

Korean BBQ King

Fil-Am Mark Manguera, owner and co-founder Korean BBQ Truck

by JOSEPH PIMENTEL / AJPress

Mark Manguera, a 30-year old Fil-Am walked into his home after a night of club hopping and dancing. Stumbling into the room with his wife Caroline and sister-in-law Alice Shin, who arrived from New York, his belly began to growl. Hunger gnawed at him.

At 4am and with little money, the options on where to dine are limited.

"Let's eat at a taco truck," he told them. So there he was, inside his home eating about \$10 worth of Mexican tacos and burritos and drinking a beer when a light bulb flashed inside his head.

He thought to himself 'wouldn't it be great if we put Korean barbecue on a taco?'

Maybe it was the alcohol talking. He shared his drunken moment of revelation with the rest of the family, he said, 'Alice, wouldn't it be great if someone put Korean barbecue on a taco, sold it from a truck at 2am and parked the truck in front of the club?'

"Sure, Mark," they giggled. But the thought wouldn't leave Manguera's head.

"Wouldn't it be a great idea if someone put Korean barbecue on a taco and sold it from a truck to all the late night partygoers?" he again thought about it.

"They thought I was nuts," said Manguera, who's married into a Korean family. "They were telling me I was crazy and to just keep eating and drinking."

He awoke the next morning convinced that he could make the idea work. He called a friend, Beverly Hilton Chef Roy Choi, about his idea.

"He said I was crazy too," recalls Manguera. "But the more he thought about it, the more he believed it was a good idea."

It only took about three weeks for Manguera to start the business.

Now three months into it, Manguera and Choi's Kogi BBQ truck have introduced Asian flavors to the predominant Mexican taco truck world of Los Angeles.

Kogi Barbecue was born that day and after a soft opening during Thanksgiving weekend in November, the Korean flavors and its unique taste have hundreds of people waiting in line, and following where the truck will be located on certain nights on Twitter.

"We had no idea that we'd be here today [with all the media attention]," Manguera told the *Asian Journal*. "We're still surprised. I can't believe it. Here we are hitting national and international news off of a taco truck."

It's said that you can find inspiration in weird places. Greek Scholar Archimedes discovered the method for determining the volume of an object with an irregular shape while sinking into a bathtub, Sir Isaac Newton was sitting under an apple tree when an apple fell on his head, and he suddenly thought of the Universal Law of Gravitation, and to peeve a customer complaining that his fries were cut too thick, Chef George Crum sliced a potato paper-thin and fried it to a crisp to create the first potato chip.

For Manguera, that night of partying, drinking and eating a taco from a roach coach has led to one of the great food revelations especially in a diverse place like Los Angeles.

Taco trucks regularly roam the streets of Los Angeles only offering Mexican delicacies but introducing Korean flavors to tacos and burritos was a marriage fit for food heaven.



"The food is absolutely delicious," said Manguera. "Chef Roy has really created this dish from his heart."

"We put a lot of love and care into our food and I think the people have really responded to that," said Chef Choi. "They've also appreciated that our food is only \$2 and that's a good deal especially in this kind of economy where people are looking for quality cheap eats."

"What you're really doing is buying a lifestyle," added Manguera about the food. "It's LA in one bite for \$2."

Humble beginnings

Despite thinking of the idea and massive publicity and good food reviews Kogi has been receiving, Manguera deflects the attention away from himself and focuses on the team that has made the Korean BBQ truck a success.

"It's the team behind Kogi that makes Kogi so successful," he said.

Manguera said he gave up a comfortable job heading food and beverage at a downtown five star hotel to take this calculated risk of opening Kogi.

"I knew that it could work," said Manguera. "I just didn't know it was going to be this popular."

Born in Manila, Philippines, Manguera arrived

to the US when he was three years old. Growing up in Vallejo in Northern California he said that it would have been easy for him to live a comfortable lifestyle like many *Pinoy*s do.

"I could have

just stayed, lived at home, found a job and played ball in the weekends," he said. "But I wanted to challenge myself."

After graduating from high school, he moved to Anaheim to attend California State University, Fullerton. He received a bachelor in Business Management before continuing to pursue his education at the California Culinary Institute. After working briefly as a chef in Hawaii, he went to the mainland and served as a food and beverage director in a Downtown hotel.

During that time he met his future wife, Caroline, a Korean American. He said ever since he met her, he's been entrenched with Korean culture.

"My mother-in-law makes the best Korean BBQ," he said. "I love Korean food."

Manguera said that he was in a comfortable position working at the hotel but when he thought of Kogi (which means meat in Korean) BBQ, he immediately jumped at the opportunity to pursue his own business.

"The key to success is not only have a team of people help guiding you but overcome fear. If you let fear take over you, if you let complacency take over your life, ten years from now and I'll look back and wish that I would have done something with my life," he said.

Now, Manguera has grown Kogi to what is today. There are only two Kogi BBQ trucks roaming the streets and another four are on their way, he said. Manguera also opened a small Kogi restaurant in the Alibi Room in Culver City. Both trucks and the restaurant go through 500 to 600 pounds of meat a week.

And although most of the menu is dedicated to Korean BBQ, he said he and Chef Roy are planning to introduce Filipino food in a taco. ■



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