

JINA KIM
Owner – Kong Ju Korean Rice Cake – Houston, TX

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Interviewer: Amy C. Evans
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Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Translation: Jung Min “Kevin” Kim
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Project: Houston’s Underbelly

[Begin Jina Kim—Owner of Kong Ju Interview]**00:00:00**

Amy Evans: Okay. This is Amy Evans again for the Southern Foodways Alliance, Tuesday, July 1, 2014 at Kong Ju Rice Bakery in Houston, Texas, on Long Point. And we just finished our conversation with Mrs. Lee, Chris Shepherd's Kimchi Mama, and now we're sitting with Jina, and she and her husband [Heesuck Ko] own Kong Ju, the business. And Jae is going to help us again with a short conversation with Jina. And Jina I met on Friday. And thank you so much for setting this up with Chris, and I'm just so appreciative of all of you.

00:00:34

So I think one of the questions from—well, actually, I'll get—Jina, if you wouldn't mind introducing yourself, saying your name and introducing the business?

00:00:38

Jina Kim (Korean): In Korean? My name is—in English? Jina Kim. My name is Jina Kim. Our business has been operating for about ten years—ten years. About ten years. We make rice cake, *tteok* [*ddeok*]* [Korean word for rice cake], kimchi — is on our menu. And side dish, Korean side dish, and Korean style *mandu* [*mandu*] [dumplings], Korean *panchan* [*banchan*].

00:01:15

Jae Yoon Um (Translator): Yeah, she's been here—she's been doing this business for more than ten years now, and then she's making rice cakes and kimchi(s) and all these side dishes, Korean side dishes, yeah, which is we call *panchan* [*banchan*] and then—and then some of the oils and stuff.

* Translator's Note: Throughout the document the Romanization of Korean is presented both in the original McCune-Reischauer form and the newer Revised Romanization form in brackets.

00:01:36

AE: Okay. So had you heard, Jina, about Mrs. Lee's kimchi prior to her working here?

00:01:43

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Before you worked here have you heard about the Kimchi grandma?

00:01:50

JK (Korean): Yes. Yes. She already—she was already doing it— inside Dong Yang Market.

She was making it inside Dong Yang Market.

00:02:02

JYU (Translator): She already knew about it because she was making kimchi for the grocery.

She was—her family actually running—.

00:02:09

AE: So was it an easy thing to fold that into this business?

00:02:13

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Was that why it was easy to bring her into the business?

00:02:16

JK (Korean): She uh—the kimchi mama wanted to work here and she—

00:02:27

JYU (Translator): Yeah, I mean they wanted her to make kimchi and there—also, she actually was—actually wanting, I mean, to do the—keep continuing the—the kimchi business. So—so apparently they both actually had a mutual agreement.

00:02:41

AE: Perfect. So Jina, you said you—the business has been here ten years; how long have you been in Houston?

00:02:47

JK: Ten—same, ten years.

00:02:51

AE: So tell me about when you came here and how you got to be a business owner, you and your husband?

00:02:55

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Can you tell us how the business got started?

00:03:01

JK (Korean): It's a bit of a long story. How should I tell it? Um— we— In L.A. [Los Angeles, California] we met a friend— a rice cake expert. And through him and a friend of my husband [Heesuck Ko], we came to Houston and started making rice cakes.

00:03:30

JYU (Translator): They actually came to Los Angeles first and then to do some business and then, while they're searching for it, they actually met a guy who happened to be a rice cake expert. And then somehow and then they actually—actually, his family still living in Houston

area and that's why they have some connection here, and then there's not much rice cake places here. So that's why they actually, the whole team actually brought down here and then—and then that's how the whole thing started.

00:04:06

AE: Okay. So tell me a little bit about the rice cake and the production because I know that so many machines back there are specific to what you do. So just a little bit of what the rice cake is and how it's—how it's made.

00:04:20

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Can you tell us briefly about how you make the rice cake and the machines that go with it?

00:04:28

JK (Korean): The basic ingredient for rice cake is rice. You make the rice into a powder and mix in a variety of beans and a variety of grains. Then you mix everything together. Rice cake is then steamed—the thing about rice cake that is important to understand is— for bread you bake, but for rice cake you have to use steam. You make rice into flour and mix.

00:05:13

JYU (Translator): It depends on what kind of rice cake, but I think the basic ingredients, again, rice and then they actually mix with a lot of these different kinds of grains, basically, with beans—sometimes a bean or sometimes some other grains. And then of course they make it really fine—finely grounded, and then what they do is actually they're steaming it instead of

baking it. So baking is the process for the bread and the rice cake is—is the steaming it. So this is how—how they make it; that’s what all these machines are for.

