

"It's (Not) Fine" | PUNCH

punchdrink.com (<https://punchdrink.com/articles/its-not-fine-daijoubu-cocktail-pop-up/>)
· by Punch

When bartenders Caer Maiko and Sharon Yeung created their Austin (<https://punchdrink.com/articles/dispatches-austin-hospitality-industry-covid/>)-based cocktail pop-up, Daijoubu (<https://daijoubupopup.com/konbini>), in early 2019, they didn't have social justice in mind. Maiko, who is half-Japanese, and Yeung, who is Chinese, simply wanted to create a space where they could be unapologetically “super Asian.”

Last fall, Daijoubu, a common Japanese expression that most closely translates to “it's fine,” launched a statewide tour in a retrofitted mini-school bus named Bruce, commandeering cocktail bars in Houston (Tongue-Cut Sparrow, Johnny's Gold Brick), Dallas (Gung Ho), Fort Worth (The Usual) and San Antonio (Still Golden Social House), as well as Austin's Nickel City and The Roosevelt Room, where Yeung is bar manager. They served their signature culinary-minded cocktails like the Kung Fu Flip (baijiu, amontillado sherry, cream, fish sauce caramel, egg and nori furikake) and the Japanese gin (<https://punchdrink.com/articles/best-essential-japanese-gin-suntory-roku-nikka-coffey/>)- and shochu-spiked Hello Motherf*cker (<https://punchdrink.com/recipes/hello-motherfcker/>), a riff on the Adios Motherfucker served in a Hello Kitty glass. “All of the music, decorations and visual media is Asian, and the cocktails highlight ingredients from that part of the world,” explains Maiko. “The pop-ups are a way for us to express our cultural identity.”

Since early May, however, Daijoubu has pivoted its mission, first raising funds for civil and human rights organization, Asian Americans Advancing Justice (<https://www.advancingjustice-aaajc.org/>) (AAAJ) and related non-profits, then, more recently, directing funds to The East Oakland Collective (<https://www.eastoaklandcollective.com/>) (EOC), a Black-led advocacy group providing meals for those in need during the pandemic.

Growing up in California as first-generation Asian Americans, Maiko and Yeung were largely insulated from overt racism. But in recent months, even before the coronavirus was documented in the United States, Maiko and Yeung began to experience covert microaggressions. Maiko cites uneasy looks and being given a wide berth when passing others on the street as examples. “You start questioning whether you even deserve to be in a space,” she explains. “This pandemic is the biggest racial problem Asian Americans have faced in decades; we’ve never collectively been viewed as a virus before.”

Yeung experienced similar encounters during a shopping trip for essentials before the shelter-in-place order took effect in March. “People were getting out of line when they saw me,” she says. “I’ve never felt so uncomfortable in my life; it’s the first time I’ve felt fearful because of the color of my skin.”

After Yeung learned that Texas has the third-highest number of documented COVID-19-related hate crimes toward Asian Americans, she and Maiko were compelled to use Daijoubu as a way to raise funds for social justice groups. “There are very limited resources for victims to seek help,” says Yeung. “It’s also culturally ingrained in most first-generation Asian Americans to just do our jobs, do them well and never make waves.”

By May, Daijoubu was selling \$5 stickers featuring Japanese and Chinese calligraphy done by Maiko and Yeung’s mothers, with the words, “It’s Not Fine: Stand Up to Racism.” The proceeds were donated to Austin’s Minamoto Foods, an Asian specialty and seafood distributor that has been supplying furloughed food and beverage workers with meals. Currently, sales benefit the San

Francisco Chinatown Community Development Center, which provides to-go meals, masks and sanitizer for seniors and families in public housing. “We never intended for Daijoubu to be a political thing,” says Maiko. “Then again, creating a space for our community *is* inherently a political statement.”

During quarantine, Daijoubu has partnered with Asian-owned businesses in Austin and Houston, selling cocktail kits and boozy boba teas to-go, from which partial proceeds were donated to AAAJ; a bottled cocktail collaboration with San Jose’s Paper Plane (<https://punchdrink.com/articles/tip-your-bartender-paper-plane-san-jose/>) also benefited the organization. “We’ve had an overwhelming amount of support from the bar community and brands, and positive feedback from being a voice that puts a spotlight on resources,” says Yeung.

Following the death of George Floyd, the duo began shifting resources to support the Black Lives Matter movement. “Watching [police officer] Tou Thao do nothing as his fellow officer murdered Floyd made us take a long look at the relationship between our communities,” says Maiko. “Asian Americans benefited hugely from the civil rights movement, but we’ve hurt Black communities by perpetuating the model minority myth and thus, anti-Blackness.”

In response, Daijoubu has vowed to work on becoming better allies. Every sticker sale going to Chinatown CDC is matched by Maiko and Yeung and donated to the EOC. With the postponement of Daijoubu’s California pop-up tour scheduled for this fall, the women have also donated a portion of their travel fund to the EOC, says Maiko: “We have to do more, and we have to do better.”

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