



Photo courtesy Kogi

meals on wheels

Chef Roy Choi is at the centre of LA's food truck buzz — he tells VICTORIA WELLS about the Kogi craze

Food trucks in New Zealand

are a familiar sight at festivals, sporting events and outside night spots, catering to those after a quick fix of hot dogs, hot chips or burgers. Food trucks in LA are entirely different beasts. The food on offer ranges from organic Jamaican to gourmet cupcakes or falafel fusion, and dedicated websites track the trucks' exact locations across the city at any time.

The food trucks have been part of the LA landscape since the 70s, but in the last two years there has been an explosion in the number roaming the city and in the quality of the food they offer. At the forefront of this development is Kogi BBQ, a Korean BBQ Taco truck which took the city by storm when it launched in 2008.

Kogi (pronounced with a hard 'g') offers Korean barbecue meat in a Mexican tortilla or taco and charges customers just US\$2 for items such as a Short Rib Taco, or \$5 for a Kimchi Quesadilla. It started with a single food truck, darting through the streets of LA and turning up outside apartment blocks, night clubs, motel carparks – anywhere there were people who needed to be fed.

"We're like gypsies," says Kogi chef Roy Choi down the phone from LA, "we go out there and search for hungry people." The hungry of LA seek them out too; the Kogi crew was the first to use Twitter to communicate with customers and now when they tweet their next location to their 50,000 or so followers it's not uncommon for a crowd of 600-700 people to be waiting when they arrive.

Word was quick to spread in the early days, creating such a buzz that soon CNN came knocking, there were write-ups in the *LA Times* and *Food & Wine* magazine named Chef Roy Choi as one of its Best New Chefs 2010.

Roy says despite this the concept of Kogi is still met with confusion by some. "We hit about 4000 people a day and our website gets 45,000 hits but it's still so abstract it's hard to understand. Because it's this weird-ass taco truck run by a bunch of brown-skinned people, flipping around at midnight – it's hard to put in a box."

While it has been the phenomenal success of Kogi that brought Roy to the attention of the

media, he is no newcomer to the LA food scene. Born in Korea, Roy arrived in LA with his parents in the 70s, moving every couple of years as they looked for work in a city that wasn't kind to Korean immigrants. "Up until 13 years old I moved around like every year or two years, sometimes twice in one year and it kind of shaped who I am," he says.

He discovered cooking in his mid-20s after hitting what he calls "a dark patch".

"I reached rock bottom and my parents put me on lockdown at home. I was 25, I had travelled the world and finally ended up right back in the same freaking place. I had no money, nothing and I was watching Emeril (chef Emeril Lagasse) every day and I felt like he was talking to me. So I moved to New York and started cooking and applied to the CIA (Culinary Institute of America)."

He graduated as one of the top students in his year, later working at hotels and becoming Chef de Cuisine at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, catering for events such as the Golden Globes.

When the US economy started to founder, Roy opted to jump before the crunch came

and left the Hilton. Shortly afterwards friends Mark Manguera and Alice Shin told him about their concept to sell Korean/Mexican food – the timing was perfect.

"I've been around food my whole life. My family is from the South Western part of Korea, and that region has always been considered like the South in America, like New Orleans, where it's just amazing food, hot-blooded people, and within that region my dad's family was really well known for food."

He talks about the Korean concept of 'son mat', or 'the taste of one's hands', which means that if your food is good, it is because it has the taste of your hands in it.

It may seem a far cry from feeding the glitterati at the Beverly Hilton, but Roy says he built his reputation in the hotel world by never treating anything as "just standard" and that carries over into Kogi.

"It's just a taco, but behind it there's a lot of love in marinating the meat, the ingredients that go into it, the meat itself and where it comes from...getting the right texture on the tortilla."

Such is the demand for Kogi BBQ that it has grown to four trucks and a popular catering business, but Roy is quick to point out it was never designed to bring fame and fortune. In fact, with Kogi food selling for as little as \$2 for a taco, it was quite the opposite.