00:05:47

AE: And so do the machines come from Korea or can you buy those here?

00:05:49

JK (Korean): We imported them from Korea.

00:05:53

JYU (Translator): All those machines are imported from Korea.

00:05:55

AE: Amazing. So ten years later, what—tell me what it feels like to have this business here in Houston.

00:06:02

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Can you comment on your feelings after ten years in the business?

00:06:08

JK (Korean): Umm— difficult. It’s been hard, but you get to meet some great people. Running the business is hard, but you meet some great people.

00:06:25

JYU (Translator): It’s very difficult, however, I mean, by doing this business, she’s actually meeting a lot of great people and that’s something she’s really enjoying.

00:06:36

AE: And so because this is mostly a wholesale business, yeah? Is that right?

00:06:39

JYU (Translator) (Korean): This isn't just a wholesale business, right?

00:06:42

JK (Korean): We re-sell. We sell to H Mart [American-style chain grocery store that caters to the Asian community] or Austin or other markets. Wholesale?

00:06:54

JYU (Translator): I mean she actually provided a lot of this kind of thing to the stores. Not only that—also to the regular customer. As you can see, they're just walking in and out all the time, yeah.

00:07:03

AE: Yeah. Okay, because I wasn't sure at first because the storefront is—it seems more wholesale with the kitchen in the back, but you do have items that people can come—like the *panchan* [*banchan*] you were saying. So are you cooking every day Jina, the—?

00:07:15

JK: Yeah, every day—every day.

00:07:19

AE: That's always been a part of this business?

00:07:21

JK: Part of business?

00:07:22

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Has it been like that every day?

00:07:25

JK: Yes.

00:07:27

JYU (Translator): It's been—yeah, she's been in the main chef for a while. She—I mean she's actually controlling all this stuff now.

00:07:37

AE: And do you make kimchi or did you before or do you now?

00:07:39

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Do you make kimchi?

00:07:41

JK (Korean): When we lived in Korea, sometimes—occasionally.

00:07:47

JYU (Translator): Yeah, she actually—I mean occasionally made a kimchi when she was living in Korea.

00:07:54

AE: So is there anything that she's learned from Mrs. Lee?

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JYU (Translator) (Korean): Have you learned anything about kimchi making from grandma?

00:07:59

JK (Korean): Just observing the process. Then after watching, I learn and ask questions. Well—yeah.

00:08:09

JYU (Translator): Just by looking at the way she's making, and that's actually part of the learning. And then also whenever she has a question, she just asks questions. That's how she's acquiring all this knowledge.

00:08:22

JK: Everything I know, uh-huh.

00:08:24

JYU (Translator): She knows everything now.

00:08:25

AE: Is there anything that either you or Mrs. Lee, her kimchi specifically of course—are any of these recipes written down?

00:08:32

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Are these recipes written down somewhere?

00:08:42

JK: No.

00:08:42

AE: And now your daughter was here earlier. I don't know if she's still here. Does she cook? Does she know some of these recipes?

00:08:47

JYU (Translator) (Korean): She's asking if your daughter knows how to make kimchi.

00:08:51

JK (Korean): No. She doesn't know.

00:08:53

JYU (Translator): She doesn't know.

00:08:57

JK: Maybe.

00:08:57

JK (Korean): When she gets older and when she gets married, then I will teach her.

00:09:02

JYU (Translator): She said once her daughter gets married, then that's the time she's going to teach her all those things, yeah. But that's something a Korean housewife is supposed to do.

00:09:13

AE: She has to know. So back to the story, I'm so fascinated by of the Super H Mart squeezing out the little guys, I wonder if there are more people like you who are—who are creating individual Korean ingredients or products here in this part of Houston that also sells to H Mart.

Are there—is there a lot of that going on here?

00:09:33

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Perhaps— do you know if there are many store that make Korean food and sell to H Mart.

00:09:40

JK (Korean): Oh— I don't think are too many.

00:09:44

JYU (Translator): Yeah, there are not too many.

00:09:47

AE: That's so surprising and depressing.

00:09:51

JYU (Translator): That's true.

00:09:53

AE: So can you tell me how it feels to be one of the people who is holding onto these Korean culinary traditions and sharing them with the city of Houston?

00:10:04

JYU (Translator): Can you repeat that question? Can you—?

00:10:05

AE: To be—sure. To be responsible for this—the rice cake, specifically, I guess, this Korean specialty that's made here in Texas and—and to be a local producer of that, like the pride associated with that or how it makes her feel to be carrying that on.

00:10:23

JYU (Translator) (Korean): There aren't very many rice cake makers in Houston. Can you give us some thoughts on the carrying on the business and passing down the tradition.

