In Its Place

Corey Lee’s Collection of Masterpieces

by Jenlon Ho

photos by Eric Wolfinger
COREY LEE will tell you that his goal in opening In Situ—the flagship restaurant inside the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—was never to open a restaurant at all.

Following a three-year, $610 million expansion, SFMOMA is now one of the largest collections of modern and contemporary art in the world. In 2014, the museum directors tapped Lee to fill its ground-floor dining space with something fitting. For Lee, the dining experience had to be more than a café version of his other San Francisco restaurants, Benu and Monsieur Benjamin.

What he created instead, housed in both a walk-ins-only lounge and a more formal dining room, is a rotating collection of dishes from chefs around the world, a gallery of dishes of today and days past, reclassified as faithfully as possible. Instead of a menu, a catalog of great works. Diners order à la carte, making it possible to taste dishes that would otherwise require dedicating an entire evening to a tasting menu, a trip to another place.

Planning menus built off other people’s dishes defies restaurant culture. For one, chefs can be fiercely protective of their work. And those who built their names on the unique dishes of today and days past, replicating as faithfully as possible. Instead of a restaurant with a singular vision, it is a constant collaboration. Instead of a museum of支付 letters created specially for this food, it is a medium for complex expression.

The name In Situ means “in its original position or place.” In art, in situ refers to works created specially for a particular space—a gallery wall, a bank lobby, a tech start-up’s bathroom. Together, many dishes coming from other places would create something entirely different here, an original experience in this new place.

A museum at its best brings people together, shows us where we came from, and offers a glimpse at where we’re headed. It’s a place to find context and common threads as much as it is a forum for debate. Lee thinks the restaurant at a museum should do the same. A meal here might reveal the origins of the Spanish avant-garde, the connections between Japanese haistu and French nouvelle cuisine, how chefs from Hong Kong to Los Gatos use sea urchin in utterly different ways, and most importantly, how all of these far-flung chefs influence one another.

LUE: We focused on chefs who were trying to do something more than cook delicious food. We looked for the dishes that start a dialogue or tap into something you do with your hands, not always so accessible. The ability to fully appreciate a work comes with knowing what’s behind it. As a museum director, I’m also trying to touch on something besides the immediacy of taste. The goal is to make food that reflects and informs how we live our lives.

To fully understand each chef’s dish, Lee and his executive chef, Brandon Rodgers, delved deeper than the written recipes and noted each chef's story. Lee cooked on the line with Tanya Holland at Boulevard’s Kitchen in Oakland and studied videos Daniel Boulud sent demonstrating Black Tie Sea Scallops, a dish of layered scallops and truffles on coerce she created in 1996 at Le Cirque in New York. Gastón Acurio’s executive chef, Victoriano López, made criolla at the San Francisco outpost of La Mar Sushi Express.

Ceci n’est pas un restaurant.
arrived of porcelain plates for Peter Goosens’s (Hof van Cleve in Belgium) salmon tataki, hand-thrown bowls for Cassidy Denby’s (The Barn at Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee) slow-cooked egg, and baskets by the same weavers in Hasting that Isaac McHale employs for buttermilk fried chicken at the Clove Club in London. Lee assured each chef he would go to whatever lengths were required to do right by their dishes, and they did the same.

In the spring, when Lee couldn’t find tomatoes that would cut for Torre del Saracino’s (Vico Equense, Italy) spaghetti al pomodoro, chef Gennaro Esposito shipped over a pallet of tomatoes he had tinned himself.

LEE: This all happened through email, a very good open communication. A chef explaining how to make a dish is much different from reading a recipe in a book. Because they knew that I was actually going to cook and serve their dishes, we talked about the variables, the sourcing, which part of the ingredients to use—all those little details that you explain to one of your own cooks.

When Lee and Rodgers flew to Charleston to see Sean Brock at McCrady’s, his master class on brown- oyster stew with benne included a contextual trip to Hannibal’s Kitchen, Brock’s personal soul-food mecca, for lima bean and pork neck stew.

SEAN BROCK: Brown-oyster stew is steeped in the Gullah/Geechee culture along the Carolina coast. When I started messing with this dish in 2009, I was just trying to understand this very historic thing. It’s a traditional West African dish brought by slaves that made its way to the Big House. It proves the West African contributions to Low Country cuisine are so fundamental. This is a touchy subject now, and rightfully so. This is a part of culture that we’re ashamed of. So when we serve this stew, it opens up a dialogue about culture and civil rights. We end up talking about more than deliciousness, and that’s good for everyone.

