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As told to Christina Lee, 1995 words.

Tags: Food, Podcasts, Beginnings, Day jobs, Independence, Business, Process.

# On balancing authenticity and accessibility

Chef, entrepreneur, and podcaster Esther Choi on being intentional, constantly trying to get better, and her path to starting her own restaurants and podcast.

**You wanted to become an entrepreneur since you were in high school. What did being an entrepreneur mean to you back then compared to now?**

It was not like that, per se. But I loved working. I remember selling candy when I was eight, nine years old. My dad would buy bulk from Costco, and I'd sell it to my friends on the bus for however much. I remember at age 12, I tried to apply for all these jobs at the mall. Obviously I was rejected because I was too young, but I think I landed my first job when I was 14, at a restaurant.

Then in high school I read this book, Rich Dad Poor Dad by Robert Kiyosaki. It's embarrassing that I was so influenced by this book. But it actually made such a big difference in my life. My dad used to get all these free books donated. One day I was going through the books (I was 15 or 16), and I came across Rich Dad Poor Dad. It pretty much changed my whole outlook on what my career should be like—what a job is, the meaning of running your own business, not being salary-oriented. My parents were small business owners as well, so I grew up in that mindset.

**What strikes me is that at age 12, you don't necessarily have to work. What was the driving force?**

I just felt always trapped in a bubble. I'm from a very, very small town, literally the boonies of South Jersey. So there is a sense of independence that I've always wanted. I've never been good at taking direction. I did study pharmacy in college because my parents convinced me to do that. It was a really, really good school. I got a full scholarship, and I felt like that was the right thing to do. But then I quickly realized, "Uh, I really hate this." Second year I dropped out, but I didn't tell my parents right away.

**At what point do you realize that your purpose was to reintroduce Korean food?**

When I was graduating college, I still didn't have a set plan on what I wanted to do with my life. I thought that the proper thing to do was to get a nice corporate job that paid really well. That's what all my friends did. That's what my sister did. That's what everyone did, especially in the Korean community. Either you go to grad school or you become a doctor or a lawyer, or you go into corporate banking—a standard, glamorous, New York City desk job. When I graduated I started working at a tech company in the marketing department. I ended up leaving that job three months later. Why was I working so hard for someone else to benefit? If I know I don't like something, I don't wait and stay there for years. I leave,

because I know it's not what I want to do.

At that point I worked in restaurants for over eight years, all throughout high school. Freshman year in high school was my first restaurant job. I worked at that restaurant for four years. In college, I also got a side job at a restaurant. Restaurants were always a side gig, my safety net. I was like, "I'm going to pursue a career in food. But I'm not going to be a chef. I'm going to work at the Food Network." I wanted to still work in the corporate environment because I thought that's what professionalism was, and I wanted to be a professional. This was 11 years ago, 12 years ago, when food media was at its peak.

Immediately I started working in New York City kitchens as a line cook, while I was in school. I still felt like I had to give Food Network a try because if I didn't it would always be in the back of my mind. I did get a job [at Food Network] eventually, and I worked [there] for a few years actually. I'm so, so happy that I did that. Without that opportunity, I wouldn't have gotten to where I am right now either. But I think as an entrepreneur you have to be resourceful and utilize everything that you have. When I eventually opened my first restaurant, I definitely asked for a lot of help from past coworkers in food media. I utilized that a lot as a marketing tool.

Even at restaurants when I was working as a line cook, or when I was at the Food Network, everything that I made always somehow got Korean-ized. I always would add kimchi to something. I would always introduce people to these Korean flavors. At the time, I was the only Korean cook in the kitchen. No one knew what Korean food was, so I was always the one making kimchi and utilizing whatever ingredients I had to make it. I would use different ingredients that they had to mimic the flavors of kimchi. I would bring kimchi-jjigae to work and then make family meals with it. I did that at Food Network—people still talk about my family meal there. When I was a sous [chef] at a Mexican restaurant, I would just incorporate all these Korean techniques and ingredients. I always knew when I opened my own restaurant it would be Korean. Why would I be cooking any other cuisine? I was the expert. How else would all these people learn about Korean food if it wasn't for me?