00:10:45

JK (Korean): This line of work is very difficult. It's very hard, so I don't want to particularly continue, but my husband wants to keep going, so I believe I should continue.

00:11:04

JYU (Translator): Apparently, this is very hard work and especially the—the—her husband actually waking up like four o'clock in the morning that kind of thing. So it's very difficult and very tough to continue. However, I mean—I mean her husband—she'd like to actually do something else, but her husband tries to keep doing this, so she's just following her husband's path, yeah.

00:11:32

AE: And Jina stepped up to pay an invoice, but I'm wondering Jay how do you—how do you know the family and the business?

00:11:39

JYU (Translator): They actually came to the church I was in, and then we just became friends because we were a—similar age groups. So and then we just get to know and then they just opened the business and it apparently—this is one of the great locations for any Korean to gather, so just staying here and just getting to know—going back and forth in each house and then—. And apparently, my wife becomes a real good friend of hers, so they just—yeah. But they're—I mean they're fun people. They're something I really enjoy. And also my kids have a—my kids and her kids actually—similar age groups, so—so that's actually also helping as well to get together, yeah. So I've been really enjoying this relationship with this family.

00:12:31

AE: Oh, they're very engaging and friendly and hospitable, so again thank you all. [*Phone Rings*] And I wanted to ask—and Jina now has to get up and get the phone, but I wanted to ask her on the heels of what you were saying about how she doesn't—this business is so hard and what she might prefer to be doing. And I can pause this actually, so we'll wait for her—.

00:12:54

We just had a little break while Jina answered the phone and I—the question that I left on was that Jina had just said how this—this business is so hard that she might prefer to be doing something else but that they're invested in this business, but I wonder what that something else might be. Does she have something that she's—?

00:13:09

JYU (Translator) (Korean): You said that this was hard. Was there anything else you want to do?

00:13:17

JK (Korean): Specifically—not really. But because this work is so hard, I've had thoughts about finding another line of work.

00:13:27

JYU (Translator): Because this is so hard they don't really have any concrete idea of what to do. But they just—because it's still so hard and—and so physically challenging, so that's why they would just like to get away from those physically challenging part.

00:13:43

AE: Well and we struck up on another conversation while you were on the phone [and recording was paused]. I was asking Jae what these brightly colored things that I've been staring at while we've been sitting at this table for these interviews were, and he said they're table decorations for the children's thirty-day birthday and a 100-day birthday, and then we got on the subject of your catering. I would love to know more about that and these traditional ceremonies that they have all these accessories that they also share with customers.

00:14:12

JYU (Translator) (Korean) : These are items for the *tol [dol]* [first birthday] and the *paek-il [baek-il]* [100th day birthday] celebrations— can you tell us more about those and the catering business.

00:14:21

JK (Korean): In Korea, the 100th day and the first birthdays are traditional celebrations.

00:14:39

JYU (Translator) (Korean): And you just rent it out to the customers?

00:14:44

JK: Just rent—to take a picture. Yes, uh-huh.

00:14:48

JYU (Translator): Catering?

00:14:52

JK (Korean): Korean side dish [business is] more bigger—. For that— Korean food— If someone orders Korean food for a particular celebration, we will make it to their specifications and to the quantity they desire and deliver to them for their *dol* or birthday celebration.

00:15:11

JYU (Translator) (Korean): And you just deliver those things with the food?

00:15:18

JYU (Translator) (Korean): [Unintelligible]

00:15:19

JK (Korean): No. If they order rice cake, it's free. It's a service we provide.

00:15:25

JYU (Translator): So because, like I said earlier, the first birthday and 100 days of newborn baby is a biggest celebration for regular Korean people. So when they do—when they order a rice cake and usually at the same time they do catering, Korean food catering for those events and then they just let the customer just borrow this one and use it for those occasions.

00:15:51

AE: Such a multifaceted business that's going on. So I do want to ask now that I understand the—the nature of the business here a little bit better, is the—I want to ask about the sesame oil that Chris [Shepherd of Underbelly], he brings the benne seeds from a farmer here locally and that y'all make the oil?

00:16:10

JK (Korean): Chris has a farm[er], and he brings in various seeds like sesame. We then toast the seeds and extract the oil. Chris has a lot of product without the equipment to do anything with it. After seeing us extract the oil, he brought it in and orders the sesame oil from us. We make it for him and he uses in his cooking. And that's how we do it.

00:16:54

JYU (Translator): So apparently Chris actually managed to find a lot of those seeds like especially sesame seeds and that kind of thing. And they actually have a facility here for roasting and also extracting all these oils from those. So okay, Chris has—must have a good eye to find all those things, so and then they just helping Chris to get those oils for the Underbelly.

