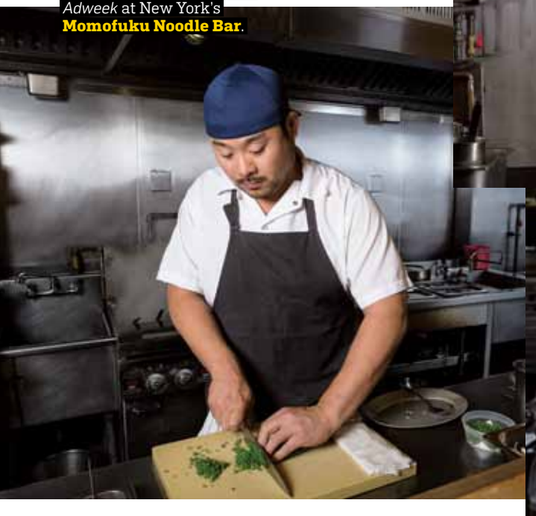
Lucky Chang

The hotshot behind the Momofuku empire has restaurants, products and now a hit food magazine, *Lucky Peach*. But a reality TV star? No, he's famous enough, thank you.

By Robert Klara



Chang cooks (and eats) for *Adweek* at New York's **Momofuku Noodle Bar**.

canvass of the food world reveals that the top 10 celebrity chefs are worth a collective $948 million. As everybody knows, only a relative few cooks will ever reach the culinary mountaintop where these kitchen gods live, but enough have made it that "celebrity chef" isn't just a defining pop term of our multichannel, food-crazed age—it has become a kind of living stereotype.

It goes something like this. A talented cook starts out with a restaurant that hits it big. Then he opens a few more. Then he crosses into the mystical realm of branding, and suddenly his name is everywhere: on cookbooks, packaged goods, TV shows, kitchen equipment. He or she (but typically, he) commands five-figure speakers' fees.

With only minor variation, the scenario handily describes the career paths of Emeril Lagasse, Wolfgang Puck, Mario Batali, and...

David Chang.

But then again, not quite.

Without question, the 34-year-old Korean-American chef who helms the highly acclaimed Momofuku is at the top of his game. Since opening the doors of his first restaurant in 2004, leading to what *The New York Times* dubbed "the slurp heard round the world," Chang's formula—"pan-Asian cooking, French techniques and bad-boy attitude," in the words of Epicurious.com—has earned him two Michelin stars, multiple awards and hoards of devotees who'll do anything to get a reservation at one of his 11 (and counting) restaurants—those that even take reservations, that is.

And with a Momofuku cookbook, a line of sauces at Williams-Sonoma and an offbeat, wildly popular 100,000-circ food quarterly magazine called *Lucky Peach* (the English translation of the Japanese "Momofuku"), Chang is well into the transfiguration from man of the kitchen to a man of media.

And yet, when we caught up with Chang last month at his East Village test kitchen (which sits safely behind an unmarked storefront, lest foodies storm the place), we came across an internationally renowned chef who's not just baffled by all the acclaim but convincingly unsure about whether he wants more of it. "I got into this profession because I wasn't supposed to achieve anything," says Chang, who once told *The New Yorker* he wasn't even an awesome cook. "Then all of a sudden," he says, "it just veered into this whole new realm."

Before it veers much further, we wanted to get Chang's take on his cooking, his businesses, his media projects and media image, and the morphing of his name and his work into something he never dreamed they would become: a brand.

***Adweek*: When you spoke at Google's campus in 2009, you said one reason you got into cooking was so you wouldn't have to do interviews, so I just want to apologize for doing this to you.**

CHANG: *[Laughs]*

You started out cooking at a really heady time, the late '90s. The dot-com boom was on, tons of venture capital was flying around. But you've said you were drawn to cooking because it was "one of the few things I thought was honest." What did you mean?

If I had done better in school, I probably wouldn't be cooking right now. But I was an idealistic college grad. I was thinking, how could you just sit down, type away meaninglessly or enter data, and do that for the rest of your life? Just accept that? It just seemed so meaningless to me.

You cut your teeth at Craft under Tom Colicchio. That place was red hot from the day it opened. How'd you get in there?

I was still going to cooking school, and my buddy was working there as a waiter. The only way I could get in there was by answering the phones.

But reservations are front-of-the-house. How'd you get into the kitchen?

I was the worst phone receptionist ever. *Ever.* One day, I went back to help out. I was just chopping mirepoix. It was just a cube of carrots, a cube of celery, a cube of red onions. I only had to do three quarts—not that much. But it took what seemed like eight hours because I just wanted to do it right. That's when I realized that I'd never cared about doing a job right before.

You actually trained in a few top-name places—not just Craft, but The Mercer Kitchen and Café Boulud. For as much as it all taught you, though, it also seems to have made you critical of fine dining. You've called it "elitist" before. What ticked you off about it?

