LASON
ROY CHOI
MY LIFE. MY CITY. MY FOOD.

WITH TIEN NGUYEN AND NATASHA PHAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOBBY FISHER
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THANK YOU TO ALL OF YOU IN AND OUT OF OUR LIVES.

GRACIAS POR TODO.

THIS BOOK IS A PART OF YOU, TOO.

—ROY, TIEN, AND NATASHA
INTRODUCTION

HELLO. I'M ROY. Get in. We're going for a ride.

Right around the time I started writing this story, I picked up a book about tribal tattoos, written by a Samoan chief. The opening line began, "I had to write this book." That first line was so powerful to me. It struck me then, as I started putting the pages of my life together, and it strikes me now, as I sit here writing this introduction after, funnily enough, having finished this book. He wrote that line because he was compelled to tell the story of his tribe and his islands. Because he thought it was his destiny to help keep former generations alive by documenting the folklore, the information, and the stories that are passed down through the art of the tattoo. So it wasn't that he wanted to write that book. He had to. It was his spiritual duty.

In a small, weird way, I feel the same about this book.

I had to write this book. To tell the story of my journey from immigrant to latchkey kid to lowrider to misfit to gambler to a chef answering his calling. To tell a story of Los Angeles and the people who live here. And to preserve it all on wax.

But before we get knee-deep in the messy yet beautiful chapters of my life, maybe it'll help to have a little map in your pocket. L.A. is a huge place, and sometimes the glare of stereotypes and television screens blinds visitors to its true character, the amazing cultural diversity of our residents and the food. That muthafuckin' L.A. food.

So let me play tour guide for a minute and show you around.

We'll start in the same place I started when I immigrated here with my family from South Korea in 1972: Olympic Boulevard and Vermont Avenue. This
is a big intersection in the middle of a neighborhood that's now the hardworking community of Koreatown, where the smoke from the Korean BBQ grills will stick to your hair for days no matter which fancy shampoo you choose and where you'll wash down your beers with crispy Korean fried chicken before hitting a multitude of other bars. A few miles north of here is Hollywood, and a dozen miles to our west is Sawtelle Boulevard, a little street with some of the best ramen and sushi in the country. Keep going west to see the canals of Venice and to kiss the sands of Malibu. UCLA and Beverly Hills aren't too far from the beaches, and if we hop northbound on the 405 and 101, we'll hit the San Fernando Valley—Granada Hills, Burbank, Tarzana, Sherman Oaks. Or if we ride the 405 southward instead, we'll drive right into the cradle of the South Bay—Torrance, Gardena, Carson, Long Beach.

East of Koreatown is Downtown proper, where Hill and Broadway split like
wooden chopsticks through Chinatown and the wind tunnels of Pershing Square whoosh us through the Jewelry District. Farther northeast of Downtown is a whole other world: the hills of Pasadena, the tacos and burritos and families in East L.A. and Boyle Heights, the amazing noodles and phở and soup dumplings in the San Gabriel Valley.

And there's so much more: from the SGV, we'll jump down the 710 or 605 freeway and drive through Commerce or Bell Gardens, passing factories and a casino or two along the way. Roll down your window and smell the sweet cripplings of lechón and carne asada smoking in backyards as we swing by Cerritos or Whittier. Keep going south, and there they are, our neighbors, Orange County and Riverside.

To loop back to L.A., we'll head up the 110 freeway, pull off in South Central and Inglewood for a hot minute to ride the wide streets and grub on BBQ and soul food, and then swoop west on the 10 freeway, through Downtown, to end up right back where we started—right here on the corner of Olympic and Vermont, the heart of Koreatown.

I know. We covered a lot of ground. But don't sweat it. I got the wheel and a full tank of gas. All you have to do is sit back and trust. In the pages that follow, you'll see a little bit of this magical city through the lens of my life and through the food of the people who really live here. Through all of that, you'll start to understand this amazing place that I was raised in and taste the flavors of the streets of L.A.

Thank you for picking up this book. Thank you for joining me on this ride through the crooked journeys of my life. L.A. welcomes you, and I welcome you, with love.

Oh, by the way, are you hungry?
Let me cook for you.
I got that, too.
You're riding shotgun with Papi now. What could possibly go wrong?
Seoul, South Korea, 1970. A hospital room in the heart of downtown Chongro-gu. A baby with a big Frankenstein head, drenched in his own blood, with more spewing out through his upper cleft like lava erupting from a volcano. Wailing, crying. Yeah, they stitched me up all right, but when the rumble in the jungle was over, I had a fat lip and a Harry Potter step between my mouth and teeth.
MY PARENTS ACTUALLY MET IN Los Angeles in 1967. They were in Korea before then, on opposite sides of the country in fact. My mom's from the most famous province in the North, Pyung-An Do. It's cold up there, where the country meets China. I don't know too much more, as Communism has washed away a lot of history, and it's taboo to talk too much about it in the South, but I do know that the herbs and plants there would make even Humboldt County blush. And I know that my mom's family took those raw ingredients and turned them into something pretty spectacular. As family legend had it, they had a magic touch: Sohn-maash.

Flavors in their fingertips. Flavors that had been passed down over thousands of years, from generation to generation, flavors that were now part of their very spirit. My mom grew up on things like mandoo, dumplings filled with mountain herbs mixed with ground meat and seafood. And naeng myun, cold buckwheat or arrowroot noodles, done two ways, both cold. One's served in ice-cold beef broth with mustard and vinegar. The other has dried skate mixed in with the deadliest of the deadly chile pastes and filled with garlic, leaving your dragon's breath stinking for days. Fucking delicious.

My mom was sister number four and child number five, right after my first uncle. She actually was supposed to be a boy but came out a girl, so they flipped around a Korean boy's name. Nam Ja is man in Korean; make it Ja Nam and you got my mom. She went to the second-best all-girls school in the country, Jin Myung, and even though her grades weren't the best, she was the queen bee of her crew, and she ruled the school. She continued on to Hangyang University. Then, in 1966, when she was all of twenty years old, my mom decided to take herself to the next level and head to America. The story was, she was going to the United States to attend “art school.” If you saw a photo of her at the Gimpo Airport, though, ready to cross the great Pacific, you'd see her outfit showing more.
art than school: Jackie O. gear, big stunner shades, a beautiful handbag. She was young, sassy, and pretty. How could the City of Angels be all that tough?

