



Inside a Starry Kitchen: An interview with Button Mash's Nguyen Tran

Features

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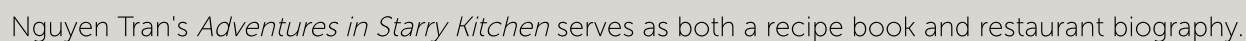
by [Eron Rauch](#)

Restaurateurs Nguyen and Thi Tran fused a lifelong love affair with games and pan-Asian comfort food to make their hit Los Angeles-based bar arcade.



What do Japanese role-playing games and Vietnamese catfish have in common? A lot, if you're Los Angeles restaurant entrepreneur Nguyen Tran and his wife, Thi Tran, executive chef of Asian fusion/bar arcade Button Mash. Our intrepid Eron Rauch sought Nguyen out for some tasty insights on how videogames and comfort food go hand-in-hand.

ZAM: Before we actually dig in and talk videogames, I think it would be great to give our readers kind of a general rundown of what Starry Kitchen is and some of the mayhem you've caused.



Nguyen Tran: Eight years ago, my wife and I started an illegal and underground restaurant in the back of our apartment that, out of happenstance became the number one Asian Fusion

restaurant listing in all of Los Angeles on Yelp. We got caught by the health department six months in. We didn't give a shit. We ran it for another three months. All we were doing was serving pan-Asian comfort food and it exploded it into a real restaurant.

Then we opened a lunch restaurant in downtown when it was the taco-truck-slash-food-truck era—The rise of Kogi and Roy Choi and everyone like that. We left there and we started serving chili crab in the Fashion District. We left there and were part of the Chinatown revival.

We quit [the restaurant industry] completely about two and a half years ago after a failed Kickstarter. Then we came back later that year through Uber Eats. Two months after that a top-secret project we had been working on for three years finally came to fruition, which was Button Mash—a bar-arcade Asian restaurant.

Now we have a book [[*Adventures in Starry Kitchen*](#)]. It is a very nutty rollercoaster story.

One of the things that really struck me in reading through the new cookbook is how openly you talked about video games and JRPGs. You even referenced *Final Fantasy* and “leveling up” to describe what was going on when you first traveled to Vietnam and had clay pot catfish in your mom's hometown. What led you to use *Final Fantasy* as a metaphor to describe one of most your most formative culinary experiences?

As a kid, I loved JRPGs more than anything. At that point in time I was playing *Dragon Warrior* and the original *Final Fantasy* on the NES. You would grind, level up, and you would get stronger. For me, there was something that translates to life. You gain more experience. You get stronger at what you do.

That's exactly what happened with Starry Kitchen. We would just keep on going and all of a sudden we got stronger. You start taking on bigger tasks, more ambitious projects, and end up building a cast of people, friends, and employees around you. How can it not be like a JRPG?

"I've been taught Vietnamese culture and to be Vietnamese all my life, [but] it didn't make sense to me until I went to Vietnam and had that dish."

That all started with caramelized catfish?

Look, I grew up in Dallas, Texas, right, and I didn't have shit to do but play videogames, at least in my head. I worked in Office Max. I went to school, I wasn't popular. Going to Vietnam and having the caramelized catfish was actual level one and I didn't realize the amount of work to increase to that level.

I've been taught Vietnamese culture and to be Vietnamese all my life, [but] it didn't make sense to me until I went to Vietnam and had that dish. I really rejected [that identity] most of my life. That dish was the culmination of everything that I learned from that point. Remember the movie *The Last Dragon*, when the kid gets the glow? It's like that. It's like holy shit, I've achieved the next level and I didn't even realize that I was so close to it.

Were JRPGs your favorite kinds of games to play?

It started with some old PC RPGs like *Wizardry*, *Ultima*, and *Rogue*. I still love *Rogue*. It's just a smiley face and you hack around that letters that represent different monsters and level up. I'm so nostalgic about that.

Then when I came across *Dragon Warrior* for the first time, I'm like god, this is like a colorful version of *Rogue*. It's the same kind of system. You level up, you get equipment and you find hidden stuff. Then I played the original *Final Fantasy* demo at the first Nintendo World Championships. It was in Dallas at the state fair park. I remember my mind was blown away.



Nguyen Tran in a banana suit. (Photo: Bao Minh Nguyen.)

Did any of your other friends play videogames?

I got the NES after everyone else did. I was a poor kid and it took me four years to convince my parents to get one. You know it's funny because I'm a retro game collector by happenstance. I have 600 video games and they're pretty pristine. It was because I grew up poor and I didn't understand why anyone would throw away the boxes or instruction manuals. All that was very precious and it still is. That's why my NES box still has the original price tag. It looks new. People are like, "Did you just buy that on Ebay?" No, I just took it out of my closet.

As far as the RPGs [were concerned], all my friends were playing more action games. At that time what was really popular was the home port of *Double Dragon*. *Kid Icarus*. And *Mario 3* was out by that time. I couldn't share RPGs with anyone.

"I'm a retro game collector by happenstance... I didn't understand why anyone would throw away the boxes or instruction manuals. All that was very precious and it still is."

Did you have any favorite foods or snacks that were your jam to pair with your RPGs?

Oh my god. Chips of any kind. Usually Cool Ranch Doritos or Cheetos. I hate to play into the stereotype, but lots of Mountain Dew.

What are some of the crown jewels of your videogame collection that you've picked up over the years?

Oh, shit. I'll tell you what I recently picked up in Japan three months ago. We're now in a really expensive age of retro game collecting, and I think I own almost everything I want, but I didn't realize there was a *Monster World* collection for the PS2. I've been fascinated with *Monster World* and *Wonder Boy* and I remember playing on the Sega Master System.

