



2021 Stand Against Racism Content Curator Irene Li



Irene Li

Co-Founder, *Mei Mei Restaurant Group*

Irene Li (she/hers) opened Mei Mei Restaurant in Boston in 2013 and has spent the years since driving the industry forward in ethical sourcing and fair and transparent employment practices. A Boston native and Cornell University graduate, Irene has worked on farms, taught in prisons, and watched perhaps hundreds of hours of YouTube videos on food and cooking. Mei Mei has been featured by Food & Wine, Eater Boston & National, The New York Times, People, Bon Appetit, The Boston Globe and more. She is an Eater Young Gun, Zagat 30 Under 30, and Forbes 30 Under 30 winner, and six-time James Beard Foundation Rising Star Chef semi-finalist.

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, she has pivoted her business to serve hospital workers with hot meals and groceries and to provide low-cost staples and household essentials to other food industry workers. She co-founded Project Restore Us (projectrestore.us) whose mission is to serve working immigrant families by raising funds and paying restaurants to package and deliver culturally relevant grocery staples - including rice, beans, maseca, and produce -- straight to their doors in the neighborhoods hit hardest by the pandemic. Since June 2020, PRU has delivered over 400,000 pounds of groceries to over 1500 families.

She serves on the boards of Project Bread, the Haley House, and Lovin' Spoonfuls. Currently, she is serving as the Program Manager for Commonwealth Kitchen's Restaurant Resiliency Initiative, putting her experience to work in supporting BIPOC restaurant owners in the City of Boston.

Social media handles: @meimeiboston and @ireneshiangli on Twitter and Instagram

Discussion Content

Robin Wall Kimmerer speaking at the Bioneers Conference

(Video)

Brief intro:

In college, I learned about Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Indigenous ways of knowing for the first time. I love the outdoors, and have for years been enchanted by Robin Wall Kimmerer's work. Her expertise in bryology, the study of moss, inspired Elizabeth Gilbert's "Signature of All Things," and has been widely celebrated as we examine our relationships to nature in response to modern climate change. In addition to the magic of nature, I learned how to express that there is more than one way to know things, to understand truth. Indigenous and non-Western epistemologies - ways of knowing - have helped open my mind to the future's possibilities and the potential for a changed world. In this talk, Kimmerer discusses Indigenous practices around land, the history of Indigenous peoples in North America, and how concepts of reciprocity between humans, and between humans and nature, might guide our lives even at the height of extractive capitalism. Undoing centuries of violence against Indigenous peoples is a critical piece of social justice work, but there is more than reparations to be found in exploring Indigenous cultures and wisdom. TEK affirms that there are ways of knowing - and therefore, of speaking, decision-making, and acting - that exist outside of the modern, binaristic, Western scientific mode. I chose to uplift Kimmerer's work in hopes that it will enlighten, inspire, and empower us as we fight for a more just and moral society.

Irene Li's Discussion Questions

1. Do you know which Indigenous peoples' ancestral lands you live on, work on, and/or own? Can you identify words from Indigenous languages that you use in everyday conversation? If not, you can visit native-land.ca to begin your learning process.
2. Kimmerer shares that a key element of respect and recognition is to know a person or thing's name. Yet, most of us can name over 100 corporate logos and less than 10 plants. Can you think of a time when your name was not known to others, and how that felt? Or a time when, upon learning someone or something's name, your sense or connection to them or it somehow changed?

How might those experiences relate to your current work toward social justice?

3. Kimmerer contrasts Indigenous understandings of land (as healer, as ancestral connection, as home, as a moral responsibility) with modern, Western concepts of land as property, resources, etc. In your life, are there (pieces of) lands that carry these meanings for you? Where do these meanings come from – your cultural heritage, your family, and/or your educational training? How could these meanings shift if we prioritized reciprocity over the generation of capital?