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## Interview with Julie Chon (Chon's Market)

Julie Chon

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Date of Interview: 5-6-21

### Interview with Chon's Market

Interviewee: Julie Chon

Interviewers: Hannah Fulton, Jordan Hahn

Location: Zoom

Length: 00:31:08

Overseen by: Dr. Dustin Wright

Biography: Julie Chon is a photographer and the granddaughter of the owner of Chon's Market in Marina, California.

Summary of Transcript: Julie Chon gives a brief introduction to who she is, her family background, and describes a little about what life is like as the granddaughter of a Korean market in California. She talks about what the market is like, how it has been run by her grandmother and other family members, and how they have handled the Covid-19 pandemic.

Interview Transcript:

HF: Hi, My name is Hannah Fulton. Today I'm here with my interview partner Jordan Hahn, and our guest speaker, Julie Chon. This is our interview for our class, the CSUMB Oral History interview Project. We're going to be interviewing some people who are in the food business who may run like an Asian restaurant or Asian market. We're just going to be getting to know them and getting to know their history, and stuff like that through this interview, so we would love to welcome Julie Chon. Thank you for being here.

JC: Hi.

JH: Alright so I'm going to start this off by asking you a couple of questions. The first one I wanted to ask is, can I ask a little bit about the background of the market? Like why did your family decide to open the market or what inspired them to open it?

JC: Yeah, my grandparents came, way back. Like, early like, how many years ago felt like seven. Maybe 60s. My grandpa was in the military and you know I think my grandpa was tired of kind of watching my grandma work in the fields in Salinas and so, and to kind of gather everyone he decided to start a market out here and so my grandma ran that until like maybe like five or six years ago, she sold it but she still...she was still working there until the pandemic.

JH: Oh, very interesting so you're really from Salinas multigenerational very interesting.

JC: Yeah. I was born in Salinas. I mean I didn't grow up here but like my dad grew up here. You came when he was young, too. And so, we have some roots here and you have yeah like the Asian community are pocketed but like the Korean community is like relatively close things like the local churches and like the local markets, restaurants.

JH: Right very, very interesting.

HF: Awesome, yeah. On that note, would you be able to tell us how a little bit how the pandemic, Covid-19 has affected your business? Like you said, Your grandmother was working there, up until the start of this, I believe.

JC: Yeah. And actually that was a slow decline on her health, like she was just forgetting things so work was getting harder and so you know she's older so we'd have her at home, most of the time but like my, my, on. Second, I don't know, I don't know the family line but she's part of the family. She's running it you know and the hard thing was I think a lot of the older Asian members would like or Asian community members would go there and congregate. So it's like their little like after again like hey like what's going on, little gossip watering hole. But yeah, so that was a little harder because I think what we saw was a lot more isolation for a lot of these older members whose grandkids don't visit their kids might not visit anymore. Especially out in a town like Marina where no one really comes back, you know, there tends to be an older generation that just sticks around.

JH: Right. See that's very interesting. So, what you're saying is this. So basically, what was I gonna transition with this, I'm sorry. Okay. So, the question we have written down here is how easy or hard was it to build the clientele. But obviously because I didn't know who we're interviewing today. So that

is my apologies, allow me to rephrase the question a little bit so building like a market for your for your market. I don't know how that came up but

JC: No that's okay.

JH: Yeah. So, how does that work? Is the most people that come to visit your market, are they mostly with Korean ethnic background or is there a mixture of every different kinds of people or?

JC: Um, yeah, I think, maybe you know what early on, it was a lot of just like Korean people, nowadays there's a mix of like you know students and then like a lot of military people also swing by especially if they're from the DLI like if they take Korean classes, you know that's what it seemed to be. But I mean, for the most part, it's a lot of just like regular older people, and for the longest time they were also doing things like DVDs or tapes for them too, which was like, way back in the days and they recently just stopped and so that's like a, they were like the last, that market and another market Asian market was like the last two on the West Coast still doing it, like all of the US coast.

JH: Could you, I don't know exactly what you mean but like they would you like

JC: Like Korean shows or things like dramas that are big like older people aren't going to access them on Netflix right they're going to access them on DVD blu ray, they're like yeah so yeah they just stopped but they were like one of the last ones.

JH: Yes, that's very interesting No, it's something that's kind of fading out these days.

JC: Oh yeah, definitely. Probably better environmentally right like at least, Yeah. Yeah. But yeah, I mean, yeah, it's interesting, but they still make a lot of their food like little side dishes you know for people and their pot stickers and stuff so they're still doing that.

HF: Yeah, that kind of makes it unique, in a way, just to have that one special thing that you know only maybe one other market was doing that nobody else was doing.

JC: Yeah, and it's kind of interesting how concentrated it is too in Marina there's like 1233 markets, three four markets in one area and it's such a small town, and like, there's a little edge and competition but you know as they get older, I think they're learning to collaborate. Yeah.

HF: Yeah. Does that give like a you'd say like a strong sense of community, at least within that area?

JC: To a degree, um, you know, and as I was like the next generation kind of takes over like at Hong's market like everything Patty like she seems to be doing a very good job at marketing that market to a newer generation who is interested in a lot of, like, Asian cuisine or like, Asian, you know, products, and so like props to her like someone asked me like are you going to do that like, I don't think so, like, I'm already like you know it's different. It's definitely harder. And, yeah, yeah, it's...it's different, but props to her. Yeah.

