

YEON OK LEE
Kimchi Maker – Kong Ju Korean Rice Cake – Houston, TX

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans
Interpreter: Jae Yoon Um
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Translation: Jung Min “Kevin” Kim
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[Begin Yeon Ok Lee—Kimchi Maker, Kong Ju Interview]

00:00:00

Amy Evans: This is Amy Evans for the Southern Foodways Alliance on Tuesday, July 1, 2014, and I'm at the Kong Ju Rice Cake Bakery on Long Point in Houston, Texas. And I am with Mrs. Lee who has the business here and makes the kimchi and rice cakes and then our friend and translator, Jae. Jae if I could get you to say your full name for the record, please? [Interviewer's note: Mrs. Lee just makes the kimchi, and the business is owned by Jina Kim and her husband].

00:00:23

Oh my—my name is Jae Yoon Um, okay. I'm just a friend of the owner of the Kong Ju Rice Cake place, and then I try to translate as much as possible today for Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Kim.

00:00:41

AE: Thank you so much; I couldn't do this without you. So—and if you would ask then Mrs. Lee to introduce herself and describe what she does here for us?

00:00:52

JYU (Korean): Can you please introduce yourself— your name and what you do here?

00:01:02

Yeon Ok Lee (Korean): My name is Yeon Ok Lee. My birthday is January 1st, 1943. I have been in the United States for twenty-six years. While I was working, I started making kimchi. Once it became popular, I continued— with a positive attitude.

00:01:38

JYU: Okay. She was born in 1943, January 1st, New Year and then she's been in the United States for like twenty-six years and then apparently, she started making kimchi from home, but it looks like it became very popular so she actually is exploring into more business side.

00:01:59

AE: Okay. That's a very condensed background story. If you could ask her, did she state her name when she started speaking? Okay; good, perfect. And then could she speak a little bit about her trip here and when that was and what she remembers?

00:02:19

JYU: Trip here means to this store?

00:02:22

AE: To Houston.

00:02:24

JYU: Oh, to Houston, okay.

00:02:24

JYU (Korean): How did you come to Houston?

00:02:28

YOL (Korean): My husband— my husband's brother invited us through family sponsorship.

00:02:40

JYU: Actually her husband's brother actually invited them over to Houston. That's how they actually came over, yeah.

00:02:49

AE: And what year was that did she say?

00:02:51

JYU: Apparently twenty-six years ago, so—. (Korean) What year did you say came?

00:02:55

YOL (Korean): We came June 19th, 1989.

00:03:02

JYU: So she came here in 1989, in June 19.

00:03:09

AE: Okay. And so she said she made kimchi at home before she came here. Could she tell us something about that, what—when and how she learned to make kimchi?

00:03:18

JYU (Korean): Can you tell us how you learned how to make kimchi at home— the steps and process.

00:03:25

YOL (Korean): Well, you know— all Koreans pretty much naturally know how to make it. If you are a Korean housewife, then you learn how to make it.

00:03:34

JYU (Korean): You must have learned it from someone— your friends, family.

00:03:39

YOL (Korean): My mother.

00:03:40

JYU: Okay; she learned basically from mom how to make kimchi but—but there’s something you know all the Korean housewives actually have to do, something—a must thing to do.

[Laughs]

00:03:54

AE: So how old would she have been when she learned to make it?

00:03:57

JYU (Korean): How old were you when you first made it?

00:04:00

YOL (Korean): Well—after I got married—at twenty-six years [old]. That's when I started.

00:04:06

JYU: Yeah, when she was twenty-six years old and, I mean, apparently that was the time she just got married.

00:04:14

AE: So the—the kimchi recipe then and—and technique is not passed down until you’re leaving home? Is that traditional?

00:04:19

JYU (Korean): Until then, did you learn from your mother?

00:04:26

YOL (Korean): Making it is comes natural for Korean people by observing the process and learning from it, you get the taste down.

00:04:37

JYU: So basically she just—she just looked at it but she didn't really know exactly. But I think the—she—once she got married and then she just by doing it over and over and then she actually just acquired the—all the knowledge.

