Background:

Robin Wong is one of the three ‘Blood Brothers’ of the famous Blood Bros. BBQ, located at 5425 Bellaire Blvd, Bellaire. The restaurant was established in 2013, and opens from Tuesday to Sunday only, from 11am until when food runs out (or 3pm). The Asian fusion BBQ introduces innovative menu items that focuses on stronger and more exotic tastes in addition to the already flavorful Texan tastes. It ranges from brisket fried rice, Thai green curry boudin, to pork belly burnt end banh-mi sandwich… the menu is a cultural and culinary scene of “East meets West”.

Robin manages the kitchen, marketing and PR; Robin’s brother Terry, who manages the front of restaurant, is also being interviewed by HAAA separately on March 7th; their non-blood related ‘brother’, Quy Hoang, who is Vietnamese Chinese, is the pit master of the BBQ. Their culturally diverse and fresh restaurant has gained publicity from the New York Times, Houston Chronicle, bon apetit, Smithsonian Magazine, among others.

Setting:

The interview was conducted in a video recording studio in Fondren Library, Rice University.

Key:

**RW**: Robin Wong  
**AS**: Ann Shi  
**AD**: AnhThu Dang
—: speech cuts off; abrupt stop  
…: speech trails off; pause  
Italics: emphasis  
(?): preceding word may not be accurate  
[Brackets]: actions (laughs, sighs, etc.)
Interview Transcript:

AD: Today is March 2 2020. And we're in Fondren Library, interviewing Mr. Robin Wong. My name is AnhThu Dang. [AS: My name is Ann Shi.] And now we shall begin the interview. Okay, first of all, can you tell us where and when you were born?

RW: I was born here in Houston, April 18, 1975.

AD: And how would you describe the household that you grew up in?

RW: I honestly don't remember much about it at all. My parents got divorced when I was very young. I lived with my grandmother from the time I was five years old to about seven years old, in Montrose actually. So that's pretty cool. And then my father got remarried, and lived with my father until I was... till seventh grade. In seventh grade, my mother got remarried. I moved in with my mother. And, and then 17 years old, I moved out the house.

AD: And so since your parents are like from different cultures, do you perhaps have any, like memories of the dish in your household? Because you know, there are different fusion.

RW: So the funny thing is, it's not funny, but we're third generation here, which is not as common. So my father was born in Tennessee, and he's half Chinese, half American, speaks no Chinese. My grandfather passed away when I was five. So growing up, growing up with my grandparents for those few years, my grandfather was very active in Chinatown, the original downtown Chinatown. So some of the things I remember is— is driving— taking the bus actually, taking the metro to Chinatown, and walking around. And I don't know why, but my grandfather knew everybody. So just walking around everybody's stores and saying hi to people, and you know they've give us snacks and candies and stuff. That was... that's one of the few memories I have growing up. I remember Chinese New Year at— I think it was— “Hunan Palace”. Is that what it was called? Downtown. It's— it's the building is still there, but I think it's been empty for years. I was always say, I think it'd be really cool for Houston to save that building, because growing up, not like now where there's a lion dance on every block. That was the big one. Everybody came out. It was a big deal.

So we got a little bit of Chinese culture then. But moving into my dad's house, second grade to sixth grade, is pretty much American You know, like any other American kid?

AD: And so do you have like a dish that you really liked? When you were young.

RW: When I was really young? Fried sweet sour pork, probably.
AD: So what were some of the values that your parents, your grandparents put emphasis on you and your upbringing?

RW: Oh, the big one is just really respect your elders. You know that that's– that's a big one, you know?

AD: And so your brother and you co-owned restaurant together right now and... Could you tell us about how your relationship with your boy has been when you were younger? Have you two always been close?

RW: So actually, there was three of us. I have a young brother that passed away. And it was like ‘98 or so. So, you know, when you grow up in a divorced family, you know, your brothers are all you have, you know. So we're all very close. And we're pretty close in age that Terry's only a year and a half older than me, and my little brother was three years younger than me. So it was always the boys, the three boys, the three boys, the three boys. So, you know, you just kind of grow up, especially, you know, and you guys probably know this too, like, well, I don't know, if you grew up here and you have... from an immigrant family, your parents are pretty much working all the time. So, you know, the only people in the house are your brothers or sisters. So you know, we're– we're very close in that sense. Just because that we were all we had, really.

AD: And so you and Terry are brothers. And how about Quy?

RW: Quy we met in high school, and we've been friends since high school. So 30 years.

AD: Okay. So moving on to your education, can you tell us a bit about your college years?

RW: So I dropped out of high school. My mom was upset. But one thing I always told my mom's like, I will go back. So finished high school, didn't get my GED, actually got my diploma through night school. Went to HCC for a few years, got some core stuff out of the way. Got... Grades are good enough to transfer into UT. So transferred into UT, stayed there for a couple years. And then we opened up our karaoke bar. So I withdrew from UT. And we just ran our karaoke bar for five years. When that closed down, I went back to school. I got my Associates at HCC, and then transferred into U of H. But then I had a kid, so dropped out again. So I just have my Associates.

AD: So when you were in college, what were you majors?
RW: When I was at UT, I started, started off as computer science. Then when I... what I really wanted to do was graphic design. At that time, there was no program at UT. I believe there is now; but at that time, there wasn't, so I thought computer science. So when I went to UT, I was kind of going towards marketing and graphic design.

AD: And what did you imagine your career would be like when you were in your younger years?

RW: I didn't have a clue. I had no idea.

AD: Okay, and so, could you tell me about your first job after all the college years?

RW: Oh, after college? Well, like I said, After college, I– I... We went straight into opening up our own business. And I probably imagined that's where I'd always be because my– my mom runs her own business. And I and I, I was a graphic designer for my friend's company for a little bit. And I just wasn't happy. So I think that I always was going to be kind of a, you know, run my own business kind of person.

AS: Do you think your interest in graphic design in a way help you in your future career? Say like in the BBQ. How did that help?

