



FEATURE:

NO GUTS, NO GLORY — AMBITIONS AS A KIMCHI MAKER

Meet WooJae, a humble but talented kimchi maker in New York. Alongside his mom, they founded Kimchi Kooks. We sat down with WooJae to find out how hip-hop and kimchi-making have influenced him over the years. We talked about the artistry of freestyling in cyphers and kitchens, about Tupac and how his music still takes on new meaning these days, and about what inspires us to keep going.

***WOOJAE WAS JUST A KID FROM QUEENS CHASING THE AMERICAN DREAM,
AND LIKE A LOT OF US, HIS IDEA OF THE AMERICAN DREAM HAS CHANGED
WITH YEARS AND WISDOM. IT IS OUR CREATIVITY THAT ALLOWS US TO MAKE
THAT DREAM OURS AMIDST THE CHALLENGES.***



Kate & WooJae of Kimchi Kooks. Photographed by Helen Melville.

Kimchi'd Cypher

The making of kimchi historically and traditionally had always been a communal ritual or ceremony that celebrates the harvest of the fall just before the winter cold arrives. This ceremony is called Gimjang. In addition to celebrating the fall, Gimjang is a big celebration of the matriarchs – when the head women of each house come together and contribute their crop share to the metaphorical (and literal) pot.



If you were a farmer, you'd bring your biggest cabbages, radishes, peppers, garlic or ginger (any vegetables you want to preserve). Someone who worked by the sea would bring the most important ingredient: sea salt – and of course oysters, anchovies, and shrimp that would be preserved along with the cabbage in the form of kimchi. And of course, some of the people who were foragers of wild plants would bring roots, herbs, and mushrooms to add to the pot too.

Korea's a mountainous region, so meat was always scarce. If you were lucky to have meat you would try to eat it right away because the opportunity was so rare. This is why there's no food culture of preserving meat in Korea as there is in Europe. Adding seafood to the kimchi allows it to have some animal-based protein, vitamins and minerals. For many of the poorer families, kimchi was the only thing they would eat other than rice all winter long.

For all the variety of ingredients and people involved in kimchi-making, it was very much an improvised art. Those who made kimchi may have had an idea of how they want it to turn out, but the harvest largely determined what the kimchi would be. Most importantly, the kimchi experience brought people together. Kimchi is definitely the people's food in Korea and the art of making it has so much in common with a freestyle rap cypher:

- Each artist brings their own flavor (Literally)
- Each must “listen” to the others’ flavors
- The proper balance of ingredients is required to achieve the most harmonic and delicious result.

*KIMCHI KOOKS TRIES TO USE AS MANY LOCAL, SEASONAL INGREDIENTS AS POSSIBLE. THEY IMPROVISE IN THE MOMENT WITH WHAT'S ON HAND -- A KIND OF FREESTYLE ARRANGEMENT THAT COMES NATURALLY. THE MAKING OF KIMCHI IS SOMETHING AKIN TO THE CREATIVE PROCESS OF AN ARTIST. **BOTH RELY ON ATTENDING TO A NATURAL STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS.***

In order to keep the spirit of kimchi-making alive, the actual art of kimchi-making must be taught and passed down to newer generations. A sad truth is that kimchi cyphers are fast becoming a lost art. This is why so much of what Kimchi Kooks stands for is more than just a delicious product. It represents culture, a mix of old traditions and new ideas, and a unique and organic plug for genuine expression and storytelling.

All Eyez On Me

WooJae moved here from Korea in '99. He was 10 years old and adjusting to a whole new life. He admits he was desperate to fit in, and growing up in Queens at that time, he was aware of hip hop culture all around him. He remarks, "It was a default mode of culture for all of us in a way - minority kids, immigrant kids."



Tupac and Biggie were the legends to learn about - almost godlike in our culture.” He says, “They were the subjects of admiration for a lot of the people I was around. So I first heard Changes and I liked the song. Then I heard Hit Em Up and I learned of the infamous beef.”

He goes on, “Biggie had his sort of cerebral and moody tone for some of his music but I felt Tupac had some of the more open and direct emotions coming from his songs. Life Goes On, Dear Mama, Keep Ya Head Up, I Ain’t Mad at Cha are the songs that come to mind.”



*WOOJAE SHARES THAT HIS LIFE TOOK A VERY DRAMATIC TURN WHEN HE MOVED HERE. HE REFLECTS," BROKEN FAMILY, LIVING IN POVERTY, SINGLE MOM, UNABLE TO SPEAK THE LANGUAGE. **JUST EVERYTHING WAS DIFFICULT AND NOVEL, FOREIGN. SCARY. SO I THINK TUPAC SPOKE VERY LOUDLY TO ME. AND I'M SURE TO MANY KIDS WHO FELT UNCERTAIN OF THEMSELVES IN THEIR OWN WORLDS."***

While some of WooJae's peers romanticized the whole Thug Life mentality, he recalls, "We all made different choices out of our own environment." In WooJae's case, he wanted to listen past the gangsta imagery. While we all know Tupac was a controversial figure, we also know he inspired a lot of kids to fight through their way of life. That's exactly what WooJae did.

