

Interview with Kim Thúy: Secrets from *My Vietnamese Kitchen: Simple Recipes from My Many Mothers*

Secrets from My Vietnamese Kitchen: Simple Recipes from My Many Mothers is a cookbook and memoir by Kim Thúy. Alongside careers as a seamstress, lawyer, and award-winning novelist, Thúy ran a Vietnamese restaurant called Ru de Nam for five years in Montreal. When Thúy was ten, she fled Vietnam with her parents and two brothers. Thúy's book illustrates how her family used food to create a sense of dignity and normality in a refugee camp. In one particularly vivid story, Thúy recalls how she and a circle of twelve thirsty people circulated a plastic bag filled with a soft drink, barely sipping from the straw on each of three passes. The book is an ode to the strengths of her mother and five maternal aunts, who are introduced to readers one by one through portraits and affectionate vignettes. Lush photos of sugar apples, chayote, and myriad rice noodles set the stage for fifty family recipes such as Vermicelli Bowls and Vietnamese Tapioca and Banana. The book concludes with suggested wine pairings, including a shout-out to some of her favorite wineries.

AMW: Your previous writing has been in the world of fiction. What made you decide to write a cookbook?

KT: Oh, you know, I didn't plan on it at all. It was really because at one point, I was sitting there at the table and saw all my aunts and my mother, and I realized how lucky we were. Because as an immigrant family, you always expect that you would lose a member through the migration process and back-ground, and you're not supposed to all end up in the same place. It was just amazing. I just saw it like a miracle. You know, the miracle is for us to have survived all this. So, I wanted to do just a simple print book for them. Together. And I thought, "Oh, I'll hire a photographer so that their

pictures will be beautiful." But then we're always talking about food, we're always eating when we visit!

Food is just part of our ritual. Because we don't know how to verbalize our emotions, everything is through food. Each of my aunts would bring something; would bring food or want to make food. Not to show off, but to share. And to basically express their love for the family. That's why the recipe book came to be.

AMW: What are the secrets you share in this cookbook?

KT: The secrets are in the recipes. Because recipes are not supposed to be told, they are only given from mothers to daughters, and between sisters. Because we think that if your neighbor has the same recipe, then she can steal your husband.

It's not traditional to share recipes. Of course, with YouTube and everything it has changed. But even now, my mother's friends, when they come around and they like something, out of respect, they would never ask for the recipe. They would just look and basically steal the recipe. Because if you ask, then you're forcing the other person to lie. If we bought a cookbook written in Vietnamese for the Vietnamese back then, we knew in advance that there will be a mistake somewhere in each recipe. Our job is to find the mistake. The best mistakes are those that you cannot really see, that you need to really experience, or you need to be a very seasoned cook in order to find.

AMW: To build on what you were saying about how deliberate mistakes used to be included in recipes, in any cookbook, we get to see pictures of beautiful, often perfect-looking dishes. Can you think back to a time in the kitchen when a dish you were cooking went horribly wrong?

KT: In Vietnam we use one specific kind of banana for a dish of tapioca and bananas. And we cook the banana within the coconut milk, right? But when we brought it here the first time, we didn't know that the bananas here, you cannot really cook. It turns purple. The first time that we cooked it and had it all ready for desserts with these bananas, it was a horrible thing to look at. So, we had to adapt ourselves and say, "Okay, we cannot cook the bananas." Or if we cook them, we have to eat it right away. If you wait more than one hour, it becomes purple.

AMW: **If you could go back and cook a dish with your younger self—let's say when you were ten years old—what would you make together?**

KT: Oh, ten years old I was in a refugee camp in Kuantan [Malaysia]. It was a small camp; we were only two thousand in there. And so, cooking was random, you know? In a sense that we ate whatever was available then. Meaning fish and that's it. Fish and a bit of rice.

And younger-younger? We were lucky enough to have cooks in the house. We were never allowed to go in the kitchen, almost. Because we cooked with coal, right? With open fire. So, it's quite dangerous for kids to be around. Basically, the fish were alive, and then they would kill the fish in the kitchen, and they would pluck the chickens in the kitchen. It was a lot of work anyway happening in the kitchen, so the kids were not really allowed.

So, if I went back in time, I would say that it's more about the food that I did not have a chance to eat when I was younger. It was all about street food. Because it was considered to be dirty, and we were not allowed to eat on the streets. That was my dream food, even today. I think I would cook many street foods with myself. I don't even know how to name them, because they only exist on the streets!

