

**CORI XIONG & HENG CHEN**  
**Mala Sichuan Bistro – Houston, TX**

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans  
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs  
Length: 1 hour, 22 minutes  
Project: Houston's Underbelly

**[Begin Cori Xiong & Heng Chen Interview]**

**00:00:00**

**Amy Evans:** This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Monday, August 25, 2014. And I am in Houston at Mala Sichuan Bistro with Cori Xiong and Heng Chen, owners of Mala. And if I could get each of you to state your name and then also state your occupation, please, for the record.

**00:00:25**

**Cori Xiong:** My name is Cori Xiong. I am the owner of Mala Sichuan Bistro. I was born in August 13, 1985, and I'm from Chengdu, Sichuan [province] of China.

**00:00:40**

**Heng Chen:** Hi, my name is Heng Chen, and I'm also from China, born on June 8, 1986. Yeah, I'm also an owner of Mala Sichuan Bistro. I was from Shenyang, China.

**00:01:03**

**AE:** Okay. And together, you operate the business and you're married, too?

**00:01:07**

**CX:** Uh-hm, yes. Yes, we're married.

**00:01:10**

**AE:** May I ask you what year you married and what year you opened the restaurant so we can kind of get that timeline?

**00:01:17**

**CX:** We got married in 2008.

**00:01:19**

**HC:** Yes.

**00:01:21**

**CX:** And we opened the restaurant in 2011.

**,00:01:25**

**AE:** Now I happen to know a little bit of your background, but would you first Cori, would you mind telling a little bit about your background and where you grew up and how you ended up in Houston?

**00:01:37**

**CX:** Hmm. I grew up in—in the City of Chengdu Sichuan, and then later on my dad moved to the United States in 1995, and I came to the United States after my dad applied for me in 1997. So I went to the sixth grade of elementary school in the United States and then went through the whole education system through college and graduated from UT [University of Texas at] Austin. And then after graduation, I moved to Houston to open this restaurant.

00:02:17

**AE:** Could you tell me a little bit about that immigration experience and being separated from your father and if you have siblings and what that was like a little bit?

00:02:25

**CX:** I do not have any siblings because around when the time when I was born, China has just introduced the one-child policy. So I'm—so I am the result of that [*Laughs*]*—*that policy, so I—I am an only child.

00:02:45

And then I—my dad and my—my parents have divorced when I was very little. It's hard; I don't know how to—. When—when my dad was in China, he was a food engineer, and he was also a professor in the University of Sichuan and later on in—in his life he—he decided to emigrate to the United States and give his children a better—a better platform, bring his children to a society with more opportunity. So he decided to move to the United States, and then that's how I later on came to the United States, as well.

00:03:39

And when I just came here, I didn't speak any English at all. It took me about three years to—to finally be able to have a simple conversation with people and that was in elementary school and also in junior high school. I went to ESL [English as a Second Language] classes in a school for newcomers. And—and the—the process of acculturation took—took a while and I—it took a while for me to get used to the new life here.

00:04:09

**AE:** Do you remember, aside from language, was there any kind of hurdles to assimilate as far as—as food and what you were used to and what you were able to get here that you—that you can recall?

**00:04:22**

**CX:** Yeah, on food, definitely, because just right after I got here, I didn't—I didn't like the food that's offered in the—in the school. And I find myself starving myself the whole time because I didn't like cheese, and I didn't like those fried chicken and all that stuff, and hamburgers. I didn't like any of that. And pizza. I didn't like any of those.

**00:04:47**

So I found myself bringing my own food to school, Chinese food and eating with chopsticks. And in the beginning a lot of the—the classmates during lunch break they would stare at me and look at my food and be look, “Hey, what are you eating? It's weird.” So it was a—for a little child, sometimes that's a little hurtful, too, for people to be staring at you and feel that you're different.

**00:05:17**

**AE:** Did you grow up cooking at home in China?

**00:05:20**

**CX:** Hmm, no, I didn't—I didn't. When I was little, I was only—when I was in China I was only eleven years old, and that's when I left China. And so I didn't do any cooking at that time. But my dad did a lot of cooking. He does a lot of cooking at home. So I watch him, and he cooks differently from everybody else. From his standpoint, he's a food engineer instead of a chef.

**00:05:49**

**AE:** Tell me a little bit more about that being a food engineer.

**00:05:52**

**CX:** A food engineer, what they do is you see all these food items on the supermarket on the shelves of supermarkets, those are—those are foods like packaged foods, processed foods. Those are all cooked in—in a way, processed in the factories. And that’s what he studies. And he—when he cooks at home, he cooks everything—he always cooks a large quantity of things, and he does a lot of—he makes a lot of sauces and has to do with a lot fermentation and stuff that normally people don’t do at home.

**00:06:32**

For example, like people would buy their own—buy—buy tofu and buy fermented sauces from the market, and my dad will make his own. And those are very different.

**00:06:46**

**AE:** Well then I wonder if we could get a little bit of your background story to complement now your—your wife’s background story, a little bit about your childhood and where you grew up.

**00:06:54**

**HC:** My story is less interesting than hers. I pretty much spent by now, I’d say about half of my life in China and half here. I came here when I was sixteen. So just attending high school. So my parents sent me, I guess, by like just as—it just happens that I went to—they sent me to a Marine

Military Academy for high school. And there I learned my language pretty much and, I guess, basically the American culture.

**00:07:38**

And then I went to UT [University of Texas at Austin] after that, and that's where I met my wife there. **[Laughs]** I really don't have any food background. That's—but everything about the food part is all coming from my wife. After graduation from U.T., I—I just know that I'm not really good at selling myself, so I know in—and I know like going to a 9:00 to 5:00 job is really not my thing, so I figured the best chance for me is to have something of my own to start—my own business or something like that. And so my wife has this background, and her dad opened the restaurant, so they kind of have this experience already and I mean we just talked—we mainly want to start doing something like this, at least something we can try.

**00:08:48**

So yeah, and I decided, yeah, that's something we can try, so that's how we started.

**00:08:56**

**AE:** I want to come back to the restaurant, but I want to first go back and talk a little bit more about your first experiences here in the States. So Cori, when you moved here, did you come straight to Dallas to meet your father?

**00:09:10**

**CX:** My dad was first in Arlington, so that was North Texas. That's—that's the first city that—that we stayed in, and then later on we moved to Allen, Texas, which is also in North Texas. And there my dad has his restaurant in Plano. So I went to elementary school, junior high school in Arlington and then my high school in Allen, and then I went to U.T. in Austin. And then after

graduation, I moved to Houston, so it's—so the order was Arlington, Allen, Austin, and then Houston.

**00:09:57**

**AE:** And then Heng, your family did they come—come straight to Texas, as well?

**00:10:02**

**HC:** No, just myself. Yeah, they sent me to the school, and then the school is in Arlington, Texas. That's next to Mexico, pretty much, and then U.T. Austin, and then after that just moved here with my wife to Houston, yeah.

