



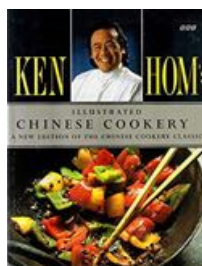
A PORTRAIT OF KEN HOM

As the celebrity chef and television presenter turns 70, he talks about his tough Chicago childhood, a life-changing audition and why he's endlessly grateful for his good fortune

Interview James Steen
Photographs Jamie Lau



Clockwise from top left: Ken with his mother; in his teenage years; presenting TV show Ken Hom's Chinese Cookery in 1984; the bestselling book that accompanied the series; Ken at home in Catus, France, in 2003; with Gary Rhodes at the Taste of London launch party in 2005 Right: Ken in 1991 at Sydney's Regent Hotel



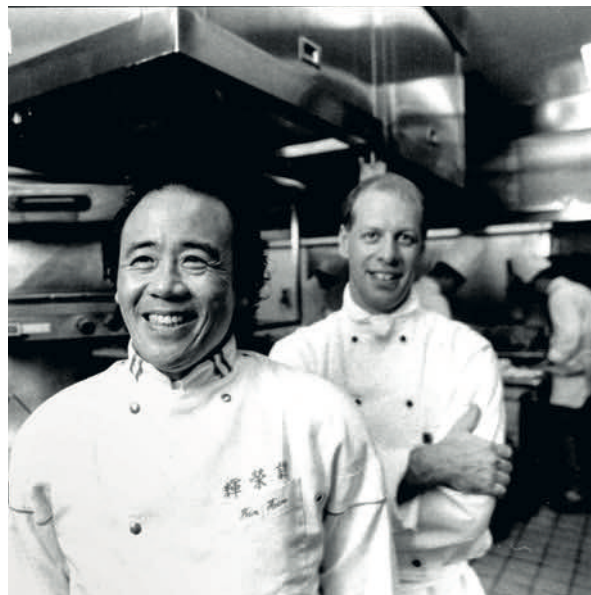
“Behind the cameras there were two fire wardens with extinguishers standing with the director,” Ken Hom says, thinking back to his first BBC appearances. “They didn’t understand the wok and were convinced I’d set the studio on fire.”

The management might have been alarmed, but audiences were mesmerised by the programme: *Ken Hom’s Chinese Cookery*. In 1984, China’s cuisine was still shrouded in mystery, and Ken’s demonstrations of the skills it called for were fast, fascinating and fun. He cooked over fiercely high heat, lifting and stirring not with a spoon but with chopsticks (“when I started school, I didn’t know how use a fork”). He used a cleaver rather than a kitchen knife, and guided viewers expertly through different types of noodles. His passion was infectious, and it made him a star.

From cooking on camera to feeding thousands, Ken’s career since then has seen him create vast banquets for royalty, prime ministers and presidents. “The most I cooked for in one sitting was 6,000 people,” he says. “It was an experiment for the University of New Hampshire and they flew me out there to see if I could cook on a budget for students. I made 27 courses. So when someone says there are 100 people to feed, that’s nothing.” To date, he has written 36 books (including his autobiography, *My Stir-Fried Life*) and in 2009 he was awarded an OBE for services to culinary arts.

It’s all a far cry from his childhood, which was spent in grinding poverty in Chicago – his mother, who became a single parent when he was a baby, was a factory worker who raised Ken in the city’s Chinatown. “My father died before I reached my first birthday, but sometimes I think he’s watching over me,” he says, reflecting on the good fortune he has enjoyed as an adult.