There were several factors involved. I didn't necessarily enjoy cooking for my clientele. I don't know exactly who they were. I had also just come back from working in Japan and traveling throughout Asia. And I saw that eating well isn't just for a certain class demographic. I mean, everyone can eat well. But in America, there's this huge discrepancy between cooking well and eating well. The best restaurants happen to be the most expensive, fancy restaurants. It's not taken seriously if you did anything other than that. I definitely could have stayed in that world. But there was something about dropping out of it that allowed me to be free to choose whatever I wanted. And I just wanted to do it a little bit different.

Well, with Momofuku, you did—certainly in terms of losing the snobbery. You take reservations via your website on a first-come basis. There's no VIP list, none of that old-guard stuff.

I just wanted to open up a noodle bar, to serve food that I wanted to do. I didn't really care that it wasn't sexy. I didn't care, and that's why Momofuku happened.

But it almost *didn't* happen, right? You were a few months into your run, and looking at closing if things didn't pick up.

In America, there's this huge discrepancy between cooking well and eating well.

We were going to go out of business in like two, three months.

But then you got some good press. *The New York Times* called Momofuku "a plywood-walled diamond in the rough." Now, I'm not suggesting that the media saved your restaurant, but it probably did you a favor.

I'm sure it actually helped us, but there was no plotting of strategy. We didn't have an agenda. We didn't have a PR company. We just had no idea what the fuck was going on. Peter Meehan, who is my writing partner in all of my ventures, will quite honestly say that our food was awful when we opened up. But it got better. We were following our gut. We were learning how to run a restaurant.

Running a restaurant is, among other things, a grueling and nasty job. Do you think the cable cooking shows clean up that image?

They certainly make it plastic, but I'm not opposed to it. Like, I'll do [a TV appearance] if it helps promote the restaurant. But obviously everything [these days] is reality TV because it's easier and cheaper to produce. [Cooking shows are] a gold mine for someone making TV—high tension situations, drama.

High energy, low production cost.

Right. And the personalities are quite flammable. For TV producers it's a fucking treasure trove.

THIS SPREAD AND PREVIOUS SPREAD: STEVEN FREEMAN

It's so hard to come to terms with any of it—the *Time* award, the James Beard Award. I got into this profession because I wasn't supposed to achieve anything.

You have 11 restaurants open and at least one in the offing. At any point between when you started out and today did you become conscious that you weren't just expanding but building a brand?

It's very surreal when people process information and create viewpoints about what something really is. I honestly don't know. We have a brand. We have a name. It's called Momofuku.

But your name, you as a public figure, has become synonymous with this operation. So is the brand Momofuku, or you?

I think it's the peach. But I mean, look at the success of Christina [Christina Tosi, the restaurant's pastry chef, who created the spin-off dessert concept Momofuku Milk Bar]. I have nothing to do with Milk Bar. And while I'm [involved with the magazine] *Lucky Peach*, I have little to do with that. I've spent more time at the Sydney [Australia] location than I have in New York. So it's a team thing. Just like any other large organization where, you know, it's much more than one individual.

***Time* selected you one as of the Time 100 [the magazine's annual ranking of the 100 most influential people]. Do you *feel* especially influential?**

It's so hard to come to terms with any of it—the *Time* award, the James Beard Award. I got into this profession because I wasn't supposed to achieve anything. Then all of a sudden, it just veered into this whole new realm. And with *Time*? It's just so ridiculous. Certainly an honor though.

Shifting gears a little bit, I'm going to use the "F" word. Have you ever thought about franchising your restaurants?

It has crossed our mind. Certainly there have been deals out there. There is a very successful fast-food company that approached us and quite frankly took our intellectual property. And they are running our concept right now. They have two stores that have opened up. [But about franchising], I don't know. I'm never going to say never. But it's hard for me to grasp the notion of having a thousand outlets.

It's hard for lots of restaurateurs who do it because it really does mean losing control. It freaks some of them out.

If I could be a voice of reason for any chef who gets approached: More often than not, when somebody starts to talk to you, they just want to suck your blood.

Well, on a more pleasant note, you've also got a magazine, *Lucky Peach*, which is really popular. But why did you decide to gamble with a print product?

We were going to do an app for Apple, and we were going to do a TV show that was going to be on the app. Unfortunately, the producers of that app totally fucked us. I hate them so much I can't even remember their name. We had great content, but it just didn't meet Apple's expectations. So we had an idea—why not do a magazine? It was funny. We wanted to do new media because it was something that was fun, something that was different. We had been fortunate enough to have a lot of opportunities to do TV, but we've turned almost all of them down.

But TV's a huge opportunity for a chef. Why did you turn it down?

I don't know quite yet if I'm in the right mental state to handle being known.

You mean, you can still walk down the street now and not get stopped?

Well, that's the problem—I do.

