

Todd Kliman Chases the Perfect Chef

Published on February 24 2010

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Todd Kliman is the food and wine editor of The Washingtonian magazine.

“I don’t think the world can have too much Chang.” —David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*, on learning that both his magazine and *The Oxford American* were publishing features on Chef Peter Chang in their respective March 1 issues.



To judge by upcoming articles in both *The Oxford American* and *The New Yorker*, Chinese émigré Peter Chang may be the most obsessed-over, and mysterious, chef in the United States.

As a preview to our Southern Food Issue 2010—available in early March—we present Todd Kliman’s evocative tale of food,

passion, and pursuit. Todd Kliman critiques restaurants for a living, but this one chef, Peter Chang, this perfect chef, has definitely pierced his professional composure.

More details about our 2010 Southern Food Issue, which is guest-edited by John T. Edge, appear after Kliman’s article.

And coming soon: Our interview with Todd Kliman about Chef Chang, the travails and triumphs of a food critic’s life, and writing about what you love.

The Perfect Chef

I Pursued, He Ran.

by Todd Kliman

Photographs by Dan Chung

Before I got in my car and drove to three different states to find him, before I began tracking his whereabouts on the Internet and running down leads that had been passed to me by people I had never met, before I had to admit that I had become a little crazed in my pursuit and that this was about more than just him, but about me, too—before all that, Peter Chang was simply somebody whose cooking I enjoyed.

I was just starting out as a food critic, and had learned through a tipster that a talented chef had taken over the kitchen of a restaurant in Fairfax called China Star, in the suburbs of Northern Virginia, forty minutes from Washington, D.C. In the world of serious food lovers, in an age of rapid information sharing, the real excitement over a new place happens far in advance of the published review in the paper or magazine and at a subterranean level, below the awareness of ordinary folks, those people possessed only of a mere casual interest in food and restaurants. Someone gets a tip and passes on the news, and a following quickly builds—a kind of culinary equivalent of insider trading.

Despite my newness to the job, or perhaps because of it, I had made myself an inviolable rule about tipsters, and that was to take every one of their recommendations seriously. Often, this resulted in driving an hour and a half for dispiriting Thai or dessicated barbecue, and I would feel toyed with and mocked; driving home, I would curse my rule and vow never again, only to get back in the car and hunt down the next lead that came my way, because the truth was that I could be disappointed nine out of ten times but the tenth time, the success, would fill me with such a sense of triumph that it was as if those earlier disappointments had never occurred. As a critic, I was inevitably thought to be gorging myself on the good life, on endless quantities of champagne and caviar and foie gras, each meal richer and more luxurious than the last, but after a while, and to my great dismay—because I had made another vow, which was to not become jaded by an excess of pleasure—these meals blended into indistinction. No matter how exquisite something might be, a diet made up exclusively of exquisite dishes inevitably becomes normal, and normal is boring. The unrequited love is always more interesting than the requited love, and, as it had been with me and dating, so it was with me and restaurant meals. I lived for the chase.

In this case, my tipster was possessed of more than just the usual slate of dish recommendations. He had a backstory to pass on. This chef had won two major cooking competitions in China, a significant achievement by any reckoning, but especially in a culture that is disinclined to valorize the individual. He had cooked for the Chinese premier, Hu Jintao, had written culinary manuals, and had come to the U.S. to cook at the Embassy in Washington, which is where he had been working just prior to joining the restaurant in Fairfax. It all sounded promising.

Not long after, I showed up with a friend one afternoon at China Star, expecting some outward announcement of the

great man's arrival, some manifestation of his specialness, only to find the usual list of beef and broccoli and orange chicken. But there was another menu, the Chinese menu, and on it was a parade of dishes I had never seen. Diced rabbit in hot oil. Sliced tendon of beef with cilantro. I didn't know where to start, so I started everywhere.

I sat with a friend at a corner table, our mouths afire from the incendiary heat of the Szechuan chilis, alterations that compelled me to keep eating long after I was no longer hungry—a desperate longing for that runner's high, that intoxication. At the same time, I was filled with a paradoxical sense that I had ordered too much and yet, somehow, not enough. I could have gone to China Star every day for a week and still not have eaten enough to know what Chef Chang's cuisine was or wasn't.