**00:10:22**

**AE:** Do y'all have some memories of your first impressions of Texas?

**00:10:36**

Of if you had an idea of it before you got here? Just [*Laughs*]*—nothing coming to mind?*

**00:10:46**

**HC:** My first impression—well, when I was in China, I only well—my only knowledge of the U.S. was through pretty much movie or TV and—and all they shows is like New York and—and all the good areas like, you know, tall buildings and all that or L.A., you know, places like that. And when I first came to Houston, well, that's when I entered the U.S., Houston, they picked me up, and then I don't see many buildings. [*Laughs*] I did see a lot of open areas, and I did see a lot of—more of country-style like environment, so that's—that's much different than what I thought it would be.

00:11:42

**AE:** And what were your first experiences with—with food in the States and in Texas? I imagine it was a little bit different because you went to Military School, but do you have some memories of that?

00:11:50

**HC:** Military School is—well they—the food they provide is pretty much American and Mexican food, like mixed. I adjusted myself really quick; I didn't have any problem with it, just I had to learn what it was and but that's it. You know, I liked it. I'm okay with any kind of food.

*[Laughs]*

00:12:16

**AE:** Do you cook at all?

00:12:18

**HC:** Rarely, yeah. The only things I know—I think I only know like a couple things to cook, but not much, no.

00:12:30

**AE:** Yeah.

00:12:32

**CX:** When I just came to the United States, I thought, exiting the airport and driving on the street, I thought this place was really, really quiet and there is nobody walking on the street and cars—only cars and no people—there’s no people walking on the street. And then so that was very different from China because in China there’s a lot of people walking on the street and then—and here the cars they drive in their own lanes. And in—compared to China, people don’t drive in their own lanes. They just drive however—however they want. So people here are—obey order more than in China.

**00:13:18**

And then so the cars drive in their own lanes, and the cars don’t honk as—as they do in China and then I thought everything was more rural and suburban than I thought. I thought it was going to be metropolitan like—like New York but I guess Texas was a lot different from that from what I have in mind, so—. That was the main difference, I think.

**00:13:46**

**AE:** That’s so interesting to hear that it’s quiet. I like that. Yeah, it makes total sense, but—. And I—I want to ask your father’s name. I—I failed to ask his name yet.

**00:13:56**

**CX:** My father’s name is Tiyani Xiong.

**00:14:01**

**AE:** And tell me a little bit more about his transition to restaurant owning after he got here and how that happened.

**00:14:08**

**CX:** His restaurant—his transition from when he just got here he was—he was an engineer for a company. I don't remember exactly what company. But in 2008 there was a lot of companies started laying off people, and his company eventually laid off everybody and dissolved at the end. So that's when he decided to open his own restaurant. It was always kind of his—his alternative option for a career here, and then since he has a—a background in—in the—in—in the food engineer department and he has knowledge in those things and he was an engineer, so he—he designed a very good kitchen, a very—a very nice kitchen, very logical—logically laid—laid out kitchen with a lot of storage and lots of refrigeration storage and also just a very—with a lot of work—work spaces and all.

**00:15:25**

And then also because of his—his academic background in China, he also knew a lot of faculty members in the Sichuan Cooking Academy so that's how—so that's how he got connections to open a restaurant. And so he has his—some knowledge of his own, and he also knew people that's how he opened up his restaurant and then had his initial team of—team of chefs.

**00:16:00**

**AE:** Okay, so I mean would it be right to say that he opened when you were in college? Is that the right timeline?

**00:16:05**

**CX:** Um, when he opened his restaurant I think I was still in high school, yeah.

00:16:11

**AE:** And what's the name of it?

00:16:12

**CX:** Allen High School.

00:16:14

**AE:** The restaurant, I'm sorry.

00:16:15

**CX:** Oh the name of the restaurant is called Little Sichuan Cuisine.

00:16:21

**AE:** So what did—what did you see once your father opened the restaurant that maybe helped inspire you to do this restaurant today?

00:16:35

**CX:** Hmm. First of all, I always thought that I had a—I had a—a natural ability for managing—for managing a store or a project. I always thought I had that kind of ability and I—I was the same; I didn't like to be put in a cubicle and—and having a 9:00 to 5:00 job.

00:17:01

And when I was in—during the summer breaks of my college life, I also helped out in my dad's restaurant and I just thought it—it was more natural for me to—it was more natural. I feel—I feel more confident running a restaurant. And I was pretty good at it, I thought. So that's how I wanted to open a restaurant too.

00:17:25

**AE:** Now is your father's restaurant a traditional Sichuan restaurant?

00:17:30

**CX:** Yes, it was a traditional Sichuan restaurant, too, uh-hm.

00:17:33

**AE:** And I know, well, I won't go there yet. Let's stay—let's stay in your youth for a little while. You're still young, but in your college days and—and state—tell me, for the record, what each of y'all studied at U.T..

00:17:45

**CX:** I studied economics in U.T.. *[Laughs]*

00:17:49

**HC:** Same. Same. I studied economics first—no, actually, just undeclared first, and then engineering and then economics.

00:18:00

**AE:** And what wants to tell the story of how y'all met?

00:18:04

**CX:** I was very active in—in college. I joined a lot of student organizations, and in those organizations I was probably the most active member that they have, so I went to a lot of

meetings, a lot of different meetings of different organizations. And my husband, on the other hand, he's—he's not a very active, socially active person. He's more of a—a homeboy or he just stayed at home, stayed at his own apartment all the time. And then we have this mutual—mutual friend and this—one day, it was in the beginning of a semester. You know, in the very beginning of the semesters a lot of organizations will try to recruit more members by having a meeting, and they will offer free food at those meetings to attract more people.

**00:19:01**

And so my husband thought, “Oh, free food. Why not?” So he went with my—with this mutual friend that we had to that organization's meeting. And that's how we met there, and I was the active member in there so—so *[Laughs]*—and I—and I recognized that this is a new guy we have never seen before, so we started talking to each other and that's how we knew each other.

**00:19:24**

**AE:** And so how—I don't want to get too personal, but I'm wondering like what you connected on, you know, the economics, the food, the culture, the personality—like is there anything that stands out of—of what y'all immediately were attracted to by about each other? It's probably better left unsaid. I did put y'all on the spot with that one.

**00:19:48**

Okay, so I do want to ask, though, going to the University of Texas, which is a giant state school, very good school, very competitive but, you know, when I asked you when you first got to Texas what you thought of Texas, what—what ideas about Texas had you developed by the time that you went to the University of Texas?

**00:20:08**

**CX:** What was the question again?

**00:20:10**

**AE:** Well what did—when you went to college, you had been then a Texan for x-number of years, and so how—how, over those years, did you get to know Texas, like about Texas, not like about Texas—your just general thoughts on—on Texas after being here for a little while?

**00:20:31**

**CX:** I think my general thoughts of Texas—well, I've been to New York for—for a year. I've lived in New York for a year when I was in high school, well almost a year and not a full year. And I think people in Texas are more laid back. Everything is slower paced, and I think people are more outgoing and then just more—more easy-minded. I feel like—I feel like people in New York are more complex. Here people are more pure and more just down to earth.

