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Seoul to Soul

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It is hard to believe that Debbie Lee, 39, wouldn't even try kimchi when she went on a family trip to Korea (even if she was only four years old at the time). But today, she calls her culinary specialty Seoul-to-soul, an East-meets-Southwest fusion that some might declare Southern-fried Korean. We chatted with The Next Food Network Star finalist about growing up Asian in the dirty South, that harrowing first Food Network challenge, her best kitchen tips, and she even gives us a recipe! It is the inside scoop on how the once kimchi-phobic culinary consultant ditched corporate America for her shot at becoming The Next Food Network Star.

Why did you apply to be on the Next Food Network Star?

A good friend of mine had to do some live free demos for one of the products that she was representing for a client and this happened to be just before casting calls. I did a couple for PPLA live and San Diego live. The feedback I received was "Whoa. You should do this for a living." I didn't really take the Next Food Network Star audition seriously because these guys are so talented, and it was so challenging that I didn't think I was going to make it. When I went to the casting call, I did it with the attitude that this will be a great experience. like that. Something to tell my friends. Before I knew it, I was cast and on my way to New York! It was a crazy experience.

How intimidating was it?

It was definitely intimidating. I mean, I have been a foodie. I've worked in the business. I'm a chef by trade. It was very exciting for me to be able to actually be on what I consider to be the Mecca of food TV and to stand in front of Bob and Suzie and Bobby and all these illustrious chefs and food talents. But it's also very, very stressful because it's like, "Oh My God! Am I going to live up to their expectations?" But they're the most gracious and warmest people that I've ever met in any kind of entertainment facet, and I couldn't have asked for a better situation.

What were you doing before you got on the show?

I was a restaurant consultant and prior to that I used to be a caterer in Hollywood. In a way, I worked on the other side of entertainment. I fed a lot of people for parties, premieres and media launches and things like that.



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How did you get started doing that?

Right out of USC, I did the corporate world for a short period. But I've always had a huge love for food, and I was always intrigued by the restaurant business. So I had an epiphany one day and decided that the corporate world was not for me. I talked myself into getting a hostess position with a restaurant in L.A. and I told the manager, "If you don't like me in a two weeks, you can fire me and not pay me." I mean he wouldn't even look at me. He was like "You're too overqualified. We're not looking for Miss Corporate America. We're looking for actors and actresses, waitresses, that kind of thing." I said, "No you should be looking for people who want to be in this business because they love the business." And you know it worked out obviously in my favor. I realized that one day I want to own my own restaurant, and I want to understand how to manage a kitchen. That's when I decided to go to cooking school. And then I apprenticed with some other chefs in San Francisco and one thing lead to another.

What would you say is the most challenging transition from cooking at home to cooking on the show?

Well cooking on the show there are a lot of different facets that go on. First of all, there are cameras, then there's audio and a crew of 70 people who watch me make food. But you get used to it very quickly. Then there's learning to explain the different ingredients or learning to simplify a recipe so the viewer can understand. When you're cooking at home, you're sort of your own audience where you're just working away and doing the same things in your head.

You've described your culinary vision as "Korean food with a soulful edge." What do you mean?

My point of view is Seoul-to-soul. My parents immigrated here from Seoul, Korea, and about sixty years ago they landed in Jackson, Miss. Then they went to Dallas, Texas for another ten years, where they completed their graduate/Ph.D studies. And the furthest West we ended up until I was older was Arizona, which essentially was South West. So the food that I was brought up on was traditional Southern fare, what we called soul food like black-eyed peas, cornbread, fried chicken and collard greens. And because my parents came here when they were so young, my mother never really learned to make a lot of Korean cuisine. Instead she can fry a chicken like you've never seen it and can make one heck of a pineapple-upside-down cake.

So it's when we came to California in my early teens that I actually met my grandmother, who had immigrated from Korea at that point. And my mother would often leave me with my grandparents - I speak no Korean and they barely speak any English except hi and goodbye. But I sat in the kitchen every day and learned through sort of quasi-sign language from my grandmother how to make Korean food. And that's kind of my story on a plate. It's about me finding myself as an Asian American girl and becoming an Asian American woman.

When did you develop an interest in cooking?

Cooking has always been my mental therapy even when I was little. The first book that I got to choose from a bookstore was a cookbook of all things. I made my parents pancakes and eggs on a Saturday morning with my brother as sous chef. It was after a couple years of working in management in the restaurant industry that I thought I want to hone in on my craft.

Why did you decide to blend the two cuisines?

It was an automatic thing. It was just the way I normally cook. If I have people over for a dinner gathering, it's probably going to be something fried because I'm a big fan of fried food, and it's always got to be something with an Asian flair. So I naturally cook with the sesame oil and it's sort of a joke at the network, "Oh, you really like that sesame oil." For me, this is just the way that I am naturally accustomed to eating and what I have grown up with.

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What was it like growing up Korean in the South?

Being in the South West was interesting. I felt like the only Korean girl in Phoenix. I don't think I knew of any other Asians other than the one family that owned the Chinese restaurant and the other family that owned the Japanese restaurant in town. It's funny because I didn't understand what Korean was until I got to Los Angeles. I was very confused. Am I Chinese? Am I Japanese? I just didn't get it. And there would be kids that would beat me up after school because I had slanted eyes. One girl I remember called me Chinese Checkers and threw me in a trash can. My brother learned tae kwon do very quickly. When I was little, I was so upset about being Korean because I would get teased so much, and I'm sure that so many of us have gone through that. I would put clothes pin on my nose at night sometimes hoping that my nose would look like an American's because I was just so confused when I was little.

So let's talk a little bit about the sweet sixteen team challenge from the first episode.

OK, here it goes.

It actually reminded me of many of the women in my family who go shopping without a grocery list or a budget in mind. You got in a bit of hot water because of it. Can you tell us what went down?

Michael and I were both so stressed and just rushing through the aisles and grabbing things as we went. Michael made a joke like two divas in a grocery store, what's a girl to do? Everything sort of got thrown in and thrown out and there was a lot of confusion.

People pay a lot of attention to following a recipe to a tee without experimenting much.

What do you think are some good cooking or kitchen tips that people often overlook?

I think what a lot of people don't realize is that a recipe is subject to a lot of different things. You may have a different kind of salt. You may have a different kind of pepper. You may have gotten a different kind of meat. The chef preparing it usually accounts for some adjustment. My advice would be to go with instinct. Use the recipe as a guideline for yourself, but it doesn't have to be to exact measurements.

The first time my grandmother taught me to cook kimchi, for example, she asked me to pour the salt over the cabbage. And of course the salt goes all over the place so she starts flailing her arms around and saying, "No no no no no." Then she tapped my hand and brought me over to her bowl. She showed me by having my hand follow her hand. Or she would bring my finger to her bowl so I could taste the salt water and take a piece off the cabbage so I would know what the cabbage was supposed to taste like. And that has made me into a cook who cooks by taste not by measurement.