00:17:20

AE: That's amazing. So I—I love the idea of an American chef coming and—and making such great use of a place like this. Are there Korean restaurants that utilize this business in the same way?

00:17:31

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Do you perhaps know if there are Korean restaurants that bring in various ingredients to do something similar.

00:17:38

JK (Korean): No, not really. But restaurants do order *ttokuk-ttok* [*tteokguk-tteok*] [rice cake for rice cake soup] or *ttokpokki* [*tteokbokki*] [spicy Korean rice cakes] from us sometimes.

00:17:48

JYU (Translator) (Korean): What about oil?

00:17:49

JK (Korean): Oil, no— *tteokguk-tteok* or *ttokpokki-tteok*.

00:17:53

JYU (Translator): The—the main ingredient for the Korean dumpling, the Underbelly that little rice cake thing, the plain rice cake thing is something other Korean restaurants [*Phone Rings*] buy occasionally but there's no oil. I mean—is actually going into any Korean restaurant.

00:18:13

AE: And so other Korean restaurants do source them for kimchi, presumably, and the rice cakes?

00:18:19

JYU (Translator): Many times they actually make them themselves, yeah, because it's buying itself it doesn't really make good financial sense. So what they usually end up is they have usually a bunch of ladies there, and they usually make their own side dishes and kimchi(s) usually. And then all the other like some basic stuff they buy from H Mart or—or local groceries.

00:18:45

AE: So then the—the products that come from here are more often than not specific for a larger market, like an H Mart?

00:18:57

JYU (Translator): Like rice cakes and kimchi(s) are for H Mart but a lot of these side dishes and the oils are not going into the H Mart and there's something—whoever knows, high quality of those stuffs actually coming here and picking up.

00:19:14

AE: Okay. Well Jina is up again for another phone call and I won't—I think when she comes back we'll have her just add her final thoughts but—. And for now I will pause again and take another break and maybe think of something else to ask.

00:19:31

Okay, so I don't want to keep you. But I wonder if there's anything you'd like to add about your business or being in Houston or your relationship with Chris—anything that comes to mind.

00:19:43

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Your business with Chris— you're doing business with Chris. Have you thought about expanding your business with him.

00:19:57

JK (Korean): As of right now, Chris orders rice cakes and we mostly supply him with rice cakes. However, moving forward, I think there is a possibility with expanding the sesame oil business with him. Chris sometimes brings in the seed, and we extract the oil. I think right now, it's mainly the sesame oil and rice cake.

00:20:30

JYU (Translator) (Korean): And the next steps?

00: 20:30

JK (Korean): As for the next steps— if there's anything that we can do, we are more than happy to work with him. But for now, it's mainly the rice cake and sesame oil.

00:20:42

JYU (Translator): Okay. So far, the—the rice cake and the sesame oil is the—the main part doing business with Chris, but I mean she is more than willing to do any other yeah opportunity with Chris. I mean she's been actually looking for that kind of thing, yeah.

00:21:02

AE: Okay, that's good to know. I wonder who she thinks might last longer, Mrs. Lee or them.

[Laughs]

JYU (Translator) (Korean): Do you think the Kimchi Mama will be here longer or do you think you will be here longer?

00:21:16

JK (Korean): Me.

00:21:18

JYU (Translator): Her. **[Laughs]**

00:21:20

AE: And I do actually have one more question and that is I wonder if—if you could describe for us Mrs. Lee’s personality a little bit and kind of what kind of woman she is.

00:21:30

JK (Korean): Mrs. Lee— the Kimchi Mama—is— has a very bright personality and is a very positive person. She also works hard and puts in a lot of effort and helps us a lot. She may be going on in years, but works hard with positive attitude.

00:22:06

JYU (Translator): She may be old, but I think she working very hard and, at the same time, she working very enthusiastically and also her character is very outgoing and very positive. And because of those good characters actually really helping the business here.

00:22:27

AE: I can see that with only having met her twice. [*Laughs*] But that’s great. Well if—if there’s any—is there anything else that y'all would like to add?

00:22:34

JYU (Translator) (Korean): [Unintelligible]

00:22:36

JK (Korean): No.

00:22:38

JYU (Translator): That's it.

00:22:40

AE: Okay. Thank you so much, Jina. Thank you, thank you, thank you—

00:22:42

JK: Thank you, Amy.

00:22:44

AE: And thank you, Jae.

00:22:44

JYU (Translator): Oh, you're very welcome. Thanks for having us here.

00:22:46

[End Jina Kim—Owner of Kong Ju Interview]