I returned not long after that initial encounter, ordered still more dishes, and felt, again, defeated. This time I was convinced there was a right way to order and a wrong way to order, and that I had ordered the wrong way. What was the right way? I wasn't exactly sure. But whatever it was, I felt certain that it was conveyed in clues offered up by the menu. The key was to decipher them, and I had not done that. Lacking any real guidance from the waiter (except to warn me that a dish was spicy, which in my eagerness to prove my bona fides—which was, really, to demonstrate that I was not the timid, fearful, judging Westerner that I might have presented, and had an active interest in duck blood and internal organs and other such delicacies—I conveniently ignored), it was easy to wind up with a table full of nothing but hot dishes, which was like reading only the dirty parts torn from a novel and concluding that the author has a one-track mind. I hastily devised a plan for my next visit: I would order both hot and cold (temperature) dishes, I would order both spicy and nonspicy dishes, I would seek, above all, balance—the balance that was, surely, there in the menu but that I had, foolishly, missed. I would enlist a group of friends to come along, reinforcements for a campaign that had become more complicated than I had counted on, their presence at the table less about communality and sharing than about subterfuge—masking my intent and allowing me to cover as much culinary ground as possible. I would do it right.

I would do it right, and in fact, I did do it right, though I did not do it at China Star. I returned to the restaurant with my five-member crew, only to learn that Chang had moved on and was cooking at a place in Alexandria, fifteen minutes closer to Washington. The restaurant was called TemptAsian Café—in intention and appearance no different from tens of thousands of Americanized Chinese restaurants across the land. When I stopped in with my wife one night, two people were waiting for carryout orders, and hearing the manager call out the contents of the stapled bags for a man in running shorts—chicken and green beans, orange beef, General Tso's chicken—I thought I might have been mistaken in thinking this was Chef Chang's place. I whispered my doubts to my wife. A cheerless and brusque waitress materialized, directed us to a table, and handed us a couple of Americanized Chinese menus. Now I was certain this could not have been where the estimable Chef Chang had landed.

“Do you have a Chinese menu?” I asked.

She gave me a scrutinizing once-over, her brow knitting. It was as if I had mispronounced the password, proving myself an interloper, undeserving of being handed the Chinese menu. For a long moment, she regarded my face, not simply for evidence of my seriousness but rather, it seemed, for evidence of my worth.

Stupidly, I smiled. Or rather, *reflexively* I smiled, because I had not wanted to smile. Even as I was smiling, I had not thought I was smiling, but I am an American, and that is what we Americans do in any situation where we are being denied what we think we indisputably deserve access to. We smile. Even when we do not know the native language.

Even when we commit egregious acts of cultural ignorance. The smile, we think, is our badge, our passport—the smile will erase everything else we have done or, as the case may be, not done; the smile will put us over; the smile will deliver us to the vital center.

I smiled, and the waitress turned and left. My wife and I raised an eyebrow at each other across the table, wondering what exactly had just happened. “Well, I guess it’s just gonna be beef and broccoli then, huh?” she said.

And then, just as abruptly as she had left, the waitress returned and grudgingly handed over the Chinese menus, which, in contrast to the bound and printed regular menu, had been cobbled together hastily via the aid of a computer. This was more like it. Here were many of the dishes I had eaten at China Star, plus a good number more that I hadn’t seen before, like a dish of fish with sour mustard greens that was preceded by a red asterisk, the universal warning that the preparation listed is going to be hot.

I pointed to the number on the menu, trying to order.

The waitress frowned. She directed me to something tamer, without an asterisk. I persisted, and she touted more aggressively the merits of the dish she had suggested. I knew from experience that we had begun that verbal joust that sometimes takes place in ethnic restaurants that don’t know and don’t court Westerners, and that each eager parry was going to be met by a forceful thrust. In some restaurants, the trick was to make multiple visits within a short span of time, demonstrating your sincerity by virtue of familiarity; then, and only then, was the staff likely to relent and allow you access to the real stuff, the good stuff, the stuff you’d truly come for. But I didn’t want to wait. In my mind, I had already bypassed this tedious and time-consuming process by having eaten twice at China Star.