MY DAD, MEANWHILE, is from Chollanam-do in the South. That’s a province known for its food and the temper of its people: all that spicy, pungent, funky stuff you may associate with Korean food—from kimchi to pickled intestines and even to bi bim bap—comes from this province. Now don’t get me wrong—the rest of Korea has kimchi, too. It’s just this southwest region has the stinkiest, and it’s the most brash. And, like flamingos pink from plankton, the people are what they eat: tough, rude at times, abrasive, dominant, vivacious, conniving. Everybody hates the Cholla people, sometimes in envy and sometimes for good reason. But the freakin’ food no one can deny.

That’s where my dad’s from. It’s proper, then, that he was a badass muthafucka.

Even at ten, my dad was smart and tough as nails. He had to be. His mom had died by then, and so it was just him, his dad, his stepmom, and his older sister. And when the North invaded the South in 1950, the whole family had to flee the stampede of North Korean armies pushing southward. Eating scraps and old, cold rice, they fled from Seoul, going farther and farther south through Busan and Gwangju, settling down and then taking off again when the fire got too close. For my dad, that meant enrolling in a new school every time they moved, and that meant he was always the new kid, picked on and bullied by the local kids. But, really, all that just toughed him up more. As the family bounced from town to town, he bounced the local competition: with the same strategy that rules any street in the world, he would find the toughest dude on campus and challenge him to a shil-lim-style wrestling match. Shil-lim’s like sumo, but without the weight and with a sudden-death point system: first on his back loses. My dad never was first on his back.

Then he went gangsta in the classroom, Pac-Man eating up the competition. Kyunggi High School, the Phillips Exeter of Korea. Check.
Seoul National University, the Harvard of Korea. Check.
First commander as liaison with the U.S. Army. Check.

He got so high up the chain of command that in 1963 he was sent abroad
to an Ivy League school to study diplomacy, international politics, and the Western
way of life. With no money and no firm grasp on the English language except for
a slippery handle on what he got from memorizing the fucking dictionary, he got
through the University of Pennsylvania's master's program. Just so he could be that
perfect foreign policy diplomat of the future. And as if that weren't enough, he ran
the mail room at ABC for Dick Clark. Mr. Incredible.

He wasn't done yet. Like other Korean students sent to the United States to
study, he was heading to another university to finish his education and get some
more perspective on this new Western life of his, so he could take home what
he knew and become a leader. He started his Ph.D. program at the University of
Colorado at Boulder, then transferred to the land where the weed is green and the
sunshine sets on the hydraulics, slow and low. This was Los Angeles, UCLA, Lew
Alcindor. 1965.

In the land of sun, he had jobs in shadows: washing dishes at Lawry's,
janitorial duties throughout the city and on the north shore of Lake Tahoe during
ski season. It was rough work, but he did what he had to do to survive. I think this
was when he also started to party a little more, and he, the perfect Clark Kent,
NO TEETH? MAN UP, BOY! YOU GOTTA BE STRONG AND HEALTHY. THE FOOD HAS TO BUILD YOUR BRAIN!

slowly transformed into a real man. A real man who wasn’t perfect, who was okay with having a little dirt under those properly trimmed nails.

That’s when he met a party girl. My mom. He pulled down his Wayfarers, lit a cigarette, and ripped straight game on her. They moved in together in an apartment off Crenshaw Boulevard and got married in a church on Jefferson and Vermont near the University of Southern California. He in a white tux, she in a simple, beautiful white gown with a veil centered with flowers. He never finished his Ph.D.

The late 1960s was a cool-ass time in Los Angeles. The Beach Boys, total Mod skinny tie shit, big long Chevys in cobalt blue cruising under bright green palm trees and the amber glaze of the California sunshine. They soaked in the L.A. sun and honeymooned in Europe. They returned to L.A., but this time it wouldn’t stick. Just one year after walking down the aisle, they bid UCLA good-bye—art school? what art school?—and off they went back to the country they had worked so hard to leave. In 1969, this meant returning to a country ruled by a dictator, Park Chung-hee, and an economy marked not by the flat-screens, semiconductors, and other bomb-ass toys of today but by heavy, raw industry. They took a step to the First World, then took two steps back to the Third. That’s Korean guilt and Confucian good son shit in play right there.
ONE YEAR AFTER COMING HOME to Korea, they welcomed me into their world. Stitched up as I was, you’d think I would have been treated differently, but in Korea it doesn’t matter if your mouth has one hole or two. You don’t baby the baby, and there was no such thing as “baby food.” So as soon as I got off my mom’s milk, they had a whole kitchen going for their little boy. No teeth? Man up, boy! You gotta be strong and healthy. The food has to build your brain.

So we’d get our Elton John on with electric griddles and butane burners surrounding my mom and aunts like pianos and keyboards. They’d feed us straight from the pan, straight off the griddle, always straight out of their fingers: try this, taste this, eat that. Chap chae, vermicelli noodles layered with julienned vegetables, egg, and marinated beef as complex and fly high as a J Dilla track. Daikon soup, abalone porridge, blended mung bean, soybean, and tofu soup mixed with rice, spinach, anchovy broth, and noodles. I slurped raw kimchi from stained Rubbermaid gloves. I was hand-fed bits of savory pancakes filled with pureed mung beans and scallions, sometimes stuffed with oysters. Flavor after flavor. Sohn-maash.

Life was tough, though. Money wasn’t flowing. My mom had married the “perfect” man, but the gravy train was starting to derail. My dad initially left Korea ahead of his class, but he came back behind the times. The classmates he had once eclipsed now shone in powerful positions in the government and universities. He was forced to kiss the ass of the people he had run circles around just a few years earlier.
And still nothing. Then there was the indignity of it all: even if he was given a decent position, how could he work for the guy he used to boss around?

