



Chef Marja Vongerichten @ CHI-Q

By Nyima Pratten, 2014-05

CHI-Q is the latest venture by Three on the Bund. The restaurant is a collaborative culinary partnership between the Bund stalwart alongside celebrity Chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten and his beautiful, Korean born wife, Marja. The

menu comprises of Marja's traditional Korean recipes that have been given a modern spin by Jean-Georges and will be helmed by Chef de Cuisine and South Korean native, Bichna Yu.

A well-known personality in her own right, Marja hosts PBS documentary "Kimchi Chronicles" with her husband and is the author of a companion cookbook "Kimchi Chronicles: Korean Cooking for an American Kitchen". Marja, born in Uijeongbu, South Korea to a Korean mother and an American soldier, was adopted at age three by an American couple and raised in the Washington DC area. At the age of 19, Marja found her birth mother and discovered that she was now also living in the US, New York to be exact. Through this meeting she was able to reconnect with her South Korean roots. *Talk* sat down with Chef Marja to find out more about her new project and her remarkable life story.



[Marja rushes in late from eating xiaolongbao in Yuyuan Gardens]

Talk: How was your xiaolongbao?

MV: It was amazing! It is actually my favourite dish so far but we haven't had much time on this trip to be adventurous around the city.

Talk: When you were growing up in the states, did you eat much Korean food?

MV: No, I grew up with typical American food.

Talk: Why then did Korean food become such an important part of your self-discovery when you retraced your roots in South Korea?

MV: Well, I think it started with my first meeting with my mother. We had talked for three months on the phone, not showing pictures or anything, so when we finally met, that was a big thing and then she took me to her house and she prepared all my favourite foods that I loved as a baby, when I was three. My first bite was *bulgogi*, it's thinly sliced beef and it's marinated. Anyway, I took one bite and this explosion of memories came back to me; my taste buds had memories, it was so crazy. For each dish that I tried, something in me remembered. So for me, that was my first real connection to Korean culture, my real sense of belonging to it or having been there, because it was so foreign and such a distant memory. When I eventually moved to New York to live with her that became our way of bonding. I also learnt the language because I was so obsessed with the food. She made me seaweed soup and she'd say, "this is called *miyeok guk*", and then take me to the grocery store and show me which *miyeok guk* to buy. A big part of our ritual was every weekend we'd go to Korean town and she'd just order all these different things.

Talk: Why did you choose Shanghai as the venue for your first Korean restaurant?

MV: Oh gosh, I love Shanghai. I've been before. I came the first time ten years ago when JG opened JG, and I think Shanghai kind of chose us. Mrs Lim (an owner of 3onB) met with Jean-Georges a year ago when she had just seen a few episodes of my show, *Kimchi Chronicles*, and she wanted to talk to us about doing a Korean restaurant together. My show also incorporates cooking and recipes so it's similar to what we did here in the restaurant. I would cook a dish that we ate in Korea in my home kitchen and then JG would do his modernised version of it.

Talk: Three on the Bund is known for its sophisticated dining options, with that in mind, do you really think that is possible to make BBQ elegant?

Talk: How much input did you have in the CHI-Q menu and did you have a hand in picking the chef de cuisine?

MV: With JG and I, it's about a 50-50 effort in terms of the menu. I trust JG of course, completely, in his choice. I've known Bina for a long time but when he told me he was going to pick her, I just thought it was the perfect match. But no, I didn't have any say in that, he knows best who should go where. He works with them for 14 hours a day. I mean, I just pop in and have a drink!

Talk: After Bina was chosen, how long did you spend with her in the New York kitchen before she left for Shanghai?

MV: Well she had a regular job, she was running the Nougatine kitchen at Jean-Georges, so literally we had a crash course in Korean food in two and a half weeks. This was in between her still doing service so a lot of the things I had to go ahead and do on my own and just quantify and write out the recipe and then she would try it for me. The great thing is she's Korean, so she understands the flavour profile.

Talk: We've read about your Kimchi Bloody Mary cocktail. Please, we beg you, tell us how to make it!

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MV: I mean it's really simple. Make sure you get a great vodka as well as a great tomato juice. A little chopped-up kimchi, use kimchi juice in it as well, a little bit of ginger...

Talk: Our mouth is already watering. How should we present it? Is a little bit of kimchi hanging from the side in order?

MV: No, I wouldn't put it on the side, maybe a piece of cucumber kimchi would work!

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