When I asked for the grilled fish with cold rice gluten, her eyes bulged for a split second before she shook her head no.

No, you don’t have it in? I wanted to scream. Or no, you’re not going to serve it to me, regardless?

What the hell did I have to do to earn the restaurant’s trust to be able to taste Chef Chang’s food again?

Whether my inner torment was visible on my face, and she had taken pity on me, or whether I had demonstrated a willingness to try any number of dishes that would have put a scare into most Westerners, or both, or neither, I don’t know, but she relented and decided to bring out the fish with sour mustard greens.

It was wonderful, sour and spicy in a way that dishes featuring fish almost never are, but even if it had been merely ordinary, I would have made sure that we devoured all of it, in this way making the very unsubtle, I hoped, point that we were deserving of being shown the full extent of the chef’s repertoire of dishes.

What followed was extraordinary: Chinese cooking like I had never tasted, better than anything Chef Chang had prepared at China Star—or maybe it was that I had learned how to order from him, in much the way that you need to read two or three books by Faulkner just to begin to grasp even a little of what he is up to.

There was a plate of cold beef that the chef had intended for us to fold into a fried wrapper of dough, a little sandwich. A seemingly simple thing, except that the thin-sliced beef, tender and almost gelatinous, had been scented with the famous *ma la* peppercorn. The *ma la* peppercorn is not strictly about heat; for that, for pure heat, Chef Chang had also used the red Szechuan chili peppers. *Ma la* numbs the lips as you eat, a sensation that can only be likened to the

novocaine you get in the dentist's chair, though without the dawning sense of dread that invariably follows an injection. Why would this be desirable? Why would a chef want to numb a diner's lips? Because the numbing is also a cooling, and that cooling works in opposition to the scorching heat of the other pepper, producing an odd yin and yang, just as the sweet, doughy, chewy wrapper was set off in contrast to the slippery, savory beef.

Out came a rattan basket of fried fish the color of a blazing summer sunset. Wait, was this the roasted fish with green onion we'd ordered? The name was a misnomer, it turned out. And the description on the menu had not fully prepared us for the taste of this fish. Wait, was that cumin? Cumin, in a Chinese restaurant? On fish? It was odd. It was haunting. I couldn't stop eating it.

After a while, I knew that I was eating it not because I was hungry, but because I was eager to learn it, to burn the precise, sensory details of the taste into my memory, the way you do with anything that's good that you've never before tried, any experience, any phenomenon. With a book, you read and re-read sentences; with a dish, you eat and eat and eat, long after you're full. Being overstuffed, for the food lover, is not a moral problem. It's a practical problem.

We had not yet finished the fish when the pancakes arrived. I had had pancakes at Chinese restaurants before, delicate crepes into which you stuffed slices of crisp-skinned duck, or greasy discs of dough that had been flecked with bits of diced scallion. But never anything this dramatic. Never these big, poofy balloons that drew the eye of everybody in the dining room, and which gave up a little plume of steam when they were pricked with a chopstick.

It was a law of reviewing that if you made three visits, almost without fail, one of those meals would turn out to be a disappointment, even if the restaurant was a good restaurant. Each meal here, though, was wonderful, and I began to feel not just that I was learning his dishes, but that I was advancing deeper into Chef Chang's canon and learning *him*.

I wrote my review, which in every other instance meant that I was done with the place and had moved on to the next restaurant to be written about, to Thai, to Lebanese, to sushi, to Salvadoran. But with TemptAsian, I did not move on.

I wanted more, so shortly afterward, I organized a group to descend on the restaurant when I learned that Chang had, again, and rather more mysteriously this time, left. Three departures in two years. Even by the diminished standards of the industry, whereby a chef at one location for two or three years is regarded as a crusty vet, this seemed like a lot.