**00:21:19**

**AE:** Did y'all have an idea that you might—you wanted to stay in Texas after college? Was that for sure?

**00:21:23**

**CX:** Yes, I liked Texas very much, especially having to live in New York for almost a year, I liked Texas very much. I thought it—it's bigger and it's more convenient, and you can always drive your car. In New York, you—it's hard to drive—drive a car around. And I think it's cleaner here, and then I feel like it's just more free. You can do whatever you want. And then there's not much of a—a social pressure or peer pressure going on. And I feel like in New York

people were just more complex and people are more judgmental and—and yeah, there’s more pressure.

**00:22:05**

**AE:** Well that might be a good segue to jump into Houston because, before we started recording, I was talking about how some people don’t consider Houston to be southern and maybe we should start there. Do y'all have an idea about what the Southern United States is like as a region? There’s the Midwest and the Northeast with New York and big cities and then the—the South, you know East Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia; do you have any like general thoughts about that as part of the country?

**00:22:41**

**HC:** What I know is that the South is very conservative and a lot of rednecks. I love redneck culture. Yeah, that’s—that’s pretty much what I know but—but the school we went to, U.T. Austin that’s—that’s a weird city. That’s pretty much liberal, yeah, very liberal. I loved that city but yeah, yeah it’s—that’s pretty much all I know.

**00:23:14**

**AE:** So then tell me how Houston compares to your experiences elsewhere in Texas now that you’ve been here for a handful of years.

**00:23:21**

**CX:** I think Houston is definitely more metropolitan. I—there is a very big difference that I noticed that is the population—there’s a lot of people moving in and out of this—of this city so

there's a lot of traffic going on. It's—I think it's a port city and also in the Chinese community, it's the same—it's the same way. There is a—the petroleum, offshore technology—technology conference every year, so—and then the—I think Air China just opened the—their airline between Beijing and Houston, so it makes it very easy for people to travel here. And then—and I just definitely feel that there is—there is a bigger moving population going on. So, and compared to Dallas, you'll feel that a lot of people have—a bigger percentage of people live there, permanently live there and in Houston I feel like there's more people that are moving around; that they stay here for a while and then they'll leave, and there will be more people coming here—will come here and then stay a while and then leave. There's a bigger moving population and so the culture is—the culture will definitely be affected by that factor, too.

**00:25:03**

**AE:** And what—how does the Chinese community differ in Houston as opposed to Dallas or Austin?

**00:25:10**

**CX:** Hmm, I think in Houston—in Dallas the Chinese community, the native of Chinese community there, they're—there's definitely a bigger portion of Chinese people that are there working in companies like just—just living there, living their life, and having their career there. And here there's definitely more—more kinds of Chinese people like people that are—that are here running their own business and people that come here regularly for business conferences, so there's more variety of Chinese people here.

**00:25:49**

**HC:** Yeah, definitely diversity here, but in Dallas it's just, you know—you know, white collar people pretty much.

**00:26:00**

**AE:** So tell me about the decision to open a restaurant in Houston.

**00:26:05**

**CX:** Well first of all, I think to open a restaurant you definitely need to find the right opportunity and the timing, as well. For us, we didn't have a lot of money, too, for a startup, and we couldn't just choose any location we wanted. And—and then—and invest money and then renovate the—the space into a restaurant. So we didn't have that kind of money to start. And then at the time when we—when we had the thought of opening a restaurant, an opportunity in Houston came up, and then we seized it. It was—it was in this location in the heart of Chinatown and then we thought—and because we—we don't have any previous experience of opening a restaurant before, so we wanted to be more conservative and—and stay—and stay in Chinatown because we didn't know if we could do well if we—if we were not in Chinatown. So it was pretty—it was a pretty conservative move to—to decide this place.

**00:27:20**

And it wasn't that—it wasn't that expensive. It was within our—our ability and limit money-wise.

**00:27:29**

**AE:** And I read, too, that y'all made some trips here and saw that there was room for a traditional Sichuan restaurant.

00:27:36

**CX:** Yes. Yes.

00:27:38

**AE:** Can you talk about that?

00:27:41

**CX:** Hmm—

00:27:44

**AE:** When you came here what you thought was missing and what gave you the idea for Mala Sichuan.

00:27:50

**CX:** Well when we—when we found out about this opportunity there, was already three other Sichuan restaurants in Chinatown at least. And then we feel that—we feel that we can do pretty well and I feel that because Sichuan cuisine in China is—there's eighty schools of cuisine in China and then in China, Sichuan cuisine is the biggest, but in the United States the—it's Cantonese food that's more widely accepted, so I feel that there's definitely more potential for Sichuan food anywhere in the United States.

00:28:34

And in Chinatown there is definitely a lot more Cantonese food restaurants than Sichuan restaurants, so I feel that because the Sichuan cuisine has very interesting flavors and then the

fact that it's so popular in China; it's the biggest—it's the biggest and most popular, most widely accepted type of cuisine in China, I feel—I feel that it's definitely got its market here, too.

**00:29:03**

**AE:** And so how about the location here on Bellaire Boulevard? It's so built up here anymore and there's—there's so many restaurants and but tell me how—you still felt confident that there was room for y'all here.

**00:29:16**

**CX:** One of the main differences—main reasons I felt confident was because of my chef because with my dad's background and as a food engineer and his connections with the people, the faculty members and people that were from the Sichuan Cooking Academy, I knew that my chef was a professional chef. He was—he came from a—an academic background. I have—I had confidence in him because I knew him personally before we opened this restaurant. And he also has confidence, so we feel that this—we are a good team and that we will be able to—we will be able to succeed and also given the fact that I have—I kind of grew up here, and I've had American education, and I spoke English pretty well like comparing to a lot of other Chinese restaurant owners didn't speak English very well, I feel that we were more of the younger generation and we're more open-minded. And we have—so I felt—I felt like we have—we have our own strengths. And if we use it to the—to the right places, we should succeed. And as long as you work hard and then you put all—all of your effort here, I think people will notice you and then people will support you once they feel that—feel your—your efforts.

**00:30:50**

**AE:** And tell me your chef's name and I'll get you to—I'm sorry. I'll get these—you to spell these out for me when we're done, but if you could say your chef's name for the record.

**00:31:00**

**CX:** Okay, my chef's name is Rong Wu.

**00:31:04**

**AE:** And he was already in Texas or did you recruit him from China?

**00:31:08**

**CX:** He—after his graduation, about probably almost thirty years ago from the Sichuan Cooking Academy, he's had about eight years of working experience in—in large restaurants in—in Chengdu, and then he moved abroad to, I think, he—he's been to Japan before. But then he's—he spent most of his life abroad into the United States, and he has been to the United States, I believe almost—

**00:31:39**

**HC:** Twenty years.

**00:31:41**

**CX:** —twenty years—twenty or maybe—at least twenty years I feel. I feel it's at least twenty years, so he's been here for a long time, so he's used to the American—American life and—and the American Chinese food industry. And before he came to Houston to open this restaurant with

me, he was—he has been working in New York for a long time and then New York is definitely has a lot of very good Sichuan restaurants, definitely—definitely very, very competitive too.

