



THE big CHANG THEORY

SUPER CHEF
DAVID CHANG
TALKS ABOUT HIS LIFE
IN THE BALANCE

by Howie Kahn
photography Gemma and
Andy Ingalls

Gastronomy/

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“The past 12 months have been absolutely crazy,” says David Chang. “I sold my apartment. I’ve been living out of a suitcase. I’ve been in the new restaurants in Sydney and Toronto far more than I’ve been here in New York. I just got back. I’m staying in a hotel. I’m looking for a new place to live.” This was supposed to be Chang’s year off, a self-imposed sentence to recharge, refocus, and revive. But it isn’t shaping up that way. Chang can only relax in a vacuum. “If I sit down in the barber’s chair to get a haircut,” he says, “I fall asleep immediately. I get 15 great minutes of sleep. When I get on a plane, even it’s a 21-hour flight to Australia, I zone out completely.”

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In the world at large, however—where Chang has 700 employees spread out across two continents, three countries, eight [Momofuku](#) restaurants, five [Milk Bar](#) bakeries, a couple of cocktail bars, a lab in which to advance the sophistication and relevance of his cuisine, and a quarterly magazine, [Lucky Peach](#), published in conjunction with McSweeney’s—he finds it, in his terms, “fucking impossible to rest.”

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Not that David Chang suddenly expected to go Zen.

We're sitting at a corner table at Ssäm Bar in the East Village, just a few stools away from where we first met six years ago. Chang, then 29 and owner of two ascending restaurants (Noodle Bar being the other), was being profiled for the first time by a national magazine. Alan Richman had written a story for *GQ*, and Chang, who had just recovered from a stress-derived case of the shingles was, as he put it back then, feeling "nervous as fuck." He was anxious about all the sudden attention; about all the fact-checking questions I was asking him (though his answers were characteristically honest, soul-searching and expansive); and about the idea of running two extremely personal restaurants that were already starting to set the bar for every other restaurant opening in New York City. The Momofukation of Downtown dining was just then beginning, but Chang was already feeling threatened that it would all be taken away. He was just starting out and intensely focused on the end.

All these years later, lunch with Chang—whose restaurants *Bon Appetit* recently called the most important in America—is even more generous in scope. For one thing, our table is overrun with pork buns; Southern smoky ham; a roasted duck presentation involving multiple sauces, fried shallots, chive pancakes, and assorted herbs and greens, all in support of



the copious bird, confit legs and breast meat with jewel-toned skin, that will actually feed me for the next three days. The conversation, revolving around big-ticket themes like self-improvement, business and organizational development, love, work, luck, fear and mortality, is equally sustaining.

"I'm turning 35 in August," says Chang, chop-sticking a slice of meat. "I never thought about life after 35. Literally, I didn't even think I'd be alive."

For Chang, reaching this ripe, old, unimaginable age directly means thinking more about others. "How do we make everybody's lives happy? That's the goal," he says. "He's also increasingly concerned about his own path away from the restaurant. "There's a new set of challenges coming up that I'm actually afraid of," he says. "I've always had the luxury of putting my life on hold because of Momofuku. If I choose to have a life outside of it, I have to go through the same problems everyone else goes through in their 20s and 30s."

We can hardly make a dent in all this duck. Two men? No match. The Beatles' "I Want to Hold Your Hand" plays over the sound system followed by Yes' "Owner of a Lonely Heart." Chang keeps circling back to the issue of happiness. "I really like when my friends tell me to just shut the fuck up and enjoy it all," he says, "to stop being a curmudgeon and a miserable fuck. So, I'm learning to enjoy it. I'm not good at it, but I'm trying."

He's serious. He's also smiling.

At this point in his career, Chang is being pulled in opposite directions. He knows more Momofukus are coming. Welcome in any market, the world over, it's a just a question of where and how. "I do want to open new restaurants," he says. "But not with the same process as I've used before. Toronto was so hard. My hands hurt. I have arthritis. My knees were shot. I couldn't talk. I couldn't work the line. I feel this need to be there and yet I don't want Momofuku to be about me. If I could have it my way, I would drop off the planet . . . and I would still be helping Momofuku."

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As the last of the late lunch crowd is seated, Chang is discussing the notion of balance, specifically finding stable ground between being incredibly present in his business's future and being entirely free of it. "I was thinking the other day," says Chang, who has given the order to box up our remaining food, "you know who has the best life?" I expect to hear another sports reference (earlier in the lunch I tried comparing Chang to LeBron James, but he said he identifies more with Knick great Herb Williams). "Thomas Pynchon," says Chang, as leftovers in 14 boxes are set on the table. "I don't mean I envy him as a writer," Chang says, approaching what seems like a moment of clarity. "But his ability to be both public with his talent and extraordinarily private with himself, that's exactly what I want."

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