It was at this point that the gossip and speculation began to float my way, in beseeching e-mails from diners who, like me, had also fallen under the spell of the bewitching cooking of the curiously peripatetic Chef Chang. *His green card has expired, and he's on the lam. He can't stay for long in one place—as soon as he's reviewed, he has to leave. No, no: He's running from a vindictive former employer, out to exact revenge upon his star chef for leaving. Wrong, all wrong—he's had his taste of Western-style freedom and celebrity, and can no longer abide working for owners who do not treat him as the glittering talent he is.*

Strangest of all was the theory that was trotted out by one of these obsessives: *He fears success.*

In the absence of a place to eat his cooking and commune with him, the obsessives needed an outlet to express their sense of neurosis. They turned to e-mail. They took to the web. Where would Chef Chang turn up next? Would he turn up next? Could this have been—no, don't speak it—the last chance to taste his pepper-fired genius?

I passed along some of these e-mails to my wife, with wry notes attached to the top, wry, distancing notes about these cult-like pronouncements. I was laughing at the lengths that ordinary folks could go in their love for a few dishes. The truth, though, was that I was just as caught up in this as they were.

He turned up, many months later, at a dismal-looking place, again in Fairfax, called China Gourmet, with garish green pile carpet that had lost most of its nap and a drink menu featuring Mai Tais. The owner had been following Chef Chang for some time now, he confessed to me over the phone, having attended an “extraordinary” fourteen-course banquet at the Chinese Embassy and then, later, having become a regular at both China Star and TemptAsian Café. So the owner was one of us, I thought, except that he had been studying more than just the intimate magic of *ma la* and finger peppers. He'd purchased this particular restaurant because it was less than a mile from where Chang's daughter attended high school. He gave Chang the go-ahead to hire his own staff, which meant the chef could hire his wife, Hongyong, a specialist in cold dishes. Having intuited that control was important to the chef, he even allowed him to choose the restaurant's new name: Szechuan Boy.

There was a sweetly childlike quality to this name, but also something grandiose, an atypical rejection of the Chinese need to recede into the background. This was a passionate embrace of foreground, a bold assertion of his individuality and independence. The place belonged to him, the chef, the Szechuan boy.

I made my first visit three days after Chang started, a marked contrast to the three weeks I ordinarily waited before dropping by a restaurant for my initial assessment. At his other stops, I had gone with one other person, but now I took groups, the better to sample a raft of dishes in a single sitting. I had learned from experience to be firm and insistent

about what I wanted, to bark out instructions. I sounded like a stranger to myself, like a petty tyrant, or a football coach, but it worked. “Yes, sir,” the waiter at Szechuan Boy said, over and over again, as I placed my exhaustive order. I was in.

My parents were my guests for that first meal. They had eaten a lot of Chinese food, from New York to San Francisco. My mother had taken classes in Chinese cooking. They regularly hosted dinners of Chinese corn soup, homemade egg rolls, steamed fish in ginger. And still nothing prepared them for their encounter with Chef Chang, for the cumin-scented ground-beef hash that we tucked into tiny steamed buns, for the chicken consommé seasoned with microscopic dried shrimp and topped off with delicately fashioned dumplings, for the *ma po* tofu with its squares of jiggly, custardy bean curd poking up from a broth so glossy and red it resembled a new fire truck. “It’s like I’ve never eaten Chinese food before,” my mother said, awestruck.

“This guy’s a genius,” said my father, who blasted anyone who deigned to attach that label to others he deemed unworthy: Bill Cosby, Bill Gates, Martin Scorsese.

Ordinarily, I would spread my visits out over the course of a month, but I was much too impatient to abide by my self-made rule this time. I went back a couple of nights later, and then a couple of nights after that, and then a couple of nights after that. Three times in one week, and then, because I couldn’t help myself, I went back two more times the next.

“This is a druglike experience,” said a friend one night, speaking slowly and absent-mindedly in the midst of eating the chef’s version of pickled peppers, as if he were finding his bearings amid a hallucination.

Another night, I watched tears streak down a friend’s face as he popped expertly cleavered bites of chicken into his mouth with his chopsticks. He was red-eyed and breathing fast. “It hurts, it hurts, but it’s so good, but it hurts, and I can’t stop eating!” He slammed a fist down on the table. The beer in his glass sloshed over the sides. “Jesus Christ, I’ve got to stop!”

