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Interview with TV Chef Ming Tsai

F&W talks to Ming Tsai, host of PBS's Simply Ming and former host of Food Network's East Meets West with Ming Tsai and Ming's Quest.

By Melissa Denchak | Updated March 31, 2015

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What was your first big break on TV? How were you discovered? "We opened Blue Ginger in 1998. The Food Network came through the restaurant. They did this great little show called Dining Around. They went to five restaurants in a half hour, and everyone got two to three minutes of fame to just talk about the restaurant and what you did. Later, I found out that it was actually a scouting show for the Food Network to see if there were chefs out there who would be decent on-camera. I still remember the first thing I said on TV: Because I'm sort of a sarcastic guy, I said, 'Hi, I'm Ming Tsai. I was born Chinese, I'm still Chinese.' And they kind of chuckled. I, of course, laugh more at my jokes than anyone. I talked about this New Zealand lamb dish I did, you know, East meets West, or actually Southwest. That was basically it."

What are some of the best recipes you've made on-air, and why? "The best-the most picturesque and funniest and most unusual-was when I did Peking duck on East Meets West with Ming Tsai. That got the most wows, the most e-mail from viewers. The cameramen were like, 'I can't believe Ming is sticking a pump up the duck.' Once people see why you blow it up, and how the fat renders off and the dipping and the hanging and all that, people appreciate it, which is why it's my favorite dish to cook for VIPs or a special holiday. Because it's a 36- or 48-hour process.

"My newest favorite toy for braising is a pressure cooker. I only became familiar with them when I did Iron Chef a year-and-a-half ago. I practiced with the pressure cooker and made duck legs, cooked for about 40 minutes. They were amazing. If my eyes were closed and someone gave me pressure-cooked duck legs and then something that had been braised for three hours, it would be really hard to tell the difference. The pressure cooker got all the wonderful broth I made with galangal, lemongrass, ginger and coconut milk into the meat, just as it would be if you'd braised it for four hours. I'm a new fan of pressure cookers for home use.

"I also use a turning slicer. You put a whole carrot, daikon or potato in it and turn it, and it makes spaghetti out of it. So, if it's carrot, you make carrot 'hair' and saute it or eat it raw. Potato you can fry or pan-sear for potato cakes. And daikon you can either tempura-fry or keep it raw as well. It just makes a very cool garnish. You end up with really thin vermicelli of these ingredients. You can get one on my Web site or at any good Asian store. It's a really fun home tool. Nobody will be able to figure out how you cut the carrots like that."

What do you think distinguishes you from other television-chef personalities? "I do East-West cuisine. I try to demystify Asian technique and ingredients and blend them smartly into Western technique and ingredients, which is different from fusion. Fusion, to me-I was an engineering major-is what you do with atoms. It's a very harsh reaction when you fuse things together. It's forced. Food in East-West cooking is a blending of techniques and ingredients. There's a reason peanut butter and escargot have never been used together-because they shouldn't be. They don't blend. My whole shtick is, if you're going to earn the right to blend techniques from different cultures, you first have to learn how to traditionally use lemongrass, store lemongrass, buy lemongrass; how the Chinese treat sesame oil; how the Japanese treat wasabi (powdered or fresh). And once you learn how to use, store and cook, then you earn the right to slowly blend it into your own cuisine. "I never blend East with East. It's always Western something-American or French technique, call it whatever you want. But if you're doing Chinese and French, you can add the wonderful flavors of those black beans and the ginger and mellow it out with a little finished butter, chicken stock, whatever. That works. If you take the same strong Chinese flavors and then try to throw in lemongrass and galangal from Thailand, you end up with way too much going on."

What is the worst experience you've had on TV? Any disasters? "David Burke had a disaster when he was on my show; it was pretty funny. And David is one of my closest friends and one of the most copied chefs in this country. I think he's brilliant, as do all of us chefs. He just looks at things differently from all of us. We were doing a tuile show. Normally, you make tuile cookies and ice-cream cones. He decided to take my warm tuile batter and pass it through a pasta machine to make tuile fettuccine, which I thought was brilliant. Only David would think of this. And then he'd use this fettuccine as a dessert garnish on ice cream or whatever. So this is the last show, last segment, and we actually had to catch a plane to get to the Food & Wine festival in Aspen. We got the batter out of the oven and into the machine, and it just shredded. It just disintegrated. He was like, 'Ah! Ming. Don't worry, Ming. We just did it.' Because they'd done it in the back, in the prep kitchen, and it worked perfectly. So he tried it again. He did it, like, seven times. He could not make it work. For the show, I think we faked it-we just said, 'He took tuile and look what he did.' We just couldn't show the fettuccine being made. I was like, 'David, you stink.'"



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