

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="https://www.maximumfun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
			<i>[Music fades out.]</i>
00:00:13	Jesse Thorn	Host	From <a href="https://www.maximumfun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and NPR, it's <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:00:17	Music	Transition	"Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:24	Jesse	Host	Let me ask you this. How many times have you roasted potatoes? Maybe it's 10 or 20 times, maybe it's 100 or 1000 times. I don't know. I don't know your life! But I'm willing to bet that no matter how many times you have roasted potatoes, it is not nearly as many times as J. Kenji López-Alt has. He put in the work, folks! And he found it: the best way to roast potatoes. I have roasted potatoes in the J. Kenji López-Alt manner, and it <u>rules</u> . <i>[Laughing.]</i> It is perfect!
			López-Alt is a food writer and a chef. He's the child of two scientists and he approaches cooking with a methodical and careful approach. A lot of his recipes perfect the staples: steak, potatoes, beans, eggs, mayo, mushroom soup. And what's great is, despite or—I don't know, maybe because of all that science, Kenji's work is pleasant and approachable and readable and nonjudgmental. If you cook at home, I'm willing to bet that one of the recipes that you use is either directly Kenji's or relies on his work.
			In 2015, he compiled a lot of his signature recipes into an award-winning book, <i>The Food Lab: Better Home Cooking Through Science</i> . Now, in 2022, López-Alt has followed up <i>The Food Lab</i> with a very different kind of cookbook. <i>The Wok: Recipes and Techniques</i> . That's a straightforward enough title. It's a book about woks. But in its nearly 700 pages, you'll find not only recipes, but a guide to acquainting yourself with, understanding, and eventually mastering one of the most versatile pans you can own.
			<i>[Music fades in.]</i>
			I'm a huge fan of Kenji's and have been for a long time. It's a thrill to have him on <i>Bullseye</i> . Let's get right into it.
00:02:20	Music	Transition	Bright, brassy music.
00:02:25	Jesse	Host	Kenji López-Alt, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> ! I'm so happy to have you on the show!
00:02:29	J. Kenji López-Alt	Guest	Thanks! I'm happy to be here.
00:02:30	Jesse	Host	I feel like I've been scheming this one out for years, now.
00:02:34	Kenji	Guest	<i>[Laughing.]</i> Uh-oh.
00:02:35	Jesse	Host	I'm glad we're making it happen. Your new book is about woks. I think everybody has some idea of what a wok is.
			<i>[Kenji affirms.]</i>
			But like, what are the distinct qualities of a wok that make it different from another pan with sloped sides?
00:02:55	Kenji	Guest	Well—you mean like on a physical level? Just like what physically—

00:02:58 Jesse Host  
00:03:03 Kenji Guest

Yeah, like what is it and why is it special is the question. [Laughs.] Well, part of it is its thickness. You know. So, compared to like a western skillet, which—you know, these days you probably have like a three-ply skillet with like stainless and aluminum core. It takes a while to pre-heat and they're kind of designed to have a very even heat across their surface. Whereas a wok is generally much thinner—you know, a couple millimeters thick—and it'll be made of a material—you know, carbon steel is the most common material for a wok and it's what I would recommend for a wok. A material that's actually not that conductive to heat, so you actually develop distinct hot and cool zones in the wok, which is actually what you want.

So, you want like a really hot zone at the bottom for searing and stir frying. You want slightly cooler areas around the sides. But you know, the real important thing is that it has these really wide, shallowly sloped sides, which make it much easier to toss large amounts of food. It also makes it very easy to toss foods up and over the side of the wok, particularly over the back of the wok where it ends up going into this kind of column of hot air and steam that actually cooks the food faster. And it's also essential for getting—you know, some dishes where you want what's called the wok hei, the sort of smoky wok flavor. You can't really do that in a western skillet, mainly because you can't toss food properly.

But it also makes it useful for a lot of other things. So, for example, deep frying is really easy in a wok, because you have these wide, sloped sides so that—you know, in a western pot—like, say you deep fry in a Dutch oven, which is what—you know, like *Cook's Illustrated*, something like that would recommend. Something that people have at home; it's really nice and heavy. It has a large volume. The problem with the Dutch oven is that the sides are really straight. So, if you put too many things inside it and you start to fry things and you accidentally have a boil over and you see foam starting to rise in it, bubbles starting to rise, there's not much room for those bubbles to expand. And so, the only way they can really go is up and over.

