JAST, **2021; 56:91 - 116**
Submitted: 24.03.2021
Accepted: 07.09.2021
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K is for Korean: Manifestations of Culinary Identity and Masculinity in Contemporary Korean American Chef Memoirs

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Abstract

While with the waves of K-Pop, K-Dramas, and K-Beauty products, Korean culture has gained popularity in the U.S., Korean culinary culture does not seem to have a substantial benefit from this visibility since Korean American culinary identity follows a different path. Over the 19th and 20th centuries, Korean American chefs contributed to American foodscape with the traditional food they had prepared at local restaurants, and cookbooks. In the 21st century, the rise of the foodie culture provides a fresh flow through which Korean American chefs have gained visibility in their restaurants, TV shows, and other culinary platforms. Meanwhile, Korean American chefs heva started to publish memoirs as a reflection of their culinary identity. The memoirs provide a broader perspective on transformation of Korean American culinary culture and culinary identity. The chefs, although their approaches to memoir as a genre differ from one another, adopt food memoirs as an expressive medium to reflect not only what they encounter behind the doors of the industrial kitchens but also their requiem for a sense of cultural belonging, individual expression, and culinary subjectivity. Within this framework, this paper concentrates on memoirs written by contemporary Korean American chefs including Roy Choi's *L.A. Son: My Life, My City, My Food* (2013), Edward Lee's *Buttermilk Graffiti* (2018), and David Chang's *Eat a Peach* (2020). The article aims to answer how the contemporary chefs construct their culinary subjectivity in relation to the Korean American culinary culture and the U.S. culinary framework. This work also tries to intrigue how Korean American chefs envision contemporary chef

identity with a specific focus on its intersections with ethnicity and culinary masculinity.

Keywords: Korean American Chefs, Korean American Cuisine, Culinary Identity, Culinary Masculinity, Multicultural Kitchen

Kore'nin K'si: Çağdaş Koreli Amerikalı Şeflerin Anı Kitaplarında Mutfak Kimliği ve Erkekliğin Dışavurumları

Öz

Kore pop müziği, Kore dizileri ve Kore güzellik ürünlerinin yaygınlaşmasıyla, Kore kültürü Amerika'da görünürlük kazanırken, Kore yemekleri bu görünürlükten üst düzeyde fayda sağlamış görünmemektedir. Bunun asıl nedeni, Kore yemek kültürünün kendine has bir çizgide ilerlemesidir. 19. ve 20. yüzyıllarda, Koreli şefler daha çok yerel restoranlarda hazırladıkları geleneksel yemekler ve yemek kitaplarıyla Amerikan yemek kültürüne katkıda bulunmuşlardır. 21. yüzyılda ise yemek kültürüne ivme sağlayan hareketlilikle beraber Koreli şefler, yemekleri, restoranlarıyla TV programları gibi farklı yemek odaklı mecralarda görünürlük kazanmışlardır. Bu süreç içerisinde, Koreli Amerikalı şefler bireysel mutfak kimliklerini yansıttıkları anı kitapları yazmaya başlamıştır. Anı kitaplarında şefler, Koreli Amerikalı mutfak kültürünün ve yemek kimliğinin dönüşümüne farklı bir çerçeveden bakmışlardır. Bir tür olarak anı kitaplarına yaklaşımları farklılık gösterse de şefler yemek odaklı anı kitaplarını yalnızca endüstriyel mutfak kapılarının ardında yaşananları değil, aynı zamanda kültürel aidiyeti, bireyselliğin dışa vurumunu ve mutfak kimliklerini yansıttıkları bir araç olarak görmüşlerdir. Bu makale çağdaş Koreli Amerikalı şefler olan; Roy Choi'nin L.A. *Son: My Life, My City, My Food* (2013), Edward Lee'nin *Buttermilk Graffiti* (2018), ve David Chang'in *Eat a Peach* (2020) başlıklı anı kitaplarına odaklanmıştır. Bu makale, çağdaş şeflerin mutfak kimliğini, Koreli Amerikalı yemek kültürü ve Amerikan yemek kültürü bağlamında nasıl kurduğunu incelemeyi amaçlar. Bu çalışma aynı zamanda, Koreli Amerikalı şeflerin çağdaş şef kimliğini ve bu kimliğin etnik kimlik ve mutfaktaki erkeklikle ilişkilerini nasıl tahayyül ettiklerini irdeler.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Koreli Amerikalı Şefler, Koreli Amerikalı Yemek Kültürü, Mutfak Kimliği, Mutfaktaki Erkeklik, Çokkültürlü Mutfak

Introduction

Food memoirs have been one of the central foci of cultural studies recently and received considerable critical attention. In his essay, Arley Avaikan basically defines contemporary food memoirs as narratives that are "more systematically autobiographical, chronicling the authors' lives through cooking and eating" (279). With a similar attitude, Barbara Frey Waxman interprets food memoirs as personal narratives that connect food to "cultural identity, ethnic community, family and cross-cultural experiences" (363). Accordingly, in the contemporary period, Korean American chefs have published memoirs through which they manifest their subjective experience of cooking in relation to Korean culinary culture. The memoirs exhibit the significance of food as a multilayered cultural agent in ethnic communities. Food, more than a basic ailment, functions as a bridge and enables immigrants to preserve a sense of identity and at the same time providing a smooth interaction with the new land and culture. Anita Mannur emphasizes the significance of food as a cultural agent in diaspora cultures. She interprets food: "[…] as a central part of the cultural imagination of diasporic populations, becomes one of the most viable and valuable sites from which to inquire into the richly layered texture of how race is imagined and reinterpreted within the cultural arena, both to affirm and resist notions of home and belonging" ("Food Matters" 8). Accordingly, Korean chefs' memoirs can be explored as rich sites through which chefs find an alternative space for self-expression and present ethnic and gendered aspects of their culinary identities. Yet, each chef's definition of memoir differs from one another like their cooking philosophy and practice.