Ken, who turned 70 in May, has a home (a restored medieval watchtower) in the south-west of France, another in Thailand and a flat in Paris. We meet in the latter, where he puts on a DVD. The footage on it dates from 1982. “It’s my audition for the BBC,” he says. He’d been recommended to the corporation’s bosses by Madhur Jaffrey, who he’d met at a party in New York – at the time he was teaching at the California Culinary Academy, a school for chefs in San Francisco. His first book, *Chinese Technique*, was selling well (his admirers included legends such as Julia Child), but he didn’t rate his chances of landing the job. “No one knew me in Britain,” he says. “Sure, I figured nothing



ventured, nothing gained. But I was not optimistic. I’d kind of been pressured into it by Madhur, who said it would change my life. But I thought, fly in, fly out, carry on in California. Little did I know.”

We sit down to watch the footage together. It shows Ken in a shabby studio, standing at a camping stove. “Hello,” he begins. “Today I am going to show you how to cook...” He stammers, and there’s a lengthy silence.

“The thing is,” Ken says to me, “I suddenly couldn’t remember what I was going to cook.” He stir-fried chicken with shallots, and – bearing in mind that cookery programmes came under the remit of the Continuing Education department – he demonstrated knife skills, showed how to remove the bones from a chicken leg and, of course, how to cook with a wok.

With his natural talent for teaching, he was the obvious choice for the job. He remembers: “That evening, an executive producer took me for dinner and said, ‘We’d like you to do the series, and write a book to accompany it.’ I said yes. I had no idea how much that short audition would eventually shape my life. I suppose it was the defining moment of my career.” When it was eventually time to make the series, he says, “I had elocution sessions where I was taught to say marinade rhyming with ‘made’, instead of marinade rhyming with ‘hard’.” »

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He makes us a lunch of Chinese sausages with stir-fried rice and peas, a reminder of his childhood meals with his mother. “This is a dish that really stuck to my ribs; it made me feel warm. And I needed to keep warm in the cold of Chicago.” It was his Uncle Paul who gave the 11-year-old Ken a job washing up and prepping food in the city’s King Wah restaurant. “I was given menial chores, but what an experience! My eyes were opened to the joys of restaurants – these colourful places of warmth and magnificent aromas.”

His childhood was not an easy one, and “I knew if I wanted to get out of Chinatown I’d have to study hard”. During a summer holiday he travelled to California, “where everyone had long hair and smoked dope”. He went on to study History of Art at Berkeley and later “fell into cooking

because it enlarged my social circle and because, quite simply, good food makes people smile and laugh and be happy, and that makes me happy”. He also grew a moustache because “I looked so young I figured I needed a moustache to look my age and get into bars. It worked.”

He touches his head. “When I realised I was going bald, I decided to shave [my hair] all away. I’d thought about a hair transplant or even a wig – but they’re too ridiculous. Actually, someone said to me, ‘Hey, I saw an old picture of you... I didn’t know you used to have hair!’”

A few weeks later, we have lunch together. When I arrive at the restaurant, he’s taking his seat at the table. “I had one of my eating dreams last night,” he says. Eating dreams? “Yeah, I’ve had them since I was a kid. I dream I’m eating and eating and eating. Then I wake up and I feel full. As a kid I was often hungry and there wasn’t enough to eat. So it’s like my dreams are feeding me. And when I have them it’s cool, because it means I get to skip breakfast.”

From time to time he is mistaken for the Dalai Lama. Not here in the restaurant, but “it tends to happen in airports. A smile of recognition from someone, and then they say, ‘Excuse me, are you the Dalai Lama?’ No. I’m just a cook.” Ken doesn’t really resemble the famous Tibetan monk, but he does have the air of a spiritual leader. He swishes around in black, radiating wise-sage serenity. He beams contentment, as if he were the man who stumbled across a genie in a bottle and had all his wishes granted.

“I never really had a specific goal. It’s something I never thought about. I’ve always simply wanted to do things that I enjoyed. I never wanted to be the world’s greatest cook or chef,” he says. “When I was young, I wanted material things because I never had them. I do like nice things, it’s true. But I find I want less and less. What I want now is to give back to the world that has given me so much.”



Below: Ken, who celebrated his 70th birthday this year, enjoys lunch