Whereas, on a wok, you very rapidly increase the surface area as you go up in height. So, when you start—you can fill up a wok halfway. You can put in a lot of food, deep fry it. And when the bubbles start to come up, they very easily dissipate, because they have all that room to spread out. It also gives you a lot more room to work in, so you can kind of slide a metal spider underneath, move things around. It makes things a lot easier to work with. The other—you know, other great things about a wok, you can steam in them very easily. So, if you have a bamboo steamer, like the kind where—you know, if you go to like a soup dumpling shop and they bring you those bamboo steamers, those will fit into virtually any size wok. Because what happens is the—you know, if you have a 14-inch wok, a 16-inch wok, it doesn't really matter. Because the round bottom fits into the round side of the wok, because the sides are flared. So, you can steam in any size steaming basket in a wok, which you can't do with a western—you know, a straight-sided sauce pan or Dutch oven.

00:05:39	Jesse	Host	So, your mom is—or was, forgive me for not knowing—Japanese and did some wok cooking at home when you were a kid, but I don't get the impression that it was a big part of your childhood food.
00:05:55	Kenji	Guest	Well, so—so, my mom is Japanese. Still is Japanese. Yeah. You know, she came to the US when she was a late teenager. And all of her kids were born in the US. Me and my two sisters. And we lived with her and my Japanese grandparents in New York. And so, she did a mix of Japanese food, some of which was cooked in a wok. So, Japanese style mapo tofu, that was like our favorite dish and still is one of my favorite dishes. There's a recipe for that in the book. But Japanese style mapo tofu; she would deep fry things in her wok, so tempura, deep fried dumplings, things like that. But she also did a lot of sort of, you know, Betty Crocker, <i>New York Times</i> recipes, things—you know. Very—she tried hard to give us a taste of America also, growing up.
			<p>You know, the person who was actually much more into wok cooking was my dad. So, my dad loved Chinese American food, particularly. You know. So, we spent a lot of our time in New York going and exploring Chinatown. And then—you know, and then also in Boston. You know, my dad—I was born in Boston. My dad moved back there when I was 12. And so, we spent a lot of time in Boston's Chinatown, as well. And there's a distinction between sort of, you know—New York style Chinese restaurants, at least in the '80s and '90s, which were mostly Cantonese. And Boston, which was a lot more Szechwan. But yeah, my dad was the one who was obsessed with Chinese and Chinese American food. And so, he actually did a lot of wok cooking and still does.</p> <p>So, that was really my introduction. You know, that and—<i>[chuckles]</i> and I also was a huge fan of infomercials. And so, I don't know if you remember wok commercials from the '80s, but there was an infomercial series called <i>The Great Wok of China</i>, and that's where I learned like—you know, they had footage of people hand hammering woks and they had someone making terrible, terrible food in it. But it was basically my introduction to how woks are made and what are the qualities of it. You know, surprisingly, the qualities that they list and explain why their wok was so good are actually, you know, reasonable standards for woks even today, similar to what I recommend in my book. Although, the type of food they were cooking was not anything I would recommend.</p> <p>But you know, I watched a lot of—I watched a lot of infomercials. I watched a lot of <i>Yan Can Cook</i>. Um.</p>
00:08:04	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckling.]</i> I was about to say, I'm from San Francisco and I'm pretty sure <i>Yan Can Cook</i> and Martin Yan were a production of the local PBS station, KQED. And so—
			<i>[Kenji confirms.]</i>
00:08:16	Kenji	Guest	Yeah, so— Well, he—I mean, we got him—we got him on PBS, in New York. So. <i>[Chuckles.]</i>
00:08:18	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:08:19	Clip	Clip	<i>[The audience applauds.]</i>

**Martin Yan (*Yan Can Cook*):** Today, let us consider the oldest argument in the world. What came first: the chicken or the eggs? The answer is: huh? Who cares?!

[The audience chuckles.]

As long as there's chicken in every wok, I am happy. You are happy. Some people prefer food for thoughts, and I prefer thoughts on food!

00:08:45 Sound Effect Transition Music swells and fades.

00:08:46 Jesse Host Yeah, so that show was all over public television. And I lived in a real public television house. So, there was a lot of *Yan Can Cook*.

[They laugh.]

00:09:16 Kenji Guest So, let's talk a little bit more about wok cooking before we get into your biography. And I also wanna run you through a few of your greatest hits. But why did you decide that wok cooking specifically was so much more than a chapter in *The Food Lab*, your first book? Well, it's actually 'cause I—you know, I started writing the second book. And it was kind of this—you know, it was a lot of stuff that got cut out of the first book. 'Cause we ended up making the first book really focused on American cuisine and sort of American-adjacent cuisine. And so, the wok chapter ended up getting cut from that along with some other chapters. And so, when I started writing the second book, I had this kind of—you know, hodgepodge of different techniques and different tools. And you know, I didn't really know where to start. And so, I just started writing the wok chapter. And I got through—just like partway through stir fries and I was like 200 pages in. And like, a chapter in book—you know, at least in that first book, a chapter was about 100 pages or so.