RW: Yeah, well, so I'm... The place that I worked for a friend of mine at his design company. And he taught me a lot of the basics. And I've done graphic design for tons of clubs in Houston. I've designed logos for different people. So I did independent graphic design. I've done a bunch of stuff. I DJ. I've ran lights. I've bartended. I've done a ton of stuff. So I know my way around this industry very well. I designed all the logos for any of our companies. So yeah, it helps out a lot. You know, just that whole sense of branding? I did– I did– I do all the design work for anything that we do, I do all the design work.

AD: So could you tell us your overall experience with Glitter Karaoke? And why karaoke?

RW: So growing up in Houston, and especially growing up in the Southwest, in Alief, there's a lot of karaoke bars, and we would go to all of them. And they all had their good points. One of the major things going to Chinatown at that time, was that karaoke bars were divided into what nationality you were. So we're ABC. So we didn't really fit any of them. We're not– we're not only ABC, we're not full Chinese. So we didn't really fit into any karaoke bar. Because we’re not Vietnamese, and we didn't go to only Cantonese bars or Taiwanese bars. You know, there's all this around. There's not really a bar for people like us. So we decided, why don't we just take everything that we love about each one of the places that we go, and make our own place. And it was very successful.
AD: So you started with a pop-up before coming to a brick-and-mortar place, right, for the BBQ? So how did it happen?

RW: So we ran Glitter Karaoke in Chinatown for five years, 2000-2005. Then we closed for five years, and my brother and I were in club— in the club scene, either promoting or I was DJing or bartending. And then in 2010, we had the opportunity to reopen Glitter Karaoke in Midtown, which is a whole different clientele. But we started doing a steak night there, and Quy, our partner now, he likes, he loves to grill. So we started steak night and he was grilling our steaks. He was starting to learn how to smoke things, which is not the same as grilling. Grilling is like you throw a hamburger on a grill. Smoking is like, there's no fire, so only smoke, and it takes 10 hours to cook something. So he's starting to play around with that, and we would pass it out to our customers. And the customers were like, this is really good. So we bought a big smoker and started doing pop-ups around town. And since we're already in the kind of the club industry, it's very easy to ask someone, “Hey, will you come let us cook? You know, I'll DJ you'll get a free DJ, you'll get free food.” You know, we'll bring people to your place. So, of course, that's very easy to do for someone that you know, that owns a bar to be like, “Yeah, come on, you're gonna bring me in business. Come on in.” You know.

So we did that for five years. We got invited to different barbecue festivals. Started getting a little notoriety, you know? Getting our name out there. And it just got to the point where people were like, You have to open a restaurant. So after five years, that's what we did. We opened a restaurant.

AS: It's really innovative! Was there anyone else that’s doing similar things to what you did?

RW: Not, not what we're doing. People are doing innovative things, but not with Asian flavors at that time. There's more now and you know, maybe we helped open the door to that, but there's definitely people, a lot more people doing it now. And I think maybe they saw that we're successful, and there's a market for it. So it's easier for them to... There's not so much of a risk for them to like, “Hey, I'm gonna try this.” They could be like, “Those guys do it.” You know, like, “We can do it too.” You know? So maybe it, maybe it did help, you know.

AD: So how did the roles— the three of you involved in working together? Like I know you have more of a marketing strategy for instance.

RW: I handle a lot of that. That stuff. Most of the stuff I do at the restaurant, inside the restaurant when we're open... I'm managing the kitchen, like almost all the recipes that come out of the kitchen are my recipes. Quy handles all of the meat. So Quy will say like, “Hey, I want to try to do this with some kind of protein, with some kind of meat.” And then I'll try to come up with
something in the kitchen, like some kind of a side item to pair with what he's doing with the proteins. And then my brother, he runs, he's like a front of house manager, and talks to a lot of the customers.

**AD:** So how did you come up with the name Blood Bros?

**RW:** So you know, marketing. I always say this, “There's a million bars, there's a million restaurants, there's a million barbecue places. You have to know your niche. You have to have a catch, right?” So our catch with the food is very strong flavors, a little bit spicier than your average barbecue. So, whereas like, “Oh yeah, it's bold, it's bolder barbecue.” So you have to have a name; you can't have a sissy name, with– if you're doing strong food. So it has to be a strong name. And I just kept thinking, thinking, and then I came up with Blood Brothers because of the story. People love a story too. So when you think of Blood Brothers, what that means is very close friends. Like... That's not my blood. That's not my brother. But he's like my blood brother, you know? So, you know, with Quy and I being, Quy and our brothers being so close for so many years, so thought “Blood Brothers” was a cool name. It's dual meaning, you know, Blood Brothers for the relationship; but then also, you're dealing with proteins. So the average person that doesn't understand like, “Oh Blood Brothers, that's really gross. Why would you name a restaurant that?” But of course those are people that are looking past the blood part. Like if you actually know what “Blood Brothers” means, it's about a relationship. You know, it's not two separate words, Blood and Brothers. It's Blood Brothers is one meaning. And so, I told my brother I was like, I mean I told Quy and my brother, I was like, came up with this name. A little, a little heavy, but tell me what you think. And I told them and they're like, That's it. That's the one. And that was it. Went in the next week, and got the DBA and it was done.

**AS:** So the three brothers are the **Blood Brothers**.

**RW:** Mhm.

**AS:** So was there any support that you had during the opening of the restaurant, like financial-wise? Or was there a mentor?

**RW:** So at Glitter Karaoke we've been doing... At this point now, Glitter Karaoke in Midtown has been over 10 years. We do chef pop-ups all the time. So we have guest chefs come in. So we have a lot of friends that are very good chefs that have been very open to sharing techniques and ideas, or we might bounce ideas off of them. And they'll help us along with some of the stuff. So, mentors. Yeah, we've probably got them all over the city, you know, food-wise.
Opening the restaurant, it was easy. We've been we, you know, we've been in this industry for 20 something years. We know so many people around town. So when we opened, it was automatically getting people there. As far as financially, my parents helped out a lot. Quy's parents helped out a lot. We do have a few outside investors, people that we've met along the way that we trust and have the same vision. So yeah, it was a little bit of a team effort, you know, but– but people look at us now and say, “Oh, you've only been open a year. How are you, how are you…? Look how much you've done.” It's like, well, the restaurants have been open for a year. We did pop-ups for five years. And we've been in this industry over 20 years. So it's not just an overnight success, like some people think, Oh man, how did y'all do it? It's overnight success. Well, I know there's a lot of work, a lot of work, and a lot of years to get where we are now.

