



**N**EXT SPRING, when three-Michelin-star chef Corey Lee opens In Situ, his new restaurant on the ground floor of the significantly expanded San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, none of the dishes on the menu will be his own. “I want to do something that best represents what a museum does,” says Lee from the backseat of a taxi, 7,000 miles from home, zooming around Hong Kong with curatorial intent. “I’m thinking of it as a food exhibition.”

Since leaving the French Laundry and Per Se after nearly a decade of service and opening Benu in San Francisco’s South of Market neighborhood in 2010, Lee, 37, has developed a style of cooking all his own. Benu’s tasting menu incorporates ingredients such as sea cucumber spines, abalone and winter melon. Thousand-year-old quail eggs, seafood XO sausage and truffled steam buns reflect Lee’s fascination with Chinese technique. Born in Seoul in 1977, Lee, who grew up in New York and New Jersey, also riffs on Korean traditions. He touches on Japanese and Mexican cuisines, too (being a locally minded restaurant sometimes means honoring the cultures around you). In a foreword to the *Benu* cookbook, published this spring, David Chang calls Corey Lee “one of the best chefs on earth.”

Given Lee’s reputation as an auteur, his new concept is an unexpected turn. Rather than offering freshly conceived recipes in a style of his choosing, Lee is developing a restaurant for SFMOMA that will act like part of the institution’s rotating—albeit edible—collection. Dishes will be sourced from chefs Lee admires and copied precisely. His re-creations will collectively highlight peak moments in modern and contemporary cooking the same way an exhibit exploring an artistic genre would, by showcasing its most formidable talents. “No matter what time of year you visit,” Lee says, “you’ll get a cross section of what’s going on around the world both geographically and stylistically.”

Where a survey of, say, abstract expressionism might feature de Kooning, Kline and Hofmann, Lee will rely on works by Keller, Redzepi and Dufresne. By asking 80 top chefs, and counting, to submit recipes from their own oeuvres, Lee aims to assemble far-flung culinary treasures in one place, thus allowing broader access to them. “I haven’t been excited like this in a long time,” says Lee, bounding out of the

taxi and into the sweltering Hong Kong heat. “I feel like I’m 20 again, looking up to all these great chefs, wanting to stage in their kitchens.”

Lee has flown to Hong Kong—where he has traveled more than a dozen times to source his sea cucumber spines, among other delicacies—to learn three recipes bound for In Situ. When reaching out to chefs, Lee, still figuring out how many dishes would appear on his menu at the same time, asked how they wanted to transmit their knowledge. Daniel Boulud emailed back with page numbers from one of his books: a section detailing his Black Tie Scallops, a dish that goes back to New Year’s Eve 1986, at Le Cirque, and features truffles and bivalves en croûte. (Boulud says it’s a tough dish to pull off so he sent a

## THE IMITATION GAME

For his next restaurant, Corey Lee asked the world’s top chefs to reveal their culinary secrets so he could copy their signature dishes exactly. And they said yes.

BY HOWIE KAHN  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK MAHANEY

demonstration video as a follow-up.) The Peruvian Gastón Acurio dispatched an emissary to Benu’s kitchen to demonstrate his way with ceviche. A couple of esteemed French chefs, a generation older than Lee, declined participation entirely. In his mischievous, Lee also offered to travel, to learn dishes not through emailed correspondence and downloaded iPhone videos but by watching chefs on their own turf. “Before we open,” he says, “I’ll be all over France and England. I’ll be in Japan.” In Osaka, the 43-year-old chef Hajime Yoneda, of restaurant Hajime, will be teaching Lee a lotus leaf, grapefruit, sake and yuzu dish he’s named “*ame*, the sound of rain.”

The ease with which other chefs agreed to the concept is a testament to Lee’s abilities. “I mean, it’s Corey Lee!” says Wylie Dufresne, who submitted

a shrimp and grits dish (in it, the grits are made of shrimp) from his late, great Manhattan restaurant wd-50. “The guy’s no joke. If I had to compile a shortlist of people with whom I’d be comfortable making my food, he’d be right at the top. He’s an amazing talent.” Boulud points out that camaraderie influences today’s cooking scene like an ingredient. “It’s so much about exchange, fraternity and collaboration,” he says. “This is the next step in that movement.”