So, I was already like 200 pages in, and I had really only written about sort of the science of stir fries and technique and nothing else you can do in a wok. And so, I called up my editor and I was like, "Look, let's—I got a lot to say about woks. Like, why don't we just write the wok book instead?" Because you know, it seemed to me sort of perfect at the time, because—you know, it's an ideal home cooking vessel. Right? It's a—it's a tool you can buy for like 40 bucks and you can cook for a family of four in it every night and do different techniques and cook all kinds of different things in it.

00:10:24 Jesse Host We've got more to get into with J. Kenji López-Alt after a quick break. We'll be back in a minute. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:10:34 Music Transition Thumpy rock music.

00:10:39 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with writer and chef J. Kenji López-Alt. He's written for *The New York Times*, *Cook's Illustrated*, *Serious Eats*, and many more. He's the author of bestselling book, *The Food Lab*. His newest book is called *The Wok: Recipes and Techniques*. It's out now. Let's get back into our conversation.

So, sometimes when you look at product review websites—those "pick the best version of this" websites and you look up woks, they

will recommend a frying pan instead of a wok. Why is that and why are they wrong? *[Laughs.]*

00:11:20 Kenji Guest *[Laughs.]* I think I actually have a very specific answer for this. I'm pretty sure the reason why a lot of these places recommend a frying pan is because when I was working at *Cook's Illustrated*, like 15 years ago now—at the time, *Cook's Illustrated* did a bunch of tests using woks and frying pans on stir fry recipes and they found that recipes came out better in frying pans. You know, western style frying pans which—you know—are sort of designed to sit flat on a stovetop. The problem was—and I brought this up at the time, and also for the record they have since changed their stance. I think they've realized what the mistake was. The problem was that they were using their own recipes, which had been designed to be cooked in western skillets and also designed sort of with the misunderstanding of what stir frying actually is—of the proper stir frying technique.

And so, they were trying to cook this recipe that had been designed for a western skillet in a wok and using a wok in a way that it wasn't really intended to be cooked with a recipe that it wasn't intended to be cooked with. And so, of course like you're gonna end up with something that tastes better coming out of a recipe that's designed for a specific pan. And so, my guess is that—as is often the case, you know—magazines like *Cook's Illustrated*, *Consumer Reports*, these magazines that do these real rigorous testings, they'll put out a piece of information and then that just kind of gets accepted as the general wisdom. And then, you know, online publications will pick that up and they'll read it and they'll say, "Okay, like what's our recommendation? Well, *Cook's Illustrated* said this. So, let's say that also." You know?

So, my best guess is that this probably—the idea that a western skillet is better for stir frying and why a lot of sources online now say that is probably coming from *Cook's Illustrated* recommendations from the—you know, mid to early 2000s. They're wrong because shortly after we published that in *Cook's Illustrated*, I did another test right there with all of the *Cook's Illustrated* testers where I cooked in a wok, cooking the way it was supposed to be cooked, and in a skillet. And there it was—I mean, it was unanimous that the wok comes out better. You get the smoky flavor. You get wok hei. You get all these flavors that you develop in a wok that you don't develop in a western skillet.

00:13:22 Jesse Host So, let's talk for a second about stir fries, which are—you know. This is one of the most miraculous foods in existence in that it cooks pretty fast, it tastes pretty good, and you can dump just about anything into it. You know? It's like a—it's a real stone soup situation. So, tell me what the kind of basic elements of a stir fry are that make it a stir fry and make it such a useful dish?

00:13:50 Kenji Guest Well, okay. So, first of all, I think the word "stir fry" is actually kind of a misnomer. It should really be called like a toss fry or a throw fry. You know? 'Cause you actually don't do much stirring, per se. You really—it's really much more about the movement of the wok. And so, yeah. Well, that's the main thing. But you know, as far as a stir fry goes, there's a lot of ways to look at it. But if you really wanna reduce it to its most basic elements—and obviously like I'm gonna be generalizing a lot and there are many stir fries that don't follow

these specific rules, but you generally start with one main ingredient. You know, whether it's a vegetable or a protein. So, usually I think of them as either like meat or—you know, or tofu. Some kind of protein that is then accentuated with vegetables. Or I think of it as vegetables that are accentuated with a little bit of meat.

If you happen to have like a very powerful wok burner or if you go into like a restaurant and you see the way they cook, what they'll often do is they'll add one ingredient after the other, toss the whole time, have a little bit of sauce at the end. At home, it's very difficult to do that, because a—you know, a restaurant style wok burner might be 125/150,000 BTUs per hour, whereas the most powerful home burner is probably 15 to 20 BTUs. You know, so it's like ten times stronger in a restaurant than at home. So, one of the—you know, one of the real tricks to being able to stir fry successfully at home is to cook in batches. And so, you know, what I do is I preheat my wok. I rub some oil into it. I let that oil heat up just until it's lightly starting to smoke, as high a heat as possible. Then I add a little more oil. I stir fry first my marinated meat, and no more than say a quarter to half pound at a time. And so, if I wanna do more than that, I would cook a quarter to a half pound, take it out, spread it on a sheet tray, and then reheat the wok, cook the other part of it, take it out, spread it out on the sheet tray, etc.