Born in Korea and grown up in Los Angeles, Roy Choi is one of the most influential Korean American chefs. Choi was aspired to write a memoir to compile his coming-of-age story intertwined with Korean American identity and Los Angeles foodscape. His cookbook-memoir *L.A. Son: My Life, My City, My Food* (2013), starts with the following statement: "I had to write this book. To tell the story of my journey from immigrant to latchkey kid to lowrider to misfit to gambler to a chef answering his calling" (Choi 1). In the memoir, Choi discovers the

central position of food and taste in his life starting from his childhood. This connection has not been lost even through the years of identity confusion, he experienced during his youth years. Choi, in line with the food memoir tradition, narrates his maturing up as a successful chef and finding self-expression through his food. He defines his culinary identity in relation to L.A.; as the city that provides him with the grounds for his culinary identity.

Another Korean American chef, Edward Lee, identifies the Southern and Korean culinary cultures as two components that dominantly define his culinary identity. However, different from Choi's identification with the city, Edward Lee defines his culinary identity by enriching his subjective culinary experience with elements from multicultural American culinary culture. Accordingly, his memoir, *Buttermilk Graffiti* (2018) reflects his culinary philosophy. The chef narrates and records his culinary journeys across the U.S. through which he discovers the alternative culinary histories of chefs on the margins of the American culinary scene. The work is a robust example reflecting the generic hybridity of the memoir genre as Lee blends characteristics of food and travel memoirs. In fact, his cookbook, *Smoke and Pickles* (2013), sets the foundations of Lee's narrative style. The chef introduces his culinary portfolio by narrating his childhood stories as frameworks to present the recipes in each chapter. Likewise, his memoir, has a hybrid structure that compiles multicultural recipes from regional restaurants and distinctive chefs whose names are unheard in the popular American culinary scene. The places Lee discovers range from authentic Uyghur restaurants to family-owned German eateries in the American hinterlands. Each chapter starts with Lee's journey notes that include detailed descriptions of places, food, and cooking philosophies end with recipes corresponding to the theme. The memoir contributes to the acknowledgement of the gastrogeographical diversity of culinary culture in the American landscape.

David Chang, pointed as "the ambassador of Korean cuisine" (Chung 1), recently published a memoir, *Eat a Peach* (2020), which provides a broad spectrum of Chang's personal journey of becoming a celebrity chef and a successful food entrepreneur. Initially, rather than a memoir, Chang started to write a manual for young chefs, which would include leadership and entrepreneurial strategies to start up a business in food sector (Chang vii). However, upon completing his manuscript, his editors announced that his work displays the character-

istics of a memoir that challenged Chang's understanding of the genre: "I was deathly allergic to the word memoir when I started writing this book, adamant that the details of my life don't explain me or Momofuku" (Chang 253). As his memoir draws to a close, Chang believes young chefs may benefit from his memoir as a guidebook. Compared to previous chefs, Chang's memoir does not include recipes that are thematically connected to the stories in each chapter. With such a stylistic twist, the work differs from the food memoir tradition. The chef makes use of generic hybridity of the genre and combines his personal memories with tips for success. The memoir stylistically reflects how Chang fashions his culinary identity from a multidimensional perspective, as a food enthusiast, a high-end chef, and a restaurateur.

In their memoirs, Roy Choi, Edward Lee and David Chang prefer to make use of variant generic aspects of the memoir as a genre and enrich their personal journey with guidelines, recipes, business tips, travel notes as well as pictures and recipes. The generic hybridity of the chef memoirs contributes to the definition of hybrid and multicultural aspects of contemporary chef identities. In the memoirs, the chefs define the contemporary cosmopolitan chef identity in relation to the Korean American culinary culture that at the same time reflects the generational differences.

Korean American Culinary Culture

In the course of history, Asian American cuisine has intertwined with mainstream American cuisine. Among other immigrant culinary cultures, Chinese restaurants, with its historical legacy dating back to 1850s (McLean 3), have long defined the boundaries of what Asian American cuisine means in the United States. Likewise, Japanese restaurants also contribute to the definition of Asian American cuisine with their establishments in the early twentieth century (McLean 14). Eventually, Asian American cuisine has adapted and become part of the mainstream food culture in the U.S. and even more, American interpretation of Asian food has influenced the global understanding of Asian food:

> Over the past couple of decades, American-style Chinese and Japanese food has become a transnational phenomenon, ironically infiltrating the Asian market (its "origin") and catering

> mostly to foreign ex-pats and locals interested in trying American interpretations of Asian food. (Arnold and Tunç 8)

Different from the earlier integrations of Asian cuisines into the mainstream culinary culture, the popularity of Korean cuisine is rising during the 21st century. There are several factors that have contributed to gradual and relatively late integration. To begin with, compared to Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese counterparts, Korean restaurants could not integrate with the mainstream food culture and expand its boundaries nationwide although Korean cuisine was part of the culinary culture in Hawaii, where the first wave of Korean immigrants settled (Chung 1), and in the Koreatowns in Los Angeles which inhabited one third of the Korean population (McLean 24). One of the major reasons for this was culinary nationalism. Food was encoded as a traditional and national aspect of Korean culture for the first generation of immigrants and symbolized the cultural legacy of the homeland. Therefore, Korean immigrants tended to conserve the cultural legacy by keeping loyal to its authentic form in Korea.

