

Carmel Resort & Wellness Center's Vegan Vision for Longevity



Photo Sarah Rice

Tong Kim makes breakfast for guests at the Carmel Resort & Wellness Center, formerly the Carmel Valley Lodge, which no longer serves waffles, milk or juice.

The craziest thing about painter, poet and self-made millionaire Tong Kim is not that he has survived three armed robberies. Neither is it the fact that he's confident humans should live to 170 years. Or that he's eaten only nuts, berries, lettuce and other vegan ingredients for the last 53 years. Or that he bought and overhauled the former Carmel Valley Lodge to imprint his trademarked Rainbow Ssambap diet and lifestyle — which involves a 22-ingredient dish with soaked beans, chopped lemon peel and banana among them — onto guests.

The craziest thing is that he can convince others it all makes sense.

His story starts in Korea, where he worked as a barber to make his way through private high school and into a lucrative banking position before immigrating to Southern California so his wife could work in nursing. He worked ungodly 16-hour days as an assistant bank manager and kitchen lackey until he could scrape enough money together to buy a gas station, and then a bodega, then another bodega (those were where the stickups happened) and eventually a motel in Orange County, then another in Carmel.

He did so well he retired at age 37 and spent 17 years “searching for the meaning of life,” a quest that included five years learning to paint (after Monet’s “Water Lilies” series captured his heart), as long as five years working on a single poem, and a culminating camping/meditation event that lasted 100 days (in the cold mountains of Korea).

But he eventually came out of retirement to buy Carmel Valley Lodge for \$5.25 million in August, “with the sole intention to guide others in transforming their lives to greater health and well-being.” (Currently both the old lodge and new Carmel Resort & Wellness Center signs are in place.) That’s according to a bio available at the lodge, in which he’s invested \$800,000 more for improvements.

The food he’s obsessed with doesn’t sound too appetizing, and more like the stuff supplied at a cruel “Top Chef” challenge: several kinds of soaked beans, bananas, cherry tomatoes and chopped lemon with peel intact.

It did help me understand this passage from his bio: “Some of the returning guests were disappointed to learn that waffles, cereal, milk and juice were no longer available.”

On my first visit to the lodge, I met him mid-prep, which he does “so guests can see what all is in it before it gets all mixed up.” Surrounded by jars of beans and seeds and nuts, we talked as he assembled a layered galaxy of ingredients on a plane of mushy tomato-banana blend.

“Lemon is very important!” he said excitedly. “I would say No. 1 food from the gods. Tomato is second. I eat 100 cherry tomatoes a day! And four regular raw tomatoes.”

I asked him about his approach to organic and availability, given such enthusiasm for seasonal items. He said he makes exceptions to both when he has to, peeling any conventionally farmed apples he might include, and relying on South American imports to keep his tomato rhapsody intact.

Finally, he took a big bowl to a little table in the modest dining room on the side of the lobby, a four-top set with small dessert plates and generous goblets of single-vineyard WesMar Pinot Noir from the Russian River Valley.



Photo Sarah Rice

The staple Rainbow Ssambap includes 22 ingredients: raw vegetables, fruits, nuts, lentils and seeds.

I found myself chewing the ssambap — which means something like “burrito” in Korean — at length. I think that’s because there’s so much going on in there, and because it’s so crunchy. Then there are those 22 ingredients, including a ton of nuts to break down. And it tastes good.

The bell pepper and the lemon zest go well with the other inputs, partly because avocado and tomato help harmonize things. All the different nuts give it depth and diversity, bite to bite. The lettuce completes the textural experience.

As we're prepping and then eating, Kim takes me through a calculus that explains why his approach, and the eponymous book (which contains lessons, recipes, his poetry and his paintings), is called "60 90 20."

It's partly derived from the age you take, more or less, to reach maturity (20), to reach retirement (60) and what he calls wisdom (90). But don't quote me too closely, because it wasn't completely linear.

The punch line, though, was: They add up to 170, the true lifetime humans should enjoy.

As he writes in the book: "According to science, the life of all animals, including humans, is six to seven times of their growth period."

For humans that growth period is 22 to 24 years, he reasons, so we should be shooting for 132 to 168.

That informs his vision for Carmel Resort & Wellness Center — which becomes clearer with a tour of the varied suites and their fireplaces and patios — with meditation through painting and poetry, swimming, horseback riding, yoga, deep breathing, spa treatments, health talks and more.

Career Southern California spa manager, Gio Stevagio has even stayed on permanently after helping through the launch period because she's so moved by Kim's vision.

He's not without some evidence that the lifestyle is working. That came as an outcome of a bet with his wife, who wasn't as zealous about the diet as he was.

He endured two days of medical tests that cost about \$5,000 at a hospital "10 times bigger" than Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula.

He had them check everything they could.

The inspiration, he writes: “If the result is good, then my wife promised me that she would eat Rainbow Ssambap every day, as I have been.”

I couldn’t corroborate, because the doctor and hospital are in South Korea, but here’s what Kim says the doctor told him: His physical age was closer to 30 than Kim’s actual 72.

He swears by it, and I believe him.

One reason why I believe him: the poem that he calls his greatest yet, and hardest to create.

It is brief, and it doubles as the valediction on his letters: “Sincerely humble and humbly sincere.”

“I know (Rainbow Ssambap) has been great for me,” he writes, “but there wasn’t proof.”

He goes on: “Since then I have been promoting Rainbow Ssambap religiously. Some of my friends jokingly call me a Rainbow Ssambap cult leader. I don’t mind because I am spreading a wonderful thing.”

All meals at the lodge are Rainbow Ssambap and a multicourse supper of things like cashew-crusting stuffed mushrooms and raw Thai salad with lemon-peanut dressing that is complemented by, according to lodge literature, “a glass of fine Pinot Noir,” because as Kim believes, “life is too short to drink cheap wine.”

I’m just not sure he means his life span or mine.

Source: Mark C. Anderson for SFGate