Even when I wasn’t eating Chef Chang’s food, I was thinking about it, and talking about it, recreating those singular tastes in words and images. I talked about it constantly; I couldn’t not talk about it. I wanted everyone I knew to try it, particularly since, as experience had taught me, he would not be here long and the moment was not likely to last. “I’ll definitely have to make it out there,” friends would say, and I knew from the complacency of their tone that they didn’t get what I was telling them, that a great restaurant, of all places, is not static, it is constantly changing and evolving, and often for the worse, and that greatness, when you can find it—if you can find it—is an evanescent thing, kept alive by luck and circumstance and numberless mysteries we can’t hope to understand, not unlike life itself, and we must heed the imperative to go, now, and give ourselves over to it.



Two weeks after my review came out, he was gone. Wherever he went, he left—that was nothing new, I'd intimated as much in the three-and-a-half-star piece I'd written. (Four stars is an exalted designation, rarely granted; restaurants with nine-buck entrées and garish green carpet are generally lucky to be considered for two.) What was new was the

suddenness of it. I knew not to expect a long run, but even I was unprepared for this latest exit. The owner, in particular, must have been ambushed by it. After all he had extended to Chef Chang, all he had given away....

Readers hounded me for weeks with e-mails, many of them suspecting that I'd perpetrated a hoax. This Szechuan Boy I'd written so gushingly about—what evidence was there to suggest it had ever existed? There was no sign out front and no printed menus inside. The owner had assured me for weeks that both would be arriving “any day now,” and I had accepted his promises at the time as typical of a harried owner with a new restaurant, but now I suspected that he had been deliberately withholding his full embrace of his elusive chef, like a partner in a marriage who keeps a separate account. As for the vaunted Chef Chang—gone. If he had ever arrived in the first place. The majority of my readers were moneyed and comfortable, accustomed to going where they were told, and they took it on faith that a glowing review of a restaurant amounted to a guarantee, no different, that is, from a rave about a book or a CD or any other product that was regarded as a fixed and immutable experience. Life was messy, uncertain, chaotic, and full of mystery, yes, but a great restaurant meal was an oasis of calm and order, a bourgeois stay against randomness and darkness, and this is what I had promised them in touting this great talent. My explanations that Chef Chang had bolted for destinations unknown, upending the entire operation, seemed insufficient in the face of their bewilderment and rage. My readers did not want me to explain Chang. They wanted me to explain *me*. My judgment. My foresight. Heck: my stability. They had trusted me, and I had betrayed that trust. I had ruined their Saturday night. I had led them astray.

Among the network of Chang obsessives, there was no less tortured a search for explanations, albeit without the hostility. Could it be explained? I wondered. For years now, I had been trying to understand him and had gotten no closer to any kind of meaning as to who and what he was. There was the cooking, electric and inimitable, and available only in discrete installments that emphasized the fleeting nature of everything that matters. And that was all. And maybe that was enough, in the same way that a painter is the sum of his paintings and the life that matters, the person, is what you find and intuit in the canvases.

Word came a couple of weeks later that Chang had left the area for good, and was now living in—and cooking in?—the suburbs of Atlanta, in Marietta, about twenty miles northwest of downtown.

So ends a crazy and intense chapter of my life, I thought—one whose passing I will mourn, even as I hold on fast to the memory of all those great meals. Things come and go, and nothing is forever, and we savor the good times when we can. Szechuan food was never the same again, every subsequent, subpar dish only reminding me what I'd once had, and how I would never have it again—the ache, the longing, that much more intense, because the gap between greatness and mediocrity was so profound.

I kept tabs on him from afar, growing jealous of Atlantans, jealous of their privilege, as I read the reports about his new restaurant. My memory overwhelmed me with a procession of bright and vivid pictures, and I was sitting down again to a meal of corned beef with cilantro and scallion bubble pancake and roast fish with green onion. I read the reviews over and over again, devouring the words, as if reading were akin to eating, as if the more I read, the more the descriptions would satisfy my desire for the real thing. There was something about these reviews that bothered me, though, and it only occurred to me after a fourth reading. What bothered me was that they were not as approving as my reviews had been, not nearly as comprehensive, not nearly as obsessive in nature, and the thought came to me that he was in the wrong place, that Atlantans did not love him enough, or understand him enough. It was not a professional thought, not something a restaurant critic, obliged to consider things with a certain objectivity and impartiality, is supposed to feel. A critic is not supposed to feel proprietary—and certainly is not supposed to feel protective—of a restaurant or a chef. That's when I knew that I had crossed a line, if only in my own mind. And that's when it occurred to me to get in the car and drive down to Atlanta.