**How do you balance the more traditional aspects of, for a lot of people, these incredibly nostalgic dishes, with your "personal spin?" I'm thinking about your take on kimchi jjigae in particular.**

Very early on in my career, one of the first chefs that I ever worked for told me that there should be a purpose behind every dish that you create. You can put 20 of the best ingredients that you can find on a plate and say it's delicious. And it could be. But there's no substance, or it just feels unintentional.

For me it was always important to be very intentional. I remember [the chef] saying this to me after I made a random dish for him to try. He was like, "What's the meaning of it? How did you come up with it?" He asked me all these questions before he even tasted it. I didn't know how to answer. But even now I still think about it all the time. When I create any dish, literally the first thing I think of is, what is the purpose behind this dish? Why am I putting this ingredient in it?

Another chef said to try to make a dish with less than five ingredients. If it's just as delicious as the dish with 50 [ingredients], you know that's the perfect dish—simplicity, but refined. That's what I think about when I create any menu. It's about balance. It's about intention. It's about how a dish is created and the story behind it. Even now, when I create a menu, that's the first thing I think of. For me, the most important thing is authentic flavors. Authentic flavors to what I know, which is my grandmother's palette. I grew up eating my grandmother's Korean food—super authentic to Korean flavors.

Every dish I create, yes, it may not be in the form of what you think of kimchi-jjigae. But when you taste it, you know that it's the same exact flavors. When we first opened mökbar, it was a ramen bar, so all the ramen bowls were sort of a disguise of a very traditional Korean soup. For example, our kimchi ramen is a version of kimchi jjigae, so it tasted like kimchi jjigae straight up. Our vegan miso ramen was modeled off of doenjang jjigae, and so on and so forth. How do I keep the authentic flavors but make it so that it is more accessible for people, because Korean food can be intimidating? I opened mökbar six years ago when there was no Korean food besides [in] K-Town. People were like, "Kimchi? What's that?"

**How did the podcast *Get Down with K-Town* come to be?**

My career as a chef evolved into being a restaurateur and now being an entrepreneur in general. When I started to expand on my career, that also had to do with media presence and being that face of Korean food. Then that evolved into not only Korean food but Korean culture as well. I'd been doing just a lot of work in production, which also has a lot to do with my background in food media. So I guess that led into doing the podcast.

They [iHeartMedia] were looking for hosts in the food sector, so I was introduced. They wanted a podcast about Korean food, but I wanted to be a little bit more. So I pitched this concept of talking about everything from Korean culture, in the lens of a chef because that's what I know best. But I still am eager to learn about all facets of Korean culture, and this was my opportunity to do that.

I didn't even realize how hard a podcast would be. In the beginning when I was pitching it I was like, "Oh I could do this. It's a podcast. All you gotta do is go and talk." No. It's a whole production. Actually, man, it's flexing a muscle that I'm not used to flexing.

**I loved on Instagram how you mentioned researching how to talk. I thought that was so important to point out, as a lot of artists are increasingly having to become more public-facing. What advice do you have for artists who face that reality?**

I think you're so right with social media and just how things are in the world right now. You need to be the face of your own business. It doesn't work how it used to work. For example, you become a chef so you don't have to talk to people and be the face. Nowadays being a chef is so different. You have to do it all. It didn't come naturally for me either.

Any artist, they have to work at their craft, right? Even being a media personality or podcast host, I thought it would come naturally for me because we're having a conversation. "People are my thing, I can do it." No. You have to put in the work and be intentional about every little detail. I literally researched "how to talk on camera." A lot of my research came from how news anchors speak-how they learn to speak with confidence and not stumble on your words and say "like" or "um" too much.

That was something that I had to really work on. I'm still actually working on it. A friend of mine who is a TV host started teaching these classes during the pandemic, "Hosting 101" or something like that. I've taken weekly lessons with her, where we act like we're doing live television. It's been really helpful for me, because how else are you going to be better at something? Practice makes perfect.

Obviously I've honed in on running my restaurants and managing people, so it's refreshing to be able to do something completely out of the norm. A big part of the way that I work is constantly improving and wanting to try new things out. Even though some may work and some might not, when it does work it's freaking awesome. It will lead to more opportunities and happiness.

#### Esther Choi Recommends:

Korean skincare — I love Then I Met You's The Cleansing Duo and Sulwhasoo's Ginseng Line

Nenox knife

Pot d'Huile Hemp-Infused CBD Olive Oil

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