Still, asking creative talents in any discipline to reveal secrets of their signature works, with the intention of re-creating them, is no small request. But cooking isn’t exactly like painting or sculpture or music, where replicating a work is considered forgery or a breach of copyright. Chefs publish recipes for others to try. Instructions are available. It’s tacitly understood, however, that any efforts at mimicry are meant to happen in private, at home. Lee’s desire to replicate other chefs’ dishes publicly may open him up to criticism—not necessarily that he’s stealing, but that he hasn’t managed to pull off what one of his peers could. He’s already guarding himself against that possibility, though, putting in the hours, and the focus, to master each dish as if it were his own.

Walking down a long, brightly lit industrial hallway at the Landmark Mandarin Oriental, Lee shakes hands with a chain of cooks. At the heart of the hotel’s kitchen, he is met by the Dutch-born chef Richard Ekkebus: tall and lean, with a red goatee and wearing all white, including a kerchief tied around his neck. He looks ready to go running with the bulls. For the past 10 years, Ekkebus, 48, has worked to establish the property’s fine-dining flagship, Amber, earning two Michelin stars for seven consecutive years.

Lee had stopped in at Amber during a recent book tour to cook for its discerning customers, a mix of local and international gastronomes and tycoons—*tycoon* being a word used in Hong Kong with frequency and little irony. It’s the kind of crowd where VIP guests with private jets offer to fly Ekkebus home with them to cook a meal before sending him back to Hong Kong in a sky suite, all expenses paid. While here, Lee found himself moved by Ekkebus’s sense of community. “Richard has this great reputation for hosting international chefs,” Lee says.

In Situ will also operate with community and inclusivity in mind. “One struggle for chefs is that our reach is limited to the spaces we each have,” says Lee. “Reaching people through social media isn’t what food is about. Something like this restaurant will help chefs reach a much larger audience.”

**COOK’S COMPANION** Lee, at Benu, in San Francisco. His new restaurant, In Situ, will open next year at SFMOMA.

Food conferences and festivals have attempted to do the same thing, but with obvious limitations. Typically lasting only a couple of days, they're often overcrowded, despite high ticket prices. More problematically, cooking in a temporary setting often lacks the precision of work done in a permanent kitchen. Lee has avoided such opportunities. "Five years ago, I made the decision to tune out international trends, to stay away from cooking conferences and events, all to create an identity for Benu that isn't easily identifiable," he says. "Now it's the opposite. It's all about immersion, building relationships and working with chefs from around the world in a deep and lasting way."

As Lee kits up in his Benu whites and a denim apron, Ekkebus tells him about his recent vacation near Phuket, Thailand, scuba diving and practicing muay Thai fighting. "I'm feeling very dangerous," Ekkebus jokes, removing a pallet of Japanese *uni* from refrigeration. A gaggle of Mandarin Oriental publicists, clad in black, collectively gasp and begin to snap pictures. Ekkebus places a morsel of sea urchin on the flesh bridging his thumb and forefinger. He does the same for Lee, to taste, as they discuss their collaboration. Lee explains that In Situ will effectively become the guardian of Amber's signature dish: sea urchin in a lobster gelatin with cauliflower purée, caviar and a crisp seaweed waffle on the side. The move benefits both restaurants. "Because of this dish, I can't do anything else with uni," says Ekkebus. "It's popular but blocks creativity."