00:04:55

AE: Could she describe for us for the—the tape about kimchi and what it is and what ingredients it consists of?

00:05:03

JYU (Korean): Can you tell us about the ingredients for kimchi and briefly tell us about the process?

00:05:11

YOL (Korean): You cut the Napa cabbage and salt it for about three or four hours— since for household consumption you're only making a small batch. Then you wash and drain the cabbage and add the seasonings— *gochugaru* [Korean red pepper flakes], green onion, garlic, a bit of sugar, and then a bit more garlic. And that's about it. Now that's for the *pogi* [kimchi] [Napa cabbage kimchi], but like I said, you should tell them about the different varieties. You just mix those ingredients together, and that's how you do it.

00:06:01

JYU: Okay. It sounds really simple [*Laughs*]. So cut the Chinese cabbage and then put it into the saltwater for like a minimum three to four hours. This is like for home use. And then when she—after three or four hours and then take it out and clean again in the clean water. And then in the meantime, she actually preparing with the—the—all the stuff including red pepper powder,

scallions, and garlies and a little bit of sugar and then they kind of mix together and then—and then it’s just mixed with the pickled cabbage.

00:06:42

YOL (Korean): And you have to put a bit of fish sauce.

00:06:49

JYU: Oh the important thing is to make sure to add some fish sauce.

00:06:56

AE: Okay. So I’m wondering first of all if there’s something about the kimchi she makes that’s her family’s recipe, presumably that is different from other kimchi, something that sets it apart besides her making it? *[Laughs]*

00:07:09

JYU (Korean): Does your homemade kimchi perhaps differ from other households?

00:07:15

YOL (Korean): The seasonings that go in are the same, but because of an individual's taste and handling of the product differ, the outcome differs from person to person.

00:07:25

JYU (Korean): Is there anything else— something special or particular?

00:07:29

YOL (Korean): Of course. Well—you can add *chapsal* [Korean short grain, glutinous rice] powder, then puree some apples and add it in, or add some onion puree, as well— if you want it to taste good. Then you have to balance the seasonings and use good quality Napa cabbage.

00:07:52

JYU: Okay. It looks like it’s the whole thing starting from the very high-quality Chinese cabbage and then her home specialties, she’s actually adding some—there’s sweet rice. They

actually make a powder of the sweet rice and then also they grind a lot of the apples and then also ground the onions, so adding together and to make some different tastes. And that's usually—it's a pretty good taste.

00:08:25

AE: Now is any of that something that she added herself or did all of that come from when she learned from her mother?

00:08:31

JYU (Korean): The things you just said— all these tips— did your mother teach you those things?

00:08:36

YOL (Korean): As you make it, you hear things from your neighbors. You also learn to experiment by adding new ingredients on your own. It's all in your head. There are no givens.

00:08:53

JYU: Looks like it's—she actually heard from some other people and also by just repeating, I mean, every time and then she actually had some different ideas. And then those ideas I mean implementing into the new types of kimchi(s).

00:09:11

AE: Okay, so then back to when she got here in 1989, did you come here wanting to start a business or, if she could tell me how this business came to be?

00:09:22

JYU (Korean): When you came in 1989 did you come with the idea of making kimchi or how did you start making kimchi [as a business].

00:09:32

YOL (Korean): At first, we looked to open a store, but couldn't find one. When we first came, the old man ran a — what do you call it— a washateria, and I worked at a restaurant. Yes— I worked at a restaurant for about seven years— yes at Goryowon [Korea Garden]. Then we started Dong Yang Market. Then, as the big stores came in — when I was running Dong Yang Market, I started making kimchi as a business.

00:10:14

JYU: Okay. Very first time they were trying to do some business in Houston but, I mean they couldn't find the proper one, but—and then the husband actually started a washateria and she—and at the same time she actually started working at the one Korean restaurant here for seven years. And then—then the family opened a Korean grocery and, at that time, she actually started making the kimchi for the grocery. That's how they—how she started.

00:10:49

AE: Could I get the names of the restaurant and the grocery and know whether or not they're still open?