The notion of preserving the culture through food has its reflections on Korean American culinary identity as Young highlights; "Authenticity is the Holy Grail for both the producers and consumers of Korean cuisine in the US. The first and most important criterion for vetting a Korean restaurant or a Korean cookbook seems to be authenticity" (114). As a result, Korean restaurants do not intend to target the mainstream culture and remained more local and traditional. Different from Chinese or Japanese restaurants, the Korean restaurants are modestly decorated with ethnic ornaments, offering Korean menus and serving authentic Korean flavors to Korean families (Chung 2). This conservative attitude also manifests itself in the cookbooks that Korean chefs scripted compiling traditional recipes from Korean culinary tradition. In his article concentrating upon the notion of authenticity in Korean American culinary culture, Young evaluates how Korean American have chefs present Korean American food in bilingual cookbooks. The cookbooks first appeared to supply recipes of comfort food to the first-generation Korean Americans and offer "more authentic cooking methods" to preserve and pass the Korean culinary tradition (115). On the other hand, Young touches upon the fact that although the chefs claimed authenticity, the books are "far from being authentically Korean or traditionally Korean" (115). In fact, the food and techniques used inevitably reflect the hybridity of Korean American food

with adaptations of ingredients, cooking methods and visual presentations (122) rather than the Korean traditions as they claim.

As stated by Young, the insistence on the authenticity has been one of the major aspects of Korean American culinary culture that is also visible in Korean American cookbooks. In the 21st century, the chefs started to pursue a new culinary identity through which they can reflect their personal experience as members of the second or third generation Korean American community. In the memoirs, all the three chefs refer to authenticity in relation to the contemporary, cosmopolitan Korean American culinary identity. In *Buttermilk Graffiti*, Edward Lee contributes to discussions of authenticity by defining it as a political agency that hampers culinary progress. Lee observes that the insistence of authenticity draws definite boundaries among culinary cultures in the contemporary U.S. culinary palette. However, this type of restrictions does not reflect the hybridity culinary experience in the United States. Lee believes the word authenticity implies an exclusion of minority cultures:

> The words authenticity and tradition are bandied about a lot in the food world. Authenticity, which we often use when defending our narrow culinary views, can be a hindrance, a means of exclusion, a distortion of history. Whenever a cookbook exhibits the tagline “Authentic recipes from the American South,” I always ask myself, What South are you talking about? Pre-colonial South? Plantation South? Post-colonial? Post–civil rights movement? Paula Deen’s South? The immigrant South? All are part of the complicated history of the South. None can claim a true authenticity. (*BG* 141)

Rather than authenticity that may implicitly suggest discrimination and exclusion of the oppressed groups, Lee prefers to use tradition that stands for the cultural legacy upon which one constructs his/her identity and values passing on these traditions to forthcoming generations as part of family culture. In his own words:

> I always feel conflicted by the notion of authenticity. I am here in Paterson for some version of Peruvian food that is authentic, but what does that mean? In many ways, the food of immigrants is not authentic but frozen in time, reflecting the culinary moment when the wave of immigrants left their homes. This is the food of nos-

talgia. It gives an immigrant population a connection to its home country. (*BG* 3421)

As Lee suggests, in Korean American culture, food has been treated as a strong symbol representing tradition and encapsulating time and place. Therefore, its stability is significant. However, although the insistence on authenticity makes a call for nostalgia, it is a fact that food evolves (Lee, *Buttermilk Graffiti* 621) and adapts in accordance with the immigrant culture. Therefore, the insistence on authenticity hampers the progress. Likewise, Rae Oum Young emphasizes that the insistence on authenticity singularizes the immigrant experience since "authenticity is a subjective experience that is defined by a relationship between a person (or a group of people) and a style of cooking and eating, rather than a quality that is fixed and embedded in foods" (114). Since the notion of authenticity does not encompass the Korean American experience and culinary culture, the chefs started to look for it.

David Chang narrates how he was challenged by the Asian food community with the arguments of authenticity upon opening his first restaurant Momofuku in 2004. Chang, together with his partner, initially aimed to develop a distinctive menu mixing elements from Korean, Mexican, Japanese cuisines, and Asian dining out culture. They believed that would be a way to reflect their culinary experience as members of minority cultures. However, Chang's food was criticized for not being loyal to Asian food traditions by well-known members of Asian American food community:"'The noodles are awful. Nothing like real ramen or any noodles I've had in Asia. If you think you're making Japanese food, I'm sorry, you're sorely mistaken. Actually, I have to ask you: have you ever even been to Japan? How can you charge people for this?' She couldn't stand the loud music or the uncomfortable stools or the unfriendly service, either" (Chang 53-54). In fact, Chang expresses that the woman's view represents customers' reactions Momofuku received during the first few months. What caused this reaction was the culinary philosophy behind the kitchen. Chang believed the food should reflect his personal experience as a Korean American man growing up in America and fuse it with Korean and Asian culture. Chang is not the only chef who is severely blamed for not preserving Asian culinary traditions. Like him, Asian chefs frequently received direct criticism for not serving "authentic" Asian food. Another Korean American chef, Tory Miller had a similar experience upon starting a new Korean-inspired restaurant. Born in Korea and later adopted by

German-American parents, Miller did not, in fact, grow up in a Korean American house where Korean culinary traditions were performed. As Miller expresses, he did not have any connection to Asian food while growing up:

> 'Since I look Asian, people think I can cook all this food like it's in my blood,' he says, 'but I didn't grow up eating this food.' […] 'The Asians come here and judge me all the time,' he continues. 'They tell me it's not authentic. But that's not what I am doing. I am doing my version of Korean food' (Lee*, Buttermilk Graffiti* 4088).

As Miller expresses although he did not have any direct experience with Korean or Asian culinary culture, due to "Asian-look," the community demands him to perform in an assigned role that does not comply with his personal culinary experience. Although it does not reflect his culinary identity, he is expected to build his culinary identity on his racial background and cook traditional and local Asian food.

In the late 20th century, fusion cuisine, as the new food movement, had a great impact on the transformation of the Asian American culinary culture along with other ethnic cuisines. Chef Norman Van Aken, in his foundational article, "Fusion" (1988), contemplates on fusion cuisine as follows:

> I am a chef. My interest and my intent is on diving deeply back down in time to salvage the golden treasures and vibrant calypso flavors of old Key West and fusing them with a contemporary sensibility and an individual personality. The foundation must be the bedrock honesty of Conch, Black, Spanish and Cuban regional cooking. Like myself, other chefs across the globe are finding that there is a combined power in what (to borrow from the jazz vernacular) I now call ... "fusion cooking" (1).

