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## Night + Market + art = Le Maximum, Venice's newest gallery



Chef Kris Yenbamroong, owner of Night + Market, stands beside his 1979 Buick Regal outside his new gallery space in Venice, Le Maximum. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

By JESSE PEARSON

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Behind the façade of a rundown used-car dealership on Lincoln Boulevard sits a new gallery called Le Maximum. Its proprietor is Kris Yenbamroong, the chef-owner who,

along with his wife, Sarah, oversees the [Night + Market](#) restaurants in West Hollywood, Silver Lake and Venice. (Editor's note: The author and Yenbamroong are friends.)

Their spots are known for Thai food that has been called authentic and playful; some of the best natural-wine lists in town; and a candy-colored, energizing sort of chaos in their dining rooms.



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When Del Mar Auto moved out of the space next door to [Night + Market Sahn](#) last summer, Yenbamroong grabbed the Venice property right away. Since then, he's turned down multiple requests to rent it out.

"I just had a feeling about it," he says. "And I wanted to invest in the neighborhood. I'm in it for the long haul here." On Saturday, with the opening of its inaugural show, the gallery will officially become Yenbamroong's first nonculinary venture.

In its first incarnation, the original Night + Market in West Hollywood was meant to be an art space-cum-eating place and hangout spot serving only a smattering of food — pork toro, chicken wings, crispy rice salad — almost as an afterthought. Capitalist realities came knocking quickly, and Yenbamroong had to sideline his gallerist aspirations and focus on cooking.

Before he reinvented himself as a chef, Yenbamroong lived in New York City, where he studied film and photography at NYU. He worked as a photo assistant to artist Richard Kern, who has been known since the 1980s for his movies and pictures that star a rotating cast of beautiful, strong, nude women. (Kern remembers Yenbamroong as a

“super reliable assistant — the kind who could predict what I needed before I’d ask for it.”)

“Formally and technically, he’s controlled,” Yenbamroong says of Kern. “But when you see his work, it feels so natural. He taught me about creating something that can come off as casual but actually be carefully orchestrated.”

This is how it works at his restaurants, he says, and it will weave its way into Le Maximum too. “We’re very rigorous about creating a party.”



Chef Kris Yenbamroong grabbed the property next door to his restaurant Night + Market Sahm when it became vacant last summer. He’s turned it into an art gallery, Le Maximum. “I wanted to invest in the neighborhood. I’m in it for the long haul here,” he said. (Jay L. Clendenin / Los Angeles Times)

Yenbamroong’s childhood friend Liam Considine, an art historian and critic, is Le Maximum’s director. The name, Considine says, “has the sense of humor and delusion

you need to test the limits of an idea. What is on the other side of the maximum? Failure and doom most likely. You have to be open to that to make something good.

“This summer I asked him if he ever thought of showing art in his restaurants like his father used to,” Considine said, “and Kris mentioned he had this empty space next to Sahm.”

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There are indeed some uncanny parallels between the paths of Yenbamroong and his father, Prakas. After Prakas Yenbamroong opened the West Hollywood Thai mainstay Talesai in 1982 and ran it throughout the heady ‘80s, the siren call of an economic boom led him back to Thailand, where he worked as a real estate developer and an art dealer, placing work by Thai artists in newly constructed homes.

But after the boom comes the crash, and the 1997 Asian financial crisis spurred Prakas back to L.A., where he refocused on the restaurant business. Today, he’s proud to see his son following in his footsteps. “It feels surreal that my only son is reliving the life that I once enjoyed in living the American dream,” he says. “It also makes me feel that Kris’ life and mine are a little more connected.”

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Considine co-curated “Blue Flowers,” the gallery’s inaugural exhibition, with artist Becca Mann. The show is a vibrant menagerie both brainy and dazzling, stretching from the psychedelic figuration of painter Tom Allen to the multimedia artist Cauleen Smith’s Super 8 still lifes that grapple with art history.

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Le Maximum is stepping into the storied lineage of food-and-art crossovers like Gordon Matta-Clark's legendary SoHo restaurant FOOD, which served the artists of downtown New York in the early 1970s, and the work of Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose performances typically incorporate cooking. (Tiravanija now owns Unclebrother, a restaurant-gallery hybrid, also in a former car dealership, in upstate New York.)

More recently, artist Michelle Jane Lee has been hosting vegan pop-up dinners in Los Angeles; art duo Lazy Mom has made unsettling food-centric assemblages a cornerstone of their work; and artist-chef DeVonn Francis launched Yardy, a creative studio in New York that situates Jamaican cuisine in performance-dinner hybrid events.

Here in L.A., the curators of “Blue Flowers,” both native Angelenos, have been thinking about the gallery’s Venice setting.

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“Obviously there has been a massive amount of change in the neighborhood in recent years,” Mann says. “But that stretch of Lincoln Boulevard has always been filled with small, independently owned businesses — auto shops, an aquarium store, a tattoo parlor, a lawnmower repair shop. The gallery also connects back to Venice’s history as a place where artists made some of the most distinctive local art of the 20th century.”

Even as Le Maximum opens, Kris Yenbamroong is pondering future projects, like adding his take on a fine-dining restaurant to the Night + Market roster.

“I find myself gravitating toward more formal settings, anything that’s kind of swankier, lately,” he says. And Le Maximum does feel like a bridge between the delicious cacophony of the three Night + Markets and the potential for a more traditional, sophisticated Yenbamroong venture.

“More and more I think Night + Market and Le Maximum can encompass so many new things,” Yenbamroong says. “I can’t wait to see where it all takes us.”

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*Le Maximum, 2525 Lincoln Blvd., Venice, [lemaximumvenice.com](http://lemaximumvenice.com)*

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