



Eric Hattori selling his products from the Piko Street Kitchen truck in Daley Plaza

Eric Hattori is a fourth generation Japanese-Thai American who, alongside his cousin, has for the past two years been serving some of the most delicious Pan-Asian cuisine from his [Piko Street Kitchen food truck](#). He was recently interviewed by Elliott Bambrough for [WGN's Chicago's Best](#), where he discussed the appeal of his food and showed Elliott how to make the Bulgogi Ribeye Bao, an item from the menu. Part of what draws customers in is the recipes for Piko's marinades that have been passed down for three generations and the mixture of this authentic taste in a modern way. He explains to me that another important factor for their business is placing high value on customer service in a similar way to what customers experience in Japan. No matter how many times a customer visits, he strives to provide the same experience and to have the same taste in all products. He currently offers tofu teriyaki and hopes to expand the menu one day to include popular Japanese street foods like okonomiyaki or takoyaki. You can follow the [Piko Truck's Twitter](#) to find where it will stop next to try the home-style cooking for yourself!

AK: Can you tell me a little about your background, Eric? What made you decide to start a food truck?

EH: I really kind of got my passion and inspiration from my parents. I always grew up making meals at home and then I also helped them when they had owned two restaurants in the city. Their first one was a Korean restaurant called Pusan House in Rogers Park. The second was when Pusan House expanded to the Wrigleyville area and was simply called Pan Asia. Both my cousin and I worked for them growing up. My cousin was the one who first approached me wanting to start a food truck because it was kind of a new food industry in Chicago. We have traveled a lot, when we travel we strictly

travel for food I would say, and hence have had a lot of great food throughout the world. When you eat food, you really learn about a culture. We both have the same love of food and we want to share our Asian culture with other people in Chicago so we decided together to try a truck to see how it goes.



Eric and I during the interview

AK: In what way have your Japanese and Thai cultures influenced the foods you create?

AH: Our menu is very diverse and Pan Asian because of how we cooked since we were young. The lemongrass chicken is more Thai-based while the teriyaki tofu is more Japanese. We always grew up with those types of foods in our upbringings and we kind of molded those flavors into our meats. So what you get are those really traditional and authentic flavors in the marinades and recipes we use and then we spin it into something you see every day like tacos, baos, buns and bowls. But you still get that genuine taste in a more modern way. We get the meats from an Asian grocery store by the Argyle area because they are more specialty items.

AK: What are the differences between Japanese cuisine and other Asian cuisines?

EH: I think it depends on where you are eating it. Japan is very intentional and detailed to the point that they are searching for perfection in what they create. When I go to Thailand, I barely go to restaurants because I look for the street food being handmade and sold directly for people right there. So, from what I've experienced, Japan is very focused on being the best. This is not to say Thailand and other countries cuisines are not also seeking ways to be the best, it is just in a much more casual setting.

In America, we are seeing less traditional Japanese or Thai cuisine and more of a fusion of sorts. That is great, but there should always be that classic Japanese cuisine as well. All I know is that when I went to Japan, it was the best food experience of my life. Everywhere you go, from 7-11 to a high-end restaurant, you can get great food.

We are starting to see more companies coming over from Japan because people here are finally becoming more conscious, selective and aware of what they eat. A lot has to do with more travel and the internet. Japanese food companies and chain restaurants are opening where they would not have 10-15 years ago.



The Piko Street Kitchen food truck

AK: Do you think that is the same even being applied to Japanese street food?

EH: Yes, I would say Japanese street food is a little more developed than other street food you have. There is almost an art form in how to make food and a beauty in the presentation. Takoyaki for instance is deep fried and not like other street food people from America are used to, but it is challenging to cook just right.

I definitely love Japanese street food....from okonomiyaki to takoyaki and yakisoba! Right now, I believe there is a real push to bring Japanese street food to the Chicagoland. You see a lot more Izakaya restaurants opening up and a lot more menus with takoyaki which I think is great. Personally though I think there is something about having a street vendor in a small tent or car make it for you right there that you see a lot in Asia at night markets but this atmosphere is difficult to achieve here.

In the future, I would love to make these types of Japanese street foods for our menu and I think the truck would be a great "test kitchen" for it because we could easily see what people like and do not like.

AK: Have your Japanese roots effected your values or business style?

EH: When I was in Japan I remember everyone being very proper and courteous no matter the encounter and now being the face of our truck I feel we have the same obligation to our customers. What will set us apart from our competitors besides our authentic flavors created using our marinade recipes for our meats is our customer service. We want to create an environment where people are getting the same service whether it's their first or twelfth time. We try to go the extra mile to make sure our customers are satisfied because eating should be a happy experience and if done correctly, something you will have a lasting memory of!



Eric and I during the interview

AK: Is there anything you as an American want to teach people here about Japan and/or Asia through your food?

EH: First and foremost, Asian food is very complex! There are a lot of ingredients used to create a specific taste and then you have to understand the cooking process as well to create that balance of flavor and consistency. Besides that I would like to teach through our food the idea of trying new things. I see a lot of people who are unfamiliar with pork belly, but once I begin to describe it to them as bacon, but cut and cooked differently, their eyes light up!

AK: What is the meaning behind your logo and name?

EH: Piko is in honor of my parents and where my passion really grew. Pi is for my mom's name, Pia and ko is for my dad's which is Hiko. For the logo we wanted something relatable and Asian-themed that we could keep using going forward. Buddha in general are inviting and tranquil and that is what we came up with. Red in Asian culture is symbolic and represents power. In the restaurant business, it is a grind and the color is kind of a constant reminder to keep going doing what you love. It is not just a hobby, there is so much labor and wear and tear on your body in this business. You are constantly moving things here and there and you are always on your feet especially in the summer. We take advantage of the nice weather by working 6 or 7 days a week during the season. In the winter, it becomes quite a bit more relaxed.

AK: What are your future goals?

EH: Right now, it is to keep the truck going and making the best food that we can. We want to maintain high standards and consistency of our products. And making sure we always have great customer service. Maybe one day we will open a restaurant, we have been going about two years now.



Eric and I during the interview

I met Eric two times in preparation for this interview. The first was to visit the truck in Daley Plaza to take pictures of him with customers lining up outside as well as to sample some of his delicious culinary creations. During our second encounter, Eric had just finished working the

lunchtime rush around Adams and Wacker, where many food trucks gather, and we walked to a quieter location by the Chicago River near the Monroe Street Bridge. The amount of energy and enthusiasm that Eric had during both occasions was very memorable and his passion for sharing Asian food culture was apparent.

Owning and operating a food truck business is not an endeavor that can be handled by everyone. There are limited areas where trucks can sell and on top of the limitations outlined in law, the financial costs of buying a truck, decorating it and maintaining it as well as costs associated with fees, inspections and obtaining licenses must be considered. Despite these difficulties, Eric enjoys his work immensely and it is clear that he intends to work in the food truck and/or restaurant business for the long-term. It is inspiring to know someone so driven in his pursuit to make and sell what he loves.

I wish him the best and learned quite a bit about food trucks in the process!