00:10:55

JYU: Yes, the restaurant is the Korea Garden and the—the little grocery is closed down because of the H-Mart [large Asian grocery store chain]. The competition was too steep. Yeah, kind of sad. That's why she came to the Kong Ju Rice Cake for another opportunity.

00:11:13

AE: Okay. So, but this is her business, correct? Or she's—she's just—she just cooks here?

00:11:19

JYU: She's more likely a partner, yeah. She's—she's in charge of all the kimchi making.

00:11:28

AE: Okay. And so what year did she come here?

00:11:30

JYU (Korean): When did you come to Kong Ju?

00:11:33

YOL (Korean): Let's see— I think it was— 2000? It's coming to about four years now. Because of H-Mart, and a big box coming, our store folded as this seven others— all at the same time. I came here after we closed down.

00:11:58

JYU: Around the year 2000 and there were about seven little Korean grocery stores closed down by big H-Mart. And at the same time, I mean she actually found an opportunity in the Kong Ju Rice Cake so which was actually the year 2000.

00:12:14

AE: Okay, so this business was already established but then they—they partnered with—

00:12:17

JYU: Right.

00:12:18

AE: —to do the kimchi?

00:12:18

JYU: Right. That's correct.

00:12:21

AE: So the Super H-Mart squeezing out the little guy fascinates me. Wow. So do you know when that—do you know when the Super H-Mart opened?

00:12:33

JYU (Korean): When did H-Mart open again?

00:12:36

YOL (Korean): H-Mart— let's see—was it 19—19—I mean—2000— it's 2014, right? So about 2009?

00:12:56

JYU: Okay. I was confused and she was confused too. So she came here in 2010, not 2000, so—so she's been here about four years and, yeah, I think the 2008 or 2009, somewhere around those timeframe, H-Mart actually opened the first one in Houston. And—and then that's how the whole thing started.

00:13:21

AE: Okay. So and then for the record, the Super H-Mart is like a—a giant American-style chain grocery store, specifically marketed to the Asian community?

00:13:30

JYU: That is very correct.

00:13:32

AE: And it's a beautiful store. But that's a sad story. So she was working in the [small] grocery and making the kimchi for the grocery and then now comes here, and am I mistaken in saying that her kimchi is at Super H-Mart?

00:13:46

JYU (Korean): The kimchi here is sold at H-Mart, right?

00:13:50

YOL (Korean): It goes to H-Mart, to the Austin market, and to San Antonio. It also goes to Deung Dae Sundries. We ship out to people who want it.

00:14:09

JYU: Yeah, her—kimchi is actually selling at the H-Mart right now at the same time also the one—one grocery in Austin, yeah, and then a few other like little places.

00:14:24

AE: Okay. Yeah, because I remember Chris Shepherd of Underbelly saying that that's how he originally found Mrs. Lee and her kimchi was reading the label closely at the H-Mart and realized it was made locally. And I want to talk about him again later, but I want to go back and talk more about the kimchi, and I want to ask her to describe the difference of making kimchi at home and then making it on the scale that she does here.

00:14:46

JYU (Korean): She's asking if you could explain the difference between making [kimchi] at home and at the store.

00:14:56

YOL (Korean): At home, you're making it on a small scale with a couple of heads [of cabbage], but here we're on a much larger scale with boxes [of cabbage], so the taste can differ. The more you make the tastier it becomes. At home— since you're only making a small batch, the flavor can vary.

00:15:27

JYU: Okay. There were fundamental differences apparently quantity but the problem at home is that because of the—the cabbage quantities are small so the—the—I mean repeating the taste is not very simple. But if you have a larger quantity of cabbage and then you can actually control the ingredients pretty well, so you can actually make the same kind of tastes repeatedly.

00:15:54

AE: So can she give us an idea of kind of how much cabbage she goes through in a day or a week or something that helps illustrate how much she makes?

00:16:01

JYU (Korean): How much cabbage do you go through a day— or a week?

00:16:09

YOL (Korean): About thirteen boxes per day.

