

SHANGHAI that's

The Smuggling Issue

Scanning China's Contraband Scams



Follow
Us on
WeChat
Now



Advertising Hotline
400 820 8428

城市漫步上海
英文版 6 月份
国内统一刊号:
CN 11-5233/GO

China Intercontinental Press
ISSN 1672-8033



9 771672 803046

JUNE 2014

PLUS

Sport: A RUFF and Brawl Knock Out One-Two
Poles Apart: China's National Pole Dancing Team
Tim Robbin's Talks Shakespeare in the Middle Kingdom
Marja Vongerichten Brings Kimchi to Number Three
And an Urban Eyes World Cup Guide Special!



MARJA VONGERICHTEN

Kimchi Chronicler spices things up at Three on the Bund

BY MONICA LIAU, PHOTO BY DARRELL LEW

Her husband may be more of a household name, but Marja Vongerichten has multi-Michelin-starred Jean-Georges beat when it comes to knowledge of bindaetteok, gochujang and everything bancham. The half-Korean, half-African American beauty didn't come to her Asian heritage until after reuniting with her birth mother; days before her 20th birthday. Since then, she has obsessively worked to rediscover her roots through Korean food – captured in 2010's *Kimchi Chronicles*. As of late May, Marja also opened her first restaurant, Chi-Q, in partnership with her better half. She tells us about her kimchi journey to self-fulfillment.

You didn't begin eating Korean food until you were reunited with your birthmother. Why did you seek her out at this time?

It was about knowing myself. You can't know yourself without knowing where you come from. My parents kept diligent records of my adoption, so I chose to look for her in college. I think most adoptees go through an immense sense of guilt, we feel like it's a betrayal to our adoptive family. But I felt like there was something missing. My birth mother had given me away when I was three and all my life I could always remember her presence.

What was it like when you first met her?

The first time I called, she actually fainted. The first time we met, she cooked me all of my favorite foods as a child – bulgogi, japchae and radish kimchi – and this flood of memories came back. It then became my obsession, the cuisine was my visceral connection to my culture. I've been eating it religiously every day for the past 19 years.

Did you feel the hole was filled after this?

Even after I met her I still felt like there was a

something missing. Other Koreans wouldn't acknowledge me as Korean. I think that changed after I shot *Kimchi Chronicles*.

How did your TV show change things?

Well, I had been to Korea many times to visit my family but due to language barriers, details were lost. When we shot *Kimchi Chronicles*, we had this slew of experts explaining everything in detail and I realized it wasn't actually that I needed to be acknowledged by other people, it was my lack of knowledge of myself and my culture. After the show, I felt like I really claimed it and owned it.

I feel like I'm telling Korea, 'Hey, see, look at me, hello!'

So, whose idea was it to create your Chi-Q?

The owner of Three on the Bund sat down with JG [Marja's nickname for Jean Georges] about a year ago and said she had watched *Kimchi Chronicles* and wanted to do a restaurant. At first, I balked at the idea because I'm married to the restaurant business and always considered myself a home cook. But JG finally convinced me and we worked out the recipes together.

It feels like this restaurant is a continuation of your journey...

You know, that has kinda been in the back of my mind. I feel like I'm telling Korea, "Hey, see, look at me, hello!" I didn't grow up hating Korea or my mother – my parents always told me she did the most selfless thing and loved

me very much – but you know...

What?

Well, it's funny that a culture that rejected people like me [Korea did not give citizenship to children who couldn't claim Korean patri-lineage] now embrace me as an ambassador after this TV show. It was very difficult to get funding for *Kimchi Chronicles* at the beginning because the producers who did the show also did *Spain: On The Road Again* with Gwyneth Paltrow and Mario Batali. They wanted a white celebrity in Korea. To be completely honest, I believe the only reason they funded my show in the end was because my husband was French. They didn't want to take a risk on something that wasn't tried and true.

Is there a dish that most represents the heart of what Korean food means to you?

A spicy chicken stew called Dakdoritang, a one pot dish that has potatoes, chicken, onions and carrots. It's spicy and flavorful – for me, that's what I want to eat with rice. It's actually JG's favorite dish. He wants it every weekend... I think he just wants me to cook!

Do you make kimchi in your Manhattan apartment?

All the time! In fact, our kitchen sink at home is not that big so I sterilize our bathtub and soak the cabbage in there. I mean, come on. You're not going to go through four hours of work for two jars of kimchi. You're going to make at least 10 bottles.

// For the full story of Marja's journey through Korean food, her early years and what it was like becoming Jean Georges' (much) younger wife, visit www.thatsmags.com. Try the couple's first ever joint restaurant, Chi-Q, 2/F, Three on the Bund, 3 Zhongshan Dong Yi Lu, by Guangdong Lu 中山东一路3号2楼, 近广东路 (6321 6622)