

# NOODLING IN THE KITCHEN

David Chang does more than mess around in the kitchens of his restaurants

> By Andrea Rademan



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David Chang is co-owner/chef of New York City's trend-setting Momofuku Noodle Bar (located at 163 First Ave.) and Momofuku Ssäm Bar (207 Second Ave.).

**NEW YORK** — “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere” goes the lyrics of “New York, New York,” the song Frank Sinatra made famous.

That litmus test holds true for chefs, many of whom have tried, and many more who have failed, to take this town. Even for established names and their bottomless backers, the odds of a new restaurant succeeding in Manhattan are infinitesimal.

So how is it that David Chang — a 29-year-old chef who shrugs off my question, “When did you know you were destined to be a chef?” with “There’s no huge story there; I never had an epiphany or anything, it just happened” — come to revolutionize the eating habits of the most recalcitrant diners in the world.

It isn’t because he grew up steeped in a culinary background. “When my folks moved to the United States from South Korea,” he says, “my father worked in restaurants, but mostly at jobs like bussing tables, not cooking.”

“Then, was your mom a great home cook?” I ask.

He replies, “My mom did all the cooking, and it was always Korean, but it didn’t interest her much. In the long run, she probably learned more from me than I did from her.”

“So what prompted you to enroll in culinary school?” I press him.

“I didn’t,” he says. “I went to Trinity College in Connecticut and majored in religion. I was an all right student, but I had no idea what I wanted to do. While I was there, I did a study abroad program in Korea, and another one in London, so that gave me a taste of what life was like in another country, another culture.”

“Aha! So that’s when the light went on?” I ask.

“No light,” says Chang. “I just knew I didn’t want to sit behind a desk all my life, and I liked to cook, so I decided to see how far I could take it.”

That’s when he moved to New York and got a desk job to pay his way through the French Culinary Institute. After graduation, he worked in several high-profile, market-driven kitchens. One of these was Craft, where he got hooked on American heirloom foods.

In 1999, he did a stint teaching English near Osaka. He traveled around Japan, worked in a few fancy hotels, and learned the art of noodle-making at several ramen and soba shops in Tokyo. The experience turned him into a noodle connoisseur.

He returned to New York, and by August 2004, he had acquired a talented partner, Joaquin Baca, and raised enough money to open Momofuku Noodle Bar, a counter-only sliver of a room in the East Village. Critics raved: five stars for New York’s Best Cheap Eats; Best Meal Under \$10; *New York* magazine Best of New York Awards; *New York Times* The City’s Best Buns (filled with barbecued Berkshire pork); *New York* magazine Best Pickle Plate (“expands on the owner’s *kimchee* Korean heritage to encompass what he finds at the market”).

Last summer the pair opened a satellite, the slightly larger Momofuku Ssäm Bar, where they serve mainly *ssam* (Korean-style wraps) every day until 10 p.m. Then they open again at 10:30, and Chang and his culinary team dazzle late-night gourmets, many of whom are off-duty chefs from other restaurants, with a limitlessly changing menu, a well-chosen beer and wine list and even some table service, until 2:30 a.m., Wednesday through Sunday. In addition to his signature short rib sandwich, house-made *charcuterie* and four kinds of country ham, expect anything from *kimchi* hot dogs to oysters with watermelon gelée, most of it with

pork. According to Chang, “Everything tastes better with bacon.” P

As for those late-night meals, “Isn’t it more typical to serve a full menu early on and just bar food at night?” I ask.

“It’s not unusual for Korean Americans to go out drinking and eating all night,” says Chang, who spends those late evenings behind the stoves, cooking like mad, joking with his fellow chefs and interacting with the counter customers.

Planned or not, Chang has hit on a winning formula. When I ask the self-effacing young chef to sum up the secret of his success, he says only, “Just be at the right place at the right time — every time.”



## BEEF, IT'S WHAT'S GOOD

Korean grilled marinated flank steak with marinated shiitake mushrooms, pine nuts, red chili peppers and scallions, from David Chang

The youngest of Joseph and Sherrie Chang’s four children, David Chang was born in Arlington, Va. His parents, now retired, and his sister, Esther, 36, and brothers, Jhoon, 35, and Yong, 34, still reside in the Washington, D.C., area. On his rare visits home, mom does the cooking, but these days, the family is more likely to gather at one of David’s restaurants. Then he does the cooking.



### INGREDIENTS (Serves 4-6)

- Flank Steak**
  - 2 pieces of flank steak (12 to 14 ounces each)
  - 8 pieces of garlic, peeled
- 1 2-inch piece of ginger, peeled and freshly grated
  - 3 whole white Spanish onions, sliced
  - 2 cups soy sauce
  - 1/2 cup white sugar
- 1 cup of fresh apple juice or pear juice
  - 1/8 cup of sesame oil
  - 1 lemon
- Salt and fresh coarse cracked black pepper

### Marinated Mushrooms

- 12-16 shiitake or oyster mushrooms, stems removed
- 2 bunches of greens scallions, finely chopped
- 3 red chili peppers, seeded and thinly sliced
  - 4 tablespoons of rice wine vinegar
  - 1 tablespoon of sesame oil
  - 2 tablespoons of soy sauce
  - Roasted pine nuts
  - Canola oil for cooking
- Salt and fresh coarse cracked black pepper

David Chang’s recipe appears on page 154 of *New Asian Cuisine: Fabulous Recipes from Celebrity Chefs*, by Wendy Chan & Grace Niwa, and edited by Andrea Rademan. It is available for \$14.95, plus shipping and handling, at [www.newasiancuisine.com](http://www.newasiancuisine.com).

When I put this recipe together for [the cookbook *New Asian Cuisine*], I wanted something that would be fast and easy to cook at home. I also wanted something that would appeal to barbecue-loving Americans who are already familiar with Korean *bulgogi*. Hanger steak is the preferred cut because it’s tender and has a lot of flavor. The marinade is made with easy-to-find American ingredients that work just as well with pork and beef for other Korean barbecue dishes. This is an Asian dish that’s Americanized by the ingredients, but the most important thing about it isn’t the ancestry — it’s the taste.

—David Chang

### DIRECTIONS

#### Flank Steak

Combine sugar, soy sauce, sesame oil, garlic, ginger, sliced onions, juice of lemon and apple or pear. Taste for seasoning. Add flank steak and marinate for 4-6 hours.

#### Mushrooms

Over medium high heat, add 3 tablespoons of canola oil to pan. Add mushrooms. Season with salt and black pepper. Cook for 2-3 minutes, then transfer to a bowl to rest. Add scallions, red chili peppers and pine nuts. In a separate bowl, add sesame oil, soy sauce and rice wine vinegar. Mix well and pour over vegetables to marinate.

Heat grill or sauté pan and cook flank steak for 4-5 minutes per side. Let meat rest for 2-3 minutes. At the same time, sauté marinated onions till tender. Slice meat and serve over a bed of cooked onions. Spoon vegetables and mushroom mixture over steak. Serve with a side of rice. ☑