And then after that, I would cook my vegetable elements and then finally I would make a sort of infused oil of some kind. So, I would add oil. I would add aromatics like chilis, garlic, Szechwan pepper corns, ginger, whatever flavorings you're going to add to your stir fry. And then at the very end, toss everything back in. Add the sauce. Toss it just until the sauce evaporates and then you're done. So, it's like—you know, once you have all your ingredients prepped, like a typical stir fry even on a home burner is gonna take no more than ten minutes or so. And most of them will take much—even much faster than that.

00:16:07 Jesse Host

Do you have a favorite food to introduce people to cooking on a wok?

00:16:12 Kenji Guest

So, I mean, I do—I definitely have favorite foods that I, myself, like to cook in a wok. You know, the issue with the foods that I love is that a lot of them tend to be really spicy. And so, I don't know if it works for everybody, but if people are into spice—you know—I think one of the easiest and most impressive things you can cook in a wok is like real Szechwan style mapo tofu. It's my favorite dish in the world. But it's very, very fast and easy. It doesn't require any of the really sort of more complex stir frying techniques, 'cause you don't really—you know, mapo tofu, so you start by—you know, you make a chili oil, which is impressive to do because you get your chilis and your spices and stuff and then you pour hot oil over them. And you can do that in front of people, and it sizzles and—you know, it's like when you walk the fajitas through the room at the restaurant. You know? It has this like big plume of aromatic smoke that comes up and people are like, "Ooh."

You make this chili oil, which is simple to do but looks impressive. And then the stir fry itself is really basic. It's—you know, you make an infused oil with Szechwan peppercorns and chilis. You stir fry a little bit of ground meat. It can be beef or pork or—you know, I have

a vegan version as well, which uses mushrooms, or you can use something like Impossible or Beyond if you wanna keep it vegan. And then you add your sauces in. And then you just add tofu and kind of toss it. So, there's no like—you know, there's none of that like heavy duty stir frying where you have to have an entire wok full of stuff that you're trying to toss through the back and get the flame to leap into it. You know, those sort of more advanced stir fry techniques.

So, it's very simple, but it's like super flavor-packed and it comes together in—you know—literally like five minutes. So, it's a dish that I cook at home, and it's my daughter's favorite dish. And it's like one of those things where it's like if I know my daughter's having a picky food day—which she does, sometimes—it's like I know she's gonna eat this.

00:17:54 Jesse Host

There are some challenges to cooking on a wok at home. You mentioned that in a restaurant, there are often really high output burners. So, you're cooking on something that is incredibly hot. And generally, those burners are producing flames and we're not talking about induction or electric heating elements.

*[Kenji confirms.]*

So, what are the ways that you've thought about addressing those kind of differences between the average—you know—apartment kitchen in Chicago and either—you know—an average kitchen in a place where woks are de rigeur or a restaurant kitchen?

00:18:36 Kenji Guest

Right. Well, you know, part of it is sort of adjusting your expectations. You know. I think in one sense—you know, one of the problems we have with wok cooking in the western world is that most people in the US were introduced to Chinese cuisine from—you know, Chinese immigrants opening up Chinese restaurants. And so, we have this idea of what Chinese food is that's largely based on Cantonese and Hunan restaurant style food, which is different from Chinese home cooking. Right? And so, you know, there are literally billions of people in the world who use a wok every day who don't have a restaurant style burner. And they cook for their families, right?

So, you know—so, one way to get over this is to first realize that not all wok cooked foods is going to taste like Chinese restaurant food. And that's fine. You know. So, a lot of the—a lot of the dishes I do in the book and a lot of the techniques I use are based on more sort of Chinese home cooking and also certain regional styles of Chinese cuisine that don't have this wok hei—that smokey flavor. You know. So, like a lot of Szechuanese food, for example, generally doesn't have that kind of flavor. A lot of Thai food doesn't have that kind of flavor to it. You know. And then if you do want to get those sort of restaurant style flavors—well, there's a couple things you can do, and I have like a pretty sizeable chunk of my book is devoted to how to replicate these sort of restaurant style flavors at home.

You know, depending on your situation—whether you have like access to outdoors or not, the easiest way is to just buy an outdoor wok burner. You know. You can buy them for 150 bucks and

they're—and you set them up outside and you have 150,000 BTUs to work with. You know. That, of course, requires you to practice cooking on them, because it's not easy. Like, if you—you know. It's not trivial to become a professional Chinese restaurant cook. So, there is a learning curve to that and you're gonna have to practice it. Same with any kind of cooking, I think.