Tasty China was the name. Grim-faced servers cleared tables with militaristic efficiency. From my corner table, in the back, I watched a huge white tureen being carried aloft through the sickly lit dining room like the crown prince, trailing a cloud of steam that I thought I could smell from several tables away: ginger,

garlic.

The new place was a lot like the old place, a lot like all the old places. If I had been plunked down, blindfolded, at a table in front of a buffet's worth of his cooking, I would not have been able to tell where I was. Atlanta was Alexandria was Fairfax. The same strip-mall setting, the same bad lighting, the same attentive but impersonal service. And the same food, the same brilliant, mouth-numbing, heart-racing dishes.

It was strangely comforting, this sameness—because there was nothing about cilantro fish rolls and cumin-spiced fried fish and pepper-laced chicken that resembled chicken and mashed potatoes or meatloaf and gravy or any of the other dishes that I ordinarily thought of as constituting comfort food. But they were comforting to me, somehow, all the same. They had become comforting. Familiarity, in food, doesn't breed contempt; it breeds the opposite—it breeds contentment. I had eaten these dishes so many times that they had ceased to feel exotic—a function largely of novelty and newness—or ceased to feel *merely* exotic. Eating them again, here in Atlanta, was like running into old friends far from home. They eased my sense of dislocation, of being far from home, in a strange city, without connection. At the same time, they would always be a little different, because this was not the palate I had grown up with, and there were new things I learned each time I dug into them, subtleties of spicing, nuances of texture, the same way a classic story or poem is different upon each fresh reading.

The plates massed around me, threatening to crowd me out, a circumstance my waiter sought to ameliorate by pushing over an adjoining table, a solution I flatly rejected on the grounds that I would look like an even bigger glutton, and it dawned on me, finally. Driving south, I had been buoyed by a sense of adventure, of lighting out for a new world, and the thought of reconnecting, retasting, had seemed to ease some of the drudgery of a long road trip. But now, having

travelled more than six hundred miles to his new restaurant, I realized: *I had traveled six hundred miles to a restaurant to eat dinner.*

And not only that, but I had just crossed a line from critic to fan in coming down here. I had formally acknowledged that an interest had become an obsession.

And that unnerving thought gave way to this unnerving thought: If the past was any guide, then Chef Chang would not last very long at Tasty China—the fact that reviews had already come out seemed to suggest that his days were numbered. And then what? Would I follow him to his next place? And the next place after that? Trail after him the way groupies did The Grateful Dead? The itinerant critic and the exile chef? The answer, I supposed, would determine just how much of an obsessive I had become.

He left, of course. He always left. It was not a matter of *if*, but *when*. When, in this case, turned out to be almost a year after he moved to Atlanta.

But this time, he did not stay in the area. He'd headed west: Knoxville, Tennessee, according to one of my tipsters.

"You're not going, are you?" my wife asked when I told her one night. We were out at dinner, on one of my appointed rounds: a generically stylish American restaurant with the same menu of rarefied, rustic dishes, it seemed, I had eaten for the last year or more. It was as if the chefs had all attended the same seminar.

"Probably not," I said.

My wife set down her martini thingie. "Here we go again."

"What?"

"Probably not means probably yes. You watch. You'll end up talking yourself into going."

"I mean, it's pretty far."

"Uh-huh."

"And it's not like I haven't ever had his cooking...."

"Enjoy yourself."



Washington, Atlanta, Knoxville...and then where? Where would it end? *Would* it end?

Was Chef Chang destined never to find peace, never to find a permanent home, to tramp from town to town, state to state, a culinary mercenary, a tormented loner genius? I wondered if growing up in Hunan Province, he could have imagined a life like this: a cooking vagabond, hopscotching across America and the Deep South—a restless and hungry seeker, Kerouac with a wok. Was this the life he dreamed for himself? Trading one suburban strip mall for another, the places as indistinct as the landscape, homogenized and featureless? Lacing complex dishes with the famed *ma la* peppercorn for Americans who knew nothing of him or his country, who could not tolerate heat and would much rather he concentrated his attention on their General Tso's chicken?

