

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Gia Vang and Yia Vang on 'Hmonglish,' Iron Chef and leaving KARE 11**  
**01G5MBV3CC357DFZM5VT8HB8K6**

CATHY WURZER: This is Minnesota Now on MPR News. I'm Cathy Wurzer. We're going to launch a new segment here on the show, notable Minnesota-based podcasts you'll want to check out. Here's one that caught our attention.

**YIA VANG:** I'm Yia Vang.

**GIA VANG:** And I'm Gia Vang.

**YIA VANG AND** And you're listening to *Hmonglish*.

**GIA VANG:**

**GIA VANG:** *Hmonglish* is a podcast that explores the intersection of Hmong and American culture.

**YIA VANG:** We lived our entire lives processing what it means to be Hmong-American. And with this show, we hope to dive even deeper.

**GIA VANG:** We want to create a space for us to explore our dual heritage while also educating the populace on Hmong culture with the help of guest and other members of our community.

**CATHY WURZER:** Yia Vang is a James Beard nominated chef based in Minneapolis known for Union Hmong Kitchen. Gia Vang is a news anchor and journalist, most recently at KARE 11 in Minneapolis. And I'm so excited that they're both here with me right now. Yia and Gia, welcome.

**YIA VANG:** Hello.

**GIA VANG:** Thanks for having us, Cathy.

**CATHY WURZER:** I'm glad you're with us. OK, let's talk about this podcast. Now, you say you've both been thinking about doing this show for a while. Who got the ball rolling on this? Tell me about those first conversations.

**GIA VANG:** Really we had a lunch date. I think, Yia, we had pho in Midway. And we were talking. And Yia and I were just talking. We got to just really sharing stories about growing up and what it was like to grow up Hmong and Hmong-American. And then Yia kind of took that conversation and went with it.

**YIA VANG:** Yeah, I mean, I met Matt, who's our producer from Gleam Tower. So Matt and I did a bunch of little projects together. And we had this little podcast called *White On Rice*. And Matt came on the podcast. I sat down with Matt, had lunch, and I'm like, hey, man, I have an idea.

And I threw it out to him. And he got really excited. And then I was actually talking about having Gia as the first guest on there. And then halfway through Matt, as a great producer would do, is like why don't she host it with you? And I'm like, oh yeah, thanks, dude. I think that's a great idea.

So the word Hmonglish, where we get that word from is this idea that as Hmong kids growing up, we had to speak Hmong to our parents. But then there were words and concepts that we just didn't understand. So for example, like how do you say computer in Hmong? There's no word for computer. Or if there is, it's a long phrase.

Or even like the word Netflix, right? There's no way of explaining what Netflix is. Netflix is actually just part of the Hmong language now. YouTube is part of the Hmong language. So we jokingly just called it, oh, that's Hmonglish. It's also the way that this third culture works.

When you have the Hmong culture. And then you have the Western culture. And then people like me and Gia that we kind of fall in that middle where we straddle both cultures. But Gia and I, we would talk about this stuff all the time. And I really felt like I had this like soulmate, you know? And I'm trying to suss out all this stuff.

And secondly, Gia is just so cool. And she's so like trendy and awesome. And that was the other part.

**GIA VANG:** OK, OK, you can stop.

**CATHY WURZER:** Fan club, that's good. I like that. Let's talk about the challenges of this third culture, as you've said. How difficult has it been to navigate this?

**GIA VANG:** Growing up, Yia is a refugee himself. I grew up as a daughter of refugees. Our parents were really just trying to survive. And so it really is a world in which we had to navigate this world of going to school, and learning English, and learning how to be American on our own. Well, when we went home, we were taught Hmong.

And our parents are very still traditional in a lot of ways. And so we were kind of like, ooh, this is a challenge. Where do I land really? And I think for Yia and I, we talk about this on the podcast, but we both had kind of departed from our Hmongness and found ways back to it. And this is another way that we're coming back to it.

**CATHY WURZER:** Have you felt more free to do that, Gia, in that you're in area of media that is your judged by your looks, and people can be pretty harsh, and you tend to-- maybe I'm speaking for myself here to some level-- you don't want to be yourself. You think you have to be something else.

**GIA VANG:** When I first got into this industry, and I tell this story a lot, I thought you had to look a perfect way to be an anchor or reporter. You had to talk a certain way. And you couldn't really show that personality or show, in my case, my Asianness or my Hmongness. I didn't want people to feel uncomfortable around me. I wanted them to feel like they could talk to me.

But now, as I've learned, being myself is really the best way for people to feel like they can trust you and they can talk to you.

**CATHY WURZER:** So, Yia, you also shared some pretty personal stuff in the podcast. Did you feel when you were a kid that you just didn't fit in with your white friends? And how did you deal with that?