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"My family has always had this kind of wizardly quality of being connected to flavour and food. For me, growing up in modern day America it's only now that I've gone through this crazy journey with Kogi that I'm looking at it deeply. We grew up poor for the first 13 years of my life....but I would wake up every morning and there would be 14 different pickles on the table, there would be three different braised stews on the stove, there would be a slow roasting pork shoulder in the oven, six different kimchi – I think they (his parents) spent all their money on food."

He had never cooked Korean food as a chef before and so used these memories as the basis for creating the Kogi menu.

"When I sat down and started to peel away the layers then I just started to cook, and this is what came out. It wasn't designed to show Korean food so we could make it into a worldwide phenomenon, it was just cooking and I was the perfect person to translate it at that time.

"It's showing flavours from this part of the world that have been overlooked, but it's not that we have never developed them, it's that people are finally opening their eyes to them."

His team is a blend of cooks from Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, El Salvador and many second-generation Koreans.

"The only way that Kogi worked, and a lot of people don't know this, is that our purveyors bought into my philosophy to give 'normal people'.... [with] normal everyday lives, to fill that void with great food. Instead of reaching for the nearest convenience snack which is chips or sandwiches or processed cheese, you could just reach for something fantastic – and that exists in Asia but it doesn't exist here in America. I had to really search for people who would buy into that."

He asked his suppliers to source the best they could in return for huge amounts of business but lower margins and it's an approach that has worked.

"On a good week we'll have mixes of all grass-fed short ribs, and sometimes we'll use scraps, but they're scraps of prime aged New Yorks, or short ribs or chuck flaps that high-end restaurants are throwing in the trash or making into burger meat. I put the pressure on them (the suppliers) to be creative."

Such is Kogi's success that it has expanded with a restaurant called Chego, set up in a former Chinese restaurant in West LA's Palms area.

"I wanted to do soulful food that represented the way we eat as second-generation Asian-Americans," says Roy, "and that's the rice bowl. I wanted to create

a rice bowl that really brought people back to their childhood and showed them the future a little bit."

The concept of the restaurant was to keep everything under \$10. And as with his Kogi food, Roy isn't cutting any corners with what he offers diners, his heart and soul goes into the preparation of every dish. Take the pork belly for example: "It's a Snake River Farms pork belly, a wonderful free-range farm in Idaho. The pork belly is cured overnight, slathered in a chilli marinade that has 17 ingredients and then it's slow roasted in a Chinese oven for three hours. Then it's cooled and cut and then it's grilled and slathered in a chilli lacquer for six times each side and then it's cut and served in a bowl with rice, Thai basil, cilantro, peanuts, sesame, three different home-made chilli sauces, wok-stirred greens and pickled watermelon radishes. So all of that goes in and it's \$8."

The low prices may seem absurd, but Kogi's lucrative sideline in Hollywood catering gives much better margins than the food truck business. This allows Roy to create the food he wants.

His latest venture is a restaurant called A-Frame, which is separate from Kogi and opened in November last year. He is a co-owner and says it became quite a personal project.

"My parents used to take me to the Redondo Beach Pier and we would splurge on cracking crabs and eating corn on the cob at the pier. You could go wild, let your guard down and get all dirty. I've built the restaurant on that premise, sort of a modern picnic, and it started to flow and people are digging it."

He heads to Australia next to appear at The Langham Melbourne Masterclass in mid-March to teach two classes and cook two dinners at Coda.

"It's time to get these flavours across the world and spread the love...it doesn't matter where you come from, and that's the amazing thing about Kogi, it's like reggae, you could hear it anywhere in the world and it will resonate with you and I think it's just time for me to do that." ●

Roy Choi will be appearing at The Langham Melbourne Masterclass, March 12-13. Visit melbournefoodandwine.com.au for details.

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