 Choi’s dish is Ketchup Fried Rice, a bowl of rice and vegetables seasoned with ketchup and topped with a fried egg, a recipe he has never cooked in a restaurant but shared in his book L.A. Son.

CHOI: When my family got to America, there were no Asian markets. You had to be creative translating what you grew up with into ingredients you could find or afford. Ketchup is a luxury. I wouldn’t have chosen this dish for any other chef to pull off but Corey. He ate this as a kid, too, so I knew he’d get it. It’s a dish of a chef who grew up in LA in a Korean family, who has a French foundation but also ate stuff straight from the can. I wanted to have someone sitting in this museum stop and say, “What the fuck? Who is this, and why did they do this?”

For at least one other chef, the project was a chance to speak. Anthony Myint decided that his dish at In Situ would visually represent the environmental impact of what we eat. The result was the Apocryphal Burger, a beef patty encased in a crisp shell of squid ink-blackened flour and edible clay, puffed in oil like Indian puri. The result resem- bles a charcoal briquette. It’s as much a striking trompe l’oeil as an edible metaphor (broadly speaking, food production accounts for about half of greenhouse gas emissions, with feedlot beef being a top emitter). Myint sent Lee photos and three pages of detailed notes, knowing full well that his recipe had so far yielded a picture perfect result only half the time.

ANTHONY MYINT: Corey sent back a picture of the recipe testing, saying, “It’s not bad. I’m getting 95 percent yield.” That’s who he is. Give him an imperfect thing and he can make it nearly perfect.

Cecilia Chiang, who introduced Americans to the concept of Chinese fine dining in the United States in 1961, has shared many conversations with Lee through the years about the disappearing authenticity in Chinese restaurants. Lee requested her recipe for guo tie—northern Chinese–style pork potstickers—promising to make them correctly. Lee made multiple trips to Chiang’s house for taste testing, learning to cook them sheng jian, steaming and lightly frying simultaneously in the pan.

CECILIA CHIANG: It is not easy to cook in all these styles, nor is it an easy job to work off of someone else’s recipes.

That takes a lot of concentration and time, trying again and again, tasting, and asking the original chef, What do you think of this? Is that okay now?

DANIEL PATTERSON: Even in the kitchens where the dishes originated, it’s not going to be perfectly consistent every day. To replicate a dish is incredibly difficult. You pick up a Jasper Johns painting and move it around the world, it’s still going to be the exact same painting. In cooking, your ingredients are different every day, the weather is hotter, or you might just be in a different mood. As Instagram will tell you, it’s easy to copy the form of something, but it’s really, really hard to copy the soul of something. And I think that’s what Corey’s trying to do, and do it at a very high level. I don’t know of anyone who’s done this before—not with attribution, anyway.

If you ask Lee, the most difficult dish to replicate came from Nahm, David Thompson’s restaurant in Bangkok.

LEE: I had to go there. That alone was no joke, and when I arrived, they showed me seven dishes in one afternoon. I’m not well versed in Thai food, so I wasn’t just learning a new dish, I was learning a cuisine and language at the same time. They were naming technique after technique and showing me fruits and vegetables I’d never even seen. I can’t remember my kitchen IQ ever being as low as in that kitchen.

DAVID THOMPSON: Thai food is notoriously complicated. If you’re uncertain about it, it’s a culinary minefield from which very few come out unscathed—diner or cook. Other major chefs have come and been equally at sea. Frankly, when I’m in a European kitchen, I’m baffled, because I haven’t cooked it in a long time.

LEE: David was like, I don’t think this is possible, and I was like, You couldn’t tell me this before I came to Thailand.

THOMPSON: Eventually he decided on larb—a mix of guinea fowl, red shallots, mint, the obligatory chilies, and lots of fresh vegetables and herbs. It is full of flavor and requires skill but is not as fraught as other dishes we considered. Corey got along terribly well with Prin Polakul, Nahm’s chef, and he chose this dish for Prin, too, because it represents the distinctive flavor of northern Thai cooking, Prin’s home region.

LEE: So this is where it gets crazy. Prin went to Chiang Mai and got them to put together a huge batch of this spice mix, brought it back to Bangkok and gave it to Andy Ricker (chef of the Pok Pok restaurants in Portland, LA, and New York), who put it in his luggage and tablets and then shipped it to us. So now we have a stockpile of this spice mix.

THOMPSON: Naam phrik laap is a blend of at least a dozen dried spices—Sichuan peppercorn, makka-ware (pinkly ash), long pepper, galangal, chili, black pepper, white
The products are different. That’s the exciting part, to see what comes out, and to see how it comes out in someone else’s hands. Who knows? Maybe it’ll be even better.