00:16:15

JYU (Korean): And how many [heads of cabbage] are in a box?

00:16:17

YOL (Korean): There are boxes that contain about sixty pounds, and there are boxes that contain about fifty pounds. I'm not sure many heads are in a box, though.

00:16:30

JYU (Korean): Thirteen boxes everyday?

00:16:30

YOL (Korean): Yes, everyday. Well actually, probably a bit more since there are other ingredients— so, in total, it's about sixteen boxes give or take.

00:16:48

JYU: It looks like she's making way too many. She doesn't really know, but I think she knows there are about sixteen—average is sixteen boxes per day. Each box is—contains about sixty pounds of cabbage. It looks like a lot.

00:17:02

AE: It does sound like a lot. My goodness. *[Laughs]* So she's here—is she here—I know that Kong Ju is closed on Monday. Is she here seven days a week making kimchi?

00:17:10

JYU (Korean): How many days do you spend making kimchi here?

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YOL (Korean): Six days— from Monday through Sunday. I take a break on Monday, so six days.

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JYU (Korean): From Tuesday?

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YOL (Korean): No Monday— I mean Tuesday to Sunday.

00:17:26

JYU: Okay, from Tuesday to Sunday so she works six days a week.

00:17:30

AE: Yes, that's what I meant to say—six, closed on Mondays. So I'd like to know if she enjoys making kimchi six days a week.

00:17:39

JYU (Korean): You make kimchi six days a week. Do you like making kimchi?

00:17:45

YOL (Korean): I do it with a positive attitude, so I don't really get tired of it. That's what you should say. And we don't just do *baechu* (Napa cabbage) kimchi, but we also do *chonggak* (ponytail radish) kimchi, and today we sliced about three boxes of *poot baechu* (baby Napa cabbage). We also have *pa* (scallion) kimchi. We make a wide variety—*oi* (cucumber) kimchi, *kkakdugi* (white radish) kimchi. I do with a positive attitude, but at night I am exhausted.

00:18:22

JYU: Okay. She's actually enjoying making many different kinds of kimchi and—and that's something she is really enjoying. However, in the evening she's getting really exhausted.

J00:18:39

AE: So that is to say then that she likes the variety in making the different kinds but it's so much labor?

00:18:44

JYU: That's correct.

00:18:46

AE: So and she has there's some gentlemen in the back in the kitchen who help. Do they help her prep the cabbage or how do they—what is the—what are their assignments?

00:18:10

JYU (Korean): The people in the back— what exactly is their job?

00:19:02

YOL (Korean): They cut the Napa cabbage and when the boxes come in, they move it around as well. Now days, they also help with washing the cabbage. After I make the kimchi and package it, they help label, put it in boxes, and move the boxes.

00:19:28

JYU: Okay. They cut cabbage and of course apparently they're moving all these boxes. And then they also are helping the—the cleaning, actually. And then when she put it into the box, I mean little jar, right, and then—and that they actually clean and put the label and then moving all the completed kimchi boxes to whatever—wherever they need.

00:19:56

AE: And how long have they all been working together?

00:19:57

JYU (Korean): How long have you worked together with the people in the back?

00:20:01

YOL (Korean): Those people change frequently, so I'm not sure. But some leave after a few years, some stay for a few months and leave. But if they're not feeling it, they leave.

00:20:21

JYU: It depends on the—the chemistry. Some people last a few months; some people last years. So really kind of—different.

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AE: Okay. And so and—and I noticed that the gentlemen back there now or who were here last week when I was here too speak Spanish, and she speaks Korean, obviously. How do they communicate?

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JYU (Korean): Ah—the workers speak Spanish, but you speak Korean, so how do you communicate?

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YOL (Korean): I use some Spanish words I've learned. But it all gets through in the end.

00:21:01

JYU: So apparently she uses a very essential keyword in Spanish, but it looks like this seems to really get all the message from her.

00:21:13

AE: That smile goes a long way, I'm sure. She's got a great smile. *[Laughs]* So I'd like to know what the first thing she does in the morning with the kimchi to prepare the kimchi.

