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LUNCH WITH NAHJI CHU

From fashion to food, it's all political for the queen of rice-paper rolls, writes Mark Dapin.

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Misschu is in love. The famously acid-tongued queen of rice-paper rolls, Vietnamese-Laotian refugee Nahji Chu, can't stop smiling as she sits under the strip light in her Bondi Tuckshop.

"I'**m** in a **brand** new relationship," she says. "She's quite young. She's an interior designer. She didn't know who I was when she met me. She asked me on a date, and it wasn't until after the date she realised who I was and what I do. When she found out, she was like, 'Oh my God! Are you Misschu? Jesus Christ!' It's only been eight weeks, but we're so in love we're actually speaking of having children. It's freaking her out, and me, in a good way."

The Bondi Tuckshop is one of four Sydney outlets for Chu's spring rolls (there are also two in Melbourne and one in London) and it's decorated to look like a stylised memory of a laneway restaurant in Vietnam. The lampshades are made from noodle soup bowls. Graphics from Chu's original refugee visa are as ubiquitous as Ho Chi Minh's image in Vietnam. Her face is on her staff's shirt sleeves as well as superimposed on the body of a surfie chick she calls "Gidget Chu" on the labels of **wine** bottles lined up like longboards along the walls.

"There's a fair amount of ego and narcissism in the **brand** Misschu," Chu says. "I'**m** very proud of my culture, very proud to be a Vietnamese refugee who has made it in this country. I wanted to say to Australia, 'I want to celebrate what it is that is Australian - and that is refugees and migrants'."

Chu's approach to gourmet fast food is unapologetically political. It's rooted in the horrors of her past, and filtered through a heightened design sensibility. She sells the best rice-paper rolls I've tasted and, as we eat, she tells the story of her early life with almost confronting honesty - all the racism and murders, the heartbreak and fear.

We begin our lunch with large rice-paper rolls stuffed with chicken and coconut, and others filled with roast duck and banana-flower salad.

Chu was born to wealthy Vietnamese parents in Luang Prabang, Laos. She remembers walking to school through rivers, and following young elephants down the street: "you had to climb on their heads to get a ride", she says. Her family fled the country for Thailand before the communist Pathet Lao took power in 1975. Her mother went first, taking four of Chu's five siblings. Chu was left behind, crying. She thought she'd done something wrong. A few months later, her father and friends smuggled her with them across the Mekong at night. "I remember our faces being painted with mud," she says. "I cried. And there was someone with their hand over my mouth the whole trip, to stop me from crying."

They were spotted by a border patrol boat, arrested and jailed for three months in North Thailand. At the age of five, Chu was not allowed out of a cell for three months.

Upon their release, the family was sent to various refugee camps in Thailand. They lived on a ration of rice and the fruit and vegetables they could grow, and ate insects for protein.

The worst part for the children was to see the adults so desperately depressed. When the names were called out of successful applicants for settlement in other countries, those left behind howled, Chu says. "It's almost like someone's died," she says, switching to the present tense. "You hear adults howling for their lives."

She remembers the camps for "prostitution, rapes" and a day of mass killings after one refugee escaped, and the Thais punished everybody. In March 1978, nearly three years after they left Laos, the Chu family came to Sydney. They had no idea where Australia might be. Chu had never even heard of the country. When they arrived, they were sent first to a hostel in East Hills and then to Cessnock, where the adults were given work on a chicken farm. They were the first Vietnamese family in the area, and their arrival was celebrated on the front page of the local paper. "The whole neighbourhood came bearing gifts - tins of food, boxes of clothes, crockery, cutlery, furniture," Chu says. "We just thought, 'This is an amazing country'."

The children attended a Catholic school and the nuns took them to the beach. They had never seen the ocean.

After a year, the Chus moved to Melbourne, to be reunited with Chu's aunt. "That was when people were yelling things on the street like, 'Go back to where you came from!', '**Ching**-Chong **Chinaman**!' and 'We hate you! We hate you!'" Chu says.

They lived in a terrace in working-class North Richmond, and children from the local state school would follow Chu and her siblings home from the Catholic school and "kick the guts out of us". She would walk home "with a blood-nose sometimes and a black eye, from kids smashing me".