In the article, Van Aken evaluates the restaurants of the time and defines fusion cuisine the hybrid food that successfully reflects the spirit of the time. In its basic definition, fusion cuisine reflects the chefs' tendency to cook by mixing or fusing different ingredients, methods, and styles from variant culinary cultural roots. While some Asian American chefs favored the notion of fusion cuisine and initiated upscale Asian restaurants targeting "young urban professional in metropolitan cities (Lio and Bott 193), others are not eager to define

their culinary identity under this title due to the politics that define racial identity. Anita Mannur, in her exploration of TV celebrity food shows, explains the implicit messages that fusion food carries in relation to politics of cultural and racial identity. She asserts that fusion cuisine exhibits a pattern that "melts the difference into a coherent whole" ("Model Minorities" 74) in contrast with the American ideal of democratic representation. She furthers her argument by questioning whether fusion cuisine has a tendency towards assimilation of cultural aspects of Asian or immigrant cuisine while making it appealing for the mainstream palate ("Model Minorities" 72-74). Likewise, in the contemporary memoirs, the chefs broach extended discussions that challenge the notion of fusion cuisine. There are several aspects explaining why some chefs do not identify with the fusion philosophy. In agreement with Mannur's view, Edward Lee believes that fusion, as a word, implies a tendency to eliminate distinctive aspects of Asian American cuisine. As Lee puts forward: "I can't stand the word 'fusion,' not only because it is dated, but also because it implies culinary racism, suggesting that foods from Eastern cultures are so radically different that they need to be artificially introduced or 'fused' with Western cuisines to give them legitimacy" (Lee, *Smoke and Pickles* 9). From a similar perspective, David Chang also rejects the philosophy of fusion cuisine as it connotes culinary racism. Chang maintains the idea that fusion cuisine implies cultural appropriation through which the white standards are prioritized. He believes that it reflects the culinary racism in the kitchen as

> minority chefs in America find cultural appropriation so upsetting is that we feel obliged to uphold these arbitrary prescriptions, while white chefs do whatever they want. We're following the rules and they're not. Most of the time, they didn't even bother to learn the rules. I decided that I should just start playing the same game. (252)

As Chang evaluates, white chefs have the liberty to fuse or not to fuse any ingredient or style they favor. On the other hand, recognized with their ethnic background, chefs from minority groups are expected to be integrated in fusion cuisine. Moreover, the fusion erodes the distinctive qualities of the ethnic food making it suitable for the American palate and therefore restricts the chef's culinary subjectivity.

The chefs' rejection of fusion cuisine does not necessarily

mean that they resist culinary progress that requires adaptation. The chefs construct their culinary subjectivity to evaluate their immigrant experience and to express contemporary Korean American identity. Concentrating on the connection between immigrant identity and food, Lori Kido Lopez suggests that food is interpreted as "a safe bridge" in the process of social integration, however; each generation has their own way of connection with the food (151). Likewise, in the 21st century, different from the 20th century Korean American chefs who claimed authenticity in their cookbooks, Korean American chefs from second or third generation have written memoirs, that contribute to the debates on culinary adaptation. For instance, David Chang promotes experimenting with style, ingredients, and taste rather than insisting to preserve the authentic Korean culinary culture. As Chang observes ethnic communities in the U.S. interact both with the mainstream culture and other ethnic groups and such an interaction necessitates a personal adaptation which is at the same time reflected through adaptation of food culture (59). The changing position of the immigrant identity can also be traced in the culinary world with the transformation of the food. Chang strongly supports that the evolution of ethnic food is inevitable since the culinary progress projects the changing immigrant experience. In fact, one may claim that food adaptation is part of the personal adaptation process in the memoirs since the chefs come over self-estrangement through the food which is the thematic core of their narrative. Therefore, the food they serve on the table reflects the cosmopolitan, male, Korean American experience. One may also observe that while looking for self-expression in the challenging times of their life, the chefs resort in food as an expressive medium through which they present their personal adaptation to American culture. The chefs belonged to America as much as their family belong to Korea. While narrating his childhood, Chang presents the diversity of culinary cultures he is accustomed to:

> As a kid, I was embarrassed by the smell of our kitchen and the look of our Korean food, so when Sherri Chang wasn't around, I mostly sustained myself with mozzarella sticks, chicken fingers, Hungry-Man dinners, microwave burritos, quesadillas, and Ichiran ramen and Shin ramyun. Latchkey kid fare, which was all right by me. (6)

As is observed, Chang identifies with neither Korean nor white American culinary culture, and he develops a multicultural understand-

ing. Korean American food reflects, in that sense, Korean American identity and intersects with other ethnic identities. For instance, growing up in the South, Edward Lee couples elements of Korean culinary culture with the Southern cuisine that portray his personal experience of America while Choi, as a chef growing up in L.A., blends elements of Mexican and Korean cuisine. Lee, further comments on his experience of American culinary diversity through his visits to various ethnic American restaurants as follows:

> I feel at home here. This is America. Maybe not the white-picket-fence version we are used to seeing, but the one that exists in every town just beneath the surface, embodied by the diversity in the labor economy. I'll bet the kitchen here is a fascinating place. I'll bet it is an uneasy collaboration at times, bound together by the necessities of food and culture and commerce. I'm glad to have found some good soul food. (Lee, *Buttermilk Graffiti* 2061)

In his memoir, Edward Lee expresses that what defines American culinary culture is the diversity of the culinary culture that is performed in the culinary fringes, which encompass the kitchens at the margins, borders, streets, and American hinterlands. Lee regards food adaptation as a fundamental notion in the modern age that represents the regional diversity of American foodscape. He adopts the term "culinary vernacular" to define the regional restaurants that represent the local variance of American cuisine and thus frequently remains undiscovered.