**AS:** So was there like a really significant difficulty that you've overcome that you would like to share?

**RW:** No, not, you know, to, not really. I mean, because if you are paying attention and you know always trying to move forward and always trying to set goals, then you know don't let yourself get to those places. You know? You have to, you always have to be a step ahead.

**AS:** So going back to the recipe since you wrote all the recipes, were there any elements of your home cooking? For example, your father, though you said your parents were divorced; and your father's background from Tennessee which was, where is also famous for barbecue… [**RW:** Right.] Does it have any elements…?

**RW:** No, my great… Like I said, my grandfather had a restaurant. He's a great cook. My dad is a great cook, but he didn't cook very often. So my mom was one of those people who were very against eating out, you know, no processed foods. You know, we cook at home, you know. So my mom's the type of mom like, wasn't necessarily like she'd say like, “Oh, we're going to cook this Chinese dish.” You know, it's very much like, “What do we have in the refrigerator that I can make?” You know, like. But I think that kind of spontaneity, and that being able to turn something good from, from nothing, I think I learned a lot from that. Just as far as like, you know, you got this, and you got this. They don't really go together, but we'll figure it out, you know. So I think that kind of creative activity helped me with my cooking. And just kind of teaching me the basic flavors of Chinese cooking.

Eventually, I'd love to go sit in some of my friend’s restaurants and learn more of the complex stuff, or more real Chinese cooking instead of like, restaurant cooking, instead of home cooking. Because I feel like I'm a pretty decent home cook, but if you start getting into more of the fancy Chinese dishes, I don't know anything about those. So… But eventually I'd love to learn you
know, you have to keep learning. So I think I've gotten by, I've gotten by. But you know, eventually those—those dishes are, people are gonna get tired of them, and they're gonna want something new. So we got to keep learning.

**AS:** So what's your most successful dish that you're proud of?

**RW:** My favorite one is I do a brisket Chow Fun, but it's... It's so dumb but it's so good. But people love the fried rice. The Chow Fun I haven't put on the menu; that's something I've cooked for staff and they love it. And it's, it's really good. But um, people talk about the brisket fried rice all the time. And I'm like, it's fried rice. Like, you know, you teach your kids how to make fried rice, like it's fried rice, but it's good. People love it. I don't know.

**AS:** Do you think that, in the way that your lack of culinary training actually helped you to become more creative like this?

**RW:** It probably did. It probably did because I... instead of thinking more focused, I'm a little more open. Because I know that I don't know. So that might... Yeah, it might help.

**AS:** So would you recommend people to go to culinary school?

**RW:** So I talked to a lot of chefs. A lot of chefs, some of them will say yes. I think it depends on how, how good of a cook you are already; how good is your palette already. If you really don't know much, then yeah, probably go to culinary school. Like for me, my, my chef friends say, “No, you need to go train with other chefs.” Just go to the restaurant. You like a restaurant, go to that restaurant ask the chef, “Can I hang out in your kitchen for a little bit?” Ask as many questions as you can. They'll let... They tell me I already know how to cook, so now it's just learning and asking questions. So they told me that's what I really need to do. Go spend a weekend in someone else's kitchen, and just watch and ask questions. So that's, that's my plan when I get some free time.

**AS:** So who’s your favorite chef so far?

**RW:** Well, one of my favorite chefs right now is Chef Ryan Lachaine. He's over in Montrose. We're very good friends. He likes to play around with a lot of stuff too. And he's very technique driven. So there's a lot of things that you can cook, you can like, let's just say I have a pork chop. There's a million different ways you can cook it. I might only know two ways. He might know 20. So he might know an application to cook and prepare that pork chop that I'm trying to do that I wouldn't know. So those are the things, like I'm saying like that. You want to learn, you know,
like, I can make a pork chop and it'll be good. But he might have 20 other ways to do it. A couple of them might be better, you know.

AS: So you talked about your food scene in Houston that has gone from little fusion to a lot of fusion, and you've probably contributed to that. And how do you think that will happen in the future?

RW: You know, a lot of people talk about Houston. Houston's on the map right now as being one of the, I guess, pushing diversity and fusion in food, because it's a– it's just merely a reflection of the people that live here. And the open mindedness of people here, like I talk about this all the time. There's kimchi in our fried rice. Ten years ago, if I put kimchi in that fried rice, the majority of Americans would be like, “I'm not eating that.” Just because they didn't know what kimchi was, and it was you know, kind of have a little bit of a aroma. You know, some of these things that we, as Asians take for granted. Some smells sometimes can be off putting to Americans. But, you know, fast forward, you know, from ten years to just five years ago, people are like, “Oh, man, kimchi, that's great.” And I'm like, “That's the, those are the same people in high school that, you would have brought kimchi to lunch, they would have made fun of you, and told you like, Take that on to the other side of the cafeteria. Keep that away from me.” You know? And you know, that's, that's what's great. Some of that racial segregation and ignorance is starting to disappear. And people are starting to get more open to trying food.

So when we opened the restaurant, we put brisket fried rice on the menu. I told them: do not put kimchi; do not tell people we have kimchi in it. But then people say, “What's, what am I tasting?” And I'm like, “Well, we put a little bit of kimchi in there.” “Oh man. It's so good.” You know? So they're starting to be open to these kinds of flavors. You know, you talk about like fish sauce. People, now people are like, “Oh man fish sauce. It's so great.” You know? It's like, Well, ten years ago, you wouldn't have said that, you know?

So you're starting to see chefs being able to integrate some of these things that– that people were staying away from, something never had the flavors. These are the umami, you know, so now they're like, “Oh man, this is so good.” They're doing in a creative way where it's not offending people, or, you know, they're not scared of it. And so yeah, there, there's... Houston's really on the forefront of that. Just all these chefs, not just in Asian restaurants or fusion restaurants, chefs all over the city, no matter what the cuisine are, integrating some of these things into their food. And a lot of times the customers don't even know it, but it's making the food better. You know, the food scene in Houston is amazing right now.