And then me. In a land of conformity, what of the boy with the deformity?

I don’t know how it exactly went down, but after almost two years back in Seoul, with no money, no job, and that lingering cognac lipstick film on their lips from the amber sunshine and cool palms of Los Angeles, they must have started to prepare. And in 1972, they finally packed it all up, snuck on a plane, and said, “Peace out, muthafuckas.” I would have, too.

IF YOU COUNTED all the Asians living in Los Angeles in 1970—Vietnamese, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, an entire continent of ethnicities clumped together as one—the total number would have been 240,000. That was just 2 percent of the population of L.A. at the time. Thanks to a federal law that lifted immigration restrictions in 1965, people from all over Asia streamed into L.A. in significant numbers in the early and mid-1970s. When the Koreans got here, they didn’t intend to take over the part of town that was once Old Hollywood. It just ended up happening that way.

Old Hollywood, along Olympic and Wilshire Boulevards, was where the entertainment industry partied in Hollywood’s glory years. But by 1950 or so, the party shifted westward, and the big Jewish and European populations living in the area transplanted west, too. The buildings and apartments in the historic core of L.A. emptied, and whole city blocks became run-down and scruffy. Old Hollywood faded, a ghost town in a themeless park.

By the 1960s the real estate in the area was cheap, dirt cheap. The Koreans coming into the city in the early 1970s discovered the low rents and hunkered down. And while they didn’t start out with much, they managed to transform the dilapidated three-square-mile neighborhood into a bona fide bustling Koreatown, now home to the largest Korean population outside of Seoul.

It all started with a pot and a bunch of people. There had to be some trust in the group, or it was all for nothing. Every month everyone met and shared stories and dreams, and, in the course of all that, everyone decided on an amount. Then everyone anted up. Each month, one person got the jackpot and opened a business. A liquor store, dry cleaner, gas station, small restaurant, trophy shop, golf store, whatever. Something. As each person built a business, his or her share of the
pot increased so new families could get on their feet. It was thanks to these kyaé
meetings that the ghost town came alive.

When our day came to take the pot, my dad snatched up that Johnnie Walker.
He opened a liquor store on 9th Street and Vermont Avenue in Koreatown, and he
was so proud of it. So proud. He polished and cleaned till the place was so shiny you
couldn’t turn around without catching your own reflection. I remember the candies
and liquor bottles. I remember the glass storefront. My dad’s proud smile.

At home my mom was possessed by a brilliant compulsion to cook. Every
morning she was up at 4:30 A.M., and a huge breakfast feast would be waiting for
me when I woke up. But in those early days you couldn’t walk down the street and
take your pick of kimchis. No, we trekked across Southern California to find certain
ingredients. We went to Santa Barbara for abalone that would be in that night’s
bowl of porridge. Goleta for dandelion greens for crab and tofu stew. Indio for bean
sprouts to complete my mom’s bi bim bap. The piers in Newport for rock cod, but
only if we got there by 6:30 A.M. and only if we were first in line. At the very least,
we would get freshly caught fish and hang them, salted, on our porch like laundry
drying on the line.

And all the while, every night, my parents fed me from their fingertips. The
sohn-kaash had made it stateside.

CLOSER TO HOME, we took in the City of Angels. We took in America. I started
watching Happy Days, and the Fonz became my idol. He was everything to me. He
was the guy who never fit in, but only because he was too cool for school. He would
say his “Ayyyyye,” laugh, and give a thumbs-up to all those things he approved. I
loved his touch: he could just be holding a float or a milk shake, and it was better
than how anyone had ever held a float or milk shake. Or he could just hit something
that was broken, and it not only worked again but worked better!

The Fonz had Arnold’s for his hamburgers and shakes; we had Tommy’s. We
drove our faded blue Peugeot with ripped upholstery to the original redbrick Tommy’s
on Beverly and Rampart. Any trip to Tommy’s was like sinking into a plush movie
theater seat with a fresh tub of popcorn with real butter or lying down on clean
sheets after a long day; time was frozen at the exact moment when everything was
just right. I was protected, safe. I loved the look on my dad’s face when we were
standing in line for goopy chili tamales, no tomato, extra onions, and an ice-cold

I.A. BON
orange Crush. I loved the open air, the sun as it hit our car hood. I loved the people around us, standing single file before scurrying off to the rails to stand and eat. I loved the hills as they sloped down from Rampart to the north and Beverly to the east.

We hit Dodgers games in Echo Park with other Korean families, all of us in the bleachers, watching the fabulous four of Ron Cey, Bill Russell, Davey Lopes, and Steve Garvey. We saw the same families over and over again at Dong Il Jang on 8th near Western, one of the first grand, opulent restaurants in Koreatown. Up until then, most places had been just small mom-and-pop joints, places to grab a seat, eat your thing, and go. Dong Il Jang, though, was a big place cloaked in elaborate Chosun period architecture, bamboo, and rice paper. Inside there were big booths and a big party room. At the same time, though, it was, and is, still a place you could imagine your grandfather sitting, with a newspaper, slurping on some noodles, gnawing on some short rib bones. From those rib bones to the bubbling stews to the kimchis to the Korean-style floor seating, you could devour what amounts to a whole cow here and then wash it all down with fried rice swirled in meat juices and kimchi stains. Classic.

My parents took me with them to the movies at night, and I remember watching *Midnight Express* and afterward chowing down on chili spaghetti at Bob's Big Boy. My dad used to be a fruit stocker and janitor at Grand Central Market, a smaller version of Seattle’s Pike Place in Downtown. I was at my dad’s hip, tasting and squirreling apples, pineapples, scallions, garlic, carrots, boysenberries, rhubarb, dried beans, and nuts away in my pocket. I thought I was real slick. And of course we hit all the important landmarks: whirled in the teacups at Disneyland, screamed on the Log Jammer at Magic Mountain, and clapped when Shamu leaped high out of the water at Sea World. I dreamed of being a tour guide and showing people all these places I was seeing.

