



COLLECTIVES

THE MAN WHO COOKED THE WORLD

At his new restaurant inside SFMOMA, Corey Lee brilliantly copies the world's greatest chefs.



Corey Lee in the Benu courtyard.

On a rainy afternoon in early March, Corey Lee is seated in the empty dining room of his first restaurant, contemplating the imminent birth of his third. Save for the noise trickling from the kitchen, it's quiet here at Benu, the ambience more Zen sanctuary than power restaurant. Lee himself is swathed in chef's whites, his black hair shaved tight and sleek as an eight ball, a glass of water by his side. Reflecting on the considerable and in some ways unprecedented challenge posed by In Situ, the restaurant he will open in June at the resurrected San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, he wants to make one thing clear. "I'm a terrible salesman," he admits.

Coming from one of the planet's most exacting chefs, one who is practically marinating in Michelin stars, this admission is both disarming and comical. It seems fair to say that anyone who can convince 90 similarly lauded chefs from across the globe to let him replicate one of their dishes at a new restaurant run solely by him doesn't have salesmanship issues. And yet, Lee insists that he does. "I'm very sensitive to putting people in a position where they feel obligated," he says. "So as I approached them, I gave them every out possible because I didn't want to leverage our relationship to get them to participate in something they might not be interested in."

It's a bit like Steph Curry apologizing for inviting you to be part of his pickup game. Since it was announced, In Situ has been something a lot of big-time chefs have been interested in. Aside from being a brand-new Corey Lee project (his second restaurant, the Americanized French bistro Monsieur Benjamin, opened in Hayes Valley in 2014), it can without exaggeration be described as a restaurant unlike any other in the world. Its concept is deceptively simple and incredibly ambitious; Every dish on the à la carte menu will be a painstaking replica of another chef's famous dish. The likes of Thomas Keller, David Kinch, Wylie Dufresne, René Redzepi, Gastón Acurio, and the Daniels—Patterson and Boulud—will be represented, as will chefs from jewel-

box restaurants (Fujiya1935, Nahm, Ronin) in distant lands (Osaka, Bangkok, Hong Kong).

“The best analogy is that if you have an orchestra or ballet company that’s taking the work of a composer or choreographer and playing that music in San Francisco or London or Paris, you try to play it accurately,” says Lee. “But it’s really to keep that work alive so that more people can enjoy and experience it.”

Lee got the idea for In Situ a few months after SFMOMA approached him in 2014. He wanted not only to collaborate with the museum but to grapple with what it represented. “For me, it centered on the opportunity to access these different works from different artists. What does that mean for food? And how can I contribute to what the museum is doing through the medium I work with? It hit me like that,” he says, snapping his fingers.

Still, the unusualness of the restaurant can’t be overstated. Most chefs open a restaurant to tell their own story, whether it’s relayed through a Sicilian grandma’s recipe for pasta alla Norma or a 15-course tasting menu inspired by a childhood obsession with *Dune*. By contrast, In Situ has the effect of sublimating the chef’s ego by making him a skilled copycat rather than an auteur. “I don’t think it’s about me at all,” Lee says. “We’re just this conduit. If people can go into this restaurant and have no idea that I or Benu or our team is involved in any way, that’s fantastic. That’s the whole idea. It’s not even about us putting our flavor on something someone else is doing. We’re just trying to represent it as faithfully as possible.”

Committing such artful forgeries has been a feat of communication, intelligent design, and frequent-flier miles. Some chefs, like Boulud, simply emailed their recipes to Lee. Others lacked recipes in a readily shareable form: “For them, it’s more about feel and taste, and it’s not so much about documenting,” Lee says. “Translating [a recipe] sometimes into another language, let alone another kitchen language, takes time.” Between them, Lee and his executive chef, Brandon Rodgers, traveled to more than 12 cities

in six countries to gather information, taking plenty of notes and photos. “I can’t remember the last time I spent this much time learning someone else’s food,” Lee says. “It’s been really fun, but also educational. In some ways, it reinvigorates you. So that’s been a really nice surprise.”

Part of the reason Lee chose 90 chefs was that he needed that many to build a menu that works: “It’s really a starting point more than a final collection of dishes,” he says. The restaurant will be split into two areas: The part with traditional seating will feature a menu with some 15 dishes, while another section, with more-communal dining, will have about 10. Both menus will rotate over time and be designed so that, as Lee says, “people can choose how much information they’re receiving.” In other words, a meal at In Situ won’t be the equivalent of a docent-led tour. If you want to learn, you can, but you don’t have to. “It’s tricky,” Lee admits. “In some ways it’s a high-concept project, but it also needs to be a very functional restaurant. We have to juggle those two things.”

If anyone can, it’s Lee. While he might be a terrible salesman, he’s an exceptional restaurateur, as skilled in his technique as he is single-minded in his focus. You can’t imagine him judging a reality cooking show, or spilling sloppy, embarrassing details about his personal life on Twitter (although he’s had an account since 2010, he has yet to dispatch a single tweet). Instead, Lee has spent 21 of his 38 years keeping his head down in the kitchen, beginning when he was a 17-year-old busser at New York City’s Blue Ribbon Sushi. After working his way through a series of acclaimed restaurants in London, Paris, and New York, he was invited by Thomas Keller to try the French Laundry on for size. Lee arrived in Yountville in 2001; four years later, Keller named him head chef. By the time he left to open Benu in 2010, Lee had amassed a reputation as substantial as his résumé: In the introduction to the Benu cookbook, which was published last year, Momofuku major-domo David Chang writes that Lee’s “skills and brutal standards were the stuff of legend.”



Octopus and coral, a recipe from chef Virgilio Martinez of Central in Lima, Peru.

While Lee does project a tightly coiled elegance, he’s not burdened with the rigidity or humorlessness that often besets those who traffic in perfectionism. When I tell him I had no idea what to tell my Lyft driver when she asked what kind of restaurant Benu is, he grins. “Oh, absolutely. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked that same question. Sometimes I just say, ‘Eh, it’s a Chinese restaurant.’” Talking to Lee, it’s easy to understand how he was able to conjure, within the space of five minutes, a list of 40 chefs he had strong enough relationships with to ask for their participation in In Situ; accolades aside, there’s a thoughtfulness about him that inspires confidence.

“I don’t know who else could do this,” says Karen Leibowitz, a co-owner, with her husband, Anthony Myint, of Mission Chinese Food, Commonwealth, and the Perennial. When Lee approached them with his elevator pitch, “we were so excited,” she recalls. She and Myint didn’t know Lee well, but his project’s more cerebral shadings appealed to them. “I love this idea of having chefs act like artists in a museum where they have their work available, gathered

together as a collection and not for the sake of pure business,” she says. Myint’s dish will take full advantage of the freedoms afforded by its surroundings: It’s a cheeseburger made with squid ink, designed to evoke a charcoal briquette.

For his part, Lee is well aware of the potential critical pitfalls that come with treating a restaurant as an art project. Some visitors, after all, will just want a sandwich, not a dissertation on culinary representation (for them, the museum will also house a café; see page 102). Others will question how you can represent food from 90 different restaurants in a cohesive way. “With any kind of high-concept program, you can’t please every single person,” Lee says. “Some are going to go in there and go, ‘How come there’s no Renoir?’”

But he’s OK with that. Lee, after all, has made his career not trying to please everyone, and is nothing if not comfortable painting by his own numbers. Inside SFMOMA, whose cool white exterior he can see when he steps outside of Benu, he’s creating a new canvas, and selling us—regardless of his belief in his ability to do so—on a vision of the world we haven’t seen before. ●●●