AS: And these are Caucasian customers or Asian customers?
RW: For our restaurant? It's a little bit of everything. We get, we are, I mean, when we get so many American, you know, white American, Black American customers that love the fried rice. They may not know there's kimchi in there, you know, because I don't put it on the menu. I don't put brisket, kimchi, fried rice. I just said brisket fried rice. But they love it, you know. And the first person to really advertise or put it out there, there was brisket, I mean kimchi, in the fried rice was Daniel Vaughn of “Texas Monthly”. And I specifically told him, “Do not say that there's…” I was like, on the side I was like, “There's kimchi in there. But don't say anything.” But as he writes it up, “These guys are putting kimchi in the brisket fried rice.” Because he was proud of it. You know, he– he was like, kinda like, “Don't worry.” He was trying to say like, the article was, “These guys are pushing Texas barbecue.” So he wanted to make it, you know, “Hey, they're putting kimchi in the fried rice.” And I was like, “Oh man,” like, you know, “It's kind of our secret.” You know. But no, it's been great. And it's like I said, people love the fried rice. So it works.

AS: So there were secret ingredients!

RW: In that one. Yeah. I mean, if people ask us, we tell them. But– but it's not, like I say, it's not on the menu. It doesn't say, “There's kimchi in there.”

AS: So in a way, you're helping culture in food to become more connected. People overcome barriers.

RW: So that's– that's kind of the thing, you know, when you– when you set out to do something, or when we set out to open this restaurant, there was, or even just the barbecue, there was never a sense of obligation, or there was never a sense of expectation, or we are never set out to be like, “We're going to be– we're going to be the spokespeople for Asians, Texas-Asian barbecue.” like it was never that. It was just like, “This is good barbecue.” This is the way we would cook it. And then people liked it. And you know, you see three Asian guys doing Texas barbecue. And it tastes a little different than... What are y'all doing? Like, well, you know, I do a little stuff here and there, you know; all of a sudden, instead of Texas barbecue, it's Asian barbecue.

And it's been great. The exposure has been great. The press, the press has been amazing about showcasing us. Whereas I always say like, “If we were three Americans, would we have gotten the same exposure?” So it's one of those things like, right? It's a catch 22. You're very proud of what you're doing. We're very proud to be Asian. We're very proud to get the exposure. The media is paying attention, you know, especially in this age of diversity right there. So all these– all these magazines and they want to be diverse. They want to be like, “We don't only showcase Americans. We showcase Asian Americans. We showcase Black Americans. We showcase this too.” And sometimes you feel like, “Oh, well, these people have a quota to me. Their editor
saying, *Go find something other than a white guy doing something.*” You know. So then you figure, you think sometimes you think to yourself, Are they only talking to us because we're Asian? Or do they really enjoy the food? And maybe it's both, right? So you gotta be proud that we're representing the Asian community. But then you also be like, Are they just here because of the way we look? Are they here for the food, you know? Or, you know, like, it's tough. I think that we've managed to represent Houston, Chinese, Vietnamese, the United States. We have writers from Singapore, and Thailand, and Japan, and Australia, come by and write about us.

So all of a sudden you're a spokesperson, when all you want to do is cook food, right? So there's some pressure there. But yeah, the main thing is like, I just want people to enjoy the food. You know, like, I understand that there is a little bit of a burden, not a burden, but like a... Yeah, like, you know, we are, we are representing not only Chinese Americans, we are representing our city. We're representing our state. We're represent our country. So is there a little bit of responsibility, that's the word, there's a little bit of a responsibility there that you feel, you know.

**AS:** So you were talking about the secret ingredient. Do you think there's any competitors out there that you think that would be worth checking out?

**RW:** Oh man, you know if it was my fried rice I like the salted fish fried rice, you know, I love it. That is not something that I could put it in front of an American person. I don't think, you know, like, I don't know, maybe. But like, that's one of my favorite fried rices, you know? And I you know the... So I mean, you look at me, I'm Chinese when I'm putting this Korean ingredient into our fried rice, because I was looking for some kind of a kick. We tried, you know, just some hot sauce, but some people don't want hot sauce. Some people can't handle the spicy hot sauce. I needed that acid. So kimchi just, just ended up working. And kimchi fried rice is not a new thing. You know, any Korean restaurant will serve that but you're not going to get that at House of Bowls. You're not gonna get that in a Chinese restaurant, you know. But it works, and you know, appreciating all Asian food. You know, you can find ways to put a little Thai into something that's Chinese, which is, I guess it's more like Singapore, or Malaysian food is a little bit of everything. You know, so that, that's kind of kind of what we're doing, you know, just kind of take a little bit of everything that we like, and try to make some, make one thing good, you know.

**AS:** And speaking of marketing, and you're the marketing guy on the team. How do you find the technology— like social media, Instagram has changed the way marketing is done?

**RW:** It puts you... So like my brother is very personable. So his marketing is talking to people face to face, I can't do that a lot of times. I'm in the kitchen. And, and most of the time, I don't really, that's not really my thing. I don't really like doing that. So being able to... But the great
thing about social media is that I can post what we need to post on, that I'm trying... the message, or the images, or the message, or whatever we're trying to push. I can put that on our social media. But the great thing about social media is, it's the opposite of that. So if you come to my restaurant, and you had a great experience, and you took a picture of food and you posted it, I can turn around and take your experience and post it like, immediately, share it, you know. So that's the great thing about social media that you never really had in the past is, Marketing was always one sided. Now it's not, not just one sided. So if I repost your story, and you're like, “Wow, look, they reposted my story. That's so cool.” You know, it makes you feel good. Then the person that doesn't even know you saw, like, “Oh, this person, this is what she had. And this is the experience she had.” It's very direct, you know. So it's coming from another customer's point of view instead of the restaurant, or the, the business trying to force their agenda on you. So it becomes a lot more open and inviting. That's the great thing about social media, I think.

