Listen to the Nitty Gritty with David Chang [here](#).

Even the briefest interaction with David Chang—brutally frank, prone to emphatic bouts of swearing—gives the uninitiated a taste of what it might be like to work in the bowels of a kitchen. Spitting oils, crisping meats, clattering dishes, the endless hours of high-octane pressure. Chang, referred often as the food world’s *enfant terrible* early on in his career, is an inflamed conversationalist, larger than life. And you’d have to be big to run the kind of operation he does. Since opening his first restaurant, the East Village’s Momofuku Noodle Bar, in 2004, the Michelin starred chef stands at the helm of what has become a behemoth culinary brand.

To call Chang’s rapid ascent into the culinary spotlight “meteoric” would seem hyperbolic if it weren’t true. In what feels like a few short years, Chang went from relative unknown to unavoidably ubiquitous. And while Chang might have some reservations about the level of fame he has garnered, the thousands of patrons who come in and out of his restaurants surely do not. Sinking your teeth into one of Momofuku’s pork buns, you are forced to assume Chang was destined for culinary greatness before he could even say “umami.” In reality, his path has been more circuitous than that.
The seeds of ambition are often planted young. Chang, the son of Korean immigrants, grew up playing golf competitively. His dad, an entrepreneur, ran a restaurant before opening a golf shop. For Chang, though, restaurants were never in the cards for him. Food was a passion, an interest, nothing more. When he watched Julia Child and Martin Yan on PBS as a kid, it wasn’t with the real intention of becoming one of them. Career—at least seen with the parameters of his childhood—was something that should be more practical, like finance. And so Chang tried to play by the rules at first. After college and some light dabbling in the business world, Chang moved to Japan to take a job as an English translator. It was there that he tried a bowl of ramen that shook him to his core. Once back in the States, he swore off the suit-and-tie life and went full force into the path he had been fighting so long. The choice was a good one.

To make up for lost time, Chang pulled seven-day shifts at Craft and Mercer Kitchen before looking into opening his own space. When he finally launched Momofuku Noodle Bar, it was
not to immediate applause. They stumbled at first, only coming into their own after, as Chang says in a [2015 interview](#), they said, “Fuck it, fuck everybody, we’re going to do it this way.” It’s an ethos that continues to motor every facet of Chang’s ever-expanding brand. Even *Lucky Peach*, Chang’s irreverent food magazine, thumbed its nose at the traditional editorial format when it launched in 2011. It has a cult following because of it.

Standing on the other end, Chang is candid about pretty much everything, from the grueling intensity of opening a new restaurant (“Yesterday I almost died”) to knowing his limitations (“The reason I left fine dining was I knew I was never going to be good enough”) to the pressure of expectations (“I’ll have real fucking panic attacks”). It’s this compulsive need to be honest that has separated Chang from the ivory tower chefs people struggle to find reasons to root for. Chang, despite his otherworldly success, continues to get cheers from the stands. Chang is completely relatable, the kind of guy that references *Seinfeld* episodes to illustrate a point. He’s an open book, and if you’re looking for real advice on how to break into the restaurant world, Chang is your guy. He won’t sell you a dream that doesn’t exist.
He won’t downplay the difficulties he faces even at his level of success. Chang is bluntly honest. Do you have to go to culinary school? Probably not. What’s the fate of the restaurant business? Tenuous at best. How should you break in? Put your foot in the door and push the door down.

Want to hear more? Tune into our latest Nitty-Gritty podcast, where Chang breaks down the last thirty-plus years of his life in under an hour.