As an alternative to cultural and political messages that the authentic Korean cuisine and fusion cuisine carry, Asian hipster cuisine or street cuisine raises as a self-defining movement through which Asian American chefs manifest their culinary identity. In their article, Shoon Lio and Megan Boot evaluate the Asian American hipster and street cuisine and how chefs have built altered and redefined the Asian chef image and traditional restaurants. As the critics put forward "Asian hipster restaurants constitute the foodscapes where chefs perform the roles of culinary and cultural rebels and artists, and also define a certain authenticity based on the personal experiences and narratives that have shaped these chefs" (208). The critics express that the hipster/street cuisine offered an alternative representation of the chefs' cosmopolitan identities and through this alternative, Asian American chefs have achieved individual expression, social visibility, and economic cred-

ibility. Korean American chefs have also found an alternative voice through hipster/street cuisine to present their culinary journey**.** David Chang is identified as the forefather of the hipster cuisine (Lio and Boot 196). Engaged in food business, Chang recognizes that ethnic cuisines are regarded as substitutes for the traditional French culinary culture that dominates New York restaurants. Chang underlines that as opposed to this class-based layering of food culture, in Asia, eating out does not necessitate being member of an upper–class. He emphasizes the contraction between Asian food culture and high-end restaurant culture that follows the French tradition in the U.S. in the following lines:

> Common day, street food being served in Asia, eating food at cheap prices is part of life in contrast to expensive food culture at high-end restaurants in New York. A comparison of food culture of New York and Asia. While dining out is for the privileged in New York, in Asian cities like Beijing and Japanese cities, the food is foundational part of life and city. But in Asia? Man, it was the polar opposite. From the grocery stands and yakitori joints in Japan to the stalls along the hutongs of Beijing, enjoying food was foundational. (Chang 34)

As Chang expresses, in the mainstream culture, ethnic food is labeled as plain, cheap food. Since it does not cost much, the taste has not been regarded as a priority. In contrast to this idea, in his cross-national food experience, Chang recognizes that eating quality food at a reasonable price does not have to be expensive and good food does not have to be exclusively prepared for an economically privileged minority. The chef narrates his observation as a culinary apprentice in Tokyo as follows: “I was scrounging to make ends meet, but I could still eat like a king. That was the real epiphany. I could eat extraordinarily well in places that weren’t punishingly expensive” (Chang 37). The simplicity of food philosophy in has Japan, shaped Chang’s philosophy of food as a restaurateur. He aims to challenge the established restaurant culture by opening a ramen shop in New York aspired by the emerging ramen culture in Tokyo: “I wanted to shock people who thought ramen was nothing more than a cheap and dirty means to fill their belly. That was the big idea: leave everyone walking out the door of Momofuku happy and surprised and glad to have spent their money” (Chang 54). As is seen, Chang’s initial aim while opening his first restaurant was to adapt the Asian food culture into mainstream American culinary cul-

ture by providing reasonably priced qualified food. At the same time, by redefining the meaning of "ramen," as delicious, he alters the dominant understanding that stereotypically categorizes it as "cheap and dirty."

Altering the position of food enables Chang to find self-expression in the American culinary scene. In parallel to his food philosophy, Chang's restaurant philosophy depends upon self-expression. The chef manifests that he lacked a sense of belonging and self-expression while previously working at mainstream restaurants:

> And so, I may have only whispered it at first, but I definitely said it: "I think the underground in food can become overground." It had happened before in music, art, fashion, in Europe and Asia. Why not food? Why not here? I couldn't relate to the people I was cooking for. (Chang 34)

Chang's foundational idea was to claim a space for underground/street food culture within the mainstream American culinary scene. He claimed for such a space since it would provide him the necessary grounds to express his American experience through food. Moreover, Chang's restaurants can also be read as performative stages where he attempts to create a counter-narrative for street food culture. With such a motivation, Chang opened his first restaurant Momofuku Noodle Bar in 2004 where he set the foundations of his cooking philosophy and quickly got public attention. As an extension of his culinary identity and the end-product of his culinary journey, his restaurant would nourish from multiple culinary cultures that manifest his culinary identity.

Like Chang, Roy Choi also expresses that although he worked at popular high-end restaurants as a chef, he was unable to find his own voice and self-expression at the American culinary stage. At the beginning of his career, he targeted to work for a classical high-end restaurant established on French culinary culture, rather than defining his culinary identity as a typical "Asian chef" cooking "Asian food." However, Choi recognized that this is also another type of political self-limitation. Therefore, in the flow of his career, he has preferred to apply techniques and discover tastes from other ethnic cuisines in the States. Due to unemployment and economic turmoil of the 2008, taking a break in his career provided Choi to develop his culinary philosophy. He discovered that a combination of Korean and Mexican

culinary culture would define his culinary identity. Eventually, together with a friend, they developed and experimented with the idea of Korean BBQ in a taco. The chef finds a meaning out of his culinary journey by combining elements from his gastrogeographical memory connected to L.A., the city he grew up in. He expresses how he recollects his culinary identity from his memory:

> As I chopped and layered ingredients, visions of Silver Garden, Pershing Square, my childhood refrigerator, cruising in Whittier, Grove Street, transient life, the desert bubbled up and started flowing through me like a tidal wave. I was possessed. Sohn-maash. [. . .] There it was. Los Angeles on a plate. Maybe it wasn't everyone's L.A., but it was mine. It was Koreatown to Melrose to Alvarado to Venice to Crenshaw crumpled into one flavor and bundled. [. . .] It began to taste Indonesian, look Mexican, feel Korean. It spoke to hipsters, comforted families, filled eager bellies. It breathed L.A. All the way. (Choi 296-98)