00:19:14 Jesse Host

You're also gonna have to make sure your fire extinguisher is charged.

*[Kenji laughs and agrees.]*

Now, you're famous for having—you know, sat in a room at *Cook's Illustrated* or *Serious Eats* or whatever, surrounded by 20,000 hard boiled eggs that you hard boiled in very slightly different ways in the most extraordinarily exhaustive hard boiled egg testing system ever devised. I think you did that for *The New York Times*.

*[Kenji chuckles.]*

00:20:57 Kenji Guest  
00:20:58 Jesse Host

But how do you develop enough recipes to fill—I'm looking at my copy of the book is about 625 pages, it looks like.

Yeah, something like that.

So, how do you develop enough recipes—? Look, there's a lot of techniques in the book. This isn't a recipe book, per se. But how do you develop all that when your inclination is to do all your recipe developing carefully, bordering on compulsively?

00:21:16 Kenji Guest

*[Laughs.]* Well, I mean, I think you said it—where it's really—you know, the recipes are all sort of derived from the techniques. You know? So, it's like if I'm doing a recipe for—you know, whether it's like beef and broccoli, right? You know? Or like a stir fried beef with ginger and basil. You know, so the relevant questions there are okay, like how do I—what am I gonna do to my meat to get the right texture in it? Alright, like one thing I've seen people recommend is washing the meat. Right? You put it in water. You massage it with your fingers. You change out the water a couple times and you wash the meat. Like, what does that washing do?

And that's a technique that's going to apply to virtually every beef recipe in the book. Right? And then it turns out it also—you know, I tested it with beef. I've tested it with pork. I tested it with chicken, and it turns out, okay, washing actually does have a—make a noticeable difference with all of these meats, both in terms of how well marinades penetrate and also how tender and juicy they become. So, really, the thing that I need to do a lot of testing on is washing. Right? And once I've done that, there's not that much difference between beef and broccoli and beef with ginger and basil other than sort of the ingredients. Right? Like the base techniques and the sort of science and the things that I'm really interested in answering is the same.

So, you know, writing a book in this way—it's the same as how I think about cooking, where it's like I don't think about cooking as a series of individual recipes. I think about it as a series of individual techniques and procedures that I can then riff on and apply to different recipes. You know. So—and I think most cooks—you know, either experienced home cooks or restaurant chefs will tell



you similar things, where—you know, you don't often cook from exact recipes. You have a sort of set of techniques under your belt and you know what parts of a recipe you can modify, what things you can add together and it's not going to fundamentally change sort of the way things work. You know?

00:22:59 Jesse Host

When you started cooking professionally in restaurant kitchens, which you did very early in your career, did you have the expectation that you were going to become a restaurant chef?

00:23:11 Kenji Guest

No. I mean, I didn't really have any *[laughs]*—any expectations at all. It was—you know. I got—my first cooking job was a summer job, in college. And I loved it. You know. I kind of just got the job accidentally, just looking for work one summer. And I just loved sort of the atmosphere of a kitchen and—you know, I sort of instantly fell in love kind of with the hospitality business and the idea that like, you know—I'm in this room in the back. I'm taking these raw ingredients. I'm doing something with them with my hands. And then someone on the other side of that door is now, you know, paying for it and getting pleasure out of it and enjoying it. And so, that like to me has always been sort of the heart of cooking. It's like you're doing something that's bringing other people joy and bringing other people together and allowing them to enjoy something, and you're doing that really just by manipulating things with your hands in a few simple ways.

So, that's *[stammering]*—you know, it feels kind of magical in that sense. You know? It's like you're doing these simple things and suddenly you've converted something into something with value. And so, that's sort of always been what I've wanted to do with cooking. I never had an idea that, late in my career, I would—you know, I didn't wanna be a—I don't think I ever wanted to be like a career restaurant chef, just because the odds are really low that you're gonna be successful at that. And even if you are successful, it's just like such a physically taxing, difficult job. And you know, that's great for some people, and—but you know, and it's not great for other—even people—even some people who get into it and love doing it, you know, when they're—I've spoken to many chefs who were—you know, once they've had kids, they're like, “You know, my body just hurts every day. You know, and I wanna spend more time with my family.” And all these things.

And so, for me, you know, being a restaurant cook was good as a young person.

00:24:56 Jesse Host

So, at *Cook's Illustrated*, there is a kind of way of doing things, which is it's America's test kitchen and it's coming up with the best recipe, right? These are the—these are—this is the brand.

*[Kenji confirms with a chuckle.]*

And that means a fair amount of testing of different techniques, different ingredients, and so on and so forth—usually in the pursuit of a kind of platonic ideal of a classic, American food. What was something that you worked on when you were working at the *Cook's Illustrated* multimedia conglomerate that you were particularly proud of, in refining something that—you know, that people might not think of beyond the—whatever it says in the Betty Crocker cookbook?

