

## FEATURES

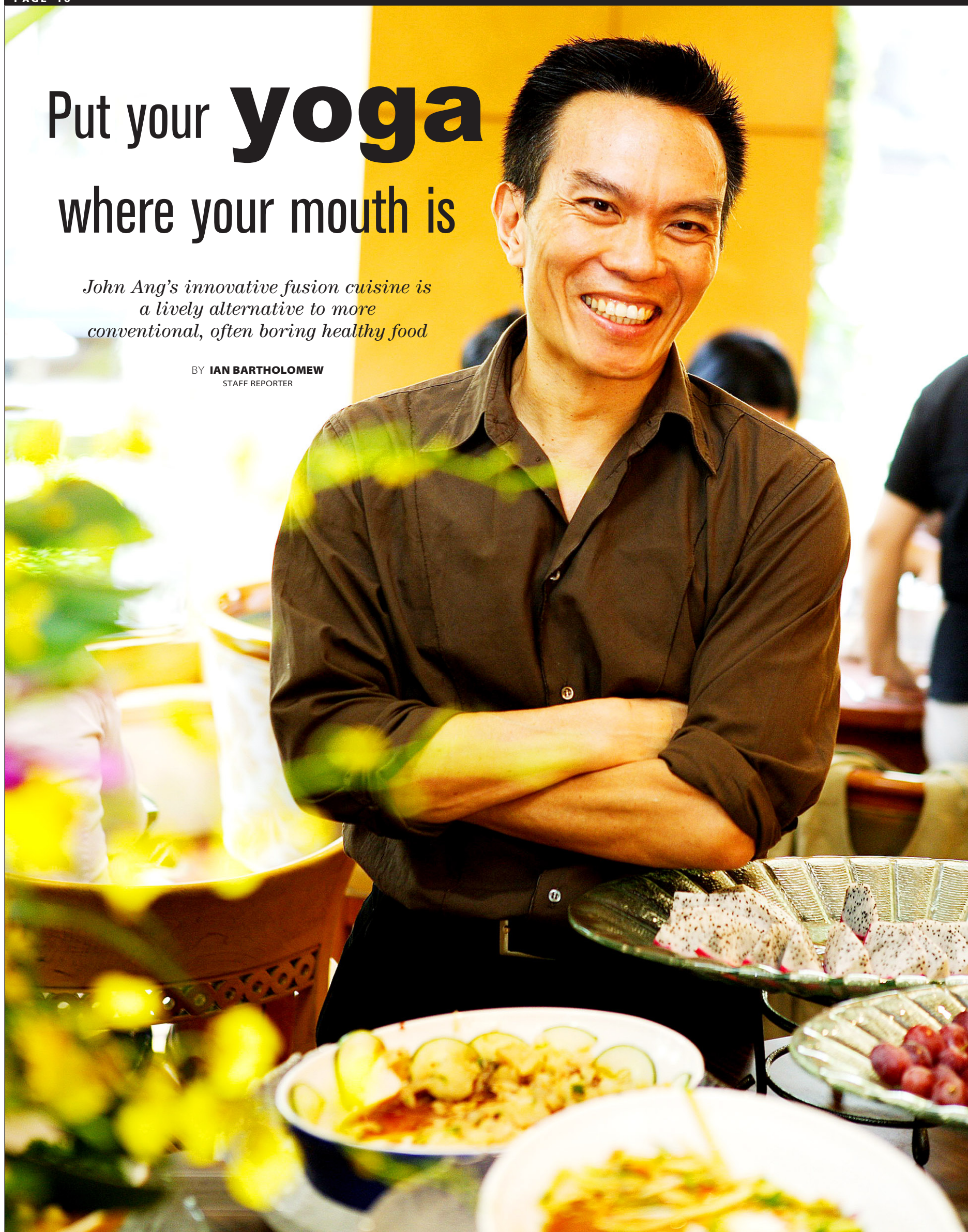
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# Put your **yoga** where your mouth is

*John Ang's innovative fusion cuisine is a lively alternative to more conventional, often boring healthy food*

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER



**J**ohn Ang (洪光明), who runs a successful yoga studio in Taipei's trendy East District (東區), is one of many instructors who have translated an interest in developing a healthy lifestyle into a successful business. But he is unique for drawing on his multicultural background and charisma to create what might become the next big thing: yoga cuisine.

Ang, who was born in the US to Singaporean parents, gave up a career in dealing antiques to fully engage in a life of contemplation. But his business instincts have proved tenacious and, apart from establishing his own yoga studio, he has developed his own brand of fusion cuisine that combines Southeast Asian spices, Chinese and Ayurvedic dietary theory, and contemporary European culinary ideas to create healthy and flavorful dishes that he hopes will broaden the culinary horizons of Taiwanese while also making them more healthy; or at least more health conscious. The Ahimsa Kitchen, which Ang recently started as an extension of his yoga studio, is open to the public and offers a menu of his own creations.

His fare can now also be found at the Aqua Lounge of the Ambassador Hotel in Taipei City, which has commissioned Ang to produce new dishes every week for a buffet that targets office workers, especially women, looking for a healthy alternative to the usual oily lunch box or office canteen offerings.

Ahimsa chef David Wu (吳東興) said that the fundamentals of the cuisine were based on innovation and home cooking.

Ang likes strong flavors and bold presentation, as demonstrated by the watercress salad with sweet and sour peanut and lemongrass dressing that I tasted at Ahimsa last week. There was nothing shy



about this little number, and the tamarind and lemongrass complemented the tartness of the watercress.