And the birthday parties! The parties celebrating my birth at four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten years were binging! You know how Western tourists go
WALKED TILL I PUT 100

I HAD A KEY AR

NO LOOK ON MY LIFE

to Asia and just have to participate in the sacred mystical Oriental ritual known as a tea ceremony. Because they think this is what we do, even if we don’t. For my parents, throwing birthday parties for their son was their tea ceremony, their attempt to connect spiritually to their new American culture. They had no idea what the fuck they were doing or why, but somewhere they learned or read or saw or heard that that was how American kids in the 1970s celebrated their birthdays. This explains the magicians—goddamn magicians—at my birthday parties and the clown with tricks up his puffy sleeves and a man on stilts walking with the clowns of the hour animals. And a pool party one year. Chuck E. Cheese’s another.

They were creating memories that were as new and foreign to them as they were exciting to me.
But the clouds were gathering.

I was five years old when my dad's liquor store sold its last bottle. My parents still kept on with the rented birthday magicians, the big smiles on their faces, the big breakfasts every morning, but I could sense the magic disappearing. By then they had started drinking at home, just a little at first, then a lot more. On those nights I always tried to be a good son, memorizing the English dictionary like my dad told me to do. I'd look up from the words and definitions, though, and watch my parents. They were about sober enough to hand-deliver a hard whack if they heard Korean coming out of me instead of English, but they also were starting to drink enough for their eyes to hollow, their faces to turn that devil's red. I didn't need the dictionary to learn the difference between sober and drunk.

With the family business closed, we moved. And moved again and again as my parents hustled all over town, working at their friends' gas stations, wig shops, video stores. We bounced around South Central and back up through Crenshaw before finally ending up in West Hollywood in a rent-controlled property that my uncle managed. We were on the second story, surrounded by single mothers and hippies, in a duplex filled with moving boxes torn open as needed.

My parents tried to dig up a new life in the jewelry business. They went straight to the source, taking dusty field trips out to the local mines to check out the turquoise, fossils, agate, and big mineral pendants that matched the huge sunglasses, long linen dresses, and bell-bottoms that were so popular in the mid-seventies. My dad even studied up at the Gemological Institute of America and became a certified gemologist. Together, he and my mom peddled their wares door-to-door, from our neighborhood all the way up to the boutiques on fancy Sunset Boulevard.

It's hard to make a sale with a kid on your back, so my parents left me behind. For two years, until I was about seven, I had a key around my neck but no
lock on my life. So I wandered. I walked until I put holes in my soles. And the more hours they clocked, the longer I was alone, ready to be adopted by the city streets. I discovered the urban forest of old palms and sycamores right below Olympic Boulevard. Made my way into alleyways and onto their broken sidewalks. Got lost in the dull lights of the 7-Eleven and swiped candy, chips, beef jerky—why not? I hopped on and off buses, getting off in Koreatown, where I discovered tamales and sniffed out kimchis, some in jars, others in plastic bags. I found hot dogs and carne asada being grilled at the park, studied the jars of soybean paste stocked in market aisles. I rode my way down to Little Tokyo and tasted fish-shaped pastries filled with red beans, grabbed aluminum foils filled with savory pancakes. I saw kids, but most weren’t Koreans or any other type of Asian. Mostly black or white instead. I wondered why I wasn’t them.

I always managed to get back home before my parents did. When they did finally turn the key in the lock, it was like spinning the wheel of fortune. Sometimes my parents would grab me for a grand trip, like to Oxnard for vegetables. Other times we’d just go to the market for a carton of Marlboro Reds and a handle of Cutty Sark. Or maybe we wouldn’t do either, and they’d just go straight to the bottles and yell and sometimes smack me to blow off some steam, then tell me what a great coming until I their friends coffee table. Nothing wro Nothing wro

Truth is, supposed to t actually be Ar
Korean, so, fu jumble.

So what Throw up the American sup thumb of app

This bei neighbor’s mc got us special
I was so On that Paramount’s f friend and I w that day, but I soul. He stop that, he looke shit would ge!

And he
Fuck, th

That we didn’t matter. been cracked.
fingertips. On of my life. Tou
what a great son I was and cook up a grand feast. I never knew what was coming until it was already done. Whatever we did, our nights usually ended with their friends dropping in and empty bottles and red cigarette boxes littering the coffee table. Food, booze, smoke, and chatter. Just a little weeknight get-together. Nothing wrong with that, right?

Truth is, I didn’t know what was right or wrong. The English-only rule was supposed to turn me into an American, but that alone didn’t spell out how to actually be American. I still ate kimchi and porridge but got a beat-down if I spoke Korean, so, fuck, I didn’t even know how to be Korean either. Everything was all a jumble.

So what does a bewildered, lonely boy who can’t find the right words do? Throw up the Bat Signal, of course. Get some outside help. And the Fonz, my great American superhero, answered the call. He swooped in with his Fonz e touch, his thumb of approval, and gave me some confidence.

This being the city where dreams are made, it just so happened that my neighbor’s mom worked at Paramount Studios, where Happy Days was filmed. She got us special passes to meet him.

I was so fucking excited.

On that great day, we went through the famous gates. Walked onto Paramount’s famous studio lot. The Fonz was busy when we found him. I know my friend and I were probably the least important things on Henry Winkler’s agenda that day, but he was the Fonz, man. Classy above all, a drink of water for a parched soul. He stopped what he had been doing and did all the niceties for us. But beyond that, he looked at me and said something without words. He somehow told me that shit would get deep, but to hang in there, because I had an interesting road ahead.

And he gave me the thumbs-up.

Fuck, the Fonz read my palm when all I was looking for was his thumb.