00:21:23

JYU (Korean): What is the first thing you do in the morning when you come in?

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YOL (Korean): I make the seasoning— since they would have prepped the cabbage— I make the seasoning, then I mix it with the cabbage. Then I move on to whatever needs to be done next.

00:21:56

JYU: The—she said the first thing she does, because all the cabbage is actually ready, so she's actually preparing all this—the mixed ingredients including like the red pepper powder, like

scallions and garlic and all this sugar and all this fish sauce thing. She kind of mixed those things; that's the first thing she does. And then, of course, I mean she keep moving on.

00:22:19

AE: And I wonder how she decides which variation of kimchi is going to make. Is it just what she feels like doing that day or is it by a schedule?

00:22:26

JYU (Korean): Ah— You produce a various types of kimchi. How do you decide what to make? Do you go by what people order or do you just make a certain amount?

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YOL (Korean): Orders come in, but we also make a certain amount. But it's based on the ingredients that come in.

00:22:50

JYU: It depends on the order. At the same time she also has a certain amount designated for that but, again, all those depends on the raw materials.

00:23:03

AE: Okay. So I want to ask a question, too, that was inspired by my visit on Friday when I saw her and she was massaging the red pepper mixture into the cabbage. I want to know if she describe that just kind of that part of making the kimchi and the importance of really penetrating the—the cabbage with the pepper and that movement you know the massaging of the—?

00:23:27

JYU (Korean): When you mix the seasoning, what do you feel? Can you tell us about the importance of mixing the seasonings?

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YOL (Korean): It's all about controlling the ingredients— and I taste it by dabbing it on the tip of my tongue. And if the flavors are right— it is ready to mix [into the cabbage]. You have to mix it well.

00:23:55

JYU (Korean): [Inaudible]

00:23:57

YOL (Korean): I do it everyday, so I rely on my instincts. Tell her that I rely on my own tastes. And for other types of kimchi, it goes out on special [orders]. We make the cabbage kimchi the most, so that is our number one product and it comes from . After that, the rest are special and depends on my preferences. So it's not really a strict process.

00:24:25

JYU: Basically she just does it, but at the same time she's actually really tasting. She's trusting her own taste [*Laughs*] so once it's right I mean she actually feels good, and then she's actually happy to make those you know kimchi(s) and kimchi massaging thing. At the same time she— because there are many other kimchi(s) it doesn't require those massaging part so and then she just does all kinds of other things at the same time. So she—she just keeps working. [*Laughs*]

00:25:01

AE: And that takes me back to before we recorded, you were giving me this wonderful timeline of Korean food and kimchi and brought these photographs. And the ceramic pots. Could you—I just want to touch on that and this and see if she uses—if her family uses ceramic pots at home and then how the kimchi might be different if you're not doing it that way—the traditional way.

00:25:25

JYU: If it's not stored the right way or not, okay?

00:25:27

JYU (Korean): How do you store the kimchi at home? Do you use the kimchi *dok* [traditional earthenware pots]?

00:25:35

YOL (Korean): These days, after you make the kimchi, we leave it outside for a day then store it in the refrigerator. So we let it age in the refrigerator.

00:25:51

She doesn't use those kimchi jar apparently [*Laughs*] and then—but what she does is she puts kimchi—outside means room temperature, stored in room temperature to make sure it's fermenting right and then put it into a refrigerator. That's how she preserves it and then she just—and then she's just eating after that.

00:26:13

AE: How long does it need to stay refrigerated before it's ready?

00:26:16

JYU (Korean): Do you need to keep it longer in the refrigerator before it's ready?

00:26:21

YOL (Korean): You can eat it right away, though some people prefer to eat it after it ripens, so you can let it go for a while. But you can eat it after a day in the refrigerator.

00:26:34

JYU: Just one day outside in the room temperature that usually is enough. So, and then if you like a little bit more sour taste, then basically you can put it longer in the refrigerator.

00:26:51

AE: So I'd like to know what she likes best about making kimchi.

00:26:56

JYU: Just a second. Can you repeat that again?