00:25:43 Kenji Guest Yeah. Well, I think the—you know, the first one that comes to mind is the reverse sear steak, which was actually the first recipe I did for them in 2000—

00:25:52 Jesse Host Wow, seriously!?

00:25:54 Kenji Guest Yeah, that was like in—I started working there in 2007, I think?

00:25:58 Jesse Host *[Laughs.]* That's like Will Clark hitting a homerun of Nolan Ryan in his first at bat.

00:26:03 Kenji Guest *[They laugh.]*  
But yeah! No, that was a—that was a recipe—a technique that came through just lots of testing. You know? Initially it was like, “Alright, like we haven’t had a steak story in a while. Like, see what you can do with steak.” And so, I started just by—you know—testing all the traditional techniques. And you know, I’ve been cooking steaks in restaurants for a long time. And the way you do it in a restaurant is like, yeah, you sear it hot in the skillet, you finish it in a really hot oven, you take it out, you let it rest, you slice it, you serve it. And you know. And then that’s when it sort of dawned on me that like—you know, restaurant techniques are designed for restaurants, and one of the goals in a restaurant is to get the food out fast and consistent. Right?

It's just not how home cooks cook. Like, people at home—it's like they don't need the steak on the table within 15 minutes after someone ordered it. They need the steak on the table at six o'clock. So, at home it's like they're—they have as much time as they want. You know, obviously not as much time as they want, but it's not like you're under the strict time constraints that a restaurant service has. And it was also at the time that sous vide had just started being used in restaurants. You know? Like the early 2000s was—you know, my last restaurant job was the first job where we had sous vide machines and we were like one of the first three restaurants in Boston to have it.

00:27:12 Jesse Host Sous vide machines are machines that maintain the temperature of a water bath to cook things that are really consistent temperature, often over a long period of time. Not always.

00:27:21 Kenji Guest Correct. And so—you know, and so they were really exciting. You know, back then, the machines were 1500, 2000 dollars, so only restaurants had them. And they were special—you know, they were repurposed lab equipment. They weren't made for cooking, yet. These days, you can buy one for—I think like Instant Pot makes one for like 70 bucks or something. You know. So, you can buy—there's really easy access to them, now. But back then, it wasn't. And so, one of the things we did with sous vide was we would precook steak or chicken or whatever it is. At the time it was mainly chicken, at the restaurant I worked at, at least. You'd precook it at a low temperature, and that way—you know, you guarantee that it's cooked evenly all the way through.

So, the idea was like, okay, like how can we sort of mimic this sous vide cooking at home. Yeah, and so, that's what we ended up with: this technique where you started at a very low temperature oven, which is different from a water bath, but it ends up actually working even better, I think, than a sous vide steak does. 'Cause you end up with a dry exterior. So, you start in a low temperature oven and then you finish it by searing it. At the time, it did not—it did not have the

name “reverse sear”. Someone came up with that on the internet like years later. From—you know, if you go to [AmazingRib.com](http://AmazingRib.com), Meathead Goldwyn’s site, he has this whole history of the reverse sear. And it turns out there was like some barbeque chef, Chris Finney I think, who was doing a similar technique before we published it.

But for all intents and purposes, I think like he or I or somewhere around that time was when that technique was first used. And I think *Cook’s Illustrated* certainly, you know, popularized it. And now it’s just everywhere, which is really pretty cool to me to see, that like this technique that did not exist, now exists everywhere. So, yeah. That—I think that’s the recipe that I have that had sort of like the most wide—at least at *Cook’s Illustrated*—the most wide-reaching influence to today.

00:29:11 Jesse Host

We’ll finish up with J. Kenji López-Alt in just a minute. I’ll talk with him about how he balances inclusivity and appropriation when he’s making recipes from other countries. It’s *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:29:27 Promo Clip

**Music: Sophisticated electronic/string music.**

**Teresa McElroy:** *Shmanners*. Noun. Definition: rules of etiquette designed not to judge others, but rather to guide ourselves through everyday social situations.

*[Music stops.]*

**Travis McElroy:** Hello, internet! I’m your husband host, Travis McElroy.

**Teresa:** And I’m your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

**Travis:** Every week on *Shmanners*, we take a look at a topic that has to do with society or manners. We talk about the history of it. We take a look at how it applies to everyday life. And we take some of your questions. And sometimes, we do a biography about a really cool person that had an impact on how we view etiquette.

*[Music fades back in.]*

**Travis:** So, join us every Friday and listen to *Shmanners* on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org), or wherever podcasts are found.

**Teresa:** Manners shmanners. Get it?

*[Music ends on a bright chord.]*

00:30:09 Music Transition  
00:30:14 Jesse Host

Bright, chiming synth with a steady beat.

