

a restaurant. Especially with Taiwanese/Chinese food, people are misinformed... People are constantly comparing gua baoto char siu bao[Cantonese pork buns], which are entirely different items. I just wish people would take the time to explore.

4. If you weren't cooking, what do you think you would be doing?

Well, I was doing stand-up comedy until I decided to open the restaurant. I've always been opinionated. Either comedy or journalism—I did a lot of music and sports writing, too.

5. How do gua bao compare to Southern-style barbecue sandwiches?

They compare favorably, especially mine. I use cherry cola to braise my pork and beef, so that's something that people like doing down South, too. Southern food and Taiwanese food have a similarity in that both cuisines understand how to introduce sugar into savory dishes without a hitch.

6. You've been known to marinate your beef in sorghum liquor. Is this a Taiwanese or a Southern influence?

This is something I just came up with myself after making bourbon barbecue sauce. I saw the technique where people flambé whiskey for bourbon barbecue sauces and transferred the technique to "red cooking," where no one is doing that.

7. Tell us about your next project, Xiao Ye, opening in June, also in Manhattan.

Xiao Ye is inspired by night markets and late-night food in Taiwan. The atmosphere will be raucous, the food is meant to be eaten in small plates, shared, and there's a lot of exploration. I give people a lot of variety to choose from, and they build their own crazy late-night meal.

Sara Camp Arnold, former associate editor of *The Oxford American*, is pursuing a masters in folklore at UNC-Chapel Hill.



Fusing Cuisine
& Communities

by Ashley Hall

"ME, I DON'T NEED COUNTRY BOUNDARIES OR RACE BOUNDARIES," says Steve Sung, owner of Café Maum, a three-year-old Korean bakery and café on Buford Highway, in the suburbs north of Atlanta. "We are all the same."

It's 9:30 on a Friday morning, and the large room is half-full with hungry diners. The guests file through a buffet line, piling their plates with French toast and cantaloupe, glistening baby carrots, and broccoli and tofu stir-fry. A sincere Asian-Fusion breakfast.

Café Maum (pronounced "mom") is a quaint incubator of integration. Korean ingredients meet European techniques. Traditional Western forms like buns, cookies, and loaves are topped, filled, and glazed with savory Eastern favorites, like red beans, green beans, sweet potatoes, and chestnuts. The décor is French Country, but the signage is in Korean. You can order a shot of espresso or a bowl of pot bing su (shaved ice with red beans). All can be had in a nondescript storefront, set in a strip mall in north Georgia.

Café Maum isn't the only bakery of its kind. In Georgia alone, there are 15 or so locations of Korean bakery chains like White Windmill and Mozart Bakery. Each has its devotees.

Buford Highway, also known as Georgia Route 13, is a place of pilgrimage for eaters seeking the new immigrant cuisine. The stretch of highway that runs between Chamblee and Duluth boasts hundreds of restaurants and markets offering a diverse assemblage of dishes from Korean, Japanese, Salvadoran, and Mexican cooks—to name just a few.

Like many Buford Highway business owners, Steve is not out to preserve sacred traditions. He's quick to blur cultural boundaries.

I find a blurry happiness in a sweet potato paste roll. The fist-sized bun looks and tastes a lot like a country-club style yeast roll. Airy, chewy, buttery, but not at all sweet. With a core of sweet potato goo running through the center. The flavors are delicate. The portion is filling.

Café Maum is spacious. The room is golden and awash in natural light. The wooden tables and chairs are custom made. There is a working stone fireplace. A rendering of the Eiffel Tower hangs over the station where you add milk to your coffee. It's an amiable suburban version of a Parisian café.

A three-tiered table in the center of the room is piled high with house-made baguettes, chestnut bread, red bean paste buns, potato and egg korokke (savory stuffed pastry), butter cookies, as well as multi-grain and white sandwich breads. The pristinely decorated cakes are

housed in a glass case. So are lovingly plated slices of tiramisu, which Steve says is the café's bestseller.

Steve, a bespectacled 50 year old, speaks with intensity and moves quickly between the kitchen and the dining room. His uniform is a T-shirt, ball cap, and windbreaker, each imprinted with the Café Maum logo.

Steve emigrated from Korea in 1987 and has lived in Atlanta since 1992. He has thrived as a small business owner and real-estate developer. His wife and café co-owner, Sydnie Lim, designed Maum's interior. The couple has three children. The oldest two attend Georgia Tech, just a few miles south of the bakery.

"Maum" is a philosophical term that references a person's heart, mind, and soul, their essence. "It is what we each have in common no matter our background..."



When he opened Café Maum in 2007, Steve hired bakers from Korea. In his homeland, Steve says, the Western pastry tradition won its way into Asian hearts, as five-star hotels in Seoul hired French pastry chefs to indulge Western tourists.

There is not much bread in the Korean diet, says Gene Lee, proprietor of the blog Eat, Drink, Man. Raised in the mountains of eastern Tennessee, Gene grew up eating traditional Korean food prepared by his immigrant parents.

"In Korean food, the rice is your starch. Dessert was fruit. If you look at pictures from my parents' weddings or parents' friends' weddings, you never saw a centerpiece like a cake. Just big tables of food and bowls of fruit."

At Café Maum, Steve has changed the game. "We wanted to create a nice community meeting place," Steve says. Located in a strip mall-heavy section of an already strip mall-heavy city, historically Buford Highway had few places to mingle. A French-style café offered the right environment for the immigrant population to commune and socialize.

"Maum" is a philosophical term that references a person's heart, mind, and soul, their essence. "It is what we each have in common no matter our background," says Steve. "They don't all know

each other," he says of his customers. "But we are all the same. They come here to connect."

Despite their higher aspirations, Steve and Sydnie live the harsh realities of entrepreneurship. Steve says they recently added buffets in hopes of drumming up more business.

"I lost a lot of money," he says matter-of-factly. In the last three years, he has watched several of his businesses and real estate investments evaporate. As he tells it, he and his family have lost a couple of small fortunes. Only the two locations of the bakery remain.

"Now my wife and my children say, 'Dad, you can do it again.' And I say, 'I'm not sure,' and they say, 'Yes, we know you can.'"

He shrugs. "So I start one more time. But it's not easy."

Ashley Hall is a former newspaper woman and long-time peddler of fine French wine. A Birmingham, Alabama, native, she's now a loyal resident of Atlanta, Georgia.



Waiter, There's a Hair...

by Gillian Clark

"THERE IS A HAIR IN MY FOOD." If you're in the food business, those are seven words you never want to hear. The plate comes back, the hair prominently protruding high above the sauce, more noticeable than the parsley.

And I feel like an idiot for not seeing it before sending it to my hungry customer. The server brings the plate to me, that hair throbbing like a thumb just whacked by a hammer.

When it comes back to the kitchen I am compelled to pull the hair off the plate. A bit of mashed potato still clings to it. It always needs to be examined, studied. The plate doesn't go to the dish room until I've conducted my investigation.

This usually means that I let the hair hang from the tip of my knife and look it over under the brighter and harsher light of the kitchen. There are times it's been a fiber from a fluffy sweater. On these occasions it is bright and blue and scraggly—not human at all. There are times when it's been a pet hair carried on a jacket sleeve, or the man-made thread scratched loose from a hair weave, too long to be real.

Sometimes it is wavy and blonde. I scan the room to see where that hair might have come from. Did it float across the dining room from table 12, carried by the cool HVAC breeze, and decide the potatoes at the next table made for a perfect final resting spot?