She studied environmental science briefly at Melbourne University, then left for a production job in the rag trade. "I wanted to work in the creative industries," she says. "I wanted to be fashionable. I wanted to be accepted. I was going against being Vietnamese. I wanted to be a cool kid. So I thought that working in fashion was going to give me that status. I really loved it. I met people and I did fit in."

All the time she was meeting people, impressing them, networking, watching and learning.

Chu turned herself into an "acceptable", westernised Vietnamese person, speaking English in a Strine accent. She spent about five years in low-paid fashion jobs, supplementing her earnings with waitressing, which led to her moving into the catering industry and eventually developing her rice-paper rolls. But she also wanted to be a journalist, an actor, or a filmmaker like her then partner, Rupert Murdoch's late nephew Tom Kantor. She hoped to tell the refugee story, to document the killings in the camps. She says all her ambitions ended in failure, except her plans for the food.

She would have married Kantor, she says, if she had been successful. He asked her, and he was a lovely man, and she could have had his children. But, as a waitress, she would always have been the little Asian woman who had not made her own money and could not make her own movies.

After they split, Kantor married another woman but ended his life in 2001.

"Poor Tom," Chu says. That was her last relationship with a man. After that, she had a six-year relationship - her longest - with a woman, and that ended seven years ago. "I used to think that I was bi," she says, "but I'**m** very much drawn to women. I have been attracted physically to men. But I think if you were going ask me, 'Just decide!', yes, I'**m** gay."

I am picking at wonderful dumplings, then sipping on a small bowl of fragrant pho, while Chu talks about her early catering ventures, and an exhaustion with the industry that led her to take a job in a call centre, working for Members **Equity**. She seems to attack every task with the same intelligence, **energy** and ambition, and ended up as a credit analyst in the bank's construction department. But in 2006, she left to start again in hospitality, making rice-paper rolls and supplying them to caterers. She thought she might cook them and sell them to cafes in the city and inner west, but the cafes were not interested so, once she had raised enough money, she opened her first Misschu in Darlinghurst in 2009.

"When I did my refugee visas on my menus," she says, "I put them in Paddington homes with a chopstick. I thought, they're either going to say, 'Oh my God, here we go, the Vietnamese have moved in,' as they did when I first came to this country. Or they'll come down to the shop and experience the food. I think the latter happened."

 

Chu wants to drive home the point that refugees have contributed positively and significantly to society. She says a nation built, since the First Fleet, on boat people, has become successful precisely because it was a haven for the desperate and dispossessed. But now "we've started pulling up the ladder" for poor migrants and, in 20 years' time, there'll be nobody to do menial work in the service industries, no one to do the cleaning.

She has been running Misschu as a **company** for seven years, and for the first two years she served customers full-time in Darlinghurst. In 2010, she opened at the new Opera Kitchen at the Opera House, and has been adding to her chain steadily since then. She plans to open in Double Bay, where the label on the house **wine** will not be Gidget Chu but "I don't know that I could get away with calling it 'Miss Jew'," she says, "but I could certainly get away with the logo having big hair and a bit of bling. And we will play on the word Chu and Jew. With trepidation."

Her ambitions are limitless. "I want to leave a legacy behind. I want to say to young females, especially, from disadvantaged backgrounds, 'Hey, I was just like you. I grew up in a refugee camp. I came here with nothing. I learnt English in Australia. I learnt my ABCs here at the age of nine'."

She has not had the space for an intimate relationship for a while. "I could argue that I don't have time for a relationship right now, but circumstances change, and when you fall in love, you can't control those emotions. It's a drug that consumes you."

Chu says she would never neglect the **business** but she feels happy and young. Misschu is, most definitely, in love.

LIFE AND TIMES

1970: Born in Luang Prabang, Laos.

1975: Family escapes the Pathet Lao, crossing the Mekong to Thailand.

1978: Accepted as a refugee in Australia.

2007: Starts Misschu as a commercial kitchen.

2009: Opens first Misschu tuck shop in Darlinghurst.

2010: Opens at the new Opera Kitchen at the Opera House.

2011: Opens at Exhibition Street, Melbourne,

and Bondi Beach.

2012: Opens at Sydney CBD and South Yarra

in Melbourne.

2013: Opens first international Misschu outlet,

in London.

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