**AS:** Do you think there's any kind of dangerous side of social media if you're not doing it well?

**RW:** If you're not, yeah, if you're not smart about it, definitely. We don't get into politics at all. At all. I don't care if it's something that's very close to our hearts. It's all about the food. That's it. It's not about my family. It's not about... It's the food. You know, that's all we talk about. It's the food, you know. Nobody needs to know what I think about anything. They just need to know that the food is good. So that's where people get in trouble. You know, the ego gets too big, or they have too much hubris, they want to make it less about the food and more about themselves. That's wrong. It shouldn't be that way.

**AS:** Talking about kimchi, which is spicy, do you think the young people's palettes are changing?

**RW:** You would be surprised so there there's a handful of people that think our barbecue is too spicy, and that's fine. They're not our target market, you know, like... the Houston barbecue scene, we're all very close. And there's a lot of good barbecue here. But if you came into my restaurant, I might be wearing somebody else's shirt. You go into their restaurant, they might be wearing one of our shirts. We're all very close. This is a big city. Everybody's barbecue is uniquely theirs. Just like a hamburger. You know a– a McDonald's, a Jack in the Box and a Wendy's and a Burger King can all be on the same street, and they all will do just fine. And you might say I feel like maybe McDonald's one day, go to McDonald's one day; you might go to Jack in the Box one day... you know, for preference and they all can survive, we can all survive. So the fact that our food might be more spicy than anyone else's, and some people don't like it, we're fine with that. Because there's plenty of other places that they will like, and they'll be supporting our friends. So that's great.
You would be surprised when you say, like younger people have a different palette than some of the older people. Yes and No. We had a lady come eat our food. Like, our beef jerky is ghost pepper beef jerky. It is very spicy. And this lady comes in. She's probably in her early 80s. She's like, “Oh, y'all got jerky?”
So, “Yeah, we got jerky. It's like it's ghost pepper jerky, ma'am. It's very, very spicy.”
And she's like, “Well, I want to buy some.”
So, “Let me give you a sample.”
I gave her a sample and she’s like, “Give me two packs.”

This is a very, very older lady taking ghost pepper, which is I don't know if you're familiar with ghost pepper. It's one of the hottest peppers out there. And she ate it like it was nothing. So people will surprise you. It's not necessarily age, but it’s about spicy. And it's not even about race. Now some people think, “Oh, Latinos so they— they can take spicy.” Not all Latinos eat spicy. Not all Asians eat spicy, you know? So it's, it's just about the person really.

**AS:** You were talking about the flavor, how about the meat? Is there any special treatment to the meat that makes it so juicy and tender?

**RW:** Yeah, and that's– that's something more for Quy; but newer barbecue restaurants use better quality meat, and that's why it costs a little bit more. So if you went to, I don't know what... I don't really want to name drop anyone. But like one of these older places that they're serving lower quality meat, so they can— they can serve it cheaper. We're using upper choice, almost prime, so it's almost the best quality meat that you can get. So it costs more. That's, you know that in itself is a cost, the labor that it takes, you know. If we get a 12 pound brisket after we cook it, it's only six pounds, because you're trimming off probably 30% of the fat; and then you cook off the rest— the cook of it—the rest of it just melts out. So when you buy a 12 to 14 ounce, pound brisket, it's like this big; by the time you're finished with it, it's like this big.

So that's that's another reason why it's not necessarily cheap. But the way Quy always says is, if you're paying, if we've charged $20 a pound for brisket, and you're complaining about that; but then you go to Guadalajara and you pay $20 a pound for fajitas but you don't complain about that. You know, it's the same. And it takes way longer for us to cook that brisket than it does for them to cook that fajita. Fajita's grilled, takes 10 minutes. Ours takes 12 hours. You know, people are learning though, people are learning that this is a new— new age of barbecue, they kind of point at the craft barbecue movement, just like craft beers. So people are learning that they expect to pay a little bit more for better barbecue.

**AS:** Have you heard of the company called “Beyond Meat”?
RW: Mhm.

AS: Would you ever consider having vegan meat?

RW: I don't know if we would do that or not. I don't know enough about the product. As far as I know, they do burger patties and stuff, but we're not a burger joint. So that's not something we would do. There's also a burger restaurant next to us. So out of respect to them, we wouldn't do burgers now. If they maybe, they offered a different product; maybe we would do it. But honestly, we're a barbecue restaurant. So we don't do seafood. We're not really serving vegan items, you know, I mean, or vegetarian items. I mean, we do have some stuff that's vegetarian on the sides. But-- but, that's not really what we do. If you-- if you're a vegetarian, why would you come eat at a barbecue restaurant? You know, like, that's where kind of like that's your fault. You know?

AS: So what is your next new item? Or new concept?

RW: Our-- our um, we're always working on stuff. So right now we're working on a pretzel hoagie. It's a smoked turkey with our house made bacon melted Swiss on a pretzel roll that's like a submarine sandwich. And then we stick it in a Panini press and melt it all together. That's one we're working on. It's not, it's like 90% there; but we're always we always want, whenever we serve something new, we want the customer to eat and be like, “Whoa, that was really good.” But they're just kind of like, “Meh it's good.” So we know it's not quite there yet, needs a little work. We just put a BLT on, which people are loving. That one's only been on for like two weeks and they like that. So that's our house made bacon with lettuce, tomato. We make a special sauce for it, like a special spread. And then when we grow that, and it's really good.

AS: Do you have a circle of friends that you test it out on?

RW: Staff, staff, I mean. We'll-- we'll-- we kind of post on our social media that we're testing stuff out; and if they want to come, they can come, you know. But by the time it gets to that point, we're pretty confident about what we're putting out. You know, we'll always take people's opinion, you know; like, if they have some, some criticism, we're always open to criticism. But, but yeah, I mean, for the most part, I think we have a good enough palette; and I know our-- know our-- I guess our, our image, or you know, know what people expect, before we put something out. You know, it's not going to be subpar. You know, we know that there's an expectation there. So we know we know it's gotta be pretty good before we put it across the counter.