00:26:58

AE: What she—what she enjoys most about her job of making kimchi.

00:27:02

JYU (Korean): When you make kimchi is there a part that you enjoy the most or find most satisfying?

00:27:11

YOL (Korean): Not really. Just tell her that a lot of Korean people enjoying eating it. For Korean people, without kimchi the meal is incomplete, so we need kimchi to have a satisfying meal.

00:27:28

JYU (Korean): When people tell you that your kimchi is delicious— that part seems enjoyable.

00:27:36

YOL (Korean): Of course.

00:27:40

JYU: Because kimchi is the most—most essential part so she really like some sort of compliment from the customer. That's the part she's really enjoying, but making it itself is not that enjoyable. As you can see it's a lot of work, yeah.

00:27:55

AE: So kimchi being such an integral part of Korean food, are—fewer people have to be making it home if they're buying at the Super H-Mart, so can she talk about that about how that she's a—a keeper of a tradition, culinary tradition?

00:28:09

JYU (Korean): Now many people don't really make kimchi at home, so do you feel the need to carry on the tradition of kimchi or pass on the tradition.

00:28:30

YOL (Korean): For me, making kimchi looks simple, but it is very complex, so I don't really teach the younger ones. These days people just buy it for convenience. I'm willing to teach those of the younger generation who want to learn how to make kimchi, but I don't want to force on the tradition to those who don't want to learn.

00:29:01

JYU: Okay. Making kimchi looks easy, but it's actually very sensitive into the many different steps. So if anyone willing to learn, I mean she is willing to actually teach, however it looks like most—most people they just want to have some easy life, so something they don't want to go through all this trouble and long hours of preparing something not many people wants—even her kids actually don't want to learn. [*Laughs*] So she just lets her kids like live easily just by buying kimchi from whatever the place.

00:29:45

AE: Well, I hope they buy hers.

00:29:47

JYU: I think so, yeah.

00:29:49

AE: Okay. So you know that—I asked Chris [Shepherd of Underbelly] before coming here, what’s the one question that he would like to ask of her and that was the question, was if she would pass it on and if—if someone who is not Korean were interested, would she be willing to pass it onto them?

00:30:02

JYU (Korean): If someone who wasn't Korean, but wanted to learn how to make kimchi, are you willing pass on the knowledge?

00:30:09

YOL (Korean): Of course I would.

00:30:12

JYU: Of course. Absolutely, yeah.

00:30:16

AE: Wonderful. Well, Chris might be your man. [*Laughs*] And I want to ask another question again before going back to Chris, but I want to go back to when she came here in 1989 and did she come to this part of Houston? Because we’re in Spring Branch right near an area of kind of Northwest Houston, and a lot of people call it Korea Town now because it’s such a great enclave of Korean community in Houston, and the background to the point of the question to ask if she came to this neighborhood when she first go here.

00:30:43

JYU (Korean): Which area did you move to when you came to Houston in '89?

00:30:49

YOL (Korean): Here— well at first, we went to the eastern part— let's see I can't remember the name. We were there for six months, then we came straight here— to Long Point. I think they called that area Uvalde.

00:31:11

JYU: She came to Houston in the east part of town which has a—the Uvalde area, but after six months she just moved to the Long Point area, which is Spring Branch, yeah.

00:31:24

AE: And so can she talk about how this part of town has changed in twenty-five years?

00:31:29

JYU (Korean): Can you tell us if you've seen any changes to the area in the twenty-five years you have been here?

00:31:37

YOL (Korean): Well— there's a new vibrancy to the stores that are popping up. But at the same time, it's not all good, since H-Mart came in and killed off all the mom-and-pop store. Not too many changes— the roads have become better. And the restaurants—those haven't changed too much either. There are a few more people.

00:32:09

JYU: Okay, so because of the more people, apparently more Korean people in this area now and because of that it's more lively environment here, but—but at the same time, but the—the big

market killed a lot of little, I mean, stores and—and that’s something she kind of feels bad about it. At the same time some of the restaurants here are not really changed much.