**00:32:15**

**AE:** Do you have an idea of what he thought about moving to Texas?

**00:32:21**

**CX:** You mean moving to Texas to open the next restaurant with me?

**00:32:25**

**AE:** Ah—

**00:32:27**

**CX:** He definitely felt confident. [*Laughs*]

**00:32:28**

**AE:** Well and what—what did he bring to the table to open the restaurant? Were there things that you had—you all had the business plan and the confidence and the motivation and idea, and what—what did he bring as a chef to the—to the collaboration?

**00:32:49**

**CX:** What did he bring as a chef to the collaboration? Well his skills and knowledge and experience of twenty—twenty years years; he has a very good sense of taste, and then he also has a very good sense of getting a feeling of what kind of food people will be able to accept here. I

think he has a very keen sense of observation, and before we opened the restaurant we briefly went to the restaurants around this—this area to get a taste of the things that other restaurants are offering and also after we opened our restaurant for about a few months, getting a feeling of our customers so he got—he was able to—to come to a more I would say more easily accepted menu for us.

**00:34:00**

**AE:** Okay, so to tailor it a little bit more for the customer base here in Houston. Are there—is he the one who you mentioned when I had lunch with Chris [Shepherd of Underbelly] here that cooked for Nixon in China in the [nineteen] ‘70s?

**00:34:12**

**CX:** That was his teacher. That was his teacher, yes.

**00:34:17**

**AE:** So he learned from the best then that—

**00:34:20**

**CX:** Yes, his Master or his teacher was the—the best guy at cooking the ants on tree, back—back then.

**00:34:32**

**AE:** And you have ants on the tree on your menu, yeah?

**00:34:34**

**CX:** Yeah, we have that.

**00:34:36**

**AE:** So is that something that he likes cooking? Does he get excited when people order that?

**00:34:41**

**CX:** He actually—he didn't learn that particular dish from his Master because his Master didn't want to teach anybody that dish. *[Laughs]* So he didn't get to learn that one, that particular one, but he did get a lot of other skills from—from his teacher.

**00:35:00**

**AE:** And I want to talk about the menu in a minute but first I want y'all to talk about your—your vision for this restaurant because I—you know a lot of what I hear and learn about y'all is wanting to do more kind of upscale restaurant in Chinatown and kind of your vision for how the restaurant looks and how it's organized and—and your business model here.

**00:35:25**

**CX:** What was the question?

**00:35:29**

**AE:** Just how you when you opened the restaurant how you—your business model of how you wanted to set it apart and just like the décor and having it be a little bit more of an upscale restaurant for the—for the area.

**00:35:41**

**CX:** Okay, I definitely wanted to be more original as opposed to more generic. And when I designed the menu, I put a lot of thought into that and it took me a long time to—it took—it took my chef and I a long time to discuss the menu and I wrote all the—all the details and all the description for all the dishes. I feel like that's what's lacking in—on a lot of Chinese restaurants' menus because for the non-Chinese speakers, they walk into the restaurant and see a menu that they don't fully understand or a menu that is not informative enough, I feel that is the—the biggest thing that's—that's discouraging them to try different food.

**00:36:30**

So I worked hard to—to make the non-Chinese speaking customers feel easy on that part. And also on hiring people that speak—that spoke English so that the communication wasn't a problem. And also I feel—in general I feel like the—the American average diner have a lack of understanding of Chinese cuisine, especially Sichuan cuisine. So I think my—my—a lot of my effort went to trying to educate people about that.

**00:37:23**

**AE:** Well let's talk about the menu, then. I remember that I asked you to bring one in. And if you could talk about some of those things that you mentioned, how you wanted to really help communicate what you were doing here with some of the things on the menu and—and the translation, we were talking about the translations last time that I saw you and how things kind of changed when you put them in English.

**00:37:46**

**CX:** Well first of all, I feel like the—the mala flavor is the signature flavor of Sichuan cuisine, so I definitely wanted to get that across. That’s why I put a short paragraph on the very top of the first page of the menu—of my menu introducing what the mala flavor is. I feel like a lot of other Chinese restaurants will try to tone down this flavor just because they feel they want to take the more conservative approach. They feel that the—the—the American diners that are unfamiliar with this type of flavor they would—they will get scared off if we—if they put too much mala into it, but that’s—that’s the opposite of what I wanted to do. I wanted to let people know what this mala is and—and for them to enjoy it.

**00:38:49**

So in the—in the—on my menu, I put down what the mala is: it is the simultaneous sensation of spices and the numbing of the lips conferred by the use of Sichuan peppercorns and the Sichuan peppercorn is a—is a spice indigenous to the Sichuan region of China. And this—this very—this very unique flavor is a very quintessential part of Sichuan cuisine and please enjoy. So I put that down. A lot of people will still ask me hey what is that; what is—what is—what’s in your dishes that’s numbing my mouth, and then I will point that—that paragraph to them and say this is what it is so they know. So they know—so they know that the flavor is—there’s—the flavors that we are familiar with which are sweet, sour, spicy, salty, bitter and there’s another flavor that’s called numbing which is—which is only achieved by the Sichuan peppercorns.

**00:39:49**

**AE:** And your father goes to China to get those, is that right?

**00:39:51**

**CX:** Yes, in the—in the city of Houston there are no good Sichuan peppercorns in the—in the whole city. We’ve—we’ve literally been to every corner of the city to find Chinese supermarkets and bought every single different type of Sichuan peppercorns that we could find; there are no good ones. And then we knew that there are some good ones that are offered in New York and the West Coast as well, but those are still not as good as the ones that we were able to get in China, so my dad personally goes to China and—and picks out those from the local market. And we import them ourselves. We import our own Sichuan peppercorns because that’s—I feel that—that is like the—the essence of Sichuan cuisine. You cannot compromise on that.

**00:40:42**

**AE:** Do you have an idea why there is so much variation in quality in that one item?

**00:40:49**

**CX:** Hmm, to be honest with you, I don’t—I don’t know. I don’t know how come there’s—I think it definitely has to do with the freshness and—and the way they store these things. And then also the lack of seriousness when people—when people cook, **[Laughs]** so it’s easy to get by to—to get some inferior Sichuan peppercorn and settle with it and we don’t settle on the inferior Sichuan peppercorns.

**00:41:20**

**AE:** Tell me too why you have the word *bistro* in the name of the restaurant? No, okay.

**[Laughs]** No comment. Okay.

**00:41:29**

**CX:** I feel like I didn't want to use the word cuisine or restaurant or—or anything that's—that you can see everywhere. I wanted to use something different. *[Laughs]*

**00:41:40**

**AE:** Stand out. Right. I get it. Okay, so your menu starts with the live tilapia, which is very popular here. Tell me more about that.