I’m Jesse Thorn. You’re listening to *Bullseye*. I’m talking with food writer and chef, J. Kenji López-Alt.

I’m not supposed to eat chocolate, because it’s a migraine trigger, but I make an exception for chocolate chip cookies, which are the monarch of cookies by such a wide margin for me that it would be obscene for me to give them up completely. There was a time when you were probably America’s number one chocolate chip cookie researcher.

[Kenji laughs and agrees.]

When you—when you were dedicating countless hours of your life to researching the different ways to make chocolate chip cookies, what were some of the things you learned that you found most interesting?

00:30:58 Kenji Guest

Well, you know. So, I'm not a baker. You know. And baking and cooking—anybody will tell you—are very different skills, because with baking it's like you put everything together—and you know, and obviously there's technique involved with how you put things together, but you put everything together, then you put it in an oven, and then you have to wait. Right? And if something starts to go wrong, there's not much you can do. Right? So, it's like—it's more—baking is more like, you know, the way I thought of—you know. Like, I worked in biology labs, and it's more like that. It's like where you design your experiment, you do everything you can, and then you just have to kind of sit back and let it take its course and hope that you get the answers you want.

And so, you know, when I started working in chocolate chip cookies—this was when I was at *Serious Eats*—my goal really was—it's really just to learn for myself. It's like why are we doing this? Why are we doing that? Like why do we cream the butter? Why do we add brown sugar? Why do we add white sugar? You know. What difference does it make in the final cookie? And so, that story, which is free on *Serious Eats*, about chocolate chip cookies—I baked, I mean, well over 100 different tests. I think it was something like 1,500 individual cookies over the course of a few months, just comparing things. So—

00:32:06 Jesse Host

Kenji, it takes a lot of work to make so many chocolate chip cookies that you can't figure out what to do with the chocolate chip cookies.

[Kenji laughs.]

Like, that really—by the time you've exhausted your like first and second level social acquaintances in trying to distribute the cookies, you know you've made too many chocolate chip cookies.

00:32:24 Kenji Guest

I mean, I luckily—at the time, I had a doorman with a big family. So, he got—he got... lots. He got—yeah. His family got fed, throughout the process of writing that book, and he took a lot of cookies. But yeah. You know. So, things like—you know, white sugar versus brown sugar. And like brown sugar is hygroscopic, which means it holds onto water. So, when you make a—when you make a sugar—when you make a cookie that's 100% brown sugar, it tastes super chewy because it holds onto moisture even if you fully bake it. Whereas, with white sugar, it comes out crispy. If you bake a cookie on a—on an insulated baking pan, something like a—like a stainless-steel pan or those—you know, those air pans? They actually spread out a lot wider, because they heat up slowly and so the dough melts out before it has a chance to set.

And so—you know, so people will send me pictures like, "My cookies spread out and are touching each other." And like the first question I always ask is, "Did you bake it on an insulated pan?" That's like 75% of the time the answer is yes I did. And so, the

answer's oh, bake it on a aluminum—a thin, aluminum baking sheet. Don't bake it on steel pan you know? So, things like that that I just never would've thought to myself, just because I'm not a baker. You know? There's—yeah. There's a lot of factors that go into it. But you know, one of the things that's nice about baking is that you can actually very easily treat it as real science experiments. You know? It's very easy to isolate a single variable, make two batches that are identical aside from one little thing, bake them in the same oven, and compare them side by side. Which is not something that you always have the ability to do with—you know, cooking on a stovetop and stirring things around, dishes where there's a lot more variables and a lot more sort of human interaction involved.

00:34:01 Jesse Host

So, Kenji, like a lot of Americans, you are from a hybrid cultural background. You have Mom, who's a Japanese immigrant who came to the United States as a teenager. Your dad is from Pennsylvania. And you know, in a lot of your cooking, you focused on—in your first book, focused on quote/unquote “American” food, right? Which means all of these kind of cultural hybrid foods. Like cheeseburgers or whatever. Right?

*[Kenji confirms.]*

Now, you are cooking the foods of the parts of the world that use the wok. You know. There are plenty of Americans for whom that is their kind of native way of cooking. There are plenty who are not. How do you think about the interplay between authenticity, interculturality, and—you know—appropriation and innovation when you're working on something like this where—you know, where the stakes are higher than when you're working on a cheeseburger recipe?

00:35:03 Kenji Guest

Right, right. I mean, that's a very good question—one that I, you know—I had to think about a lot as I was writing. I think—you know, so first of all, the way I approach the recipes in this book is that virtually all of them are something that I either have a—you know, a dish that I have a personal connection to. You know, and I explain what the connection is—either something I grew up eating or something that I've—you know, I've found through traveling, and I've really enjoyed. You know. And as I mentioned, like when I was a kid—you know, my dad was super into Chinese American food, and so we spent a lot of time going through Chinatown in New York and Boston. That was sort of—the food of my childhood was Chinese American food.