Oh! *Panzer Dragoon Saga*! I bought that when it first came out. The thing about it is that honestly, *Final Fantasy 6* is the most influential JRPG for me, but *Panzer Dragoon Saga* is almost immaculate, it is so amazing as an experience. There's nothing like it I've ever played.

Part of the reason I bring up your game collection is that in [Adventures in Starry Kitchen](#) you mentioned that it was part of what drew you and Jordan Weiss together to create Button Mash. How did you and Jordan first connect your love of videogames?

Jordan's wife used to eat at my original lunch restaurant in Bunker Hill in downtown Los Angeles. He wrote me this six page email about how they love our food and he has this [outrageous] idea to open a bar-arcade-Asian-restaurant. He went on and on about the games.

This is indicative of everything I've done, at least my career in Starry Kitchen: I was like, "Okay, let's do it."

He was like "What? That's it?"

I was like "Yeah, man, I can obviously see your passion for it and you don't know this but I have 600 video games at home so fuck it, let's do this."

The décor and game selection of Button Mash is like classic 80s. There's wood paneling and wacky prints on everything. But instead of soggy pizza and frozen chicken fingers, Starry Kitchen made a menu that have a heavy southeast Asian influence. How did you and Jordan end up navigating that particular pairing?

I give Jordan the credit for a lot of that. He started going to all the different [bar arcades] around the country. They noticed A) Most of them were just bars, and B) If they had food, it was always shitty.

Thinking about that, it was like, why don't we go with something that is actually quality? But let's go in the opposite direction: let's give them Asian food. A lot of people come for the nostalgia of the games, but they don't always all play them. They really just want to be around it. It acts as really great decoration.

Most people had an expectation of shitty food or no food and when we beat that, people started coming back more often and more regularly and bringing friends because you know, sometimes inexpensive good food plays a factor. It was meant to be different. That's basically it.



Starry Kitchen's signature Singaporean chile crab dish. (Photo: Bao Minh Nguyen.)

Does Thi [Nguyen's wife and the powerhouse chef of Starry Kitchen] play video games at all?

She does not play too many videogames, but she likes puzzle games. She's very frustrated that she's never been able to beat me at *Tetris Attack* on Super Nintendo. At Button Mash though, *Galaga*'s her game!

What was her role in crafting the menu at Button Mash?

We worked together to develop it, but my wife is the executive chef and instigator, so she developed the entire menu. I would review it with her, but I took a backseat to her creation of food that "made sense to a crowd that would go to a bar arcade and not necessarily expect there to be good food."

"Most people had an expectation of shitty food or no food [at a bar arcade] and when we beat that, people started coming back more often."

The expectation is people will sit down, they'll order, and they'll go back and forth between eating and playing videogames. You don't want to give people too heavy of food because then they just get comatose and they're like "My God, I wanted to play a game but now I just want to pass out."

That was one of kind of things that intrigued me when I heard about Starry Kitchen partnering with a bar arcade—how would one eat chili crab and not gum up the *X-Men* cabinet?

That's the reason why we don't serve it at Button Mash—Because even though it's our second-most coveted dish, if someone's playing *X-Men* and holding a crab claw that's saucy, that doesn't make any sense to eat that and play the game. Those are two totally different experiences.



Nguyen and Thi Tran. (Photo: Allen J. Schaben, [Los Angeles Times](#).)

You've already mentioned some games that have been the most meaningful to you. I want to play a quick association game where you to pair these videogames with Starry Kitchen dishes. So, first off, let's jump in with *Dragon Quest*.

Ginger chicken wings.

Why would you pair that with the chicken wings?

The simple answer is my wife is actually born in the year of the dragon and her favorite thing that we serve are the ginger chicken wings.

How about *Final Fantasy 6*?

I would say the chili crab. Because it's one of the things that you should take your time to really enjoy and understand all the nuances of it and for me, that's what *Final Fantasy* is about: it's a story and the history and everything in it. The crab, it's easy to jump into it, but it used to take us two to three days to make that sauce. We'd bring down the crab, we'd then stew the crab in the sauce, then we'd make these beignets, there's all these complex elements to it that were just really beautiful and should be appreciated individually before stuffing your face with it.

It also looks like a *Final Fantasy* monster.

Oh yeah! I didn't even think about that. It could be. I would totally throw a Meteo at it.

Okay—last one. *Panzer Dragoon Saga*?

Oh my god, that's a really ... you actually caught me on the spot on that one. Oh! The "Crack" Krab Cakes. It's because they're pretty rare because we haven't served them in like six years and people will still ask me about them. There's one ingredient that's incredibly hard to find so even though the recipe is in the book now, they're kind of like a unicorn and I feel like *Panzer Dragoon Saga* is a unicorn for many people.

If you're in downtown Los Angeles this weekend, you can say hi to Nguyen and Thi Tran yourself at [Button Mash](#). They also deliver.

[Editor's note (6/30/2017): since running this article, we received a letter from the founders of "the original Barcade™" objecting to the use of their trademark as a generic term. We think there's sufficient evidence the term is genericized (and also, that trademark law in the United States is some bullshit), but since this seems like a really petty thing to lawyer up about, we have complied with their request and edited all references to "barcade™" in this article to the un-portmanteau'd "bar arcade." Cheers.]

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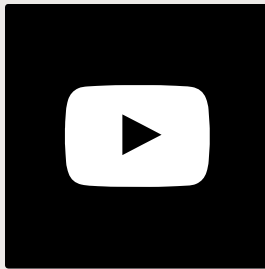
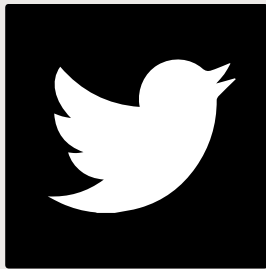
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