00:32:43

AE: And this, too, appears to be a very mixed community, a lot of Latino immigrants and Korean and is there a lot of kind of—or any give and take? Or does she, for example, like Tex-Mex? Does she eat out and experience other cultures here in Houston?

00:33:01

JYU (Korean): This area have both a significant Hispanic population, as well as Korean. When you go out to eat, do you perhaps try to eat Mexican food?

00:33:14

YOL (Korean): Hardly ever. I mostly stick to Korean food even when I eat out. I hardly eat Mexican food.

00:33:28

JYU (Korean): Outside of work, you don't really interact with your Mexican colleagues, then?

00:33:32

YOL (Korean): Not really.

00:33:35

JYU: So she hardly goes out to a Mexican restaurant and she only goes to the Korean restaurant, and then she doesn't have much interaction with the Hispanic [community] around here.

00:33:47

AE: Okay. So now let's go to Chris Shepherd, and I'd like to know if she remembers the first time that he came here and asked about her kimchi?

00:33:55

JYU (Korean): Do you remember when Chris—the head of Underbelly— came to visit?

00:34:02

YOL (Korean): Well, I don't speak English very well, so we exchanged pleasantries. I also found out my son-in-law was his junior colleague for two years. I couldn't really get my words out, but I tried my best. He's really friendly, too. Every time he comes in he always greets me fondly with a hug.

00:34:29

JYU (Korean): Your son-in-law was a junior colleague [of Chris Shepherd]?

00:34:31

JYU: Hmm, okay. Yeah, she remembers everything, although she couldn't really speak, and apparently her son-in-law actually went to the same culinary school as Chris. And—and Chris was such a friendly and a very nice guy and something, I mean she was hugging him and that kind of thing. She actually really impressed and now we're so very—I mean she vividly remembers those—yeah very nice and kind nature of Chris.

00:35:05

AE: And how did she feel that an American chef was here and—and paying so much attention to her and had such a great interest in what she was doing?

00:35:15

JYU (Korean): How did you feel when an American chef came in with an interest in Korean food?

00:35:20

YOL (Korean): Who— my son-in-law?

00:35:22

JYU (Korean): No—no— Chris.

00:35:23

YOL (Korean): It feels good—that there are people like him— people who seek out and try to learn about tasty food from various nations. I was thankful when he sought out our kimchi and rice cake and took it back to his restaurant to sell.

00:35:51

JYU: She actually was fascinated about some foreign people actually introducing some Korean stuff and especially whatever she is making. And—and any of those other—I mean non-Korean people, actually, I mean when they're interested in Korean stuff, I mean she always feels real proud and also very pleasant and fascinated about those processes.

00:36:17

AE: So what—in her words, what would she say she's taught Chris about what she does?

00:36:22

JYU (Korean): Did you say anything to Chris?

00:36:29

JYU: Yeah, she just couldn't—she really wanted to say something to him, but I mean she really couldn't do anything because of the language barrier.

00:36:39

AE: Well, you need to come visit, Jae. *[Laughs]* Well and I—he’s told me, too, that she has gone to—Mrs. Lee has gone to eat at Underbelly. Can she share that experience?

00:36:49

JYU (Korean): Have you gone to Underbelly for a meal?

00:36:53

YOL (Korean): He's insisted I come visit— but unfortunately I still haven't been.

00:36:57

JYU: Okay. She hasn’t been to Underbelly yet, and I mean even though Chris actually invited her a few times and it looks like she—but she’d like to go, but it looks like again the language barrier would be the biggest problem—in my opinion.

00:37:13

AE: Oh, I think all she needs to do is sit and enjoy dinner. Absolutely. And then be—stand up and be welcomed by Chris and eat his food. She would enjoy it immensely, I think.

00:37:21

JYU (Korean): When you do go— even if you can't speak the language— you'll be treated very well.

00:37:29

YOL (Korean): I'm sure that'll be the case. I tried to go along with my children— my daughter and son-in-law, but our schedule doesn't seem to match because they are all working.

00:37:41

JYU: So she’d like to actually go there with like son-in-law and family and, but it looks like their schedule and her schedule doesn’t seem to be cooperating very well.