In the given excerpt, Choi gives a spectrum of places and tastes in his memory that enable him to create his culinary identity. As it is evident, Choi's understanding of food is not a sole product of Korean cuisine. While developing his culinary identity, Choi nourishes from different ethnic culinary cultures. Mexican culture, an inseparable part of his life, not surprisingly, becomes a significant anchor in his culinary identity. He combines the distinctive tastes that landmarks his childhood, belonging to Korean and Asian American cuisines in Koreatown which makes L.A. the city that define the chef's cosmopolitan identity. As a result, his food is neither Mexican, nor Korean, it represents the streets of Los Angeles. In other words, Choi's food embracing his elements from different cultures defines his culinary identity. Accompanying their food and cooking styles, the restaurants contribute to representation of Korean American culinary identity. For instance, Choi alters the established norms of the high-end restaurant culture, by changing the position of street food culture from within. Since the chef does not feel that his culinary identity belongs to the mainstream French line of restaurant culture, Choi opens his first van restaurant, KOGI in 2008. By turning a van into a restaurant interacting with the street, Choi claims a space for the street culture that can be recognized by the mainstream culture and society. One may also regard the restaurant, as a solid entity that represents Choi's personal transformation. He challenges the mainstream culinary culture with the van restaurant

that serves hybrid combination of Korean-BBQ in tacos, celebrates the street culture, and reinforces the chef's cosmopolitan identity.

In the same manner, David Chang attempts to find his culinary voice at the American culinary stage through his food adaptations from multicultural culinary cultures. Following Momofuku Noodle Bar, David Chang opens various restaurants namely, Momofuku Ssäm Bar (2006), Momofuku Ko (2008), and Momofuku Milk Bar (2009) where he experiments with multicultural culinary cultures including Japanese, Korean, Italian. Along with challenging the American palate with uncommon tastes, Chang also challenges the mainstream restaurant culture with an attempt to deconstruct the stereotypes associated with Asian American identity and culinary culture. Established in 2015, with the fried chicken joint, FUKU, Chang, as a restaurateur, attempts to take political action through opening a restaurant. The chef has aimed to use the restaurant as a political sight to combat racist remarks. Chang has intended to design every single detail in this attempt and urged his customers to rethink about the racial discrimination and stereotypical Asian American representations. Even the name of the restaurant, FUKU, is deliberately chosen for its resemblance to everyday slang as a rebellious stance. The restaurant protests the white hegemony in the food sector that sets the norms. In Chang's words: "The name came easily: Fuku. A riff on Momofuku and a phonetic fuck-you to everybody who took us for granted, mocked us, or made us feel lesser for how we ate" (200). Along with the name, the decoration of the restaurant also contributes to the sight of this protest. FUKU's walls are decorated with framed posters of Asian American characters including "Oddjob from *Goldfinger,* Gogo Yubari from *Kill Bill*, Uli from *Die Hard*, Lo-Pan from *Big Trouble in Little China*, Chong Ki from *Bloodsport and Mickey Rooney's buck-toothed Mr. Yunioshi from Breakfast at Tiffany's*" (200). Chang defines this strategy as an attempt to urge his customers to stop and question: "All the ugly stereotypical Asian sidekicks and villains from cinematic history—the painful, humiliating images that somehow continued to go unchecked in American culture" (200). Besides the posters, with word plays, Chang wants to alter the Asian American representation in mainstream culture: "Here's what we do: we print the word Dericious! all over the sandwich wrappers. I want white people to see it and feel completely uncomfortable saying it out loud. We are gonna reclaim all this shit." (200). However, unlike the chef expects, the customers have enjoyed the atmosphere with ignorance:

> 'Dericious!' they kept saying to each other, laughing like little kids. They kept at it, their pitch lowering to martial arts master sotto voce: 'SO. DE-RI-SHUS.' I freaked out. I'd hoped to weaponize the racism I'd experienced as an Asian American person. I'd hoped non-Asian people would be too scared to utter the words on our wrappers or laugh at the pictures on the wall. But they weren't scared at all. (203)

As Chang recognizes that the messages have been misunderstood by the customers, he decides to change the restaurant's theme. FUKU challenges the mainstream Asian American representations and transforms the restaurant into a performative sight of protest to reclaim Asian American culinary identity. Although Chang does not hesitate to experiment with elements from Asian American cuisine, he admits that it was not easy for him to reclaim his Korean American culinary roots in definition of his culinary identity. As the chef explains, he embraces his Korean legacy in the later years of his career:

> I spent a good portion of my career avoiding the perception that I was messing with Korean food. For many years at Momofuku, we buried any sign of Koreanness under other influences and disguises. While cooking has enabled me to fight battles and explore subjects that I'm too scared to approach in real life, I couldn't overcome the shame and anxiety I'd felt about Korean food since I was a kid. I've slowly become more comfortable exploring my heritage. (Chang 250-51)

The chef's connection to Korean food mirrors the definition of his culinary subjectivity. As Chang expresses, the food becomes the text through which the chefs find self-expression. They present their life philosophy along with food; therefore, one can also read how their philosophy of food evolves while the identity transforms. Eventually, food for Chang becomes a space where he discovers his cosmopolitan identity as a Korean American chef.

Korean American Chef Identity and Culinary Masculinity

In the 21st century, the popular foodie culture has demanded the chefs to become more visible social figures apart from their domineering role in the restaurant kitchens. N. Pascual Soler believes that

the gourmet trend with blooming cookery programs, food documentaries, movies, and blogs led to chefs' becoming the center of attention (4). Accordingly, culinary masculinity, in a broader sense, is produced through "gendered figures of the masculine professional chef and feminine domestic cook" (Cairns 294). As the chef image evolves, male chefs have been exposed to a gendered chef identity built upon ideals of traditional masculinity that are fierce competition and aggressiveness. Likewise, the food shows, and food media portray male chefs in line with the traditional depiction, as machos in the kitchen. In other words, the definition of culinary masculinity has been traditionally defined in accordance with the values of white, heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic practices do not only configure white heterosexual men's lives, but also shape minority masculinities. Jeffery Sobal underlines that "hegemonic masculinity provides a comparison point those individuals may elect to adopt or reject in specific places, times and relationships" (147). Contemplating upon minority masculinities, Jachinson Chan points out that although they are excluded from the hegemonic concept of masculinity, men from minorities still may desire to be part of this privileged group:

> Men of color, who are excluded from the hegemonic model of masculinity, may unwittingly buy into this notion of complicity. Despite exclusions based on race, men of color can still benefit from patriarchal dividends, and they may demonstrate a longing for inclusion to a hegemonic masculine identity. The seduction of a hegemonic masculinity can be a powerful force that lures men of color from a place of complicity to an aggressive pursuit of being a part of an elite group. (10)

Confirming the practices of ideal masculinity, the chefs define the kitchen as a separate professional place dominated by dynamics of male competition and profit-making. Accordingly, Korean chefs' practices of cooking and the notion of being a chef exemplify Chan's ideas on benefitting from the power of male bonding. Though they are marginalized as members of a minority group, they benefit from the privileges of their gendered identity. For instance, they have the chance to practice cooking in a multicultural kitchen which provides a new transcultural space for self-enterprise and networking. This can be exemplified through Chang's memoir as he makes frequent visits to Europe to meet famous European chefs. They create special occasions to practice cooking, share, and learn from one another. Though this is

not presented as a male activity, the chefs Chang refers to are pioneering European male chefs. This private network, providing the male with social and economic benefits, can be read as a practice of male privilege in the food business.

Though their approach to food and cooking differ from one another, all three chefs define the culinary identity by centering cooking as a professional journey in their narratives. In Choi's and Chang's memoirs, one can observe that the Korean American chefs have initially adapted heteronormative codes in their connection to the kitchen. They regard cooking as a profession that is separate from home kitchen. Traditionally, the domestic kitchen is a female sphere where cooking means womanly caring (DeVault 118). For instance, while chefs define their culinary identity, the focus is on how they mastered cooking and developed entrepreneurial skills. On the other hand, they do not touch upon domestic cooking or family responsibilities concerning nourishment. They do not offer any alternative practice that challenge or alter the norms of hegemonic masculinity in their personal lives like sharing the unpaid domestic work or cooking at home. In their memoirs, the chefs do not try to alter or challenge the traditional connection of male chefs to the industrial kitchen. Their established marriages with children are referred to in the works with thanks to their spouses "being patient and supportive" while they are taking successful steps in their culinary careers. For instance, Roy Choi separates his domestic role as a father and a husband from his culinary identity at the beginning of his work. Although he dedicates the memoir to his family, he prefers to keep his family life separate:

> I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO MY AMAZING WIFE AND DAUGHTER, JEAN AND KAELYN, WHO I DON'T WRITE ABOUT MUCH IN THIS BOOK BECAUSE THE MOMENTS WE SHARE TOGETHER ARE OUR OWN. (3)

Like Choi, male chefs in their memoirs define the boundaries of the chef's identity within the food business and concentrate on either being a chef or cooking at the restaurant kitchen. However, since contemporary chefs are influential social figures, the chefs' being more vocal about their domestic roles like home cooking might encourage alternative moods of masculinity by providing practical models in lieu of the heteronormative roles. Like many chefs, Chang adapts the popular crude chef image. The macho/crude chef image is portrayed by the media as a type with certain characteristics. Chang has great respect for

Anthony Bourdain, who has been an influential figure in configuration of this popular image. For Chang, Bourdain portrays

> the life of the cook was a life of adventure, looting, pillaging and rock-and-rolling through life with a carefree disregard for all conventional morality. It looked pretty damn good to me on the other side of the line. It's awkward to think about how much I enjoyed reading his stories and the many others—mostly told by men—that glamorized the crude. (Chang 229)

Among the many images imposed by media, Bourdain has been registered as a seminal figure drawing the blueprint of the crude chef image. While the crude chef is often portrayed as an aggressive and strict figure who orders and controls his staff, the restaurant kitchen is also compared to a military base. Although they manifest their anxieties emerging mainly from their ethnic background in the earlier years of their lives, neither Chang nor Choi questions the military system and the hierarchical relations that comply with the crude chef image in the industrial kitchen. Another reason for chefs to perform the crude chef without questioning its merits could be related to the construction of traditional masculinity in Korean culture. As John Lie asserts, military culture had a central position in defining Korean masculinity, at the end of the military training, men "learned to obey orders, live by the clock, smoke and drink and lead a homosocial existence" (79). Accordingly, the top-to-bottom power relations associated with military structure also represent the order in the kitchen. The chef as the power holder has a limitless power over the staff who obeys him by merely saying "yes chef". Therefore, through their position in the kitchen, chefs not only do get satisfied from being the ultimate authority but also guaranteed a privileged male status. In fact, Chang and Choi admit that they have adapted to "the macho chef" type, since they felt "powerful" while practicing this role. Roy Choi narrates how satisfied he felt practicing the crude chef image in the early years of his career:

> Damn, I felt so strong and powerful. Like a king stepping on his villagers, just because he could. Finally, he brought the right cuts, and I grabbed them while glaring ferociously. Over the next few hours I threw shit around, yelled at everyone, and basically acted out every single cliché of the out-of-control macho chef. (233)

As is clearly stated in the quotation, Choi's image of a chef is a tough, quick-tempered, intolerant crude chef controlling his staff by yelling and aggressively throwing things around when things are out of his control. David Chang also admits how often he has lost his temper in the restaurant kitchen upon subjectively observing that the staff does not take their tasks seriously. In his memoir, Chang honestly regrets identifying with the crude chef image. He expresses that the quick-tempered male chef image is widely accepted and practiced in the kitchen culture. In fact, he admits that his "out of control" position in the kitchen is his way of reflecting his personal rage as a member of immigrant community against the world: "This all leads me to question whether kitchen custom created my personal brand of rage. I think the job—the fear, the stress, the habits I'd learned, the culture—unlocked what was already roiling inside me" (72-73). Practicing the crude chef, neither made Chang nor his staff happy. His emotional climaxes in the kitchen blocked effective communication and constructive kitchen culture that could support people working in the kitchen.