Not as much as you'd get stopped if you were on TV though.

Yeah, yeah. I have done some stuff on TV. But I'm able to make the distinction between what a chef actually is and what the world perceives. And for me, it's going to be a lot harder to discern that distinction if I do TV. So it may happen, but at this point it's not something I'm comfortable with.

In *The Atlantic*'s review of your magazine, it seemed like the writer didn't want to like it but sort of had to because the content was a lot better than what one usually gets from a food magazine. Was that something you were aiming to do?

No, I had so little to do with that.

Who gets the credit then?

Peter Meehan on the creative content, Chris Ying on the editorial end. But Peter did so much work on it. That was really his baby, his fuck you to everyone who said, "You can't do this." But I'm just there, and I get way too much credit for something I can't deserve.

You also have a line of cooking sauces with Williams-Sonoma. Usually, when well-known chefs decide to do a branded food line, it turns into a whole array of stuff. But this is just one bottle of sauce. What's the thinking?

We were dipping our toes into something with a very respectable company. It allows us to see a part of the food world that we know very little about, and it was really a no-brainer for us. We knew it would be a money-making venture.

How well is it doing?

I have no idea. I know that people buy it.

Do you see it as a pure revenue source or more of a visibility thing?

Certainly it gets the brand out there. But for us it was, OK, how do you produce something in mass? So we got to see how a big company like Williams-Sonoma attacks a problem like this.

Well, you've been getting more mass with your restaurant openings. You opened up in Sydney last year, right?

Yep, August.

That 22-hour flight must suck.

I love flying on planes, actually. I don't like the jet lag. But I actually can relax. I can sleep because I just know there's nothing I can do. It's just forced relaxation.

And you're also going to open up in Toronto. But here's the thing. Both of those places are really high-end. In Sydney, Momofuku Seiōbo is in Star City, a five-star, $860 million hotel and casino. And in Toronto you'll be in Shangri-La, a high-rise luxury hotel and condo. Don't these places run contrary to the simple, egalitarian thing you're doing here in New York?

Sydney was something where I had an opportunity. The people who backed us let us do what we wanted, so it was really more about executing and control. This was our first project outside of New York and outside of America. The challenge was, could we execute something literally across the planet? Could we transplant our DNA, and have it grow there into something else? Can we do it right?

Do you feel like you have?

I feel that we have, yes.

Sometimes famous chefs build so many restaurants that you wonder if they ever see some of them. How often do you actually head out to Sydney to see how things are going?

I go out there a lot. I've probably spent four and a half months there since last August. I spend more time there than anywhere else, really. If we hit all our goals that we have there and we exceed our own expectations there, then it elevates everyone's game. It's not just another outpost. It's not just this cash grab. We're doing something awesome.

So how's Toronto going to fit into this?

Toronto is going to be a little bit different. Again, it would be easier to just roll everything out and do the same thing. But we're going to offer a little bit to everything. The first floor is going to be very casual. The second floor is the bar. The third floor is the restaurant.

That's so much bigger than anything you've done. How are you going to execute on that scale?

Certainly, it's a different market, and all these things that are very scary and frantic. It's very important that we fail [now] and get mistakes out of the way. That's my biggest concern as we get larger and as our brand becomes synonymous with doing things right. If Toronto is going to grow organically and not been seen as just another outpost, then we have to make mistakes. It's going to be really hard. Maybe I'm an adrenaline junkie or something. But it seems like we have the staff now that can pull it off—not just pull it off, but do it well. We've gone from being these amateur bank robbers to being a team of cat burglars. So things have changed.

Obviously they have. Hey, by the way, what do you cook for yourself at home?

I rarely cook at home. Never, actually.

Wow. OK, then, what's the most important meal of the day for you?

The staff meal at 5 o'clock. Our cooks care about making the food delicious, which is why our staff meals are so delicious. That means a lot to me. It's the test of a really healthy restaurant—how good the staff meal is. Because if you care about what your peers eat, then you're going to care a hell of a lot about a paying customer.—*Robert.klara@adweek.com; Twitter: uppereastrob.*

Eat Your Heart Out, Rachael Ray

When a mobile app project David Chang was working on went bust, instead of tossing out the content, he and co-conspirator Peter Meehan, the former *New York Times* food writer, reappropriated it for a quarterly magazine called *Lucky Peach*. Published by McSweeney's, Dave Eggers' San Francisco imprint, *Lucky Peach* is an irresistible concoction of artful writers (Anthony Bourdain, Ruth Reichl), surprising photography, quirky design, and that rare thing nowadays: an intelligent conversation about food. (No "Yum-O!" here.) —*R.K.*

All 100,000 copies of the first two editions of *Lucky Peach* sold out almost immediately. The launch issue, from last summer, recently commanded $125 on eBay.

PHOTO: KELSEY PILLISCHER