Amber regulars have joked about starting an Occupy Amber group—named after the political movements Occupy Wall Street and, in Hong Kong, Occupy Central—should Ekkebus pull the item from the menu. Lee, on the other hand, will be providing a culinary service by presenting the dish—a chef's meditation on coolness and creaminess—in the context of a museum. "One of the components will be to educate," Lee says. "If we don't provide information about history and technique in a readily available way, then it's not a museum. We're still trying to figure out how to convey things about each dish without making meals feel like seminars. Finding the balance between being in a museum and being a restaurant will be important. The menu will look more like a museum program, but diners will be able to interact with it, unfolding it multiple times to reveal more and more information." A portion of the proceeds from each item will go back to the original chefs, most of whom have chosen to donate their share to the museum or to another charity. Ekkebus's dish will give back to SFMOMA.

Although curators often hustle to gather works of art, they don't also have to learn how to make them. "We're going to do this exactly the way you do it," Lee tells Ekkebus. This means weighing ingredients down to the gram, detailing every step in the process with the precision of a scientist and videotaping Ekkebus slowly thickening gelatin with a spoon. (There's no talking in Lee's iPhone footage of Ekkebus's demo, just repetitive motion and noise, a hypnotic droning that lends it the feeling of video art.) For plating and service, it means pulling out a measuring tape and noting the exact dimensions of the napkins, flatware and vessels used for each dish.

"I've come to think of Corey, informally, as our curator of food," says SFMOMA director Neal Benezra. "He's doing something absolutely new."

On the way to Fook Lam Moon, a family-owned Cantonese restaurant whose history in Hong Kong goes back almost 70 years, Lee expresses excitement at bringing attention to a way of cooking that's decades, even centuries, old. "Of all the recipes here," Lee says, "I'm most curious about this one. The idea of an old-school Chinese chef sharing his methods isn't really common at all."

To underscore his point, Lee tells me a Chinese folk story. "An apprentice asks his master," says Lee, "'How come my chicken never tastes as good as yours?' The master responds, 'Because you have many, many years left to learn.'" Lee laughs and reveals the punch line: "When the apprentice turns his back," he says, "the master tosses some orange peel into the dish and walks away." Commander's Palace, the Louisiana-Creole restaurant founded in New Orleans in 1880, will be the only place represented at In Situ that's older than Fook Lam Moon. But to Lee, Fook Lam Moon holds the greatest secrets.

In its kitchen, dim sum is made at an astonishing clip. Serving baskets are stacked in a formation that

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makes them look like a bamboo approximation of the Marina City complex in Chicago (recognizable from the cover of Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* album). Chickens are fried whole over bubbling woks, not submerged in liquid but rather held above and ladle-basted with hot oil until tenderly cooked. Janet Chui, a 42-year-old third-generation restaurant executive who helps run the restaurant with her older brother, Duncan, explains that chefs of certain skill levels are permitted to cook only on certain woks. It's like an orchestra. In music, the most talented player sits first chair. In the Fook Lam Moon kitchen, the best chef runs wok number one. Lee absorbs the panorama. "I feel lucky to be here," he says.

Head chef Leung Sun Lung, 48, a Fook Lam Moon veteran of 20 years, stands at his station, his *mise en place* ready to go. "We've been thinking of what food we should do for your project," Chui says to Lee. "We decided to do something steamed, which is very Cantonese, with an ingredient you can source well in San Francisco—crab." Between Lee and Leung, on a silver counter, sits the crustacean's claw along with vessels containing aged Shaoxing wine, the restaurant's signature broth, egg whites and scallions.

Leung speaks bluntly in Cantonese. Chui translates for Lee, who records video with one hand while taking written notes with the other. When the dish is complete, the egg whites and broth have been combined and steamed to the consistency of custard. The wine-marinated cooked crab claw is set on top. Finally, Leung garnishes with the chopped green onion. "Pretty easy?" Chui asks. "I fully understand it," says Lee. "Please tell people there is a future for real Chinese food, Corey," says Chui, having explained, over turnip cake with XO sauce and braised pomelo skin with dried shrimp roe, that the younger generation of local cooks is more interested in learning Western styles.

