

As Seen on TV

As diverse a background as one could imagine and a career to match, we ask TV chef and restaurateur Bobby Chinn, how he ended up cooking for 16 years in Vietnam, and find out about his *banh mi* shop in Saigon

TEXT BY SAM SINHA IMAGES PROVIDED BY BOBBY CHINN

HOW IS IT THAT A CHINESE-EGYPTIAN, born in New Zealand, educated in California, Cairo and the UK ends up becoming doyen of Vietnamese cuisine and Vietnam's favorite adopted son? According to *The Mind of a Chef* culinary legend Anthony Bourdain, the answer is simple: "What Bobby doesn't know about Southeast Asian food is not worth knowing."

From the opening of his very first restaurant in Ho Chi Minh City, Bobby made a specialty of creating modern dishes from traditional ideas. His 'apple smoked pork belly, braised cabbage, egg' is a contemporary take on a Vietnamese classic.

He soon became acknowledged as a world authority on Southeast Asian cuisine. Regular appearances on international television and a bestselling cookbook about the history and nuances of Vietnamese food have cemented his reputation and led to his cooking for the likes of Bill Clinton and Bob Dylan.

This is all the more incredible when you consider that Bobby only started cooking in his 30s. Before that he worked a number of jobs trying to find his calling. This included stints performing as a standup comic, selling seafood to "the mob," and working as a trader on Wall Street, none of which satisfied him.

He tells me, "I followed the natural progression that we all follow. Go to school, go to college, get a degree in something that might have value, without ever questioning my personal happiness."

"Making money wasn't exactly making me happy. When I left Wall Street, I was open to anything and everything. I





Apple smoked pork belly, braised cabbage, egg



Seafood Ceviche, Mangosteen Coconut Dressing, Truffle Oil

lived my life like an algebraic equation, going through the source of elimination to find out what I loved, or what I thought I might love. I didn't know what it was or what it could be, so I worked through a lot of jobs until it made sense."

Never quite fitting in as he was constantly on the move, Bobby developed a thick skin and an ability to win people over to his side. "My life was influenced by the circumstances in which I found myself. A matter of survival, a circle in a square peg, not exactly filling in the holes." With a tremendous resilience Bobby never let knock backs stop him from trying something new. He explains "growing up between three continents, many schools, many inter-

national students and in many different social classes made me very open and accepting to whatever life threw at me."

It was while working as a waiter at Elka, a Franco-Japanese restaurant in San Francisco, that he started to hang around the kitchen. He charmed the chefs into teaching him how to make classic stocks and sauces and discovered a talent and passion that he had not previously explored; much to the disdain of his father, who had sent him through the English public school system at great expense, hoping he would settle into a sensible career.

Once he had realized what he wanted to do, Bobby set about learning as much as he could and worked for Hubert Keller

and Jeff Inahara, gaining culinary skills and all-important experience. All was going well until his progress was suddenly halted by a serious back injury which left him unable to work. "The back injury derailed my career as a chef for a whole year, during which time I laid in bed, read cookbooks, watched *Great Chefs*, *Great Cities*, watched PBS, and learned a whole lot without actually cooking."

After surgery on his back, Bobby was declared, 'stationary and disabled' and was told he would not be able to work as a chef in America by law. A devastating blow, which would have ended many a budding chefs' career, but Bobby took it in his stride and looked for a way to continue cooking.

Go East, Young Man

Through his ever-supportive father, Bobby found himself with an opportunity for a move to Vietnam. Health and safety laws being less stringent than in the US, he was able to work legally, and now had to set about making his name in a new country and continent. "In many ways Vietnam worked out very well for me, because no one really cared over there," Bobby explains, and with a cheeky grin, "I would be able to get my staff to do the heavy lifting."

As always his unfailing charisma allowed him to get a new start. "I had met Alexander Egert [owner of Phu Cuong Son in Saigon] on my first trip to Vietnam back in 1993. We chatted, nothing came of it, then my name was getting tossed around on a new project called The Riverside." Already he was making a name for himself and sure enough there was a job at the end of it, and more contacts. "Alexander flew me out to cook for him and seven of his guests, and ended up hiring me after that dinner."