And so, a lot of the recipes in the book are these Chinese American things or they're dishes that are inspired by, you know, the Joyce Chen cookbook, which is like one of the early Chinese American cookbooks that my parents cooked out of. Joyce Chen was a Chinese American immigrant who opened a restaurant in Boston, in Cambridge. She was the first woman television chef of color. She invented like polypropylene cutting boards. She invented number systems on Chinese menus. Like, she invented bottled stir fry sauce. Like, she's just like this amazing Chinese American entrepreneur chef who had this cookbook. And my mom used to cook this dish called Chungking pork out of it. And in that cookbook, she partnered with a doctor. And so, a lot—and at the time—you

know, it came out in the '60s and there was a lot of sort of health-conscious cooking, then.

And so, a lot of the sort of traditional Chinese recipes were adapted. So, every recipe calls for like lean pork loin. You know? And all these things. So, my mom used to make that dish and it was always really dry. You know. It's actually—the dish that you might be familiar with is Szechwan double cooked pork, which is where you take pork belly. You boil it briefly, then you slice it, and you stir fry it and it's this kind of rich, fatty dish. Right? And so, this ended up being this other dish in Joyce Chen's book that my mom then also further came out with this really dry pork, 'cause you boil a pork loin and then you stir fry it. And so, it was only like when I was writing this book that like I realized, "Oh, like this dish that my mom used to make is actually this Szechwan dish that I became familiar with—you know—living in Boston and going to Szechwan restaurants.

So, you know. And so, I try to make these types of connections in my book and talk about how these dishes relate to me, as a person. I think—you know, the other important thing for me in this book much more than in my first book, was doing a lot of sort of—you know, more typical journalism. You know, reaching out to other chefs, other cookbook writers, interviewing people, giving as much credit as I can for ideas that aren't originally mine, trying to tell people where they can find better resources. You know, because if authentic Chinese or authentic Thai or authentic Filipino cooking or authentic Japanese cooking is your goal, this is not the book for you. Right? This is not in any way meant to represent any of these cultures from a personal or a technique perspective. This is really the way I cook with a wok, and it's based on all these things that I grew up with and all these things I've learned through the years having, you know, cooked with woks for a large chunk of my life.

00:38:04 Kenji Guest

So, you know, I think with any issue of sort of—you know, appropriation and approaching other cultures and borrowing ideas from them, you—I think your responsibility as a writer is to, you know, give credit and explain. You know, don't take credit for ideas that aren't yours and make sure that you're coming at everything from a sort of—as personal a perspective as you can. So, you know. There's a very extensive bibliography in this book and throughout the book there are recommendations for places you should go if you want to learn more about specifics of certain regional cuisines or certain ethnic cuisines, cuisines from certain ethnicities that I'm—you know—not intimately familiar with.

00:38:41 Jesse Host

It's funny that those issues of credit become so important in a world where there is like the least requirement to credit of almost any creative endeavor. *[Laughs.]* Right?

*[Kenji laughs.]*

00:39:06 Kenji Guest

Like, you can't copyright almost anything about a recipe, which—you know, gives birth to this entire internet economy of just like copying recipes and spending your money on SEO. *[Laughs.]* Yep. Yep. *[Laughs.]* Yep, I've had—I mean, I've had a lot of recipes that have become like 60 second, hands-only videos. I'm just like, "Oh! That's my recipe!"

[Jesse laughs.]

00:39:17	Jesse	Host	But, you know. J. Kenji López-Alt, I'm so grateful to you for coming on the show. I so admire and appreciate your work, which has made my life a lot better. And I hope you'll come back again sometime soon, 'cause there's 20,000 more things I'd love to talk to you about.
00:39:30	Kenji	Guest	[Laughs.] Yes! Anytime.
00:39:33	Jesse	Host	J. Kenji López-Alt. His book is called <i>The Wok: Recipes and Techniques</i> . I recommend buying that book along with a wok if you don't have one already. We'll link to some of my favorite recipes of his on our website, the <i>Bullseye</i> page at <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> .
00:39:51	Music	Transition	Bright, triumphant music with synth flourishes.
00:39:58	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. It's been another one of those weird windstorms, here in Los Angeles. Common occurrence here in Los Angeles. And this giant eucalyptus tree right outside my office window lost a few more giant branches. Terrifying! This tree's gonna fall over and crush my house. Better knock on wood.  Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio, Valerie Moffat and Richard Robey. Did I just speak that tree thing into existence? I hope not. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is "Huddle Formation" by The Go! Team. Thanks to The Go! Team and to their label, Memphis Industries.  <i>Bullseye</i> is on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. You can find us there, follow us there. We will share with you our interviews. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.
00:41:03	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]