"Fook Lam Moon is so important to the project," says Lee over a noodle break at the estimable wonton shop Mak's. "We'll have the 'cool' chefs of the moment, too," he says. "Daniel Patterson, René Redzepi—they're important, but Fook Lam Moon helps us represent a grand cuisine." Lee adds chili sauce to his bowl and slurps. "Where else can these worlds meet right now?" he asks. "I think it's important that they intersect somewhere other than Instagram. We can be this conduit for exchanging cultures, for interpreting the world through works."

Lee is sensitive about what he has signed up to do. His contemporaries have entrusted him with their creations and reputations. He doesn't take the responsibility lightly. But now, stepping into the kitchen of one of Matt Abergel's restaurants, a Japanese-inspired seafood bar called Ronin, his anxiety appears to lift. Abergel, a 33-year-old Canadian expat who got his start at Masa in New York City, also runs Yardbird, specializing in yakitori, and a gourmet shop, Sunday's Grocery, both in Hong Kong. "What are we trying to accomplish?" he asks. Beneath his apron, Abergel wears shorts and a T-shirt; on his feet: the high-top collaboration between Supreme and Vans that has the phrase "F—Em!" printed in white letters over red fabric. "The goal," says Lee, "is just to hang out."

Lee is clearly in his comfort zone: learning, asking questions, recording and measuring. Abergel breaks it all down. The plates he uses for the dish are designed in Venice, California, but made in Hasami, Japan. Lee says he'll purchase a set. Seaweed butter and panko bread crumbs are combined. Abergel stirs for 20 minutes before eventually adding fresh seaweed, *nama-nori*. The chefs discuss salinity and uni provenance, and then Abergel puts his ingredients in a small, ceramic bowl: the rich, buttery panko, the seaweed, the sea urchin. Using a Microplane, he zests *kabosu*—a sharp, green citrus fruit—on top.

"Now smash it up completely," instructs Abergel.

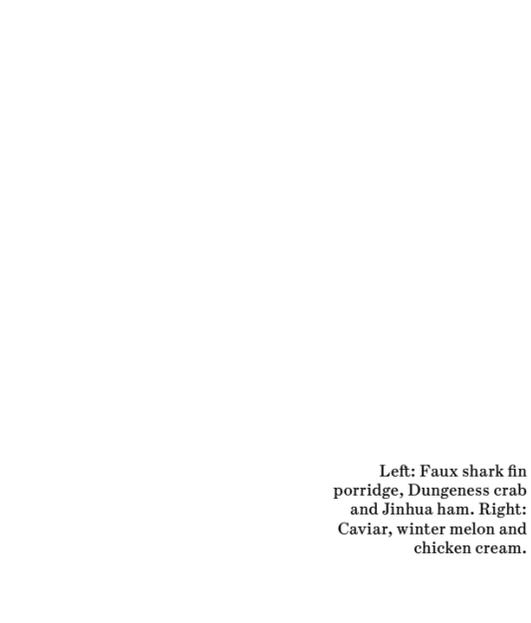
"Smash the sea urchin?" asks Lee incredulously. "You really instruct diners to smash it?"

"Yeah," Abergel says. "Mix it all up until it looks terrible."

Lee smiles, pleased by an idea that feels unconventional and bold. "This is an amazing thing to be a part of," Abergel says. "We'll be able to represent your style clearly," says Lee. Abergel looks at a pile of panko and asks Lee if he'd like to go through the recipe one more time, but Lee's already untying his apron, ready to move on to his next trial. "I've got it," says Lee, slapping Abergel on the back. "I think I've got this." ●



From left: Acorn beggar's purse and unlaed chicken egg, lily bulb and pork belly; beef tendon and sea cucumber glazed in lobster sauce with dried garlic flowers.



Left: Faux shark fin porridge, Dungeness crab and Jinhua ham. Right: Caviar, winter melon and chicken cream.

**TASTING MENU**  
"It's Corey Lee!" says Wylie Dufresne. "If I had to compile a shortlist of people with whom I'd be comfortable making my food, he'd be right at the top. He's an amazing talent." From Benu's menu, from left: Tomato, celtuce and XO sausage; steamed bun with black truffle.