**00:41:49**

**CX:** When we got—when we took over this restaurant, there was a live fish tank in the restaurant, and the fish tank is a lot of money to build and then so we wanted to—wanted to utilize that very well. We have—actually have a very big tank, so—and then there's a very good supply store for live tilapia and my—my chef happened to be—happened to be really, really, really good at cooking tilapia and cooking live fish. He actually has got a—a national award, a bronze medal, on one of the tilapias that he made back in China when he was—it was a national cooking competition to—that took place in the national hall people or something like that, something—something—it was in Beijing. It was like the—it was like the biggest—biggest—

**00:42:52**

**HC:** Government.

**00:42:52**

**CX:** —yeah, where government people have meetings. It's like equivalent to the Congress here. So he—he's really good at—he's really good at cooking these live—live fish(es), so he wanted to—we wanted to—so number one, we wanted to use the tank. Number two, my chef is really

good at cooking live fish(es). So that's why we first of all—well first when we—when we had our menu, we only had it four live tilapia dishes on our menu, and they were really, really, really popular, and then we expanded it to twelve—twelve different—different live tilapia dishes.

**00:43:37**

**AE:** Wow and why the choice of tilapia as a specific fish? It's easy to get; that's one, I'm sure.

**00:43:44**

**CX:** Yeah, it's easy to get. It's easy to get a steady—steady quantity of it and steady quantity and quality of it. And also this fish is very hardy; it's easy to keep alive, easy to maintain, easy to keep alive.

**00:44:00**

**HC:** Also the—the cost most people would accept the price because if—if we get a—say, bass, it's hard to maintain, a lot more expensive, so less people want to spend that much money to try this.

**00:44:22**

**AE:** And tilapia, I imagine, too, since it's such a mild fish it really takes on the flavors of the—.

**00:44:28**

**CX:** That's right. It's a—the tilapias here are farm tilapias, so they are not—they're freshwater and—and in Sichuan, Sichuan is—is an inland province of China, so in Sichuan there is only

fresh fish as well. So this tilapia fit really well, and in Sichuan we didn't really have any salt—saltwater fish.

**00:44:57**

**AE:** So what's the most popular tilapia dish you have?

**00:45:00**

**CX:** The most popular tilapia dish is definitely the mala pot-roasted tilapia. This one is very heavy on the mala flavor, and then it's a little bit sweet at the end. And this one is also the award-winning tilapia that my chef had back in China.

**00:45:17**

**AE:** And this—are all of your tilapia dishes served in the same way on the bowl on the burner or—or is that just the hot—?

**00:45:27**

**CX:** Um, the—

**00:45:32**

**AE:** With the burner—the way that it's served, with the burner that comes to the table?

**00:45:37**

**CX:** There's a—only two of the tilapias are pots, are hot-pots in the hot-pot form, the other ones are all whole—like a whole fish. The—the hot-pot ones they're sliced and then cooked into a pot of soup.

**00:45:54**

**AE:** Great. So the—you said you started with four and now you have twelve. Are all twelve equally, you know, well received?

**00:46:02**

**CX:** When you have that many of a choice, no. I don't think—I don't think all of them will be equally as popular. But still, the—the first ones that were—that were offered, they're still the most popular ones, yeah.

**00:46:18**

**AE:** Okay, well let's go onto some other things that you offer and maybe some highlights of like really typical well-known and loved traditional Sichuan dishes that you have.

**00:46:35**

**CX:** On the whole menu? Definitely the spicy and crispy chicken; that one is a very, very, very traditional Sichuan—Sichuan dish. And then also the tea-smoked duck; that's also an exclusive Sichuan dish. It's very popular. The Dan Dan noodles, that's a very traditional street food that you'll be able to get on any—on any street or on any corner of—if you're in China. And also the—the house special cold noodles, the funky stick chicken, those are—those are exclusive Sichuan flavor—flavor profiles as well.

**00:47:14**

And also cumin beef, that's very popular. The Chengdu-style pot roasted prawns with Yibin preserved vegetables and ground pork, and that's also something from—that's also an ingredient—Sichuan ingredient. Those are very popular.

**00:47:43**

**AE:** And you added in the beginning some kind of more generic—not generic but Chinese dishes like Kung Pao Chicken and things that American are more familiar with, and do I have it right that you took those off the menu, or do you still have them?

**00:47:59**

**CX:** No. The—the Kung Pao Chicken like Kung Pao Chicken that's actually—that's actually a very—people probably don't know this but Kung Pao Chicken is originated for Sichuan. It's a Sichuan dish and a lot of Chinese restaurants here has made it into an American dish [*Laughs*] so we—we have this—this item on the menu, and then it's cooked in the—in the very traditional way.

**00:48:36**

**AE:** Then tell me, we're opened to the page that now has the—the Basil Intestines as—as the dish is titled. Tell me about those dishes that are maybe a little bit have taken longer or are more difficult for the American general public to latch onto and the blood cake that we were talking about last week.

**00:48:56**

**CX:** What do you want—?

**00:49:00**

**AE:** Well just that the—the—the dishes that you have with the—the organ meats and the blood cake and those things that are traditional in Chinese culture that when Americans come in here and they see those how they have responded to them.

**00:49:16**

**CX:** It's—to my surprise that I felt like the—the American diners here are more open-minded than I thought. When they—when they see these pork intestines or—or blood—the blood cake and stuff like that, some people are willing to try them and some people are not. Even—even the people that are not willing to try them, it's because either they—they've tried them before and they didn't like it or even—even if they didn't want to try it they—they didn't freak out. They—it seems like they definitely knew that these types of things are offered in culture foods. So but then some of them are—they are willing to try it, and I feel like they're still pretty open-minded. Some—some people will still try it at some point in time, and they decide if they like it or not.

**00:50:23**

Like the—the crispy and spicy pork intestines, I think there are quite a few American people here that they tried it and they liked it, and they will get it again so it's pretty good. And then also we have a few dishes that have kidney in them and they like it, too. Sometimes I think—I think it has—maybe it has to do with the Southern—the Houston being a Southern city is I feel like that a lot of people that—that have done hunting before they've—they've—it's not

unfamiliar to them to—to eat like the organ meats. So if it's not that weird to them, they—they will try a Chinese restaurant's.

**00:51:11**

**AE:** How are you—are you able to easily source those things for your menu?

**00:51:15**

**CX:** Yes, [*Laughs*] because Chinese you eat those things and then there are—because there's a large client base that has a demand for these things, so they are offered in the market.

**00:51:30**

**AE:** Great. So tell me about let's go back to the translations of some of these because there's a page that you just flipped by, I don't know if it's front or back, the Prosper at 5:00 A.M. [dish]—some of those titles. Because Chris [Shepherd of Underbelly] was talking about, you know, he loves the stories that are on your menu.

**00:51:44**

**CX:** The Prosper at 5:00 A.M., this particular dish I had—I had to—I did a lot of research before I gave—gave it this name because I knew, even though the Chinese—this is actually a direct translation of—of the Chinese—well, not exactly direct translation, but I knew that it had to be some kind of—some kind of story behind this—behind this—this dish name or why would it be called 5:00 a.m.

