAW.EARTH and Outpost Architecture renovated the space, adding photos of Moe's family from Burma along with a chic, Scandinavian-inspired aesthetic featuring white-washed brick, natural woods, gold fixtures, and neutral-toned tiles.

By the summer of 2020, people were lining up. **Rangoon** doubled its original seating capacity with backyard, sidewalk, and covered street seating where socially distanced diners slurped coconut chicken noodle soup and shared colorful tea leaf salads.

Burmese restaurants in NYC are few and far between. Prior to Rangoon's opening in 2020, the only Burmese food in NYC could be found in Flushing where Little Myanmar, a small market selling imported ingredients, offered a menu of Burmese homestyle foods at the back of a mall. Rangoon's rise has coincided with broader excitement for Burmese food in the city. Little Myanmar expanded with a full-service restaurant in the East Village in 2022, and Burmese Bites expanded from pop-ups at the Queens Night Market into a full-time spot in the Queens Center Mall.

For Moe and Bendji, though, expansion wasn't a part of their plan. The overall dearth of Burmese restaurants in the city and the fact that several realtors were approaching the couple with affordable turnkey offers (due to numerous restaurants shutting down during the pandemic) made it a smart business decision.

"We never thought we could have opened in Manhattan on such a limited budget," Bendji says. "We're just self-funded with some family support."

The couple was further buoyed by a **MICHELIN Bib Gourmand** in 2022 and decided to go for it.

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Rangoon's expansion to Chelsea has also allowed it to showcase several more dishes on the menu. Photo credit: Rangoon.

Rangoon's Chelsea Expansion

Rangoon Chelsea opened at 158 Eighth Avenue, on the corner of 18th Street, in the fall of 2022. Decorated by the same design firm as the Brooklyn outpost, the much larger restaurant offered opportunities for menu expansion as well.

There are now grill and fryer stations allowing Moe to showcase an even broader range of Burmese cooking including fritters and skewers.

Rangoon's squash tempura is similar to what Moe found on the streets in Burma. She still relies on family there to source elusive ingredients such as regional nuts and roasted chiles that make dishes come to life at the restaurants. Most other ingredients are sourced from other parts of Southeast Asia, a local restaurant supplier, plus a handful of supplemental trips to Chinatown. "Most of the dishes are traditional, but we give it a twist," Moe says.

Pork shoulder, cooked slowly in fermented tea leaves, is a "very special dish you can't find anywhere in New York," Moe says. She's proud to offer a taste of home to Burmese immigrants and others curious about the cuisine.

Growing up in Burma, Moe loved the coziness of her extended family's home, where the aesthetic was influenced by British colonization. Pictures of her family, along with Victorian wallpaper, tea sets, glassware, and cutlery have all helped Moe recreate that feeling for diners in the form of a neighborhood bistro. It's the type of place you can go to for a nice meal any day of the week, or for a special occasion featuring a bottle of natural wine, Bendji says.

With business booming and the two restaurants in a steady groove, Bendji and Moe aren't exactly ready to slow down. Next up, the couple is planning a line of condiments including Burmese roasted chiles.

"We want traditional Burmese food that's approachable for everyone," Bendji says. "That's always been our inspiration for making it all happen in the form that it's taken so far."

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Melissa Kravitz Hoeffner is a writer based in Brooklyn, where she lives with her wife and rescue dog. You can follow her on Instagram [@melissabethk](#) and Twitter [@melissabethk](#)

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