RESTAURANTS

Breaking the rules at SFMOMA

Corey Lee’s In Situ shares repertoires of world’s top chefs

By Paolo Lucchesi

It’s not supposed to go like this.

The usual arc in a chef’s career is fairly well established. A budding cook replicates dishes under a master chef in the master chef’s restaurant. Like an apprentice jazz musician learning the ropes by playing the classics, the new cook only ever in a while stirs on the master’s classic tunes.

When the apprentice feels ready to create something original, he she goes solo.

Chefs, once they reach the apex of their career, don’t go back to replicating in others’ kitchens. In “The Divine Comedy,” Dante doesn’t talk through Purgatory only to go back to hang out with Virgil. That’s the narrative.

Corey Lee is throwing away the script at his new restaurant, slated to open June 14 on the ground floor of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Lee, who spent decades working at America’s top kitchens, has run the French Laundry, is the chef of San Francisco’s four-star Benu and Molecule Benjamin, NAMED IN SITU, his new restaurant has a fairly simple premise. It’s a collaboration with the world’s top chefs, the menu a collection of global cuisines’ greatest hits. In essence, food is treated as intellectual and artistic property, and the restaurants functions as its gallery. It’s the ultimate restaurant concept — and one that, if played correctly, could be of great value for a public more and more interested in food.

Lee, along with his chef de cuisine Brandon Rodgers, has worked with nearly 100 chefs from around the world, ranging from Alice Waters of Berkeley’s Chez Panisse and Sean Brock of Copenhagen’s Noma to Adeline Gaudet of Paris’ Yann Troï and Rodrigo Oliveira of San Paolo’s Mecos. Some sent recipes, some sent sketches, and some demonstrated the dish to Lee in person. But each dish was the collaboration’s choice.

“They choose a dish from their repertoire, or they come up with a dish that we will learn and make on their behalf at the museum,” Lee says.

For his part, Lee shaves off comparisons of the jazz apprentice, opting for another arts metaphor: ballet.

Specifically, he references Coppelia, which played earlier this spring a few blocks from his Hayes Valley bistro, Molecule Benjamin. It was originally choreographed by Arthur Saint-Léon in the 19th century then corroborated by George Balanchine in 1971, and is now being produced by San Francisco Ballet’s Helgi Tomasson.

“Was Balanchine ripping off Saint-Léon? No, of course not,” says Lee. “It’s an homage to these guys, and the San Francisco Ballet is keeping this work alive and more relevant and letting other people enjoy by taking a work that already exists and performing it.”

“I’m the conductor, and I have a ballet company capable of producing — maybe not exactly, but hopefully exactly — in a way that people can enjoy and appreciate the idea. There will be challenges, of course.

These dishes are removed from their context. Does a single dish from Houto Nakajihashi make sense when extracted from the multicourse rhythm of a meal at Miyawara, a hyperkinetic high in the mountains above Kyoto? Can a Sean Brock stew, so closely linked to the history of the South, be fully appreciated outside of Charleston, S.C? Many dishes also rely on the ingredients of a particular region. For example, John Holman’s Bang of Osaka’s Mazu-sho shared his famous salted butter ice cream. Yet In Siti’s butter base came from any actual Norwegian cow. “We’re using a butter from here,” says Lee. “Is it going to be the exact same? No, but at the same time the dish is about featuring the butter from your local area. It’s seeing butter transformed through the seasons. That’s what the dish is all about. You understand the intent of the dish.”

Another question: Can a column while we formed from a collection of 90 plus random dishes from the Americas, Asia and Europe? The menu will shift and match around 9 items at a time. Balancing geography, size (appetizer, entree, dessert) and style (fish, vegetable,
meat).

As counterintuitive as it may be for a diner to compose a meal of Spanish roast chicken and pine-salt (Isaac McHale, London), octopus and the Coral (Vegilio Martinon, Lima, Peru) and guinea fowl fancy larklang mai (David Thompson, Bangkok), that contrast might be essential. In Sita, the script on no many expectations—it’s not a reflection of its place. It’s not a single chef’s vision—because it is meant to be different.

“If a guest comes in and dicus and has all those different dishes and then they say, “Who was it OK but my favorite restaurant is still Delilah—I think they kind of missing the point, you know?” Lee says. “We’re not trying to offer it as a restaurant experience. We’re hoping it’s a fun and engaging culinary experience in the SFMOMA.

Few chefs have the requisite technical prowess and global connections to pull off such a restaurant. As Lee noted, he’s the one with the ballet company capable of producing this. And maybe no one else will replicate this.

Or, maybe they will. Maybe this is a flash-forward moment for the dining industry. Maybe this is when a new collaborator world of possibilities is opened, when chefs once again rethink what food, and a restaurant, can be.

Pastry homage or even replicating dishes isn’t unprecedented. David Leitch has long produced an egg dish at Manzanita as a tribute to Alan Pashard of Arpege in Paris. At the French Laundry, Thomas Keller’s signature foie and lobster has been on his menu for more than two decades, but it seems back to Jean-Louis Palladin. The Castro’s Aute has a tuna dish on its menu named after Barcelona’s famous Quinon y Quinet. The list goes on.

But dedicating an entire, permanent restaurant to such a varied cuisine is different—and that’s precisely what could make In Situ a game-changer.

Such sharing of intellectual property was not always a possibility. For decades, fine-dining chefs staunchly guarded their secrets. That closed-door mentality began to change quickly in the late 1990s and early aughts, and a new generation of modern cuisine emerged. This was championed by Ferran Adrià, Joan Roca and company. ... In the same way, top-flight chefs like Judy Rodgers, Thomas Keller, Ferran Adrià and Michel Bras shared their recipes into influential cookbooks.

And then the Internet opened everything up. Ideas were shared. Friendships were formed. The culinary world became smaller. In Situ is the next, and most extreme, extension of that movement. And unlike its predecessors, it finally represents a moment that could bring this culinary artistry to a broader audience.

Most people—even those interested in food—will never make the pilgrimage to Lammi Island to taste the cooking of Blaine Wetzel, or trek to Engin- to see the statues that fashion Michel Guérard’s Les Pins d’Engins. You’ll never get a reservation at No- ma in Copenhagen or at Ryo- Går in Tokyo.

Record the geography; inaccessible has been further limited by price points. Even most Bay Area residents can’t—or don’t want to—pay hundreds upon hundreds of dollars for the hours-long meals at local restaurants like Man- zana (12) per person at 20) at at In Situ, for a fraction of the price (all dishes are mostly under $5), you will eventually be able to taste snapshots from those tasting menus.

This is the moment when such dishes dormant in a more public forum rather than within a small circle of chefs and privileged diners. Overall it increases and interest in food, an awareness of cooking. The fair is still in its infancy today, it’s very much a part of our culture,” says Lee. And he seems on the estab- lished SFMOMA has performed by De Marchi and De Marchi had a strange one of the fundamental needs of a museum: “In its history, SFMOMA has performed as a portal to the cultures.”

And Lee has the ultimate potential of In Situ: The importance is no less than that Lee is the conductor, it’s that such a stage even exists. It’s not simply a portal into the culture of Copenhagen or Tokyo. It’s a portal into the cul- ture of fine dining.

The avant-garde culinary world has isolated itself for a long lime, perhaps In Situ can help share some of its achievements with the real world.

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Three dishes from In Situ’s menu (far left to bottom right): The Apocalypse Burger by Anthony Myint of Mission Street Food in San Francisco; umami soup by Hiato Nakahigashi of Mikazuki in Kyoto; and buttermilk fried chicken with pine salt by Isaac McHale of the Clove Club in London.