Dear Mama

Starting the kimchi business became a passion and a dream for WooJae's mom, Kate. When she was growing up, her mother (WooJae's grandmother) would host huge Gimjang events in the 50s and 60s. At an early age, Kate got to see the art up close and personal. Coming to America as an immigrant single mother living in New York, her dream of sharing kimchi-making as an art and a product became a driving inspiration to keep moving forward. This life experience really solidified the dream of launching her own business one day.

KATE HAS A LOT OF PRIDE IN KIMCHI MAKING, BUT THE ORDINARY KIMCHI FOUND COMMERCIALLY IN THE US WAS A DISAPPOINTMENT FOR SOMEONE WHO SEES THE PRODUCT AS SO MUCH MORE THAN "SPICY CHINESE CABBAGE".

Coincidentally, her first job after moving to New York was at a Korean grocery store in Queens. It was there that she saw how all kinds of Korean food products - imported or local - were being sold. But no kimchi ever made her feel a sense of pride. In Korean cuisine, kimchi is the foundation of it all. All meals start with kimchi, and no table is complete without it. And yet for her, there was not a decent kimchi in sight. This is where the idea for Kimchi Kooks all started.

*WHILE WOOJAE IS QUITE SURE HIS MOM NEVER LISTENED TO DEAR MAMA (OR ANY TUPAC FOR THAT MATTER), THE SONG HAS A LOT OF MEANING FOR HIM. WOOJAE TELLS US “I USED TO LISTEN TO IT TO FIND COMFORT, TO SORT OF SEE MYSELF THROUGH HIS STORY. **NOW I HEAR IT AND ALL I SEE IS MY MAMA.**”*

He goes on, “I understand now what he’s pouring out in the song. It’s not about him. It’s really about his mother.” The shift in perspective is powerful for WooJae and others. As an artist, Tupac delivered a universal message on reconciling the pain and gratitude that came from life with his mother. He was able to express how he now understands his mother and as WooJae puts it, “We could all use a little bit of that. A little sympathy.”

WooJae talked candidly about the difficulties of running a mother/son family business. He explains, “You are exposing yourself to a lot of memories and experiences - some painful - and have different feelings around those events. Yet, here we are working together to create something nice for ourselves. It can be confusing but also so rewarding.”



How Do U Want It?

*WOOJAE RESPECTS WORDPLAY, AND HE BROUGHT IT INTO HIS BRANDING – WITH NAMING CONVENTIONS (KOOK IS A FAMILY NAME AND ALSO A NOD TO NOT TAKE LIFE TOO SERIOUSLY) AND **ADDING KIMCHI'D INTO THE LEXICON.** HE IS MAKING HALLYU WAVES AS HE SHARES HIS KOREAN CULTURE.*

“Kimchi” derives from an ancient Korean word which literally means “salted vegetable.” This got WooJae thinking of the truly expansive and theoretically limitless application of kimchi. The maker can bring together both ingredients and history to create something truly delicious and respectful of cultural traditions. This whole etymology lesson is where the idea for kimchi'd as an intentional action and a verb was born.

WooJae and his mama are serving up two new kimchi'd products to kick off the concept: kimchi'd cabbage and beets and kimchi'd kale. We are salivating over the next kimchi'd offering.



Life Goes On

FOR US, WOOJAE EMBODIES EVERYTHING ESSENTIAL FOR MAKING HIS AMERICAN DREAMS COME TRUE: KEEPING IT REAL, HUSTLING HARD, OVERCOMING OBSTACLES, BEING YOURSELF, PUTTING YOURSELF OUT THERE, AND LETTING CREATIVITY FLOW.

NOTHING'S MORE GANGSTA THAN THAT.

We thank him for schooling us on all things kimchi and even putting us on to some new music: Free Lunch by Isaiah Rahshad. Today, WooJae lives in Brooklyn. On the weekends, you can find him on the street serving up Pajeon, Korean pancakes (with bacon!) with his amazing mama. The next chapter is just beginning.

I Get Around

On any given Sunday, you can find Kimchi Kooks serving it up street-style at Down To Earth Park Slope Farmers Market on 5th Avenue.

Otherwise, you can catch them at various pop-up events throughout the city. This upcoming weekend, Kimchi Kooks is collaborating with Metal House Cider to celebrate Cider Week NYC 2017. WooJae will be serving up a savory Korean bar snack menu specially designed to pair with the signature dry, sparkling cider. It's going down at Sunny's Bar this Saturday, October 28th from 4-7pm

The Kooks' handcrafted kimchi is available locally on the shelves of natural food grocers like Whole Foods Market, Green Grape, and others in the New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut area.