00:37:53

AE: I understand. So Chris also says that he gets the sesame oil pressed here and uses the rice cakes but does she have anything to do with either of those things?

00:38:02

JYU (Korean): Do you have anything to do with the sesame oil and the rice cake?

00:38:06

YOL (Korean): That's not me— I don't do that. Kong Ju does that.

00:38:12

JYU: That's the job of the owner.

00:38:16

AE: So has the owner been to—to have any of Chris' food using the items that he uses here?

00:38:22

JYU: Yeah, I remember.

00:38:24

AE: Do you know what he had to say about that?

00:38:26

JYU: I was with him.

00:38:26

AE: Yeah?

00:38:27

JYU: Yeah, he actually invited a bunch of close friends to Underbelly. I'm sure the ticket must be really huge. [*Laughs*]

00:38:35

AE: So what did he think, and what did you think?

00:38:37

JYU: It was very interesting and at the same time, I mean I was really—one thing I was truly impressed with, the—the all kinds of mix; it's not just American or it's not just Asian. It's just a little bit of here or there, and then somehow he just made it like beautiful, yeah.

00:38:58

AE: Hmm. So and we can wrap it up here. Y'all have been so generous with your time. I want to know if she has enjoyed living in Houston for these twenty-five years.

00:39:09

JYU (Korean): Has Houston been good to you until now?

00:39:15

YOL (Korean): Houston has been good—especially for us old people. The climate is warm and because of the air conditioning, it's been a comfortable life.

00:39:31

JYU: Yeah, she's been quite comfortable and especially for older people nowadays because this kind of weather is actually better for older people and also this is one of the most comfortable cities. She—she's been enjoying living in Houston.

00:39:45

AE: Good. I do also want to ask—I know that Chris brought a culinary tour here on Saturday for people to visit. He likes bringing people here and meeting her and showing her off. What does she think about that?

00:39:15

JYU (Korean): Chris came by recently brought some people over and gave a tour. How did you feel about that?

00:40:04

YOL (Korean): I think it's great. I'm happy that Korean kimchi has been introduced to various people and that I was able to interact with them.

00:40:25

JYU: I mean she was really fascinated and she really enjoyed that part. And not only because it's her kimchi is known, she actually just explained as a Korean food, it's actually becoming known to the—the non-Korean people which is that something she—I mean she's really enjoying something—she's really proud of it.

00:40:48

AE: Has her business grown since Chris has been bringing people here and is—is now a buyer of her product?

00:40:55

JYU (Korean): After Chris brought people over, have you noticed an increase in customers?

00:41:02

YOL (Korean): That I don't really know about.

00:41:06

JYU: Yeah, she cannot tell. Yeah, it's something you need to ask to the owner. [*Laughs*]

00:41:12

AE: Okay. Yeah, that's true. I'm sure she—she doesn't have to keep the books, thankfully.

Okay, well, and I'll just—I'll end by with my last question is if—how, you know, maybe how long do you think that you'll stay—stay doing this?

00:41:25

JYU (Korean): How much longer do you think you'll be doing this?

00:41:29

YOL (Korean): Until the customers tell me that it tastes terrible [*Laughs*]

00:41:33

JYU: Until the customer says it's bad. [*Laughs*]

00:41:37

YOL (Korean): And as long as my health keep up.

00:41:40

JYU: As long as her health is in shape.

00:41:44

AE: Perfect. Beautiful. Well is there anything that I haven't asked or known to ask that you or Mrs. Lee would like to add or a note to end on?

00:41:57

JYU: Not that I can think of.

00:41:59

JYU (Korean): Is there anything else you would like to add?

00:42:02

YOL (Korean): No.

00:42:04

JYU: There's no more.

00:42:04

AE: Okay; well thank you so much. We interrupted her kimchi production today to sit at this table, so thank you so much, Jae. Thank you, Mrs. Lee, very much.

00:42:12

JYU: You're very welcome.

00:42:15

[End Yeon Ok Lee—Kimchi Maker, Kong Ju Interview]