That was it. Whatever my parents were going to do that night suddenly didn’t matter. Something inside me unjumbled and fell into place, like a code had been cracked. I looked at that thumb, and a deep part of me saw the flavors in our fingertips. On a level I wasn’t even aware of, I was encouraged to make that a part of my life. Touch of gold. Everything’s better. Sohn-maash.
KIMCHI

A car needs gas; as a kid, I needed kimchi. Everything I am comes from kimchi. Kimchi plus a bowl of rice equals a meal for me. Hot dogs and kimchi? Sure. The La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles bubbled slowly throughout my life, and they always reminded me of the jars of fermenting kimchi that filled our refrigerators. In a way, all that kimchi took this long to ferment within me.

Always slurp the first batch from the bowl with your fingertips before it goes into the jar. Industrial gloves for mixing are optional but recommended.

**MAKE 1 BIG JAR**

**PASTE**
- 1 cup kochukaru
- 1 cup peeled onion
- ½ cup water
- 15 garlic cloves, peeled
- ¼ cup peeled and chopped fresh ginger
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons fish sauce
- 2 tablespoons oyster sauce
- 2 tablespoons natural rice vinegar (not seasoned)
- 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- ½ cup jarred oysters
- 1 tablespoon salted baby shrimp

**VEGETABLES**
- 4 cups water
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 large napa cabbage
- ½ bunch fresh chives, cut into 1-inch batons
- 1 tablespoon salted baby shrimp

Put all the ingredients for the paste in a blender, puree, and set aside.

In a bowl large enough to hold the cabbage, mix the water with the salt. Split the cabbage in half and soak it in the salted water for 2 to 3 hours at room temperature.

Drain the cabbage. Mix ½ cup of the paste, the chives, oysters, and salted shrimp and layer between the leaves of the cabbage. Coat the exterior of the cabbage with the remaining paste.

This is when you cut off a leaf and slurp.

Stuff the cabbage into a gallon-size glass pickle jar and seal tightly. If it doesn’t fit, you can cut the cabbage in half again.

Keep the jar at room temperature for 2 days, then put it in the refrigerator. It will be ready to eat in about 2 weeks and can be kept refrigerated indefinitely.
ROCKY, YOU CAN DO IT.
A RAW EGG IS LIKE A SLURRY. IT’LL COOK GENTLY IN THE PORRIDGE AND PULL THE WHOLE DISH TOGETHER.
ABALONE PORRIDGE

The island of Cheju is famous for its abalone porridge, and Los Angeles has a place called Mountain Cafe on 8th Street in Koreatown that does the best version of the dish. But people who eat abalone porridge on a regular basis know it's best eaten at home with family, especially when you have a toothache. This is how I do it. Hope you enjoy.

For the anchovy stock, homemade is best, but you can also use canned anchovy stock, fish stock, chicken stock, or even instant dashi broth.

SERVES 4

ANCHOXY STOCK
1 cup dried anchovies
13 cups water

PORRIDGE
8 cups cooked white rice
2 tablespoons plus 2 teaspoons minced peeled fresh ginger
2 tablespoons Asian sesame oil
2 tablespoons roasted sesame seeds
8 ounces Santa Barbara abalone, pounded and diced, or chopped fresh or canned clams
Big pinch each of kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
4 eggs
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon thinly sliced scallions
Bottle of soy sauce for the table

To make the anchovy stock, combine the anchovies and water in a medium pot over low heat and simmer for 1 hour. Drain through a sieve and set aside. You should have about 3 quarts.

To make the porridge, combine the rice and stock in a large pot and bring it to a boil. Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook until the rice starts to become bloated, about 10 minutes, stirring the rice often. Add the ginger, sesame oil, sesame seeds, and abalone.

Over very low heat—lower than a simmer; you’re looking for one bubble to pop on the surface every now and then—cook until thick but still viscous, about 20 minutes. Season with the salt and pepper.

Pour the porridge into 4 bowls, crack an egg into each, and top with scallions.

Splash in soy sauce as desired and GET DOWN.
TWICE-COOKED DUCK FAT FRIES

As a kid, I loved going to Tommy’s Burgers with my dad, the sun setting low and slow as we pulled up to the tiny shack and got in line to order burgers and fries. Those were such simple things, but sometimes the things that look the simplest take the most care. And these duck fat fries using potatoes, sweet potatoes, and yuca are a take on that—yeah, they might take a little while, but the process of making these isn’t a burden as much as it is hidden dedication. Do it with care; then the fun will come from eating it. Things that come in threes must be good, right?

SERVES 4

2 cups canola oil
2½ cups duck fat
8 ounces Idaho potatoes, peeled and cut
lengthwise into ¼-inch-thick batons
and held in water
8 ounces sweet potatoes, peeled and cut
lengthwise into ¼-inch-thick batons
and held in water

8 ounces yuca, peeled and cut
lengthwise into ¼-inch-thick batons
and held in water
Sea salt
Limes, halved
1 bunch Thai basil leaves

In a deep fryer or a very large, deep pot—whatever you got, man—heat the canola oil and duck fat to 250°F. If you don’t have a food thermometer, you’ll know the fat is hot enough when you drop one test fry in there and it sizzles slightly.

Line a sheet pan with paper towels and grab a big metal spider strainer for scooping the fries out of the fat. Dry the potatoes and yuca after removing them from the water.

Dump the Idaho potatoes into the fat, in batches if necessary to avoid crowding, and, moving them constantly, cook until they’re slightly colored, about 3 minutes. Transfer them to the paper-towel-lined sheet pan. Repeat for the sweet potatoes and yuca; look for a light, light beige color, letting the fat come back to 250°F between batches.

Once all the tubers have been par-blanch, bring the fat up to 350°F and fry each batch again until crispy, 4 to 5 minutes, or a deep golden brown color. Scoop each batch onto the paper-towel-lined sheet pan. Sprinkle with sea salt and squeeze limes all over.

Fry the Thai basil leaves in the fat until crispy, about 2 minutes, and toss with the fries.

EAT NOW.
CHILI SPAGHETTI

Chili spaghetti at Bob’s Big Boy, milk shakes, root beer floats, late-night movies, repeat—that was our family fun. My parents took me to some raw-ass movies: Midnight Express, Taxi Driver, The Godfather, Apocalypse Now, Jaws, The Deer Hunter, The Exorcist, Dog Day Afternoon. Man, I was only five years old, homie! I don’t know what they were thinking, but those movies were great! I felt so alive being up so late, watching crazy movies, and eating spaghetti topped with chili. I wasn’t in bed by eight—ya know what I mean?