**YIA VANG:** The worst thing ever is during roll call. And they just butcher your name. And everybody kind of giggles and looks around. But it didn't hit me until later, I think in high school, where I'm like this stinks. I don't want this.

But I think as a kid you're just like, well, I guess this is what all kids go through, right. But I remember coming home, it's like I can't really talk to my parents about it. Because they would just be like, don't worry about that. Just focus on school.

**CATHY WURZER:** You've got this great show. Have you had fun talking about the culture and the history of Hmong people? How have you have you done that?

**GIA VANG:** I would say absolutely. I mean, I think our first episode with Lee Pao Xiong, who is a professor and the Director of the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University here-- Yia and I were just like, oh my God, we had no idea about so many things about our own culture. And so that was really cool but also super fun to learn about.

**CATHY** What's been the reaction?

**WURZER:**

**YIA VANG:** It's been incredible. Because it's just-- what I love about this show is it does twofold. One, it connects all of us Hmong kids together. I love the fact that there are non-Hmong people listening in. And for them, it's like I never knew that.

**GIA VANG:** People have been really just feeling like they resonate with it in that we've gotten messages from parents who say, I listened to this today. I was in tears. I am going to listen with my child tonight and my children tonight.

And that's really what we're hoping to do too, is make sure that the next generation hears what we're talking about. Because this is also their culture. And so then to just be the bridge of storytelling for them, so they understand where they come from, that's also really important.

**CATHY** So before you guys go, of course, you've got some big news, both of you, to talk about in addition to this podcast.

**WURZER:** Yia, not only are you James Beard nominated chef. You're going to be on the Netflix reboot of Iron Chef, is that right, that premieres tonight?

**YIA VANG:** Yeah. Yeah. It actually literally-- Yeah, so it just dropped like this morning.

**CATHY** What?

**WURZER:**

**YIA VANG:** It's been really amazing. My mom was so excited. I didn't realize this. My sister called me. My mom was so excited. Literally, this morning she woke up and asked my sister to put it on. And she actually took pictures alongside with the screen to show everyone.

So mom was super pumped. She's just like-- but it's been a blessing. It was really cool just to be able to do-- when we talked to the producers when we were invited to come on as a competitor, I said, hey, man, I want to do Hmong food.

I understand you guys might have little things here and there. And you want us to direct whatever. But I just said, I want to do Hmong food. And whatever the secret ingredient comes through that door, we're going to do Hmong food. So they were like, yep, we're totally down. Let's do it. And we got a chance to really showcase that. And it was really fun. It felt--

**CATHY** I'm so happy to hear that. And of course, Gia, off air you and I were talking about your big announcement that you're leaving KARE. I think Friday's your last day. My heart is broken. Because I love you. I love watching you. But I know you're going off to a whole big chapter in your life. Good for you. How are you feeling about it?

**GIA VANG:** You know, Cathy, it's been hard. It was a really tough decision. And I've said this to many people. And they know that. And I've been very public about it on my social media. But it was not an easy decision. The loss of community here, especially the Hmong community, is really tough for me.

My dad lives here. My cousins I grew up with live here. But it's not just that. It's that this pocket of the world, the Twin Cities, is so unique to the Hmong community. And I think that nobody-- if you're not in the Hmong community, you might not understand how unique it is. But it is really, really special.

And so I think I've just built a lot of sisterhood here and a lot of friendships. And I think it's ancestral in me to want to be close to my people. That's what we've always done as a people. If you listen to the podcast, we've always been a collective. We've always wanted to stay together.

And so this has been really tough to leave a community that is so vibrant and really robust. And I have been so lucky and grateful to be a part of for the last three years. So it's a little bit of grieving. And I'm waiting for the part where I can get excited.

**CATHY** OK.

**WURZER:**

**YIA VANG:** Gia has really changed my life. I admire her. And she's going out there kicking doors down. And it's one of those things that's, for me, sometimes I feel alone in a lot of this. But then you watch someone, you know I watch someone like Gia. And I'm like, yep, I got someone. I got someone who will back me up.

**GIA VANG:** Oh gosh, Cathy, it's like-- I'm sure Cathy is like, well, dude, you too. And that's what I'm thinking.

**CATHY** Exactly.

**WURZER:**

**GIA VANG:** I'm like, dude, you too.

**CATHY** No kidding. That's exactly what I'm thinking. For goodness sakes, Yia, you guys are both amazing. And I really appreciate your time, that you took time, to talk with us, really. And all the best to both of you.

**WURZER:**

**GIA VANG:** Thank you, Cathy. Thanks for having us. And thanks for wanting to talk about this.

**CATHY** Yia Vang is a James Beard nominated chef based in Minneapolis known for Union Hmong Kitchen. Gia Vang is a news anchor. She's a journalist most recently at KARE 11 in Minneapolis. You can find the *Hmonglish* podcast on Spotify and Apple Podcasts, and on Instagram @hmonglishpod.

**WURZER:**