AS: So how is the working relationship in your kitchen like? Are they like a family?
RW: I think it probably depends on who you talk to. ‘Cause I'm– I'm kind of strict, you know? But you have to be, you know, I have, like I said, there's– there's so much pressure. I try to tell people all the time, you know, we have people from all over the world coming to eat our food. It better be right when it leaves this kitchen. You know. The last thing you need is for someone to travel, let's just say from all the way from Australia; and we send them out something and it looks like garbage; and they take a picture of it and posts up, “I've traveled all the way from Australia, Australia to come here to Blood Brothers Barbecue. Check out my food.” And then someone posts that looks like garbage. You know?

So I tell them all the time, whatever comes out of this kitchen, you better make sure that it's magazine worthy. You know, not just picture worthy— magazine worthy. Because you never know who's in your restaurant. You know, we've had the editor of Vogue magazine in there, and we didn't know. I just happened to do a search for Blood Brothers. And oh find I checked out Blood Brothers, it was great. Like, editor of Vogue magazine. I was like, “Holy cow!” You know, there's just, you just never know. So it better be good. So yeah, I'm tight in the kitchen. I think, I don't want to say it's a family in there. That's probably a little strong. I think they all know that I respect them. And I think they respect me. And they all know the pressure that we're under. So I think then they care about the company. You know, they care about the restaurant. So they want to do their best too.

AS: Can you tell us a bit more about this film that you're doing?

RW: They actually reached us out to us. The cooking channel has a show called “Man, Fire, Foods”, where it's about just anything cooked over flame, smoke. So they contacted us actually a few years ago. But because we were only doing pop-ups, it's very hard for a film crew to just be like, “When are you going to do your pop-up?” “Oh the middle of the month next month...?” It was very hard for them to just [snaps his finger] pack up their stuff and make it out there right. So our schedules never aligned. Then they found out that we opened the restaurant. So they called us and they were like, “Do you still want to do it? We'd love to come see you.” Then they found out that we opened the restaurant. So they called us and they were like, “Do you still want to do it? We'd love to come see you.” When you're dealing with a network television, you're dealing with the producer of that particular show. And then you're dealing with the producer of the actual channel. You know, like the network. So things kind of take a while. So they approached us months ago. Like, “Oh, you know, you're interested in doing...? Yeah. Which is good. Okay, cool. Cool, cool.” Sent us a couple emails. You know, talk to him a couple times. “Oh, okay. Cool. We'll let you know.” Then two weeks ago, “Hey, you got approved.” I'm like, it's in two weeks. “What days are you coming? Oh, this day and this day...” And I'm like woah, I was like, “I've got something that I can't really change on that date.” And they're like, “Okay, well, we'll work around it.” You know.
So, yeah, I mean, it's exciting because it's, you know, to cable network. We've done some stuff for Localish, which is ABC. And I have people come in like, “I saw you on TV and like when Localish!” Well apparently, like I guess on their digital channel. They play it all the time. We did a thing for PBS a couple years ago. And you know, it's kind of one of those things too; when they run out of programming, they throw on these shows and it gets on all the time. This cable network, same thing like they, they re-run old shows all the time. So it's a good thing to be able to do this show. And, of course, it's like it's an honor to be a part of the show. But it's also like something that is like, repetitive advertising to a more than national audience. Like I don't know where else they'd go, but definitely in the US and definitely Canada. So that's pretty cool.

AS: Do you have any advice for young entrepreneurs?

RW: Stay humble. Work hard. If you have something bad to say something about someone, don't say it, keep it to yourself. You never want to be the ugly person. You know, you have to—it takes a long time to earn respect in this business, and you never want to damage that. So, you always want to be someone that uh, that other people can respect or will have something nice to say about you. You don't want to ever be the person that someone says like, “Oh, that guy's an idiot.” You know? It's bad. So, yeah, work hard. Stay respectful. Stay humble. Take care of yourself. That's a big one in this industry. There's so much pressure leads to a lot of problems. A lot of dreams. Getting a lot of drugs. Take care of yourself. Yeah, that's a tough one.

AS: So do you think that there's uh, with all these AI booming in technology, would a chef be replaced by a robot?

RW: No, no that will never happen. The reason why I can say this to you is that, I can tell you right now, I can tell you to cook, let's just say traditional Chinese dish, eggs and tomato. I can give you a recipe for eggs and tomato, three three eggs, one tomato, and bla bla bla bla. Tell you to make it actually, I would make it myself. I'll give you my recipe and give a robot my recipe. And I can tell you I want it to taste like this. And I can give you the recipe, I give the robot the recipe, they're not going to taste the same. The reason is, no, the eggs aren't going to taste the same, the tomatoes aren't going to taste the same. So you've got to know how to season, you got to be able to recognize, “Oh, this tomato was sweeter than this tomato.” Or you know, so that's why it wouldn't work. Humans, you know, you have to have the palate, you have to be able to season, and that—that's the difference. That tomato might be super runny. This one might be a little more dry. You know, there's just so many elements in cooking. Like I've got a wet tomato, okay, well, you might have to cook it a little longer, you know; like, you know, cook out some moisture.
So there's just—there's too many elements. To get right and cooking, you can't just follow a recipe, and that, and that's why beginning cook—beginner cooks get so frustrated. “I follow the recipe exactly, why isn't it good?” Right? Well, you—you actually kind of have to learn how to cook. Because no—no vegetables are—you know—nothing's alike if you can't follow a recipe exactly, you know. You have to know how to react on the fly, you have to know how to make it work. You know?

**AD:** And I guess how does your Texan-Asian identity come together through your cooking?

**RW:** Because what—in this restaurant or just my cooking in general?

**AD:** In general.

**RW:** So, I think I'm a little bit different than, than some of my Chinese friends, because I'm not full-blooded Chinese. My—like I said, my father's from Tennessee; my grandmother growing up would cook very, like more traditional Southern food. You know, and I'm sure you know, you guys know what I'm talking about, like Southern food; you know, like biscuits and gravy, you know, things like that like Southern stuff. So I, I grew up appreciating that. I think—I think that's helped, I guess, in the sense of relating food to American people, as because I really grew up eating American food. And then I also grew up eating very Chinese food. And even some of the stuff I'll order at restaurants, my mom will look at me and be like, “How do you even know what that is?” Because she would never order that. You know? But when you grow up, and especially if you grew up in Chinatown, you know, a lot of people in the restaurant industry or they want to be like, “Hey, try this. This is so good.” You know, and it's something you've never heard of before, like salted fish. My mom would never make that. It's like one of my favorite things. But yeah, you're around people. So on one end, I've got extreme Southern comfort food. I've got, I've got good—you know—food from my mom at home. And then we go, I've got all these friends in the, in Chinatown, in the restaurant industry that are like, “Try this, this is great! This is great!” And you know, that's why Houston's so great. You take all those things and put it together and you know, you got some amazing food, you know?