This was the Chef Chang I had created in my imagination, in lieu of actual knowledge of the actual Chef Chang. A chef with poetry in his soul, a romantic figure who yearned to break free of all that constrained him, including the limits of his own imagination.

It troubled me to think that there might be another Chef Chang, or many other Chef Changs, that I had driven to Atlanta and now hopped a flight to Knoxville to eat the cooking of a man who was on the run from authorities, or who had gotten in deep with the wrong people and who did not pick up and leave because he

sought a greater freedom, but who picked up and left because he was interested merely in survival.

Who else, I wondered, was following him?

Maybe he was the one and also the other, a romantic figure on the run. Maybe he was neither, and all the speculation was horribly off base.

I had driven to Atlanta with the idea that eating more of his food would bring me closer to understanding him and whatever compelled him to keep leaving places, but it hadn't even brought me closer to understanding why I picked up and followed him. I liked to think that I was recreating his own journey westward, tracing his steps in the hope of entering his mind and heart. I liked to think that, because otherwise I would have to come to grips with the idea that I was losing my mind, just a little. Washington, Atlanta, Knoxville.... Where would I stop? *Would it stop?*

I had always thought the food was addictive—the way you ate more than you intended for no other reason than that the scorching heat set your heart to racing and caused you to sweat and gave you the feeling of release and exhilaration. Now I had to wonder if there was something addictive, too, in the quest itself. I reflected on that very question as I sat at my table at Hong Kong House, surrounded by half a dozen dishes, my heart racing, feeling happier than I had in weeks and maybe months, the simple contentedness that comes of knowing that you are in the right place at the right time.

I had suspected that this meal would be my last, that I was not long for the road, that I couldn't continue to follow him from city to city. He was the one in exile, not me. Enough. I'd had my adventure.

I said all this to my wife when I returned. She looked at me the way she often looked at me when I made a promise to stain a bookcase or embark on some other project of house beautification: *I'll believe it when I see it.*

And in truth, I knew when I said it that I had said it simply to have said it, to give the idea a spin, to look good; I was test-driving, I wasn't buying.

A year later, I learned that Chef Chang had bolted again. He had come east and was cooking in Charlottesville, Virginia, at a place called Taste of China. I was in Richmond, doing research for a book, when I got the news. *An hour away. He hasn't been this close since he was in D.C.* What came over me, then, was almost chemical, an emotional sensation akin to that triggered by the peppers, an involuntary systemic reaction. I was salivating.



I was standing outside the bathroom at Taste of China with my cellphone pressed to my ear, assuring my wife that I was fine, that the trip had been a smooth one, when I spotted Chef Chang through the narrow window of the double doors and subsequently lost the thread of our conversation. It was the closest I had ever come to seeing him.

"Where are you?"

"Charlottesville."

"Charlottesville? I thought you were in Richmond."

"I was."

"And now you're in Charlottesville...."

"I finished what I had to do in Richmond and decided to come home by way of Charlottesville and get some dinner," I said, adding that I was going to be back later than I expected. I was feeling like a cliché.

"Where are you having dinner?" she asked, just as a manager pushed through the double doors of the kitchen, exposing us to the echoing sound of clanging pots and pans and cooks barking instructions at one another. I craned my neck for a better glimpse.

Out came two waiters bearing large trays on their shoulders and gesticulating wildly as they bickered in very loud

Chinese, presumably about who was responsible for what.

“Don’t tell me,” she said, and I couldn’t tell whether I was hearing admiration or dismay in her tone. Admiration and dismay? “Are you with him there in the kitchen?”

“No, I’m outside, peeking in.”

“Are you going to talk to him?”

Talk to him. Such a simple idea. An inevitable idea, an entirely practical idea. Chef Chang and I had never met, but it seemed odd that I would not seek him out now, that I would just sit there at my table like any other customer in the restaurant instead of one who had intimate knowledge of his canon and who had studied his techniques and methods. Besides which, I was a restaurant critic in Washington, not Charlottesville, so what harm could be done in divulging my identity if I so chose? And why, at this point, after all these many trips, after Atlanta and Knoxville, would I not choose?

