

Mijune Pak takes a break in Coal Harbour Bar, overlooking the West Building of the Vancouver Convention Centre

Culinary Adventurer

Mijune Pak dishes on her career as a foodie

BY SHERI RADFORD + PHOTOS BY KK LAW

"I've always loved food," Mijune Pak says with a laugh. "I've always had a big appetite." The vivacious Vancouverite doesn't look like someone who eats for a living. Her slim build, flawless skin and perfectly stylish outfits, always matched with sky-high heels, suggest a model, not a voracious eater who visited 524 restaurants last year.

"Dining out is a big part of Chinese culture," Pak explains. While she was growing up, her family ate out at restaurants at

least twice a week. Pak herself was born and raised in Canada, so she describes her palate as "split" between the Asian foods her mom cooked and the Western foods she ate elsewhere.

Pak started experimenting with cooking at a young age. Her favourite after-school activity was bringing a friend home and making gingerbread cookies or pizzas from scratch. "Our after-school mealtime would be epic," she says. Despite this love of



cooking, she also knew early on that she didn't want to become a chef, preferring to create intimate dinner parties for a few friends.

When she was a teenager, Pak started attending Dine Out Vancouver, the city's annual festival of food. She saved every penny from her allowance and babysitting to try \$18 three-course menus during the festival. "It's not like I started fine dining right away," she says.

Pak studied communications at Simon Fraser University, with the vague goal of a career in marketing or advertising. It was in 2009 that her sister encouraged her to start blogging, but Pak was reluctant. "I don't know anything about blogs," she recalls saying, but eventually she set up Follow Me Foodie (www.followmefoodie.com). She quickly got "addicted" and started posting every day. Researching all the endless details beguiled her: "My personality type is pretty excessive, so when I'm into something, I get fully into it. I would be up until five in the morning reading about an artichoke, or reading about the history of the stew I ate at an Indian restaurant."

Soon Pak was a fixture on the local blogging scene, and her ability to consume several back-to-back dinners in an evening became legendary. At first, she could "eat 5,000 calories in one day and then the next day just skip lunch and eat a normal dinner" to recover. Now, at age 32, Pak admits it's getting harder: "Since I started in 2009, I've probably gained 20 or 25 pounds." But not all of those meals are likely to induce envy in the average person. "I've eaten so many weird things," she says, listing sheep's penis, water beetles, bee cocoons, silkworm poop, mealworms, scorpion and tarantula. "The spiders almost taste like hairy fries. You can feel the hairs on their legs touch your lips."

Pak's reputation as a knowledgeable foodie grew alongside her (still minuscule) waistline, and eventually television came calling. Regular appearances on shows such as *CTV Morning Live* led to her latest gig as one of the judges on *Top Chef Canada*. Before flying to Toronto to tape her first season, the executives asked her to bring some of her own wardrobe, which they would supplement. The fashion-savvy Pak showed up with five huge suitcases in tow: two of clothes, two of shoes and one of accessories. The executives loved her personal style so much that

they decided she could wear her own outfits—meaning no shopping trip for her. "Maybe I should have rethought this," a disappointed Pak remembers thinking at the time. Despite this small misstep, and despite the long hours on set, the experience has been a dream come true. "I don't feel like I'm working," she says. That's because she's doing what she loves most: eating and talking about food. Her third season with the show airs in spring 2019.

Pak travels around the world frequently, pursuing experiences on her foodie bucket list, adding to her wardrobe wherever she goes. She estimates that she owns between 80 and 100 pairs of shoes, but that number grows whenever she visits Los Angeles, New York, Spain or Asia. When shopping for clothing and accessories locally, her favourites include Nordstrom, Blubird, Middle Sister, Fine Finds, Maska, Couturist and Zara. While in Toronto, she favours Intermix.

Getting Pak to narrow down her list of favourite restaurants is more challenging. "That's really tricky," she says, pondering for a moment. Then she rattles off some faves, interrupting herself often to add ones she's forgotten: Botanist, Tetsu Sushi Bar, St. Lawrence, Hoytong Chinese Seafood, Burdock & Co., Boulevard, HK BBQ Master, AnnaLena, The Pear Tree, Cioppino's. Soon she's naming specific dishes—often not on the regular menu, that only die-hard foodies know about—at Maenam, Popina Canteen and Dynasty Seafood. For sweets, she recommends Chez Christophe, Thomas Haas, Beta5, La Glace and My Frosty. For brunch, Burdock & Co., Café Medina and L'Abattoir. And for stellar views while dining, she suggests Ancora or Five Sails.

Despite all she's achieved so far, Pak isn't content to rest on her laurels. She describes herself as constantly hustling for the next gig. When asked where she sees herself in 10 years, she thinks about it for a moment, then lays out her ideal scenario: "It would be great to have a platform where I can travel, and showcase more of the world for people, and learn about food and talk to people about it, while meeting other people who can educate me about it."

One thing's for sure: wherever this foodie goes, we're happy to follow. **W**

CLOTHING: BLUBIRD
HAIR AND MAKE-UP: ANITA LEE OF HELMET SALON
SHOT AT: COAL HARBOUR BAR IN PAN PACIFIC HOTEL