**AS:** Is there any fusion that went wrong? Or other people's fusion that went wrong?

**RW:** Not off the top of my head. I mean, you know, some people, some chefs try to force it. I think that when you force things, that's—that's when it kind of—not that it goes wrong, but you kind of missed the mark. You know, we always try to say good food is simple food. My friend Ryan will say, “Yes, it's simple.” But they don't see the back end. You know, like I was saying, like, there's certain things that you can do to prep food, some prep stuff that's heavy prep, like, you might look at the dish and be like, “Wow, this is so simple!” But it took 10 hours to prep it,
you know. But when, but keeping it simple, keeping it fresh, not trying to force too much into a dish. That's the best food. I think that's the problem is that a lot of people try to force too much into the dish, or it becomes you're trying to think like, “What are they trying to do here?” I can see this, “Sorry, I see this over here.” But if you just took off a couple things that would have been like, much, much better statement, you know. So that's what we try to do.

And like we're not formally trained, so I don't even— I wouldn't even know how to do all that stuff. You know. So I think that's why we kind of get away with— well we get away with is just because, everything that I put into a dish, it has to make sense, it has to work; because I just don't have enough knowledge. You know, that's kind of like, the thing with the rice. When we put the rice on at the restaurant, when we first opened, and my mom was like, “It's okay.” I'm like, “Yeah, I know, Mom. I'm working on it.” Like, everybody else thinks it's fine. I know it could be better. I'm working on it, working on... She would tell me; she kept calling; she could tell I'm tweaking it out a little bit. And then I finally got it right. And she was like, “Yeah, it's good.” “Yeah, I know. It's good.” You know, it took me a while but I got it, you know.

AS: So speaking about the finance side of the restaurant management, how do you make sure that a dish is profitable as well as popular?

RW: So what a lot of people don't understand is that... Well obviously if you're selling a lot of meat, meat is expensive. So beef especially is expensive. So all we have, all we did was sell beef brisket all day or beef ribs all day, we wouldn't make any money. So you have to look at other things. Pork is cheaper. Poultry is cheaper, you know? So you have to make sure like, “Okay, well if we're going to sell turkey, there's more money there, we got to make sure it's good.” You know. So that's how you kind of— you kind of— you always try to balance it out. Like— like for our sides, we have a flat price. Everything's $3 for the for the small cup. This one we might not be making any profit at all. This one we it might be all profit. So, you know, you just got to find those things. If you do everything like over the top, over the top, you're never gonna make money. You got to be able to say like, “If we could raise the price on this; but we might sell less, but let's just sell this one.” Because we know we make higher profit, you know, we can, we can do it. We can cook a little bit more of this one and a little bit less of this one. You know that—that makes the demand for this one higher, and we sell them, we'll have a little bit more of this leftover. You know, it'll– it'll– it'll run a little bit longer, you know. But we'll make more money, you know, so and just— just find it, you have to know.

This is the problem with a lot of restaurants. Number one, their labor costs too high. And number two, they try to do too much. Keep it simple. You know? We're only open four hours a day right now. Eleven o'clock to three o'clock. People are like how can you survive? Even my mom, “How can you survive? Only four hours a day?” I'm like, “Yeah, but do you know how much food
we're selling in four hours a day. We sell more food in four hours and most barbecue restaurants run all day long.” So, but let's just say we try to extend the hours three o'clock to go to six o'clock. Okay? Our—most of our business at lunch. So from three o'clock to six o'clock, let's just say two customers walk in the door every 30 minutes, but I've got to pay a full staff. Is it worth it? No! Why don't just close down, just shut it down, you know; say open another three hours to make 100 bucks, and then 100, all that 100 that goes to my staff. Doesn't make any sense. Just shut down. You know.

So we've been you know, but— but we make a little extra to try to stretch it— stretch it. We also try to integrate like you said, “How do we make money?” We try to integrate more high profit items. Like I talked about the sandwich earlier, sandwiches are good profit. You could charge $10 for a sandwich, you know? So you just try to find out other ways— other ways, you know?

AS: Have you ever thought about franchising the business?

RW: People ask that about us every day, I'm actually in the middle of something. I don't think I can talk about it. But there's big plans for the future there. I can say that there's big plans for the future of “Blood Brothers”. And then that might be something that maybe we can revisit next year. I don't know, you can have like an update or something. You know, it would be interesting because this is a big thing. I think is very interesting. If it all works out, it might not work out. Who knows?

AS: So how would you differentiate the success of the “Blood Brothers” among other restaurants?

RW: That's the thing. Uh, that's the thing. It's like, you wonder, like about where the success is coming from? And at the end of the day does it matter? I'm sure my brother and Quy don't even think about it. This is stuff I think about. You know, are we deserving of it? You know? Is it just because we're Asian? You know, is it just because of this big push on diversity, you know like... you know, all these movements... I mean, I'm like I said, it's, it's probably a little bit of everything. I look at a friend of ours, who opened almost the same time we did; and we're getting—and he pays a lot for PR. We don't pay for any PR. I'm PR, you know, like, we don't pay for it. And he looks at what we're doing, he’s like, “Why? I'm paying thousands of dollars for this PR person; you guys seem— seem to be non-stop.” You know. But if you watch me all day, I'm on it all day long. I don't sleep—you can talk to my family. I'm in the bathroom, I'm on my phone; I'm always on my phone; I'm always marketing always. That's all I do. I'm sure they're not doing that, you know? So I don't know. Hard work, you know, hard work, a little bit everything maybe—you know the push on cultural diversity; you know, great story “three friends, high school friends open this restaurant's good food” you know. It's a chain reaction of
things. You know, when–when–when *The New York Times* comes in and talks to you, then somebody– some other writers looking at *The New York Times*, “Oh, well, who's that? Oh, I want that! Sounds interesting!” And it's a trickle down, right; and it keeps trickling down, keeps trickling down.