A similar dish served at the Aqua Lounge, watercress salad with pecan, fig and Parmesan, also proved unusual, especially in its pairing of Chinese figs with Italian cheese. Other dishes such as Japanese asparagus wrapped in mochi and served with a wasabi sauce or Moroccan fruit and vegetable cigars (composed of a mixture of cranberries



and capers) are all calculated to intrigue both the eye and palate.

"In Taiwan, usually, the moment food becomes healthy it also becomes boring. It's either boiled or steamed," said Ang, who says he wants to foster the excitement of eating.

The process of introducing his cuisine to a high street hotel has not been without its problems, Ang said. "Slowly I adjust. In the beginning I could not use too many spices. When I started using

With unusual creations such as Moroccan fruit and vegetable cigars, made from a combination of cranberries and capers, far left, and mochi used as a wrap for asparagus, John Ang's brand of fusion cuisine is healthful and exciting.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF AMBASSADOR HOTEL

cumin, all the staff rejected my food. They didn't like it, so they thought the customers wouldn't like it either. It was really tough," he said.

Ang, whose dishes provide a number of innovative options amid the smorgasbord of healthy food presented at the Aqua Lounge, hopes that through this mainstream outlet, he can introduce more people to his alternative to more conventional, less exciting healthy food.

Through meditation, "you realize that you are two people," said Ang. "In cooking too, there are two people involved: there is the ego that tastes the food, and the real self that tastes the food."

Although the food Ang serves at Ahimsa and Aqua Lounge is fully vegetarian, he believes that it is his aspirations rather than the food itself that defines yoga cuisine. "A move from red to white meat is yoga cuisine. Becoming vegetarian is yoga cuisine. Although regular vegetables have lots of pesticides, and maybe even preservatives and trans fats, it is your desire to improve that makes what you eat yoga cuisine," Ang said.

If you go:

Aqua Lounge, The Ambassador Hotel, 63, Zhongshan N Rd Sec 2, Taipei City (台北市中山北路二段63號). Call (02) 2100-2100 X2186 for reservations.

Ahimsa, 2F, 10, Ln 101, Da-an Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市大安路一段101巷10號2樓). Call (02) 8773-3640 for reservations.

[ SOCIETY ]

## Australia's 'Big Things' go from kitsch to art

*The large models that were commissioned by rural communities to put themselves on the map, are now being recognized as works of folk art and heritage-listed*

BY NEIL SANDS  
AFP, DADSWELLS BRIDGE, AUSTRALIA

Long dismissed as tourist kitsch, Australia's "Big Things" — giant models of everything from koalas to pineapples — are now being heritage-listed and recognized as works of folk art.

The gaudy structures, commissioned since the 1960s by rural towns keen to put themselves on the map, have gathered such a following they are even being compared to Egypt's pyramids.

"They're like our pyramids, our temples," respected artist Reg Mombassa said.

"Because European settlement was so recent, Australia doesn't have historic old buildings like in other countries and the Big Things are a way of saying 'we're here, this is our place.'"

Australia has more than 150 Big Things, including the Big Banana at Coffs Harbour — which is about 13m long — the Big Trout at Adaminaby and the Big Gumboot, an oversized Wellington boot that adorns Australia's wettest town, Tully in Queensland.

Among the more unusual examples are the Giant Worm, celebrating the oversize invertebrates found near Bass, the Big Cigar in Churchill and Humpty Doo's Big Boxing Crocodile.

Mombassa, internationally renowned for his designs for surfware brand Mambo, painted his favorite Big Things in 2007 for a range of stamps commissioned by Australia Post.

He said he first fell in love with them when traveling around the countryside in a crowded mini-bus in the 1970s and 1980s with his band Mental As Anything, best known for 1985's *Live It Up*.

"You'd be on these long, long trips and they'd break up the tedium," he said.

He described their tackiness as part of their charm, calling them a typically extroverted Australian phenomenon.

"Some of them are pretty crappy," he said. "But others are folk art, definitely."

"You look at the Big Merino (a sheep in Goulburn weighing almost 100 tonnes) where they've recreated the texture of the wool in concrete. Or the Golden Guitar, that's a beautiful-looking guitar."

The Big Things' highest accolade came earlier this year when the Queensland government placed the Big Pineapple on its heritage register, ranking it among the state's top historic buildings and cultural sites.

The Queensland Heritage Council said the 16m high fiberglass fruit had attracted millions of visitors since it opened in 1971.

"[It] is important in demonstrating the development of agritourism and roadside attractions in Queensland," the council said.

There have also been lovingly photographed coffee-table books dedicated to Big Things, and Web sites where overseas tourists express a mixture of admiration and bemusement at the giant structures.

Julie-Anne and Rob McPherson fell under the spell of the Big Things late last year, when they bought the Giant Koala at Dadswells Bridge in Victoria.

Rob was working as an incident controller on Melbourne's highways at the time, an often stressful job investigating car crashes, and the couple wanted to escape the rat race.

"We were looking to maybe buy a caravan park or something," Rob said. "But I stopped in here, found the place was for sale and just fell in love with it."

He said friends and family were initially skeptical when told they were buying the 14m bronze and fiberglass koala, which comes with 1.4 hectares of land and an adjoining shop and cafe.

The pair are in the process of revamping the koala, nicknamed Karla, installing red lights in her eyes to give her an imposing night-time appearance and applying a lick of paint to make her markings more distinctive.

In recent months, Karla has been featured in comedian Paul Hogan's yet-to-be-released feature film *Charlie and Boots* and a national advertising campaign for a telephone company.

Rob said the public's fascination with Big Things showed no sign of waning.

"We get 100 cars a day coming here and buses making the trip specially, bringing in 50 people at a time," he said.

"There's just something special that appeals people, it's a sense of fun or something, I don't know."



A giant statue of Australian outlaw Ned Kelly looms over Glenrowan, Victoria, the location of his final stand. PHOTO: AFP