

Danny Bowien's bold reinvention of Sichuan food combined with his warm personality have made him a standout figure in the US restaurant scene. We talked to him and discovered a philosophy rooted in inclusion, and explored why punk and a DIY spirit are as essential in the kitchen as they are on the stage.

Mission to Spice

Photography: Ben Rayner
Styling: Heathermary Jackson
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Simone Rocha jacket



R13 leather vest, dress & shirt, Gucci shoes, Danny's own socks

Mission to Spice

GL: People make a fuss of the fact that you're a 'punk chef'. Do you think that's a big part of your ethos and who you are?

DB: It's interesting to me because I spent a lot of my early life blending in. I was adopted when I was three-months old and then grew up in Oklahoma City. Even then I felt that I already stood out so I did what I could to blend in. If people asked what I wanted to be when I grew up I'd usually say a doctor so I could disarm them and deflect questions.

GL: When did that all change?

DB: Around the time I was 18, I was in bands and playing music. Seeing how my friends were and how things were at the time I realised that maybe it didn't have to be that way. A good friend moved to San Francisco, so I went there and immediately fell in love with it. I decided I wanted to be there and enrolled in culinary school.

GL: Was that where your love of food began?

DB: No, that came way earlier. As a kid, I was small so I wasn't allowed to play sports in case I got hurt so I would cook with my mom instead.

GL: Can you tell us a little more about your route to where you are now?

DB: Well, it wasn't very direct – it took me four years to graduate from culinary school. Part of it happened when I moved to New York and was cold-calling restaurants looking for work. I called the Tribeca Grill and was told to be there at 5pm. I used the last of my cash on a cab but was still 15 minutes late. They took a chance on me, which was great because I really didn't know what I was doing, but I got a real sense of family there. After that, I moved on to another spot, but it was a different story, everyone was doing coke and after the chef gave me a black eye with a ladle, I'd had enough and moved back to San Francisco.

GL: You worked a lot in fine-dining

restaurants, but Mission Chinese doesn't fit that mould. How did you come to the style of cooking you do now?

DB: After moving back to San Francisco, I began doing pop-up restaurants with some friends, I'd missed the DIY aspect that you just don't get with fine dining. I also wanted a place my friends could go to and relax and enjoy the food.

GL: Can you tell us about how you got into cooking Sichuan food?

DB: Yep, one day a friend took me to this restaurant, Spices II, and I tried the mapo tofu. This was something I'd grown up eating but here the way they made it was amazing. It was a revelation for me! I always describe it as like 'licking a battery' and I knew I wanted to cook like that. I love that it's a challenging food that incites emotion. It's like going to see a show: you get there and at first it seems a little loud, then you get into it.

GL: You had a mentor for your cooking in China, can you tell us more about that?

DB: At that time, you had to figure out dishes – there were no YouTube channels you could follow to learn from. I used to try things until things started tasting the way I wanted them to. The mentor thing came later, I was doing a TV show and they took me to China and I met Yu-Bo who was incredible. He shared everything with me and taught me so much; it was really amazing.

GL: How did Mission Chinese get started?

DB: I was doing a pop-up restaurant in the Mission district. We had new themes each week, some tables, and I had a headset to take orders too. It got so busy that critics started coming. *The New York Times* came, then *Bon Appetit* named us best new restaurant so it all blew up pretty quick.

GL: You're very grounded for someone who's had a high level of success, how do you manage that?

DB: Part of it is that DIY spirit; you learn as you go along, and through mistakes. I always tell my team that I'm going to make mistakes but the exciting thing is growth. No one has everything figured out. I wasn't always that way. When I started cooking, I had something to prove and I wanted to go viral, but now I know it's about staying true to my vision and knowing what that is. I've failed a lot and learned from that, and it's important to have fun and not take yourself too seriously.

GL: How does that work in a practical sense?

DB: I look on it as building a culture. We're about to open a new restaurant in Brooklyn. So I met with a St. Nic's employment agency that finds work for locals from Bushwick and Williamsburg. That way, we're adding to the community there.

Coming up in restaurants the way I did, I wasn't encouraged to be a free-thinker. The nature of kitchen culture is to say 'yes' – it's such a hierarchical environment: one person has all the control and say-so. It's all contingent on the chef. The downside of that is when people are irresponsible with their power.

For me, I want people who are hungry to work and check their ego at the door. I don't hire people from the fanciest restaurants and I really believe in mentorship. I've seen lots of guys in my kitchen move up and that's a great feeling. I started off paying everyone the most I can and I still do. I want a familial vibe, but there does need to be structure.

Everyone wants their voice heard so the hardest part of things can be managing people and expectations but we do what we can to make people feel happy.

GL: Since moving to NY, your personal style has evolved too. Can you tell us a bit more about what you like to wear?

DB: Well, I don't have a lot of stuff; I tend to find things I really like and obsess over, get them and



This page top: Marc Jacobs jacket, trousers & turban, Acne top; Bottom: Vivienne Westwood top & skirt
Opposite page: Gucci sweater, Simone Rocha skirt, Gucci shoes, Danny's own socks





Kenzo shirt, McQ skirt, Gucci shoes, Danny's own socks, Thom Browne bag





wear them to death. It feels good to express myself that way. As a kid, most of my clothes were from Walmart or second hand so I always wanted cool stuff. There're a lot of parallels between food and fashion too. Once food trends hit, by that point it's over and likely the chef has moved on. It's that hyper-cycle of change and revival. With places like Noma, they function almost like the big fashion houses. They lead and people copy. That's where I relate to people with creative talents, not someone doing it for the sake of it.

GL: You've been nominated for four Emmys. How does that feel?

DB: I love the fact that someone will put me in front of the camera. Growing up, there wasn't anyone like me on the food network. Usually, once I do one thing, I'm thinking about the future but I'm trying to

be more present and enjoy things.

GL: With that in mind, what are you working on right now?

DB: I've been looking at how we can add more vegetarian and vegan dishes to the menu, but dishes that are really great in their own right. Part of this has come from being in bands and having artist friends with restrictions and wanting them to feel included. It's also a fun challenge for me. We've just created a vegan zine with some of the recipes in it too. As a kid I loved beef jerky so I have been experimenting with bamboo shoots; we braise it, smoke it and then dehydrate it. You end up with something so unctuous and delicious. It really adds something to any dish. I love the balance of Thai cooking, you should be able to pace and balance flavours so that is definitely part of my approach.

GL: What's the most important advice you could give to someone who wants to do what you do?

DB: Learning from slip-ups and failure, and really what's important is about transition, because that's where you grow the most – when you come out of failure and into success. The recovery from one to the other is what counts. I'm excited to keep making mistakes and see what comes from them.

GL: You're a busy dude, how do you relax?

DB: Recently, I've started playing drums in a side project with two artist friends of mine. They were in *Thursday* and *Saves the Day* so that to me is the most epic thing of all time. Their music got me through a lot of stuff and it's exciting to me to play. In that way, you take a risk and connect with the audience in that moment.



This page: Simone Rocha shirt, Kenzo trousers, Anya Hindmarch bag
Opposite page: Simone Rocha jacket & Heron Preston sweater



Givenchy top, Kenzo trousers



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