These were smart, sensible arguments my wife was making, but they were aimed at normalizing what was not normal. To talk to Chef Chang was to make purposeful a trip that had been conceived on a whim and a notion, since an interview could be useful, and might one day form the basis for a piece (I didn’t have an assignment to come down here)—to talk to him, in other words, was to turn what was, in truth, a crazy pursuit of a man and a taste into something that could be spoken about in ordinary conversation without making me look like a loon.

Our bond, such as it was, was through food, through the silent communication of dish and diner, I said to myself. Not through talk; through taste. But this was an attempt at self-justification, an attempt to preserve some semblance of my critical distance, the wall I erected between the moments I described and my ability to be affected by them and, possibly, succumb to them.

What would happen if I went up and introduced myself? Would he bolt in the middle of dinner and never come back? Would he fling the contents of a hot wok in my face for making his life in Washington so difficult? Would he call the cops and accuse me of stalking him? And how would I plead, if he did? What would I say? What *could* I say? Taste of China was his sixth restaurant in four years. I had been to all of them. Where he went, I went. He cooked, and I wrote about him. I wrote about him, and he left.

Seeking him out was beside the point, I decided, which made what I did next so stupefying, as though I had contrived a passive-aggressive defiance against my own ruling. I ordered nine dishes. Nine dishes, for a table of one. The waiter had turned to walk away after dish four, and I had had to flag him down to return. He attempted to put the brakes on me after dish five, but I persisted. By dish number six he was shaking his head, his tired eyes widened in alarm. By the ninth, and final, dish he looked worried for me, worried for my soul, and I imagined as he turned to head back to the kitchen that he cursed my Western indifference to waste. What was I doing?

The plates gathered around me—scallion bubble pancake, corned beef with cilantro, cleavered whole chicken with finger peppers, cilantro fish rolls, roast fish with green onion—and this time I did not put up a fight when the adjoining table was shoved up against mine. I wanted Chef Chang to come out and see the spectacle in his dining room. I wanted him to come out and see my devotion, the depth of it, wanted him to know that I was no mere customer but a fervent loyalist. A critic, yes, but only by occupation. Our connection now, clearly, transcended those bounds.

He did not come out. It was okay. I understood. Maybe it was better this way. Not through talk; through taste. I did not come to Charlottesville for a meeting of the minds. I had come to Charlottesville because his food was a part of my life. His tastes had become my tastes. Where he went, I followed. I dug into a mound of cleavered chicken with peppers. My mouth went numb. Tears rolled down my cheeks.

To read Calvin Trillin's article about Chef Chang, click [here](#) (http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/03/01/100301fa_fact_trillin).

Southern Food 2010

Guest edited by John T. Edge

Five years after the much-beloved original Southern Food Issue, *The Oxford American* returns to every hungry heart's favorite subject. With our special guest editor and Southern food expert John T. Edge again helming the project, this issue strives to gaze past mere nostalgia and onto a new horizon of Southern cuisine. "For those of us who live to eat, these are hopeful times," says John T. Edge. Amidst the South's changing economic and cultural landscapes, we reflect on past cooking traditions and take stock of new trends for a better understanding of our connection to food and the people and places that cultivate it. Including features on the elusive Chef Chang by Todd Kliman, and new fiction from Megan Mayhew Bergman, we reveal the perfect cake recipe from Diane Roberts, explore Creole food heritage from Lolis Eric Elie, sample homemade beef jerky with Jack Hitt, and dig deep into the history of mud-eating with Beth Ann Fennelly. This Food Issue also debuts "The OA Manual of Good Taste," a collection of insightful pieces to inform the curious gastronome about the South's new best-kept secrets, like Nashville chocolate, MoonPie-flavored beer, and Central Texas sushi.

And please join us in Charleston, Atlanta, New York, Little Rock, and New Orleans to celebrate the release of this issue and hail the future of Southern cuisine. For more details about these events, please click [here](#) (<http://food.oxfordamerican.org/>).

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