



KEANA PARKER

**CHARLIE IN CHARGE** Darryl and Carolyn Rudolph are at the helm Charlie Hong Kong. (Right) Who wouldn't want to dig into that fresh dish?

# Hooked on Charlie

WHY CHARLIE HONG KONG REMAINS A FAVORITE CULINARY HANGOUT **BY TARA FATEMI WALKER**

**C**harlie Hong Kong is more than an affordable place to get Asian-inspired healthy street food. The benefits for your body and soul begin from the moment you walk up to the order window and are greeted by three words painted on the wall: Respect, Kindness, and Gratitude. These are the founding principles of owners Carolyn and Darryl "Rudy" Rudolph, who believe they are integral to the way they treat their staff and their customers.

"By eating here you are saying yes to your body, yes to the environment, and yes to community," says Carolyn.

The Rudolphs are committed to giving customers inexpensive healthy food. "Organic and affordable normally don't go together," she adds. "We buy in bulk to do that, and work hard developing long-term relationships with our vendors." Most of the produce is from local Lakeside Organic Gardens.

Everything is cooked fresh every day and the healthiest vegetables are used—kale, red and green chard, mustard greens, cabbage, broccoli, and bok choy, which make up CHK's organic vegetable medley. About two and half cups of the medley is featured in the dishes here. That adds up to 400-500 pounds of vegetables the staff chops daily.

The most popular dishes among customers are Spicy Dan's Peanut Delight and Gado Gado (both feature the veggie medley) and Teriyaki Chicken Rice Bowl. Carolyn points out that selected dishes feature healthy ingredients including "coconut milk, with lots of vitamins and important minerals, and anti-viral properties" and "turmeric, which has anti-inflammatory properties and has been referred to as a natural wonder because of its many benefits."

All of CHK's signature dishes are vegan, but there are also many dishes available with sustainable seafood or hor-

mone- and antibiotic-free meat. CHK features free-range Rocky's Chicken from Petaluma. "Before deciding to use their meat, we visited the farm and plant and witnessed their process from beginning to end," says Carolyn. "We try to have personal relationships with all our vendors."

A special dish on last summer's menu was Garlic Basil Noodles, featuring fresh basil from local Blue Heron Farms. Carolyn often decides on seasonal specials after getting inspired at local farmers markets. An early autumn special was Spicy Green Beans.

At one point Carolyn was a vegetarian, although she isn't anymore. "I grew up in the Midwest, and food didn't have 'real taste.' In my twenties I traveled through Europe and Asia and got to taste simple, 'real food and tastes' and experience farmers markets," she says. "I fell in love with feeding people simple food.

"I raised my family that way; everywhere we would go, even when we went camping, I'd have to ask 'where's the local health food store, where's the farmers market?' My kids would roll their eyes."

Today, her kids are grown and some of them are staff members at Charlie Hong Kong; clearly their mother's passion for healthy food has had a positive effect.

One of the sons took the passion a step further and dressed up as a carrot for a recent event, this summer's "Golden Carrot Awards." These awards from Santa Cruz County's Go for Health! Collaborative recognize restaurants that have made exceptional efforts to provide high standards in nutrition and food safety and provide healthy food options to their patrons. In 2011, CHK earned the top honor: "Ultimate Golden Carrot." Carolyn was gratified by the recognition of how hard the restaurant strives to provide healthy, delicious food.

In addition to organic ingredients, there are many facets of CHK that display a commitment to sustainability and quality. When the Rudolphs bought the restaurant from the previous owner in 2000, one of the first things they did is switch from cooking with canola oil to rice bran oil. Rice bran oil is high in antioxidants, which makes it very heart healthy. Since then, they have worked hard to ensure that all ingredients are first-rate, and in recent years they have added many eco-conscious practices, which led Save Our Shores to name the restaurant "Business of the Year" in 2011.

As of Earth Day 2011, the restaurant no longer uses plastic bags; it stopped carrying plastic water bottles in 2010. CHK also uses compostable utensils. For to-go orders, re-usable fabric totes are available for purchase (or customers can take food home with just the box it comes in). "I see organic food and the environment woven together," Carolyn says. "I care about sustainability."

An active food advocate, Carolyn signed up CHK to be a part of Food Day (Oct. 24), a national event pushing for healthy, affordable food produced in sustainable, humane ways. "We participate in these kinds of events as much as possible, whether it's donating a percentage of sales to an organization or giving in other ways," she says.

The Rudolphs' collaboration on inexpensive, nourishing food has helped make Charlie Hong Kong a mainstay in Santa Cruz's food scene. "This is a space to come and nurture yourself, and be in community with other people," Carolyn says.

*Charlie Hong Kong, 1141 Soquel Ave., Santa Cruz, 426-5664, charliehongkong.com.*