Furthermore, Chang criticizes himself for treating mercilessly towards the people that work for him at the restaurant kitchen. The chef adopts a different narrative technique and uses strike through to model his previous perspective and the inexperienced culinary persona. Following his self-manifestation as a self-centered, perfectionist, intolerant chef, he gives voice to his mature self. This time, he elaborates on his past actions with the insight he has gained through his culinary career. For instance, the chef narrates how easily he has lost his control upon the maintenance man strolling into the kitchen with his whispers:

> "interrupting our serious self-important world with his joyful obliviousness. I stormed toward him like a drill instructor. I can't actually recall anything about what came next. I was literally out of my mind. My staff tells me I screamed at the man. Threatened him. They said I had been slicing something on a cutting board and was now gesticulating wildly with the knife. (164)

By using such a strategy, Chang compares his destructive culinary persona and how he gained insight about himself during his culinary career. As so, he models an alternative chef image that might replace the crude.

Korean chefs admit that they realize the significance of the

staff's mutual growth, gender equality and ecological consciousness in the later stages of their career. Choi presents how he gained insight and a progressive vision as follows: "it wasn't the pot throwing and the bullying that made a chef a chef. Even on Grove Street, respect came from working hard, supporting your crew, showing love and leadership, and having their back" (Choi 233). Through drawing a constructive image of a chef, Choi contributes to the alternative chef image who cares constructive work ethics as opposed to the crude. Chang also emphasizes that rather than applying the imposed norms intoxicating the kitchen staff, the chefs have the potential to transform the restaurant kitchen as a space for communal healing. In his words: "I believe our industry can still be a place of healing—a refuge where people nurture one another physically and spiritually—but only if we make it so" (Chang 229). As so, Chang's personal endeavor to become a more constructive chef and concerns of racial justice enable him to construct a more progressive chef image who questions the culinary culture within the context of gender justice. For instance, upon redundancy of a chef due to one of his employee's sharing an inappropriate photo of a female coworker, Chang shares his first reaction as follows:

> My gut reaction was to think that the punishment was harsh. A suspension, I could understand. But firing a chef over a nude photo that someone else took? I knew that the chef was extraordinarily busy. I imagined him working on the line when this employee showed him the photo on his phone. [. . .] Did he really need to be fired? I continued to turn it over and over in my mind. What was I not getting? (224)

Chang does not deny the existence of misogyny and sexual harassment in the industrial kitchens. He demands that it is the chefs who should neither deny nor tolerate racial or gendered injustice in the kitchen. In the following lines Chang narrates how he recognizes the similar traits that shape racism and sexism:

> As self-centered as that approach may sound, it helped me understand what I was missing. What if a cook had been spreading around some racist meme he'd made of an Asian co-worker? What if my chef ignored it and I found out about it later? I imagined the years of insecurity and humiliation flooding over me, and the sense of betrayal I'd feel after my staff had let it slide. How would I have reacted? I would have lost it. It had been so

> easy for me to imagine the male chef's perspective, but it took more effort to empathize with the woman. (224)

By opening the discussion for gender justice in the culinary culture his memoir, Chang proposes to alter the traditional kitchen norms and promotes to be more vocal about gender justice in the industrial kitchens.

Edward Lee also portrays an alternative chef image with his ecological concerns. The ecological approach correlates masculinity with ecological issues and demands deconstruction of human species' relation with other species and environment in a constructive way. (Hultman and Pulé 478). At another level, ecological masculinities propose an alternative in which men are portrayed as part of the ecological system as opposed to the hegemonic "industrial/breadwinner" masculinity (Hultman and Pulé 477). In accordance with this idea, Lee's concerns of the visibility of local ethnic cuisines provokes him to question ecological justice and enables him to gain ecological consciousness. In his cookbook as well as his memoir, Edward Lee, regards cooking as the final step before presenting the food on the table. He looks for agricultural justice concerning the animals and plants lives before they come to the kitchen table. Rather than industrial ones, Lee advocates agricultural acts and encourages eating clean food from local and clean farms. In his cookbook, Lee regards Berry's much-quoted words: "Eating is an agricultural act" (1) as an influential motto that had a great influence on his career and kitchen (Lee, *Smoke and Pickles* 99). In parallel with W. Berry, Lee believes that it is the chef's responsibility to find clean food supplies with the philosophy of "farm to table" movement elaborating upon the ecological, moral, and political concerns about the food presented on the table every day (99). Farm-to-table movement defines the eco-conscious market that brings the food prepared in the restaurant kitchen directly from the farms, rather than distributors, stores or food chains and the local production is supported with this philosophy. Lee's attempt can be read as a manifestation of an ecological culinary identity that reacts against the industrial perspective that gives right to destroy other life forms into the hands of white male. Accordingly, ecological concerns of the chef encourage the reader to gain an ethnical perspective and raise consciousness about ecological justice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, chefs from minority groups have started to gain visibility in media and gourmet culture that establishes a platform for them to subvert the traditional representations of culinary culture, culinary masculinity, and form a progressive Korean American culinary identity. Ethnic food stands as a significant cultural agency for the long-silenced immigrant cultures as opposed to the assimilating over voice of the mainstream culinary culture. Accordingly, all three chefs address minority/ethnic food as a dominant agent that contributes to the contemporary American culinary culture and represent the culinary transformation from Korean American perspective. Their cuisine reflects multiculturalism in American foodscape with variations of culinary blending. As well as being an expressive medium, cooking evolves to be a performative act through which chefs may unite people and influence the society as artists. The chefs, as celebrity figures, possess the power to vocalize social issues and support racial equality and gender justice. Therefore, the memoirs might also be read as reflections of progressive culinary masculinity as an inseparable part of chefs' culinary identity. Although the chefs portray themselves within the boundaries of traditional understanding of a male chef as hardworking, competitive, and tough, the works also have signals of a more progressive chef image concerned about mutual growth, gender equality and ecological justice. The memoirs reveal performative reflection of subjectivity through food as part of the chef's role in the 21st century.

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