Like there's this little ball, made with cassava—manioc and a little bit of curry powder, I think. And chili and some green onions. They shape it into almost like a mini croissant of about two centimeters long. Visualize little curls. And they fry them up. Somehow, I just thought it was the best thing *ever*. And you cannot find it in any restaurants!

AMW: **That sounds amazing. What would you want to say to your younger self?**

KT: I was allergic to everything when I was younger. I was allergic to fish, seafood, milk, egg, the wind, the cold. So, I would say that, "Oh, you will see, soon enough you'll be able to eat *everything* or *anything!*" I'll say to her that, "This is just a time to prepare yourself to open up all the doors, all day,

and how do you say—*les papilles* on your tongue? On the taste buds. So that you get to eat *everything* in this world and *love* everything. Not only to try but to *love*, *love* and *love* everything that you taste.

And that I will become a *gourmande*. I know the word doesn't exist in English—*la gourmandise*. That I'll spend the rest of my life eating for pleasure. Never because I'm hungry, but always out of pleasure. I'll have that luxury to eat for pleasure.

AMW: **We know from research that the cooks who receive the most attention in today's culinary world are professional male, celebrity chefs, and they're disproportionately white. How do you think we can start to shift culture so that there's a greater recognition of the people who are featured in your book, for example?**

KT: Well, I think the thing is that we give too much importance to celebrity and recognition. I think many of us will never have a chance to eat anything from those chefs that we see on TV. We give so much value to that, and I don't know why. Maybe because we take for granted what we have every day. Those are the little things that make us, that give us a life.

It's like, yes, we celebrate someone who can lift up 200 pounds or 300 pounds in one shot for 30 seconds. Right? He gets a medal. But a mother or parent who carries bags of groceries every day, and if you add them up, there are more than 300 pounds. You have to do it every day. And nobody celebrates that.

So, it's the long run that is difficult. Because a mother, to try to find a new recipe every day? Oh my god. She's the most creative, when you think about it. To make lunch boxes 365 days a year and try to still be creative. How many ways you can make a ham sandwich?

We think that it's so easy to have an ordinary life, but actually it's very difficult. It's very difficult to be always on the sidewalk at the same time to wait for the bus, which will come and take your child to school. That constant, right? It doesn't matter what happens in your life, you have to be there at three o'clock every day. Especially in my case because I have an autistic child. He's 17 now. So, I've been doing this for, well, 10, 12 years.

AMW: **Your book begins by describing the special way you cook for your younger son, Valmond, who is autistic. I've heard other parents of children with autism describe how creative they need to be in their cooking. Is that something you incorporate as well?**

KT: Sure, sure, sure. Because they're very specific. With an autistic child like mine, it's more about listening and trying

to understand, more than creativity. It's to go into their brain and see life through their eyes. And not project what we think on them.

For example, when he wants a boiled egg, he would bring out a pot of water. Just a pot with an egg. And when he wants a fried egg, he would bring a pan with butter, because he's nonverbal. It's very difficult for them to tell us what they feel or what they want or what they desire. So, we have to be very patient and just follow them, almost. To make everything available and see what they will pick and choose.

When I want to add one new ingredient, for example, in his pasta, I would look at him first and I say, "Do you want tomatoes? Do you want me to add this?" I need to pay a lot of attention to see that his little finger moved and said, "No." Because if I was quicker than that, I would have missed the cue. So, I would say it's about patience.

I just talked to one autistic boy, and he was verbal, so he could explain to me that he cannot eat yogurt with pieces of fruits in there. I said, "Ah, you don't like yogurt? You don't like fruits?" He said, no, he loves yogurt, he loves fruit. But

the problem is when he has pieces of fruit in a yogurt, his brain doesn't know what to say to his mouth. Do you swallow it like a liquid or chew it like a fruit? So, the mouth gets jammed. Then the brain gets jammed. And he cannot swallow or chew because you have to choose one of the two. And he couldn't choose. So, he can eat yogurt but the fruit's already blended. And we would never understand this if he had not told us, right?

We think that everybody thinks like us. Children who can speak, they will tell you that they don't think like you. And they prefer almonds to peanuts, for example. But an autistic child cannot tell you why he's not eating what he's eating. And we think that we listen, right? But actually no, we're just projecting what we think. Really, Valmond has taught me that, you know, that I cannot presume anything. 

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