**00:52:15**

So I went—I—I did ask my chef, and my chef also told me the—the story too, and I also did some research myself. Did you want me to explain the whole story? Okay, sure. It’s—and back in China, when people didn’t—when the modern clock is not invented yet, well Chinese invented the first clock and it was—it was a—a large water tower. It’s not something portable that you can put in your own house. So—so a town would have just one clock and—and then it would—and then they would—they would—there will be a guy who hits a gong and reports the time on the street. The guy will literally walk on the street and hit the gong and report the time by calling out the time.

00:53:08

So this guy, the time reporter in this particular city back in China, he—he was a time reporter. So his—his—his time, his—his sleeping hours, his schedule is different from everybody else because everybody else will be working during the day and he will be working during the night reporting time and reporting time every hour. So and this guy he—he invented a dish on a particular New Year’s Eve. And usually on New Year’s Eve people would stay up; people will stay up and eat together. So this guy, he—on New Year’s Eve he made this dish. He invented this dish himself with some pork blood and pork intestines and then so these people that are—that are in the city asked him, “Hey, what are you making? What is this dish called?” And people thought this dish tasted really good. And then so he—he didn’t have a name at the time. And then he felt like okay, I made this dish at 5:00 a.m. in the morning, and it’s made with pork intestines and pork blood, so let’s just call it 5:00 a.m. pork intestine in pork blood.

00:54:23

And then the pork—pork intestine in pork blood in Chinese sounds—sounds very similar to—in Chinese it’s—it’s pronounced *cháng wàng* [sounds like *chung wong*] and it’s so—very, very similar to another Chinese phrase which is *chāng wàng* [sounds like *cheng wong*] and

*chāng wàng* means prosper. And then people felt, oh, this—this dish sounds very lucky. It's got a very lucky name, so let's call it *gáng chāng wàng*. Well *gáng* means 5:00 a.m. because he made it at 5:00 a.m. in the morning, and then so people—people felt it's very lucky. It's a very lucky dish, so later on it became a—it became a lucky dish that people eat on New Year's Eve at 5:00 a.m. because it means when you eat this—this—this dish at 5:00 a.m. in—on New Year's Eve the next year you will prosper.

00:55:21

So that's how I gave—gave its name, Prosper at 5:00 A.M. because on—on the character it just says 5:00 a.m. pork intestines in pork blood. But then they—it really—these two characters sounds like prosper. And that's the background.

00:55:42

**AE:** Are there a lot of dishes on your menu that you did research for like that?

00:55:46

**CX:** Um, there are a few. Some of them were to—to come up with a Chinese name, too. Like the—like this Kung Pao—there's a—there's a different—there's a different ways of writing this—writing this dish name. The second character some people write it this way; some people write it another way and I had to do—go do research on which—which is the correct, the correct way of writing it. And then I feel like this is the more correct way. The other character means flash—flash fry but this character actually is more close to the original—the original story, so I chose this to write—to put this character instead of the other newer version.

00:56:41

And then also some of them are—are less difficult like the Prosper at 5 A.M. Like ants on the tree. I think a lot of the other restaurants will probably just name it vermicelli with—with—with ground pork or something like that, but I feel like it's—it's more fun and more interesting just to translate it the way it is in Chinese because I feel like it's more poetic that way.

**00:57:12**

**AE:** It's so amazing, the work that went into this menu, and I wonder how many people who eat here actually realize that.

**00:57:18**

**CX:** I think people will definitely realize that. Even Chinese people too; even though they read the Chinese part of it, sometimes they will go and see the English part, and then they will laugh and say, “Hey that's interesting—ants on the tree,” and then they'll laugh. **[Laughs]**

**00:57:33**

**AE:** Do you think it helps people who are familiar with Sichuan cuisine to maybe try it because it has a story behind it?

**00:57:38**

**CX:** Definitely, definitely. People will—I've definitely had people ask me, “Hey, why is this called this? What's the story behind it?” And then some people will find the name interesting and it makes them want to read about it and it makes them want to taste it, like the funky stick chicken that just sounds very funky and very funny. And—and I think so, yeah.

00:57:58

**AE:** What is the funky stick chicken?

00:58:00

**CX:** The funky actually is a flavor in Sichuan cuisine. The funky flavor, it literally means the funky flavor in Chinese. And then the funky flavor is—is made of—of a seven layer flavor, seven layer flavor and they are the sweet, sour, the mala, the salty—salty, savory, and aromatic, and together this seventh flavor because it's really hard to give it a name, so we just gave it a funky—we just gave it a name of funky flavor. So it literally means funky, yeah.

00:58:41

**AE:** Hmm. I'm conscious of the time that we've spent here. We've spent an hour together, but I have a few more questions if y'all have the time and patience to sit with me because I definitely want to talk about Chris, and I'd like to ask you when you remember first meeting Chris Shepherd who has Underbelly.

00:58:56

**CX:** When I first met him I was actually serving tables on that particular day, and he came in here and I just remember him being really big and then this—he has this very kind of authoritative aura. And he ordered a whole table of dishes that he couldn't finish and he left me a—a very big tip [*Laughs*] and then it was very coincidental—it was a coincidence that on that—on that same day another table—another table had another chef. He was another chef too and this other customer told me that—told me and pointed at Chris—at Chris Shepherd and told me, “Hey did you know—do you know who that is?” And I said, “I don't know who that is.”

And he told me who he—who he was and told me that he’s Chris Shepherd and he owns a restaurant called Underbelly, and he’s the chef owner of that restaurant. So that’s how I knew Chris.

**00:59:55**

But that was after—that was after it was—it was—it was later on that I actually got to—got to talking to him as a—as restaurant owners. The first time we were just talking to each other because as a waitress and a customer, yeah.

**01:00:14**

**AE:** And so it seems to me that, along with Chris, that a lot of people found you early on—reviewers and bloggers and people in the industry. How did that make you feel to be recognized so early on?

**01:00:26**

**CX:** I feel very happy that—that my efforts are seen by people and my efforts are felt by people. I feel like—I feel like I was—I was approved because I—I put this—this much effort into—into like that I put all these thoughts into my restaurant and into my menu. I feel that people definitely recognize that. In the very beginning I would—I would go online and search my own restaurant online every day to see if there’s anything—if—if anybody—anybody talks about my restaurant online. And the very first thing I found was a blog article by Dr. Ricky and then it was later—later on that I found out that Dr. Ricky was a food biologist, and then by reading his blog article, I recognized that the first time he came in here to—to eat here I—I served him, too. I waited his table as well. He—he ordered a dish called the—the konjac—the—the konjac beef and then he ordered that dish and he was—he was an English-speaking customer. He was on the first English

speaking customers that we had and he—he wanted to order this dish on the menu, and I told him, “This dish is pretty exotic. It’s got konjac in it, and it’s jelly textured because every time—every time when—when somebody orders this—this dish I will—I will definitely—I will always remind them that this dish has konjac in it, and the konjac is a gelatin texture thing because there are people who don’t like gelatin textured things. So I told him that and he—he was okay with it and he ordered it and then—and then when he went back to write his own blog he put that—put that in—actually he put that into the blog saying that this restaurant prides themselves on exotic things, so that’s how I knew that. I was the person who—who waited his table.

