

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now James Beard nominee Christina Nguyen tells us what's for lunch**  
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INTERVIEWER: Four chefs and one pastry chef from the Twin Cities have been nominated by the prestigious James Beard Foundation for Best Chef Midwest. Finalists will be announced March 29. It is a huge honor, so we wanted to catch up with them, all of them, this week. And since our show airs over the lunch hour, well, we thought we'd ask them, hey, what's for lunch?

Today, I'm talking with Christina Nguyen. She is the chef and co-owner of Hai Hai and Hola Arepa. And Christina's on the line. I'm sorry to keep you waiting here, Christina. I know you are busy with, probably, folks at the restaurants wanting to eat. And ah, I tell you, it's been a busy day. Thanks for joining us, and congratulations.

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Of course. Thank you so much for having me.

**INTERVIEWER:** Now, it's not your first time in the James Beard spotlight. I know you were a finalist for Best Chef Midwest for Hai Hai, I think in 2019 and 2020. And you were a semifinalist back in 2018. It's got to feel pretty good to be back here again.

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Yeah, absolutely. It does. I'm super honored to be back. And yeah, we'll see what happens. [LAUGHS]

**INTERVIEWER:** Tell folks who don't understand how big a deal this is, what about the attention that one gets from being nominated?

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Well, I guess it's a big deal in the food industry, or in the restaurant industry, just to be, I don't know, I guess recognized by your peers. And obviously, we run our restaurant. We don't do it for awards.

But it is absolutely a nice acknowledgment to have, for me and our entire team, who work so hard all the time. So I think that-- and, obviously, we get busier because of it, which is awesome, especially when people are visiting from out of town. It's always nice to have that recognition.

**INTERVIEWER:** So let's talk food. Which foods do you most like to prepare? What brings you joy when you're there in the kitchen?

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Oh, gosh. I love cooking all of our Southeast Asian food. I love to explore. I guess, as far as lunch goes, if that's what we're asking about, I also try to have things that aren't too time-consuming to make.

So for lunch today, I made myself some turkey larb, or laab, which is a Thai or Lao sort of meat salad. So you take ground turkey, for example, because I'm trying to be healthy. Because a lot of the times, chefs don't eat the healthiest because we love food, and we go out, and we consume tons of butter. But when I'm home, I try to keep it a little bit light.

So for a good lunchtime snack, I do ground turkey and then mix it up with some fish sauce, some lime juice, lots of herbs, some toasted rice powder, a lot of chilies for mine. If I'm making some for my husband, Birk, maybe a little less chilies. But then we end up eating that kind of as a lettuce wrap or with some like cucumber or raw cabbage scoops-- just whatever's laying around in the house.

And then if I have some aromatics, like some ginger, lemongrass, lime leaf, then I throw all that in. But sometimes I don't have that stuff, and I just improvise. So that's what I love to eat for lunch. That's kind of light, protein-filled. I can get through the rest of my day without needing a nap.

**INTERVIEWER:** [LAUGHS] So tell me the story behind the Thai meat salad. Is it a family recipe?

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** No, it's not really a family recipe. My family's Vietnamese. But it's just one of those really good things that's just simple. It's one of my favorite foods because it kind of hits all of these notes of sour, savory, fresh, lots of herbs.

And it's just one of my favorite foods ever. And you can do a lot of different things laab style. You could do an omelet laab and replace the turkey for just an omelet that you make that's cut up. You can do, obviously, tofu or different meats. But it's just a nice, refreshing, tasty, and, if you want it to be spicy, very spicy and flavorful snack or lunch.

**INTERVIEWER:** Sounds great. Oh, my gosh. Say, what's the rest of your day looking like?

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Well, today, it's Monday, so we're closed. So I'm just doing some work at home and not at the restaurants today, necessarily. It's nice to be closed on Mondays so that we know that something's not going to break or that we can fix something, but yeah, just working at home, being a pencil pusher.

**INTERVIEWER:** Now, the final awards are going to be announced June 5, I believe. Are you going to be at the awards ceremony, staying home, or what are you going to do?

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Oh, gosh, I guess it depends if I make it to the finalist cut, which the shortlist, I think, is announced next week at some point.

**INTERVIEWER:** See, I'm already assuming. I'm assuming you're going to be a finalist, then, by saying that.

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Oh, wow.

**INTERVIEWER:** There you go.

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** I hope that you are clairvoyant, and I hope that's real. So depending on if I make it to the final cut, then hopefully, I'll be in Chicago having a lot of fun. I mean, the James Beard Awards are just an amazing fun time.

And I got to go one year. But then in 2020, of course, because of the pandemic, it ended up getting canceled. But I get to just hang out and meet amazing peers who are so inspirational to me and kind of fangirl on some of my favorite chefs. So it's a lot of fun.

**INTERVIEWER:** Well, I tell you--

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Hopefully, I'll be there doing that. Otherwise, I'll probably be at home, watching and cheering on my friends.

**INTERVIEWER:** I hope you will be there at the finalist-- as a finalist. Christina, thanks for telling us what's for lunch. And I hope you have a good rest of the day.

**CHRISTINA NGUYEN:** Absolutely. You, too. Thanks so much.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you. Christina Nguyen. She's the chef and co-owner of Hai Hai and Hola Arepa.