

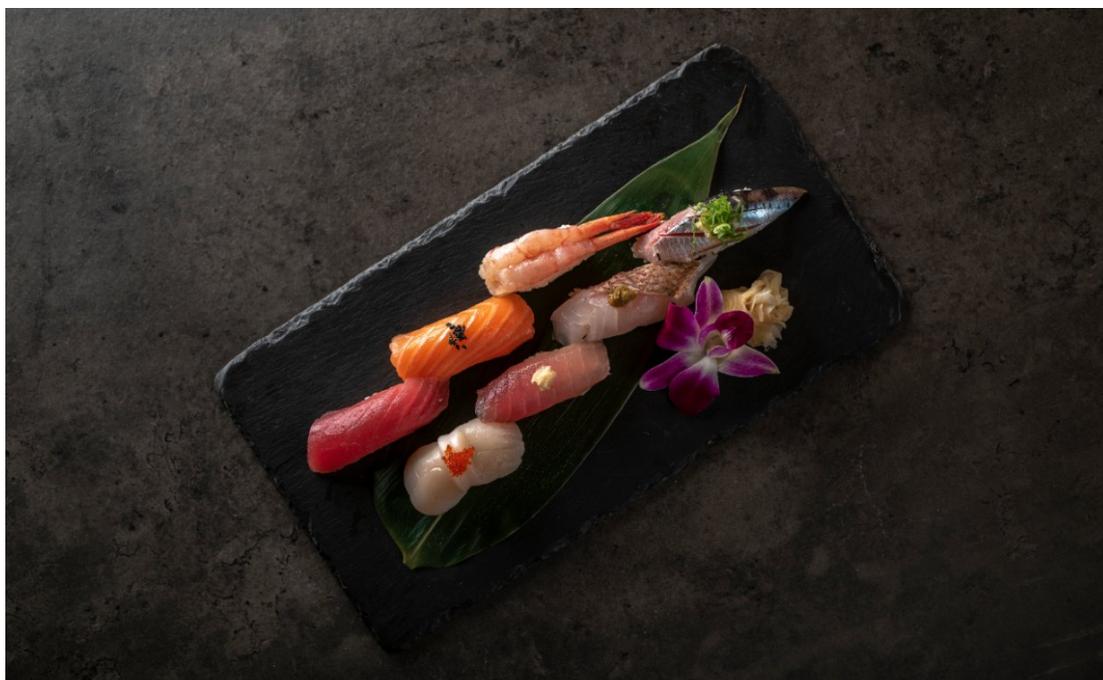
INTERVIEW

From banker to sushi master: The amazing career of Mun Kim

Mun Kim was a banker on Wall Street, today he is a celebrated chef in Munich. In an interview he tells us what bankers and cooks have in common

by Leonie Schlick

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The Mun offers classic sushi as well as East Asian fusion cuisine.

David Kopplin / Mun



Mun Kim was born in South Korea, grew up in Hawaii and worked until 2008 as a banker on Wall Street. Then he began an apprenticeship with the famous Japanese sushi master Makoto Okuwa and opened two restaurants in Argentina. In 2016, the "Mun" followed in Munich-Haidhausen, offering East Asian fusion cuisine. In 2018 it won the Gourmet Award of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and is listed with 15 points in the *Gault & Millau*.

CAPITAL: You worked for 20 years as a banker and then started an apprenticeship with the well-known sushi master Makoto Okuwa. What is the biggest difference between sushi art and banker life for you?

Mun Kim: That's an interesting question (laughs). Bankers handle a case based on history and numbers. What they do is logical and based on their knowledge. Whatever cooks or sushi masters make is based on their personality, it all depends on their personal taste. The chefs are then analyzed and criticized by their customers. Bankers are the other way around: they analyze and criticize their clients.

And what do bankers and cooks have in common?