**01:02:33**

And he mentioned in his—in his blog article that there was very few restaurants offering this—offering this ingredient on their menu.

**01:02:44**

**AE:** So how did people find you early on? Did you advertise or was it just word by mouth?

**01:02:49**

**CX:** No, we didn’t advertise and—and that’s how we wanted it to be because we didn’t—we didn’t want to advertise that much. We wanted to just take it slowly and take it step by step. We didn’t want to get too, like advertise too much and then—and then have everything out of control and get too much customers that we can handle. We wanted to—we wanted to go at it slowly and more steady and improve slowly and—and, you know, like improve increment by increment instead of just getting a spike of business. I don’t think that’s—that’s beneficial in the long run, and then I think the very first—the very first foodie that found out about us was—he was driving around. He was—he was a true foodie and then—and then he just—he just always drove around

this area and then found—found us and we were a new Sichuan restaurant that—that just opened. So he walked in and tried our food and he liked it, and then he kept on coming. And he was—he was—he kept on coming like almost every day and tried out our whole menu. And he was Chris Frankel, yeah.

**01:04:05**

**AE:** So you've gotten a lot of attention in just a few years.

**01:04:11**

**CX:** Yes, I have to say that I'm very lucky and thanks to—thanks to all these thoughtful customers, as well.

**01:04:21**

**AE:** So let's go back to Chris for a minute because I was at the Off the Wall dinner where you spoke and you had a dish on the menu. Can you talk about that collaboration and what that was like?

**01:04:32**

**CX:** The Off the Wall dinner? Chris first came to me—oh, well before—before this Off the Wall dinner I knew that he has this—this wall of pictures of people and places that inspired him. I—I feel like I wanted to—I feel like, when can I get onto that wall? I felt—I asked myself, I was thinking to myself and then later on he came to me and—and was like, “Hey, did you want to—did you want to be a part of the Off the Wall dinner? And I was like, “Oh, definitely, yes.” It was a great honor because I—I feel like his restaurant is the—the—how do I explain it—like the

center spot of the Houston, the Houston's diverse—diversified food culture. I thought his—his restaurant was like the center spot of that.

**01:05:28**

And so he came to me and—and asked me to cook a few dishes with my chef on—at his restaurant to—to showcase the—the different—the different foods that Houston is offering. And he says that at that—at that event there will also be other—other restaurants going there, so I felt it was a very, very good collaboration, I feel. It was very meaningful. Other than me, there was another—other than us there was another Cantonese restaurant and then another Americanized Chinese restaurant run by a white guy, which was interesting. And then also Chris would be doing his version of all of this and bridging the gap between all this. I thought it was very—very interesting, very creative event. So I went there and I offered Mapo Tofu [soft tofu cubes braised with fresh leeks in mala spicy bean curd sauce], cucumber appetizer, a mala chicken appetizer and then also there was one more. **[Laughs]** Oh, cold noodles, right; the cold noodles—the cold noodles was a favorite by a lot of people.

**01:06:46**

**AE:** So what do you think that means in a place like Houston, for another restaurateur to be bridging that gap as you put it? That was a really great way to put it and bring people together through food like this. What do you think about someone like Chris bridging that gap and collaborating with other restaurants in the city?

**01:07:08**

**CX:** I think people like that, hmm, play a very good—a very big part of contributing to the—to the international culture of food in any city. I think it's—it's great to have more people like him.

**01:07:26**

**AE:** And he—you know, he said when you were talking about how people found you and that—that blogger was one of the first American customers that you had, and then when I was here with Chris a couple weeks ago, he was commenting on how diverse your customer base had grown. It was a lot of white people, African Americans, Chinese, very diverse group at lunch that one day. Tell me about those changes and—and what that means to you.

**01:07:52**

**CX:** I feel very happy. I feel like I've achieved my goal. Placing my restaurant in the heart of Chinatown, I felt like it—it will be definitely more difficult to achieve that goal of introducing this type of food to all kinds of people because in Chinatown, obviously, your—your number one clientele will be Chinese, and it's kind of away from the other—the other food districts in—of the city like it's—it's away from the [610] Loop [freeway], and it's outside of the Loop and it's away from all the other nice restaurants. I feel like it's harder to do that but because of all—all these articles have spread the word and all these foodies following—following every—foodies, everybody following each other, I feel like they've done a lot of advertisement for me. They've done a lot of marketing for me.

**01:08:48**

Yeah, so it's—I feel very happy. I feel very content that—that more and more people are getting to know what this type of food is, yeah.

**01:09:02**

**AE:** Well and one of the last questions I want to ask you, and I'm probably not going to ask it very well, but the idea that I have in my head is to ask about how the immigrant story of entrepreneurship has changed in that, you know, when—when Chinese immigrants would come here and open a restaurant to support their families and the—the language barrier wasn't as—you could easily open a restaurant if you didn't speak English well, and it was a great way to support the family and other members in the community, if you knew people there. But then those families, you know, the first generation of immigrants wanting to do better for those kids and those kids go onto be professionals, and then how y'all are these young entrepreneurs who have—who are professionals but you've chosen to go into the restaurant business. Is that—culturally, is that something that you've had to fight for or kind of explain yourself about or is it something that's just been—been easy to do?

**01:10:05**

**CX:** I think it definitely has to do with the education of my own family because normally, the average Chinese family would expect their kids to follow a very traditional path, which is get education and then pursue—pursue a career that is stable, like get a—be a doctor or be an accountant, be an engineer, yeah. **[Laughs]** It—that way it's—it's more your—your job will be more secure and—and so my—my family wasn't like that. My family kind of gave me a lot of freedom. They didn't—my family it has—it also has to do with the fact that my parents have divorced because they've divorced so they don't—they don't raise me together and I—I kind of just kind of—I feel like I kind of just grew up myself. **[Laughs]** They didn't really help me along the way, so I just kind of did whatever I wanted. And then I felt like in the—the first generation of Chinese that opened their restaurant without speaking much English, I felt like they—they did

that because they—they probably didn't have anything else that they could do better. And for them opening a restaurant is easier for them to earn—to—to earn a living.

**01:11:35**

And for me, I didn't—I didn't have a problem with that, and I didn't like the traditional, hmm, the traditional path that Chinese, that the average Chinese parents wanted their kids to have because I—I just didn't—I just didn't like that. So I felt like because of this—because of that most of the Chinese restaurants that have been opened, that have been opened in—in this country have—that's—that's what has shaped the impression of Chinese food in this country. And a lot of times, the first-generation Chinese restaurant owners, they didn't really—their goal wasn't to—wasn't to you know introduce this—this great food, this great cuisine to American people. They just wanted to earn the money. They just wanted to earn a living. So whatever was easy; whatever was—was easily acceptable by people that's what they did. And I felt like that—that was wrong. That was—that was misleading, and I don't want—I don't want that to continue.