SERVES 4 TO 6

⅛ cup plus 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
2½ pounds ground beef
1 large onion, minced
5 garlic cloves, minced
12 ounces tomato paste
1 tablespoon cider vinegar
2½ cups beef stock, homemade if*
you’ve got it, canned if not
One 4-ounce can diced green chiles
1½ jalapeño peppers, minced

1 tablespoon ancho chile powder
1 tablespoon cayenne
3½ tablespoons ground cumin
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon canned crushed pineapple
3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
Kosher salt
1 pound spaghetti

GARNISH

⅛ cup grated cheddar cheese
½ cup minced onion

Bottle of Tabasco sauce for the table

Heat the vegetable oil in a large saucepan over medium heat for about a minute. Add the beef to the pan and brown it. Transfer the beef from a pan to a bowl, leaving the oil in the pan.

Raise the heat to medium-high and add the onions and garlic to the pan. Cook until soft and lightly browned, 3 to 5 minutes.

Add the tomato paste to the pan, stirring and cooking the paste just slightly for about 2 minutes. Add the vinegar to deglaze the pan, then add the stock and the ground beef. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to a simmer. Simmer for 30 minutes, then add the green chiles with their liquid, the jalapeños, chile powder, cayenne, cumin, oregano, pineapple, and cilantro. Simmer for 30 more minutes.
Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and add the spaghetti, cooking until al dente, 8 to 10 minutes.

Drain the spaghetti and transfer to a big bowl. Pour the chili over the spaghetti and garnish with the grated cheddar cheese and minced onions.

**TAKE IT OUT TO THE TABLE TO SERVE FAMILY STYLE, OPEN THE BOTTLE OF TABASCO, AND SPLASH.**
CHAPTER 2

VER GARDEN

WELCOME TO
SILVER GARDEN
Open 11am - 9pm
We accept Visa, Master Card, American Express, Diner's Club
Please seat yourself

Silver Garden was a family restaurant. My family's restaurant. Deep in Orange County, there was no other Korean restaurant around at the time that had food quite like we did. It was in the right place at the right time, until it wasn't.
MY PARENTS DIDN’T CHOOSE the restaurant business so much as it chose them. Sales for their hippie jewelry faded as the seventies switched gears from Peter, Paul and Mary to the Bee Gees, and they had to look somewhere else for work. By then, everyone in the L.A. Korean community knew about my mom and her legendary food and homemade kimchi. Her kimchi was so good that not only family and friends, but also friends of friends and friends of friends of friends, straight up bought it off her. She took orders, cooked up a red storm at home, then packed it all up in Styrofoam containers. I'd pack those into cardboard boxes, and off we'd go to make home deliveries. Everything spilled in the car, my parents fought, but my mom made it happen.

She sold her kimchi and panchan at house parties and bowling alleys and parking lots while pregnant with my sister. She was like the Avon lady, but instead of makeup, it was kimchi calling. Free savory pancake with any purchase. What a deal!

"Open a restaurant," everyone would say to my mom after eating her food. And after their jewelry business went belly-up, my parents realized that, hey, they should open a restaurant. Move their underground hustle above ground. There was another kyae meeting. They combined their savings with the kyae pot and looked south to plant their seeds.

Our restaurant was in Anaheim, California, barely five miles north of Disneyland, on a long, never-ending boulevard called Brookhurst Street. Brookhurst runs almost twenty miles from Huntington Beach north through the Vietnamese ex-pat community Little Saigon in Westminster, up through the OC’s own Koreatown in Garden Grove, all the way into the barrios of Anaheim. We were in the western part of those barrios.

When we opened the restaurant there in 1978, West Anaheim was what you could call trashy, a transient hood. Some residential pockets did take root, but for the most part the homes weren’t where the heart was. The blood that ran through the veins of the neighborhood was a bit less...
wholesome: dive bars, drugs, Harleys roaring through the parking lot in front of the Humdinger, where girls danced nightly. As for Korean food, there were some noodle joints and a few small sul rong tang joints specializing in beef marrow soup, but that was it. Opening a big, family-friendly Korean restaurant in a place like that was like opening the only Korean restaurant in Hell’s Kitchen back when it was Hell’s Kitchen.

But that’s why the area was so cheap. And cheap real estate, as you know by now, is like a ghetto birdball for Koreans. Our new home was just a few miles from its cultural cousins in Little Saigon and Garden Grove, but it may as well have been a hundred.

I WAS EIGHT when we started work on the restaurant. We called it Silver Garden, after my sister, just born. Her English name is Julie, but her given name is Eun-Jung, which means—well, you guessed it. All the family love was poured into our little girl. It’s an Asian thing, y’all. Prosperity and future, pride and no prejudice. Your children’s names are the waters that cleanse and sprout new life.

Before we took it over, the restaurant had been an Italian-American joint—emphasis on “American”—and we made it our own right quick. The restaurant’s sign was Winnie-the-Pooh yellow, with huge black letters and the Korean lettering—Eun Jung Shik-dang—just to the left of the English translation. “Silver Garden” was just one name crammed on a strip-mall signboard, just one business stuffed onto a strip of concrete with six other businesses, lined up like ducks in a row. We were the odd duck out, though, tucked between a used-appliance store and a silkscreen T-shirt shop. Just a few hops down were a couple of choice dive bars—Sherwood Inn (“Cocktails, Hot Fantasies”) and Sugar’s (“Beer—Girls—Pool”)—plus a hobby shop, a takeaway BBQ rib place, a liquor store, and a nail salon.

The first thing you’d notice about Silver Garden was that almost the entire storefront was floor-to-ceiling plate glass. You know that glass that encapsulates car dealerships? The kind
of glass that wobbles when fire trucks roll by? That kind of glass made up the front of Silver Garden. The front door was glass, too, with a long handle that braced its center like a belt. Rice paper framed by bamboo square boxes tic-tac-toed the bottom half of the front facade. Open the door, scrape. The door always stuck. Pull hard. Boom.