So you just have to, you have to keep yourself interesting, I think. You know, like, the *The New York Times* article was like a year ago. But my, someone still might be referencing that, you know. So I want to say like, “Oh, are they, are they kind of past their prime? Are they still worth talking to?” You know. You say you still kept all these things, you know, and that's what we kind of, you know, we've been pretty lucky, like all these kind of things, kind of, are spaced out to where it kind of like, “Okay, we're still on people's tongue.” You know, people are still talking about us, you know, and that's what you want to do. You just want to keep people talking about you. Otherwise, you– you get forgotten and then people start talking about the new guy, the next guy. You know.

**AS**: So does the media come to you? Or do you reach out to them?

**RW**: I've never reached out to anybody. They find us.

**AS**: Who was the first person that discovered you?

**RW**: *Locally, Locally*. You know, I think it always starts *Locally*, right. So we– we're doing pop-ups and you know the local food guys will, “Hey, go check out these guys this weekend. They're doing this thing!” You know, kind of like, what's to do this weekend. And then that'll catch the eye of a barbecue fan, barbecue blogger or something. And they come out there like, “These guys are pretty good!” And then we do something fun, you know. A dish that's different than that, that catches the eye of the barbecue editor at the *Chronicle*. who also is one of the partners for the Houston Barbecue Fest. So he comes out, he tries it, he writes about it, he invites us to Houston Barbecue Fest. There's– there's 3000 people that go to that from all over. Then they start writing about it, you know. All these barbecue bloggers from all over the US from all over Texas. They start writing, “Oh, Blood Brothers! Never heard these guys, man. They did some cool stuff.” And then it just kind of grows and grows and grows. And that like I said, that's kind of the benefit of social media and having, you know, a decent, our own decent social media that people can say, like to tag us, “I finally had Blood Brothers!” And then they tagged us; and then someone that doesn't know, who we are at all, could go to, they're like, “Oh, that looks cool.” They click on us, and they look at ours and, “Oh, that's really cool.”

So yeah, it's a big, you know, things can go viral very quickly. I don't, okay I think, they're holding *The New York Times* thing was a– was a referral from somebody in OCA or somebody
here. He come—he had to come to Houston. He wanted to showcase diversity. So he contacted someone here and they were like, “Well, these guys are doing Texas barbecue with an Asian twist and are very well known.” And so he came out. It was a very short thing one day. From that article though, we also got the Smithsonian article, which was amazing, really cool. We spent a whole day with Brett Martin, the writer, and then a whole day with the photographer. That was really cool. And I thought, maximum two pages. I mean, it's a barbecue. We were– we were on the cover story, you know, like a couple pages. It was like eight pages in a Smithsonian, so that was really a big deal. You know, very big deal.

AS: How did you manage to balance between “Asianess” and “Texaness”?

RW: I guess I said we don't. We don't think of ourself as Asian first. We think of ourselves as, Houston first, Texas second, then probably Asian third, I think. You know, I think– I think that's the way we would think about it. You know, you don't— yeah I don't want to say the wrong thing. But you know, like, you know, I'm born here. So I'm a native Houstonian. You know, I think of myself as, not being different from anyone else; you know, even though we know we are. But I think, I don't you know. I think it's– it's improper, it's not right, to think of yourself, you know, we're all American, right? So, I shouldn't think of myself as Asian first. I think of myself as an American, even though I know I'm Asian. You know.

AS: So how would you manage your time of the day? For example, like work life balance, or...

RW: Not right now. It's all work all the time. I try to spend as much time with my family as I can, and they know I'm making a huge sacrifice. They understand that it's not going to be forever. Like I said, if I have got something that I'm working on, if that really works out then, then I will be able to spend more time with my kids. But right now, it's a huge sacrifice, you know, for my wife for my kids. Even if I am home, I'm on the phone, or I'm just so tired. You know, so I mean, my daughter can be talking to me and I'll just pass out. But, you know, I try, you know; they know they know I'm working on something, you know. Terry and Quy, they don't have kids, so they don't have to worry about that, you know; but, uh, you got to do it. You know? Like, I don't have a choice. You know? My kids are great; actually, you know, like I said, I just try my best. That's all you can do. That's all you can do with anything is to do your best, you know?

AS: How about working with a family member— your brother?

RW: You know, we've been working together forever. So it's fine. I kind of know what I can expect from him. He knows what he can expect from me. And I try not to overburden him. Just keep it simple, you know. So that– that's a... I think it's more of– more of a learning experience
for Quy you know. ‘Cause he, him and I work well together, but him– him– he's never had to really work with my brother very much. So he's kind of learning how to deal with that a little bit. But– but we– we do okay. As I just it's a lot of communication. I always say communication makes everything easier. You know, you just got to get it out there.

**AS:** This is just one last question. So where would you go yourself when you go out to eat? What are the restaurant that you go?

**RW:** When I'm in Chinatown, I like also “House of Bowls”. I like “Xiong's cafe” is good. I've been wanting to go to my friend's steak house. He just opened this place called “My Steak House” on— I think it's— in the Welcome Center. He's a great cook. I haven't been to his– his restaurant, but he's a great cook. I want to check him out. We go to “San Dong”; “Hao-Hao”, we go to Hao-Hao... Yeah, I mean, kinda– kinda have a bunch of places that I go. “Wing Kee”, we go there. Yeah. If I go, if I go out to you, you know, “Golden Dim Sum” I go. We go, we go all over Chinatown. It's hard for me to do that now with my kids because they don't eat the same food I eat. But, man yeah, I could eat in Chinatown every night and not be bored. But that's me.

**AS:** Incredible! Thank you so much for your time.

**RW:** Yeah, thank you. It was fun. I hope it was good. [laughs] Or, no.

[Interview Ends.]