

FOOD

Focused on food, flavors and the future

Local couple blends heritage and hustle in the booming pop-up food scene



Jessette Kalsi works on cooking lumpia as husband, Richie, serves a customer in the Love Lumpia pop-up during the Farmers Market at Kaiser in Vacaville. PHOTOS BY ROBIN MILLER — THE REPORTER



Richie Kalsi serves a customer at Love Lumpia's pop-tent during a recent Farmers Market at Kaiser in Vacaville.

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Jessette Kalsi scoops generous spoonfuls of a savory blend — meat, vegetables, spices, and sauces — and places it onto a lumpia wrapper. With practiced hands, she folds the bottom edge and begins to roll, sealing the wrapper with a touch of moisture.

Carefully, she lowers the freshly wrapped lumpia into hot oil alongside three others. Within minutes, they emerge golden brown, crispy, and irresistible. She places them into a to-go container and walks to the front counter of their pop-up tent, where her husband, Richie Kalsi, helps finish the packaging before handing the order to a waiting customer.

It's a labor of love — literally.

Their business, Love Lumpia, is more than just a name. It's a reflection of their passion and a dream in motion. The couple hopes to one day open a brick-and-mortar restaurant where they can share their love for this Filipino staple — and other recipes — with the entire community.

For now, their pop-up is a launchpad, a way to connect with locals, test what resonates on their fusion menu, and build a loyal following — one delicious lumpia at a time.

That's the key to pop-up restaurants, a growing culinary trend, offering temporary dining experiences in unconventional locations, allowing chefs to experiment and test new concepts before potentially opening a permanent establishment.

For chefs and hopeful restaurateurs, they are platform to experiment and showcase their creativity without the financial risk and commitment of opening a permanent restaurant. They can test new concepts, refine dishes, and gauge customer reactions, all while building buzz and a loyal following.

“Long term we would love to open a restaurant but I've seen people open restaurants and the close soon after,” says Jessette. “They think if I just get it going, people will come and maybe they have no restaurant background and it fails.”

The Kalsis' dream will be built on market research and marketing as well as good food, says Richie.

Before Love Lumpia came to life, Jessette and Richie were already building a life rooted in creativity and ambition.

Richie spent years in marketing and business, helping grow several successful businesses across Southern California. But deep down, he was always a storyteller. That calling eventually led him to the Bay Area, where he pursued a degree in creative writing.

Meanwhile, Jessette had long nurtured a love for cooking. She found joy in blending flavors, recreating family recipes, and experimenting in the kitchen. With Richie's encouragement, she took the leap and enrolled in culinary school.

“When I proposed to her, I told her we would only get married if she finished her cooking degree,” he says with a smile. She did it and that led her to become a sous chef and eventually a head chef at esteemed restaurants in Napa Valley and beyond.

Yet despite her success, something was missing. She wanted more freedom — to experiment with bold new flavors but also create stylish plates. She and Richie agreed that the traditional foods served in restaurants lacked style.

And it's a tough industry, even today, for women, Jessette says.

“You work ten times harder and get paid 10 times less.”

Together, they saw the perfect opportunity to strike out on their own. Richie's background in business development and marketing paired naturally with Jessette's culinary talent. What started as a simple idea — just a conversation — quickly blossomed into Love Lumpia: a shared dream to bring Filipino flavors to a broader audience, on their own terms.

And not just to celebrate tradition, but to blend it boldly with global influences — Italian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Korean, French — and whatever else inspires them next.

Richie's creative writing skills come in to play in their menu descriptions like: "Naughty Pancit Lumpia — With flavors this risqué you'll want to eat this lumpia in secret. But tell a friend and share, share share," or "Voodoo Wagyu Beef Lumpia — Imagine a lumpia so rich in flavor that it casts a spell on you."

But make no mistake — their creativity is rooted in something deeply personal.

Jessette first learned to make lumpia not in culinary school, but at her grandmother's side.

"Grandma would see all of us kids running around and say, 'Come on, we're going to roll lumpia.' I was good at it. The others would eventually run off, but I was the last one standing," she recalls, smiling. "Even now, when I'm rolling, it brings me back to those days. Grandma was like my second mom — it's like she's right there with me."

Today, Jessette's inspiration comes from her husband and their young son. "They tell me what tastes good, what needs adjusting," she says with a laugh.

You can find their little black tent at the Kaiser Permanente farmers markets — Tuesdays in Vacaville, Fridays in Vallejo — and at the Saturday Vacaville Farmers Market at Creekwalk. Sometimes they pop up at In-Shape in Browns Valley. They also cater, bringing trays of golden lumpia to school programs, celebrations, and family parties across the region.

For Richie and Jessette, starting Love Lumpia wasn't just about launching a business — it was about building a legacy. Something rooted in heritage, fueled by love, and flavored by imagination.