

BUSINESS INSIDER

SMALL BUSINESS

It's tough to run a restaurant in LA. This chef is giving it a shot — in only 200 square feet.

By [Kathleen Elkins](#)



Box Chicken operates out of a 200-square-foot kitchen space in West Los Angeles. Shelby Moore for BI

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- Box Chicken opened its ghost kitchen, serving Japanese soul food, in Los Angeles in 2024.
- Chef Noah Clark sees the ghost kitchen as a launchpad to a brick-and-mortar space.
- This article is part of "[Made to Order](#)," a series highlighting the business strategies driving today's food industry.

Noah Clark grew up eating California rolls, collard greens, and chicken katsu — a multiethnic cuisine that his Japanese American mother, Reiko Clark, and aunt, Maggie Antoine, developed in their hometown of Los Angeles.

"We both ended up marrying Black guys — and raising these Blackanese babies," Reiko told Business Insider. "They are literally Japanese and African American, so they were raised on what we call Japanese soul food."

The sisters brought their home-cooked food to the South in the late 1990s when they moved to Atlanta and opened their first restaurant. Clark was 8 at the time and earned an allowance — "\$20 every two weeks," he recalled — helping around the kitchen.

When he was old enough to take on more responsibility, his aunt Maggie, who developed the recipes — including the heart of the menu, the Japanese chicken tender — assumed the role of "yoda" in the kitchen, he said. "She called me Luke all the time."

The restaurant expanded to multiple locations throughout Atlanta, but after a messy split with their business partner and main investor, the family brought their fast-casual concept back to Los Angeles in 2024 when they launched Box Chicken out of a small space in CloudKitchens.



Noah Clark, the head chef of Box Chicken, and his mother, Reiko, who leads the branding. Shelby Moore for BI

Tell me about the decision to relocate from Atlanta and open shop in Los Angeles.

Noah Clark: We were thinking about doing a completely different concept because I was ready to move on.

Reiko Clark: We were burned. We were really hurt.

Noah: I was probably the most scarred from it out of all my siblings because when I graduated, it was my life. I dedicated everything to it, I was working 80 hours a week, so I did not want to reopen. I was ready to move on from it.

What changed your mind?

Noah: We were having these weekly family meetings about what we wanted to do and my sister was like, "I feel like this is stupid. Why are we talking about opening another concept?" I said, "If you guys want to [do chicken], that's cool, but I'm out." I was very stern.

After everyone left the meeting, one of my other aunts was like, "Noah, can I talk to you?" And she just said, "You'd be a fool not taking advantage of this chicken tender. It's a gift from God. I've seen how people react to it. It's something that you should not pass up on."

Reiko: That's all he had to hear: "It's a gift from God."

Why did you choose to start as a ghost kitchen?

Noah: When we were case-studying places we saw Main Chick. We looked up their story and they started as a ghost kitchen, and they have like eight locations now.

We knew we didn't want to have crazy up-front costs. We knew once people catch wind of what we have, it's just a matter of time. But I did realize, probably two weeks into being open, that we need a brick-and-mortar because customer service is such an important part of the business, and just being able to sit down and eat it fresh is also important.

Did you design your space or did the ghost kitchen come outfitted?

Noah: The only things this place came with were the sinks you see right there and that one silver shelf.

Reiko: And the hood. They provide the hood, and that's a big-ticket item.

Noah: Everything else we had to bring in, which is great for us because we can do anything and customize it completely. Opening up multiple in Atlanta, we got really good at efficiency and laying out kitchens.



After Clark boxes and bags an order, a robot delivers it to a smart locker where a delivery driver will pick it up. Shelby Moore for BI

Noah: The rent's not crazy. We were looking at a brick-and-mortar on Sawtelle and the rent was like 16 grand or something, maybe even higher. It's like, how are these places surviving? And they're not. They're always closing. So, it is definitely cheaper.

Reiko: And they include your internet, your electricity, water, gas — all utilities are included, so that helped.

Tell me more about what you miss about the brick-and-mortar.

Reiko: We're used to being in the front of house — talking to people, chatting them up, and really sales pitching every day.

Noah: Talking people *out of* certain items when it's their first time. On our menu I have the option of doing no sauce. This one always gets on my nerves. In Atlanta, we would always be like, "No, get a sauce. The chicken tender isn't tender if you don't put sauce on it." I can't have that conversation.

Reiko: Can't convince them.

Noah: The way I try to convince them, I put next to the 'No Sauce' option: "Don't do it, trust me!" And they still don't pick a sauce, and it drives me crazy because they're not going to have the experience I want them to have for their first time.



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- Crazy Hot +\$0.00
- No Sauce (This means no flavor! Don't do it, trust me! If it's your first time, please pick a sauce.) +\$0.00

Box Chicken

Noah: I have regulars, but I only know them by what I see on the ticket. I can't actually talk to them. I was leaving notes for a while just to people I saw all the time, like one guy who ordered three times in two days.

How many orders do you get a day?

Noah: A slow day now for us is 15; 20 to 30 is a good day; when we have catering, sometimes it's 40 to 50. Our goal is for 30 to 40 to be normal, and we'll get there eventually.

We've seen a bump recently, but the fires really hurt us. The holidays always hurt no matter what because people are saving and not going out to eat. December is always slower.

Our slowest day of the week is Saturday. People are going out to eat. They're not really ordering in anymore.

Reiko: The thought is, because COVID is over, I'm going out. Why would I want to eat at home on the weekends? So that's why we need to be in a brick and mortar.



Box Chicken started operating in LA in 2024. Shelby Moore for BI

Noah, what does a typical day look like for you?

Noah: I get here around 9:30 to 10:30, depending on what I have to do. If we have catering sometimes we'll be here at like 6:30 or 7 in the morning, depending on how big it is.

I get here, turn the fires on, start getting through my prep list and what I need to do. I try to get the big things out of the way before the orders start coming in.

I have yet to see a serious rush, which I am looking forward to. I love it when it's like that. I miss the stressful environment. I miss seeing a line. I miss seeing all the tickets printed. It was really fun when we all were drowning because we were all suffering together.

I'm looking forward to when we get back to that — when I have a line and we're calling out and I'm hearing "heard" or "behind." That word right there. I do miss that.

What's the future of Box Chicken?

Noah: The main goal for us is to have a brick-and-mortar. I still like the concept of ghost kitchens; I just think it's made for restaurants that are already established and that want to get their food out further.

Starbucks, for example, was having trouble with Uber Eats and DoorDash because they were getting flooded with all their orders, so they pivoted, partnered with CloudKitchens, specifically, and stopped letting their locations accept Uber Eats and DoorDash. It actually increased their sales because they were able to make more coffee in-store. So, for something like that, it's perfect. The Starbucks CloudKitchens are probably killing it, but their main locations are doing better because they don't have as much on their plate and they even take care of their regulars.

I think our future is to have at least one brick-and-mortar and then little [ghost kitchen] satellites.

I would love for us to be known for one location in Los Angeles but be all over the world.