First thing to greet you: a cigarette machine. On the wall to your left, a corkboard pinned with calendars, business cards, flyers, couches for sale. Slope right. Walk into the main dining room. Enter the magic.

Rice paper with bamboo trim covered the walls, and my parents hung up antique tools from Korean farms—brooms, fruit-gathering baskets, hatchets, drying baskets for fish and chiles—for decoration. It was dark in here, but not so dark that it was depressing. A bamboo and rice paper room divider split the dining area into two; on the right side, big leather booths studded with brass buttons lined the wall, and brown Formica tables and stackable polyurethane chairs arranged into four- and two-tops took up the rest of the floor space. On the left side of the divider, larger tables in the same Formica. This side was the party room.

As you headed toward the server area, the place began to lighten up until bright white light swallowed the dark. This was exactly the line where the back of the house met the front of the house; in fact, you could literally stand right on this border, and half your body would be brown and the other half white. Ha!

When you stepped into the kitchen, you’d note how huge it was. There was a soda machine on the right, then the hand sink, water station, ice bin, and a stand-up refrigerator. To the left against the dining room wall, a piano of burners. The grill was on a side wall, and the center was filled with a prep table, stainless steel shelving, and a dishwashing area.
There weren't too many cooks in the kitchen. There was my mom, the chef at Silver Garden, always elbows-deep in kimchi-stained plastic tubs. There was a dishwasher dude, a couple of older ladies helping with the kimchi and marinating meats, a cook putting out stews. Then my dad, doing whatever my mom told him to do. It don't matter whether you are classically trained, a chef is a chef, and you do as the chef says. Yes, chef!

It was just this tiny group of people, but the kitchen was constantly busy, and the food never stopped coming.

Every morning before the restaurant opened at 11:00, the kitchen went into overdrive. The back alley was an orchestra of food: Porcelain barrels of fermenting bean paste lined up around the door like pipe organs. Right next to these barrels were salted fish, croakers or mackerels, hung and tied together, accordion style. In the pit of the alley were crates and crates of onions, scallions, garlic, mung beans, soybean sprouts, ginger. My auntie—a distant relative, actually, but the kind of relative you gotta call “auntie”—would strap on rain boots and wash all the vegetables down with a red hose. She was a short woman with a gold tooth and beautifully wrinkled skin. We have a joke in Korea: there are three types of humans—man, woman, and, for certain women of a certain older age, ajuma. She was definitely an ajuma.

The vegetables sun-dried on milk crates and old clothing racks. As they dried, we'd bring them into the kitchen for prep, and they'd inevitably land in one plastic bucket or another. There were buckets on the floor for the marinated spicy crab and sesame spinach. Other buckets for the short ribs marinating in thick black sauce. More buckets for the mountains of kimchi waiting for salted baby shrimp and oysters to be added. On the counter, flat chives laid out alongside big cubes of daikon and young baby radishes painted in red, all diced and cut, ready to be crunched in your mouth. Big blenders overflowed with savory pancake mixes.

Past all the buckets and blenders was the dry storage: cases of soju and beer, bags of dried chile flakes, sacks of unpeeled garlic and onions, jars of unpeeled ginger, kochujang, cucumbers, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, and pounds and pounds of rice. Then there were the cases of oranges and apples; once sliced, they were strictly reserved as our dessert for the guests.

Just off to the side of the kitchen in the very back of the restaurant was an amazing particleboard trapezoidal structure, a little island my parents built for my sister and me, which we turned into the Choi Family Treehouse. Two big couches,
a couple of lamps, a 19-inch television on a swiveling pedestal, a
twin bed with striped sheets, a baby playpen, a crib for my sister,
a bookshelf, a desk. This was the scene of much of my third- to
sixth-grade elementary-school education, where I did my homework,
read books, solved multiplication tables, learned my prepositions
and adverbs—did everything I needed to do to stay at the head of
my class. I'd get out of school, pick up my little sister from day care,
maybe take her by the supermarket, where I'd swipe a few candies
for us, walk to the restaurant, and, while the kitchen was in full
prep mode, settle us down in the treehouse. She'd take her nap, I'd
start on my homework, someone would be hosing the vegetables
outside, someone else would be whack-whack-whacking at some
piece of meat, everyone working at his own station until . . .

Three p.m. Regardless of what you were doing, everything came to an
immediate halt at 3:00 p.m. At exactly three o'clock on the dot, it was dumpling time.
Family time. The ladies took off their aprons, plunked down at booth number one,
poured flour on the table, and set down a stack of dumpling wrappers and a big
mound of ground meat laced with vermicelli noodles, ginger, scallions, garlic, soy
sauce, sesame oil, and fish sauce. Time stood still as the women took the tips of their	
spoons, scooped up just the right amount of meat into the palm of their hands,
dropped it into a dumpling wrapper, brushed on the egg wash, folded, and pressed.
Then again a thousand times more.

And all the while, they talked shit.

"Yah, did you hear that Eun Ja got a new Mercedes? That ho been tricking
for a long time, and now she finally got a sugar daddy and thinks she's all that. It's
a nice car, though . . . Yah, what are you gonna do about what Jee Su said about
you? She said you left her with the bill and didn't offer to pay because you guys have
no money now and she says that you guys are gonna have to file for bankruptcy.
She says that your kids are doing no good in school but her kids just got a summer
scholarship to UCLA . . ."

"Yah, do I look fat? Yah, I want to get my eyelids done. Do you think I'll
look good? Looklooklook—what do you think? Should I get them done? Should
I? . . . Yah, does your husband just come home and fart all day and throw his shit
everywhere? . . . Yah, did you hear about the new beef soup-place in Garden
Grove? Wanna go? But I heard the sisters are fighting there now and the food went

34 L.A. SON
downhill. . . . Yah, let's go shopping. That new stuff from Loehmann's is on sale, and we can get some noodles afterwards. Hurry."