A CONVERSATION ABOUT A SUMMERY WARM TOMATO & BASIL TART

Corey Lee and Michel Guérard talk through how they crossed era and oceans to recreate a dish from Guérard’s restaurant, Les Prés d’Eugénie.

LEE: Michel Guérard is one of the great chefs of nouvelle cuisine.

GUÉRARD: Nouvelle cuisine was a reaction against uniformity. Most chefs were still cooking under Escoffier, a great chef no doubt, but some wanted more creativity. It was popularized as a movement by journalists in the seventies, but the principles were there in the seventeenth century. We just led a gentle revolution to allow French cuisine to evolve and transform.

LEE: He was one of the first chefs anywhere in the world that I really looked up to and was inspired by. I first read about him in the book Great Chefs of France. I was probably eighteen or nineteen, and was just getting my first real turn at cooking, cold-calling kitchens around England. That book was my first look into the French world of haute cuisine, Michelin stars, and that caliber of chefs. What I still remember clearly is a picture of Guérard dressed like a woman, resting his head on Paul Bocuse’s belly as they danced. That revealed so much about his personality.

GUÉRARD: Ah, that photo was taken at an event Bocuse organized at his restaurant in Lyon. Paul was dressed as a corsair, and I was a young lady. Paul is taller than me, so I was leaning my head on his chest, and we were holding hands, dancing slow. We were having fun. That photo captured the nature of our friendship, our mutual respect. It was the height of nouvelle cuisine and an extraordinary time of our lives. We were joyous and working hard. We really lived!

LEE: After looking up to him for three decades, witnessing him rewrite French gastronomy, I never thought we’d someday collaborate. I still get starry-eyed that this has happened. I realize now, without this project, I never would have been able to carve out the time to learn from him at this level.

GUÉRARD: When Corey contacted me, I hadn’t heard of a project like this before, anywhere. There are restaurants in museums, but none do it this way. Sometimes ideas just come like a firework. I jumped in blindly, just knowing of his reputation as a consummate professional. Three Michelin stars are a bit like a passport.

LEE: It comes from a memory of my grandmother in the orchard in Vétheuil, a village on the bank of the Seine. She was the first great chef that I knew. We would harvest the fruits at their peak. All the secrets of French cuisine and gastronomy without humility toward natural ingredients. Cooking this way is entirely about allowing people to taste ingredients as they are, unadulterated. A great chef knows not only how to treat the ingredient but to express its essence. You cannot pretend the ingredient is something else. This understanding shows Corey is a true chef.

I chose this dish for Corey because it conveys the simplicity I pursue in all my cooking. The ingredients are at the core. It is at once rustic and elegant. Just because a dish is simple does not mean anyone can make it. I sent a step-by-step recipe, which I thought would be no problem for a professional to follow. A well-trained, skilled chef understands the principles of fine cuisine. From our interactions that followed, it was clear he had the sensibility necessary to execute this kind of recipe and that he understood it at a profound depth.

It comes from a memory of my grandmother in the orchard in Vétheuil, a village on the bank of the Seine. She was the first great chef that I knew. We would harvest the fruits at their peak. All the secrets of her cooking were there in their ripeness. She would arrange the fruit in a circle on the crust with some butter and sugar, and pop it in a wood-fired oven. It was simply marvelous.

I make the feuilleté, layered pastry, with about the same technique that she used. Mine, I would say, is a little lighter. (I hope my grandmother is not offended!) You must use only just enough flour, not a speck more.

LEE: When executing any dish that is seemingly simple, with just a few ingredients, every little step and gram counts.

GUÉRARD: Above all, this recipe depends on the tomatoes. They must be very sweet and bright, dense and plump, like the ladies in old paintings. You cut them into rondelles, remove the water and seeds, then place them on the pastry with a reduced concentrate of tomato if it needs it, and bake at full blast. When you take the dish out of the oven, you glaze it with pesto—olive oil and basil—to bring in flavor and make the tomato glisten. You must eat it right out of the oven, still warm and crunchy.

LEE: I’ve been concerned about the ripeness of the tomatoes we’ve been getting in California. All the tomatoes in this dish are cooked—either baked or simmered down as a compote. So it’s not just underripe tomatoes that would be an issue—over-ripeness would change the dish. Texturally and flavor-wise, they need to be just right. If they aren’t, we’ll have to wait to put this on the menu.

GUÉRARD: There would be no haute cuisine and gastronomy without humility toward natural ingredients. Cooking this way is entirely about allowing people to taste ingredients as they are, unadulterated. A great chef knows not only how to treat the ingredient but to express its essence. You cannot pretend the ingredient is your slave. This understanding shows Corey is a true chef.