I worked as a corporate banker, so my clients were companies. As their banker, I needed to know every little detail about the customers in order to give them the best possible advice. Even as a chef, I have to know everything about the current trends and also what my competitors are doing. In both professions, the small details play a very important role. While bankers should pay attention to the footnotes and the fine print, as a chef, for example, it depends on how well you prepare the meat as opposed to other chefs.

"When I was allowed to cook, I was always happiest"

Why did you even decide to become a chef?

I've always loved cooking. Bankers usually work between 70 and 80 hours a week. My only day off was Sunday. Since I always went shopping for groceries directly after getting up and then spent all day in the kitchen and cooked for myself and my friends. That always made me very happy. However, I ended my job as a banker independently. Something haphazard, as it should continue with my life, I then made a trip to Mongolia once. There I had a lot of time to think and realized that I was always happiest when I was allowed to cook. To see that people enjoy something that I have created, I enjoy it a lot. I wanted to experience this moment every day.

Where does your interest in cooking come from?

The biggest influence for me was certainly my mother. She's a great cook and I enjoyed watching her and helping her as a kid. When she cooked for the family, she always had a smile on her face.

"What we do, there was not before in Munich"

In Argentina you finally opened your first restaurant together with your business partner Cary Gilbert. Why there?

After not working as a banker anymore, I decided that after 25 years in the US I would like to live somewhere else. As a banker, I've been to Argentina five or six times and have

already fallen in love with the culture and the wine. So we moved to Buenos Aires. There we opened a supper club with Asian fusion food, which was very successful. Later we moved to Mendoza and opened a restaurant there.

And how did you get to Munich from there?

In Argentina we met friends of Munich Eric Dolatre. He said that there is something like we do not exist in Munich and whether we even want to think about opening a restaurant there. We did not speak a word of German and have never lived in Europe before, but we felt like the challenge and actually did.

They have been running the "Mun" in Munich for almost three years now. Do the Germans have special needs for their food?

If you asked me about that just after the opening of Mun two and a half years ago, I would definitely have said "yes." At that time I was very careful with the spiciness and other ingredients, because I wanted the guests to like the food. Now I can not find that anymore. Of course, from time to time I get the feedback from German customers that there is too much garlic in the place or something is too spicy. But that can happen anywhere, the Germans are not special. Meanwhile, I cook exactly as I would like to eat and my restaurant is full.

You were born in South Korea and grew up in Hawaii. Which of these influences play a role in your kitchen?

I have a dish with a slight Hawaiian influence, but otherwise the Hawaiian cuisine does not matter much to me. Korean cooking, on the other hand, has a big impact on me, especially as my mother used to cook.

"What comes to your plate depends on seasonal products"

What is important to you when creating a new dish?

As a banker, he often had meetings in restaurants that had great food. When I create dishes now, I try to bring in these memories. Or if I go out to eat and find a dish interesting, then I let myself be inspired by it. I also experiment with new ingredients, spices, ideas. For me, what's on the plate depends on what's available for products, for example seasonal vegetables. I go shopping three or four times a week to see what's out there.

What do you prefer to eat privately?

The funny thing is that while I make professionally expensive fine dining. In my private life, I like street food the most. Especially in Asia, I always go to the street food markets. They

represent people, what and how they eat in their everyday lives. But my favorite dish is forever the kimchi soup of my mother.

"I know exactly how much it costs at each dish"

They now own their third restaurant. Do you see yourself more as a chef or as a businessman today?

Half the one, half the other, I would say. As a chef I create dishes and as a co-owner I have to worry about these dishes being profitable. So I try to make sure that my product is better than the others, that the quality is high and that it is liked by the guests. At the same time, nine people work for me and I want them to have no money worries. That's why every meal I send out of the kitchen knows exactly what it costs.

Have you already set new goals? Which city is next?

In fact, we have just started to think about whether we should open what we have here in Munich in Berlin. Another idea that we have had for some time is a restaurant for high end casual dining that is not as high priced as the "Mun" but still offers very good quality. This could start here in Munich and then pass on to other cities. In any case, we want to stay in Germany for now.

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