Men, money, hair, wrinkles, gossip, new ventures, books they read, the old days. Anything. Everything.

Time went back on the clock around 4:00 p.m. That's when the dinner rush hit. And that rush was almost always for our signature dish, the hot pot.

The hot pot. Twelve bucks for a family-style serving of spicy kimchi-tofu with shiitake mushrooms, vermicelli noodles, pork neck, shrimp, crab, rock cod, leeks, and a raw egg swirled in seconds before you eat it. The hot pot was served in a tin bowl shaped like a flying saucer with a hole in the middle. Heated by a can of Sterno underneath the saucer, the stew swirled and boiled around in the doughnut ring of heat.

To accompany the hot pot, you could get a warm tofu or rock cod dish braised in soy sauce and rice vinegar, topped with shaved scallions and toasted sesame seeds. And some salted croaker fish and the raw spicy crab, too. And of course you couldn't leave without a plate of panfried dumplings and grilled short ribs. Then, as the Sterno began to sputter, you could mash the rice into the bottom of the stew and turn it into deliciously crispy bits. On top of those greatest hits we had our B-sides. There were twenty-five to thirty dishes on the menu in total, divided into sections for BBQ, stews, soups, dumplings, hot pots, noodles, and rice, plus specials like braised kalbi. All between five and twelve bucks.

At its busiest, the restaurant did two hundred to three hundred covers a night. That's fuller than full—lines-out-the-door full. And that's because nobody, I mean nobody, was doing food as good as Silver Garden back in that day. If Yelp were around back then, Silver Garden would have been on the home page with 4.5 stars, there would have been lines out the door, and there would have been food blogs decorated with photos of that hot pot.

But this was the late seventies and early eighties. We had to rely on the original
form of Yelping: old-fashioned word of mouth. And, damn, word got out fast. Our
crowd included the occasional white and Indian folks, but the restaurant was mostly
crowded with the small but fierce community of Koreans in Anaheim. We had friends
who rolled in a few times a week. Then there were Korean groups who came in after
work. Korean guys hungry after a few rounds of golf. My dad took care of these
crowds, and the two waitresses—usually young Korean exchange students or little
sisters of my mom’s friends—took care of the orders.

And me, why, I played maître d’. Before everyone came in, I took care to
Windex the front door and windows, made ‘em real shiny and clean. I checked on
all the tables, made sure the settings were right, had a Coke while waiting for the
crowd to arrive. And when they did, I posted up by the cigarette machine and said
“Welcome to Silver Garden” and told them they could sit anywhere. Then I’d give a
wink to the cute waitress cuz I was a cool cat with a cool little crush on a cool little
coed. She’d wink back and greet the table. Every once in a while I’d go back to the
Treehouse to check on my sister and take a break to watch TV or read a book with
her. Then I was back out on the floor, part of the laughter and the roar, refilling the
panchon and water glasses.

Honestly, I probably got in the way a lot. But even then I knew that people
were at our restaurant, sitting in our booths, to eat and enjoy themselves. So I tried
to have a great time, too. For the first time in my life, the cooking that I was so used
to at home was part of everything I was doing—no start point, no end point. For
two years it was a beautiful blend of all good things. The garden was in full bloom.

THEN THOSE DAMN CLOUDS started gathering again to rain on our parade. I told
you this was West Anaheim, right?

The grass was looking greener on the other side of Brookhurst. There Koreans
were turning Garden Grove into the next Koreatown, while our end of the street
darkened. Drugs trickled in slowly, then flooded the area like water bursting through
a dam. Our neighborhood became the seedy motel capital of the West Coast,
occupied mostly by increasing numbers of hookers, transients, bikers, and gangs.

Disco was out, heavy metal in. These new residents definitely weren’t looking for our
brand of hot pot. Eventually, nobody really wanted to come to our part of town—
not for a visit and especially not for Korean food.

My parents became grumpier and grumpier and worked harder and longer,

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This
and I latchkeyed it like I had never latchkeyed it before. They still found time to put me in the Cub Scouts and Little League, but I knew what was up. We were losing customers, our business. Everything was COD now. Electricity bills paid in the morning to have functioning lights during the day and the night. Then paid again tomorrow morning with last night’s take.

My parents, trying to keep Silver Garden alive, added bulgogi mixed-rice bowls and spicy mandoo stews; these didn’t really make sense for their menu, but all the newer Garden Grove restaurants offered these, so they tried to make them fit. They painted new signage on the window, brightened up the dining room, made flyers. None of these things worked.

And my parents just couldn’t see that they were chasing their own tail. My dad was blind to the weeds in the garden, but it was more from pride than denial. He’d have scotch with his buddies in the restaurant, invite them over to share glorious plates of kalbi and soju, as if we were still ballin’. He coped by showing off the most when he had the least. My mom continued to prep as if three hundred covers were coming in each night, stuffing plastic bucket after plastic bucket with marinating meats and her fantastic kimchi. Night after night, these dishes just sat row after row, orphaned and waiting for people who never showed up. Some of the food rotted and decomposed in the back of the walk-in. Sometimes I went in there, quietly, cleaned it all out, and filled our trash cans to the brim with my mom’s amazing food. Enough there to feed a small army, if only the war wasn’t already lost.

They started to sell Amway and jewelry out of the restaurant.

One by one, the ajumas, the young waitresses, the dishwasher, the cooks were let go. Then it was just us three working the back and front of the house. And then there were none. It was a pink sky at dusk when Silver Garden began dinner service for the last time. My parents worked fifteen hours that day. They were beaten down, smelling of garlic, and hungover from scotch. There was pain in their eyes, but resilience too. We served our last dish to our last customer. The Humdinger whistled its bells; the birds on the wire silently flew away.

For all the things it may not have been, it was the most beautiful time in my life. The prime time of my mom’s life. The first time I picked up on the feeling that food was important and not just a meal to fuel yourself to do something else.

This was my family’s restaurant.

This was Silver Garden.