

Requiem for the Celebrity Chef

Eat a Peach

By David Chang with Gabe Ulla
Clarkson Potter, 290 pages, \$28

By RIEN FERTEL

THE CELEBRITY CHEF is dead. His reign, at least in the United States, was short-lived but spectacular. He—and it was almost always a he—first emerged out of California in the mid-1970s, topping pizzas with smoked salmon (Wolfgang Puck), and by the '90s was dunking oysters and caviar in tapioca pudding (Thomas Keller). He wrote books that stood out as literature (Anthony Bourdain), became more notable for his television appearances than his restaurants (Bobby Flay) and arguably kicked the American culinary lexicon down a notch (Emeril Lagasse). More recently—and no doubt further hastening his demise—he has been called out for misbehavior, misconduct and worse.

Perhaps no celebrity chef changed the way Americans eat more than David Chang. He opened his first restaurant, Momofuku Noodle Bar, in New York's East Village in 2004. Less than a decade later he was on the cover of Time magazine, alongside two international celebrity chefs, above the caption "The Gods of Food." You might never have dined at one of the many restaurants in Mr. Chang's Momofuku empire, but you've no doubt eaten Momofuku-derived dishes, such as his ramen or his steamed pork buns, copy-and-pasted by lesser cooks in every corner of the country; or devoured a Compost Cookie from his stoner-dessert emporium Milk Bar or a deadpan impression of a Chick-fil-A sandwich from his Fuku fast-casual chain; or binged on his shows "The Mind of a Chef" and "Ugly Delicious."

Momofuku, in Japanese, means "lucky peach." But in "Eat a Peach," Mr. Chang's memoir, co-authored with Gabe Ulla, the fuzzy fruit becomes a Sisyphean rock. With humor, pathos and heaping spoonfuls of self-deprecation, Mr. Chang covers the ins and outs, the fires and floods, that come with running a restaurant—while constantly questioning his place in the constellation of celebrity chefs. "I'm literally one of the poster children for the kitchen patriarchy," he writes, despite being a Korean-American among a sea of white stars. Yet he's frequently miserable. "I've created my own prison," he confesses. "I just don't understand my appeal. . . . I'm not supposed to be here."

Mr. Chang covers his rise, beginning with his suburban Washington, D.C., childhood, "embarrassed by the smell of our kitchen and the look of our Korean food." He traces his meteoric trajectory from prep school ("the same school," he writes, "as PJ, Tobin, Squee, and Justice Brett Kavanaugh") to prep cook at Craft, one of New York's trendiest restaurants, for six months without pay—a cultural hold-over from the French *stagiaire* system—to opening a ramen shop despite lacking any noodle-making know-how. (He hired translators on Craigslist to decode Japanese cookbooks.) "Nothing we cooked was authentic," he writes. Yet for anyone who lined up during those early years for a seat on one of the infamously uncomfortable stools at the Noodle Bar and its



COUNTER CULTURE David Chang at his Momofuku Noodle Bar in 2007.

sister restaurant, Momofuku Ssäm Bar, the dishes prepared by his kitchens typified a new way of eating: Asian-inflected eclecticism unafraid to pummel our tastebuds with fat, salt, spice and a *mélange* of textures. I'll never forget my personal favorite dish from that

Chang writes about the boys' club of high-pressure kitchens, about struggles with bipolar disorder and depression, and about finding peace in family.

period, an apple-and-lychee salad with smoked bacon and chili nuts.

I'll also not soon forget Mr. Chang's presence in his restaurants' open kitchens, visible for all patrons to see, a presence he describes as a "combination of fear and fury" and "unchecked insanity and abuse." He writes about having treated the restaurant business with the same mentality and intensity that Francis Ford Coppola notoriously brought to the filming of "Apocalypse Now": Prepare as if for an actual war. "Cooking brings out the best and worst in me," Mr. Chang admits. Employees were hazed, physically punished and psychologically tortured. At Momofuku, the customer was regularly wrong and,

if the kitchen felt slighted, might be instructed to "go fuck yourself." For years, Mr. Chang survived on sleepless nights fueled by high-end bourbon, Russian novels, prescription drugs and suicidal thoughts. "Conflict was fuel," he writes, "and Momofuku was a gas-guzzling SUV."

"Eat a Peach" is an honest, ugly, raw dish of a book. Mr. Chang writes about his struggles with bipolar disorder and depression. Of reluctantly signing partnership deals and expanding the Momofuku brand to Las Vegas, Los Angeles and Sydney, Australia. Of the debauchery that surrounds the international celebrity-chef boys' club. Of the litany of punched walls and unhinged meltdowns, including threatening an employee with a knife. Of his fraught relationship with Peter Meehan, his close collaborator on the Momofuku cookbook and Lucky Peach, their quirky, genre-smashing magazine. (Mr. Meehan recently resigned from his Los Angeles Times editorial position, announcing that "in my tunnel-vision commitment to making the best thing we could, I lost sight of people and their feelings.") Of blaming himself for the overdose death of a bright young chef's apprentice. Of finding some semblance of tranquility in therapy and with a high-end life coach. Of finding refuge and peace in marriage and fatherhood. Mr. Chang apologizes for his behavior, but only broadly, abstractly, never directly to the individual workers he's harmed.

There was a time when such a book might inspire a generation of young cooks to sharpen their knives and move to New York, much like similar chefs-behaving-badly memoirs, including Bourdain's "Kitchen Confidential" and Bill Buford's "Heat." But "Eat a Peach" reads like a requiem, the last gasp of the celebrity chef. "Do not open a restaurant unless you must," he advises the next generation of chefs, when he should have written: Do not operate a restaurant like I did.

Mr. Chang's memoir will no doubt add more fuel to the funeral pyre. He might be called out for his episodes of bad behavior. He might be forced to divest his restaurant holdings, as has happened to other misbehaving celebrity chefs. Or he might take a different tack and use his capital and charisma to speak out about sustainable and equitable farm, health and wage-earning systems, like his mentor Tom Colicchio. Or, like José Andrés, he might help feed the nation's neediest. In the wake of Covid-19, Mr. Chang has joined forces with other New York restaurant owners to address wage inequality in the city's restaurant industry. But customers and critics will surely demand more. Whatever happens next, Mr. Chang knows that as the hill stretches ever higher, the Sisyphean peach that is his burden grows heavier by the day.

Mr. Fertel is the author of "The One True Barbecue."

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