Bobby was desperate to open his own place and started with a restaurant called Saigon Joe's in Ho Chi Minh City. This only lasted a couple of months and was the first in a string of false starts, restaurants opening and then being shut down or Bobby being kicked out soon after. As ever the determined Chef Chinn would not give up. "I've opened five restaurants in Hanoi over a period of 13 years starting in 1997. Not one was easy. Saigon wasn't any easier!"

Bobby seems most proud of his eponymous restaurant that he opened in Hanoi in 2001. "When I built the restaurant I wanted to do something that no one had ever dreamed of here. I named the restaurant after myself to protect myself. I had been kicked out of every restaurant that I had ever worked in here, and if it happened again at



Lobster Noodles

least they would have to rename it.”

This restaurant did help to build a reputation for Bobby, allowing him to diversify into television projects and writing. His cookbook, *Bobby Chinn's Vietnamese Food* is full of authentic recipes with a fascinating outsider's perspective on the country's cuisine.

Perhaps, though, this broadening career path contributed to its closure a few years later. “I decided to close it because my eye was no longer on the ball, I had way too many responsibilities and interests in other projects and I couldn't afford to leave it in the hands of anyone else.”

Nowadays Bobby flies all over the world, judging cookery competitions, cooking on TV in the UK, US, Asia and just about everywhere. He tells me, “I've just finished filming the first season of *Top Chef Middle East* in Dubai on MBC network. I've been doing private events, World Gourmet Festival in Bangkok, as well as the Food & Wine festival in Hawaii. I'm in constant development of new shows and working on several restaurant projects and a little consulting.”

Despite all this, he still finds time whenever he can to sit with the locals at the street food stalls which Vietnam is famous for. “In Hanoi, I only eat on the streets unless I eat at Don's. Dishes range from *banh cuon* on Bat Dan Street, grilled quails, *bun bo*, sticky rice, *pho* in the Old Quarters, crab soup. I'm a creature of habit.”

“In Ho Chi Minh City I eat at Hoang

Yen when I want a little luxury, but random street stalls all over the place, Ben Thanh Market. *banh xeo*, I'm still open to trying new dishes and places all the time.” It's refreshing to hear a renowned chef who still likes to eat the humble food that is made by working people.

This enthusiasm for the food of the people feeds into his own cooking and he has recently opened a *banh mi* operation in Ho Chi Minh City. “It's a family business run by my father. We would always hope for more business, as our production costs are going to be higher than a street vendor and it's a damn good sandwich!” It is good to hear his father is still supportive after all that Bobby has achieved and overcome. Bobby hopes the family-run enterprise will fare better in longevity than his early restaurant openings.

Vietnam and its food culture have had a similarly turbulent history to Bobby Chinn, and perhaps this is what has drawn him to the place. He explains the origins in his book: “Vietnamese cuisine massively benefited from the 16th century European trade, especially the traditions brought in by French colonials.” The French influence mixing with the Chinese and native tribal food traditions is often talked about as what sets Vietnamese food apart from its neighbors, but Bobby thinks there is more to it than that.

“What has taken the French hundreds of years of culinary evolution, the Vietnamese had already been perfecting over the last thousand years.

Vietnam had the key ingredients and techniques at its fingertips for centuries. Its food is light, healthy, and generally easy to make. It can be subtle yet bold and is about quality ingredients, color, contrast, texture and execution.”

With this characterization, Vietnamese food is at the stage that the rest of the world is just catching up to. They were doing gluten and dairy-free, light, healthy food before it ever became a trend in hipster joints in the West.

Bobby attempts to take the best from what he has learned about Vietnamese food and refine it. Modern twists are employed alongside traditional ideas; refined presentation alongside ancient technique. His fine-dining style ‘lobster noodles’ place sautéed lobster tail into a humble noodle dish, a modern take on the much loved *cha ca Ha Noi*.

On his future, Bobby is typically pragmatic. “There are a lot of opportunities, it's working on the one that feels right, and makes the most amount of sense. Restaurants or TV, that's the question. I gave up on planning a couple of years after graduating from college so I think it's fair to say that I go with the flow and what feels right.”

Bobby exudes a charm and openness which seems to have been his key to success. Along, of course, with his extraordinary resilience and refusal to give up. His lack of a permanent place in the world made him adaptable enough to adopt a new home, Vietnam, which, reluctantly at first, has adopted him into its own food culture. ■