**01:12:47**

And then being somebody from a background like me, like my dad being a food engineer and then growing up seeing him making all kinds of crazy stuff at home, and also his connection with these professional academic chefs, I feel like that I had a—I had what I needed to achieve my goal.

**01:13:14**

**AE:** Yeah. And that was beautifully—perfectly put. How about your family, Heng?

**01:13:19**

**HC:** My family—my family is just an ordinary family. They sent me to get an education. They didn't really—well they didn't want to tell me what to do, so that's—that's pretty open-minded compared to a lot of people back then.

**01:13:42**

So whatever I chose to do they supported so, and then my wife and her—her dad together wanted to open a restaurant and so I thought, why not try it? And if this doesn't, work then—then we think of something else.

**01:14:02**

**CX:** Can always go back to the normal—to the normal path. *[Laughs]*

**01:14:04**

**HC:** Yeah.

**01:14:05**

**AE:** Do y'all think this is unique to you and your families, or do you think this is something that's more prevalent across your generation of—of Chinese families, Chinese kids, adults— young adults? *[Laughs]*

**01:14:21**

**CX:** I think it will become more prevailing later in the future, but we're probably definitely one of the first to do this, to—to follow a different path because a lot of—a lot of my—my college classmates parents would—would not let their kids do this and then—but they—they see that we're doing this and we've done well, and they're like, “Hmm it's pretty nice.” It's nice.

**[Laughs]** But I probably wouldn't have my kid—kids do that. I probably wouldn't have the—the confidence to do that because they—they're afraid of, you know, losing money and going bankrupt and all that stuff. But we took it—we took the risk and we're risk takers. **[Laughs]**

**01:15:03**

**AE:** Well this one paid off for sure. What would y'all say is the future of Mala Sichuan Bistro?

**01:15:12**

**CX:** The future, hmm. I don't think we're the people who have like big dreams. My dream is to do this and that. I feel like we're doers. We—I feel like we're just—we just try to do—try to do the best of what we're doing currently, and I feel when you do that you're—whatever it is that you wanted to do will just all come easier. It's better to, you know, give yourself big dreams.

**01:15:42**

**HC:** We do have a goal though. It's pretty much our mission, too, that we don't have it posted up like companies, but we—what we're trying to do here is we try to be the—pretty much the—what do you call it the commissioner—is that a word, the—basically to introduce the real authentic Chinese—well Sichuan cuisine to American people. That's—I feel like this is something nobody has done it before and we are doing—we're the first ones doing it because all before that I go to a lot of places to eat. We go to a lot of places to eat and then we talk to a lot of our friends, American people friends, all they know about Chinese food is that oh, orange chicken, Kung Pao Chicken, you know, some—some kind of fried rice or, you know, broccoli, so everything you can find from Panda Express.

**01:16:55**

They—they I guess succeeded of what they're doing but—no, we—we didn't want American people to get a wrong idea of what—of what real Chinese food is, so this is what we wanted to do, and it seems like we're getting some progress. We're getting American people to come to our restaurant and—and actually liking our food. So definitely, yeah, we want to have more American customers. We want them to—to try our food and to know what Chinese—real Chinese food is, so hopefully we'll—we'll get that done and we'll get more American people like it—to like the real Chinese food.

**01:17:40**

**CX:** Get more people—get this type of cuisine to be more widely accepted here.

**01:17:45**

**AE:** So do you think as—maybe ambassadors was the word—is the word to say that you're cultural ambassadors of—of Chinese cuisine, Sichuan cuisine, but do you think this is—I mean would it be too soon to ask you if there is room for growth in this restaurant or if this is replicatable to maybe also do somewhere else in addition to Houston?

**01:18:09**

**CX:** There's definitely a possibility but, like I said, the opportunity is something that just pops up. So we can't really predict.

**01:18:22**

**AE:** Well and that wasn't fair because you're doing a great job now, so congratulations on that. And we won't look past the success that you've already achieved. Well, is there anything that I

haven't asked you that you'd like to add or something that I may not have known to ask that is relevant to our conversation?

01:18:41

**CX:** I have to think about that. *[Laughs]*

01:18:50

**AE:** Is there—this may not be relevant, but is there any kind of Texas or Southern American food that y'all like or that you eat outside of the restaurant?

01:19:00

**CX:** My favorite one is Texas Roadhouse.

01:19:04

**AE:** Steak?

01:19:04

**CX:** Yeah, their prime rib.

01:19:08

**HC:** Yeah, their prime rib and their bread, the bread and their little cinnamon butter, yeah—yeah.

01:19:20

**AE:** So that's a big night out for y'all?

**01:19:24**

**HC:** Yeah, we—we go to there like what—like occasionally. We don't really eat out that—that often. We have a restaurant here so we just try to—I mean save money too because eating out really—spend a lot of money, yeah, so—.

**01:19:48**

**CX:** I would say—I would say there might be one more. We've just collaborated with [sommelier] Justin Vann with his—with his wines for—with our food. Because wine is not a part of Chinese culture, and I'm talking about like fermented grape juice wine. So and—and nobody has really done pairings with wine in—in Sichuan cuisine and it's one of the hardest foods to pair a wine with. And Justin has done that. And I think for my restaurant one of the hard parts was to introduce—introduce this type of very specific cuisine to American people, and now on the other part I'm also trying very hard to introduce the idea of drinking Western wine with Sichuan cuisine to Chinese people. That was also the other—the other part I'm trying to do.

**01:20:47**

So I'm trying—bridging—trying to bridge the gap between Chinese diners and American diners.

**01:20:54**

**AE:** Are you having some success there so far?

**01:20:56**

**CX:** Oh yeah, because I would have a lot of Chinese customers come in and ask for Heineken, Budweiser, and stuff like that or Chinese customers that come in and ask for red wine because to a certain degree a lot of Chinese people feel like that only red wine is a real wine. They don't feel the white—the white wine is a real wine. They feel like only the—the red wine is—is a true wine, and it's more upscale and it's—it's—it's hard to let them know that the—the wine you have to pair it with food, because if you pair it right the—the food will make the wine taste better and the wine will taste—will make the food taste better. And they should—they should complement each other.

**01:21:45**

And then so—so right now, even though my Chinese customers always ask for red wine, we're still just only offering two red wines on our—on our wine menu and we're trying to—and also there's beer. A lot of Chinese—Chinese customers are—are—are now drinking the Ayinger [German beer] from our menu and we've had a big success in that. We have a lot of Chinese people that love this beer that they've never had before, and they can't have it anywhere else. They can only have it here. I'm very happy on that end, too.

**01:22:23**

**AE:** That's great. I'm so glad you mentioned that because that definitely sets y'all apart, for sure. Well, is there any—anything else you'd like to add or note to end on? It's been a great conversation, and I appreciate your time an awful lot. All right; well thank you both very much. Thank you.

**HC:** Thank you.

**01:22:43**

**CX:** Thank you very much.

**01:22:44**

**[End Cori Xiong & Heng Chen Interview]**