HF: Yeah. Um, if you happen to know, What do you think are some like secrets, or tips that you or your family might know to be successful in like a business like this, like,

JC: Yeah, I think the best thing is to like really get to know your locals because what it is is a lot of a lot of the products they buy are generic but it's like once you know like what people are kind of looking for because they actually go out to the Bay Area to get a lot of their like items, and you know if they knew their local farmers or something they could do a little bit less driving out and doing all these things they do source some of the things but there is that language barrier. Maybe that's also another thing you know coming into it. And so, yeah, but I mean, look, I mean, honestly, it's all about the locals. That's what I think. The more you pull them in the more you can really engage with them. Yeah. Yeah.

JH: Right. Very interesting. So you mentioned that, I'm going to skip over that question because we kind of talked about that over. How's your experience as an Asian American shaped your success in the food industry?

JC: Okay. No, no, that's okay, I think, um, I think, as like, you know, we as people like how it's kind of getting more diverse like people are really looking out for different things out here. And it's kind of cool to see like people like you know for the longest time like like that mukbang like by eating kind of like YouTube craze came up right and like they would do that spicy noodles challenge right and it was just interesting to see that kind of like diverse culture and just even fusion you know I think there's a lot of potential for people who might find certain foods are similar in different cultures and kind of giving that kind of like fusion right so, um, yeah, I don't know, just, it's, it's hard and then as an Asian American it's a lot of Asian American women that start these businesses too. So it's also interesting to see. And unfortunately with the flux of like, what's been going on recently that kind of tying into like the fears and like kind of older mindset they have, and it's a plausible like fear too but it's like, how do like kind of dive in and like disperse, racial, you know, there's still racism and Asian cultures and racism and all these cultures and so it's like, how do you kind of divulge from that and really look at what is the concern, you know, like it is, it's plausible to have these fears, but it's also like how do you

make it so that it's not dividing everyone. Right. Yeah.

HF: Definitely. Very good point. Um, so I know that Chon's market is primarily like Korean market with a lot of like Korean food being sold there. In particular for, you know, for someone who might not know that much about like Korean food, what would you say is the type of food that you offer there, or if there's anything unique, or different that you might sell or something that might be from like another culture or another country, something like that. And kind of where does, where does that originate from like I know you said some of it is locally sourced.

JC: Yeah. What. From what I know Chon's market does because each market is kind of something that's uniquely their own like Asian market has like their Kimbap where they're like kind of Korean rolls that sell like for like 150, and it flies off yeah it's I mean if you're into it, like totally go for it but it's pretty good if you're just on the fly and you just get a roll of rice with a bunch of like inset-like stuff inside. It's really good. But Chinese market every month, maybe twice a month. They do like dumplings. Fresh dumplings are steamed and then you can get them frozen so they'll freeze a bag for you but I think it's 10 bucks. So good though because it's like they make it, it's cheap. It's like a box like you get like a two row box. It's so nice and, I mean, that's been their biggest seller from the people who know. And so I think I just told him I just become a dumpling house you'll be fine you know but, you know, but you know it's it's work and they do good work so yeah I mean, Korean markets always have the kimchi or like the fermented stuff that's really good there because they make it all by hand. Like they make it you know like. And so to that a lot of people locally find comfort in that because I think, you know, there's food, you can make and then it's also nice buying product right so that's like someone else has made so yeah.

JH: Yeah there's a lot of work that goes into making kimchi. I did not realize.

JC: Yeah it's I mean it's, there's a lot of fermenting in any culture it's a, there's a science right I think because we anything goes a little wrong you got this wonky tasting like funk right yeah it's amazing what humans have come up with.

JH: Yeah, it's weird how you experiment with preserving food and you end up with something like that, where you end up with wedding diseases like botulism and from yeah.

JC: And then you can get like penicillin right on the other end right.

JH: On the other end. Exactly. Yeah. So do you have a favorite part about the food industry?

JC: Um. For me, I think I get to see a lot of my culture, right, I think, cuz my mom cooks at home too and then like my grandma still makes food and like when I go visit the store pretty often they're always making food and what I get to see is a lot of like, comfort, right, for themselves too because you know that they're not going back to Korea right they're not going back to Asia anytime soon. And a lot of these people do it to preserve and then to kind of comfort themselves as well because this is their familiar territory, you know, and. And for me, I get to see that being because I document and record a lot of these recipes too because I'm a photographer so I like it. And my biggest thing lately has been that and so, especially as like my grandma gets older, my mom gets older, my aunt gets older and like the owner gets older over there so yeah I think for me, personally, I get to see them kind of enjoy the things they enjoyed when they were young, you know when they were in their country and so, and then finding joy that other people find comfort in it too. And so I think that's been kind of really cool to see. Yeah.

JH: Oh, a great answer. Right.

HF: Yeah, thank you. Um, with that, what would you say is like one of your least favorite parts about the food industry?

JC: Oh yeah, I think, you know, and it comes with the language barrier because I'm not working in there but I know the ladies working there are like, they'll send me documents you know they're like this came in the mail what does it say and I think, you know, it's, you know, as with any business it's the legal aspect, right, and like, you know, and then a lot of that if they have to change something comes with money and because a lot of these businesses are small. It's like, you know, there's always a you know they try to chip away at a corner you know the but it's like we have to stay and you have to remind them right so I think that's like the hardest that language barrier because it's, it's different like you know, like you read a law book and you're like, all right, totally different English, same with Korean you like you have to translate it into a way of understanding so it's different. Yeah.

JH: Yeah. language barriers are definitely, I've worked a little bit in the restaurant business I can, I can tell that it's definitely an issue.

JC: Yeah language barrier and there comes like a stigma with not being able to speak a certain way, right, like with accents and some accents are more well received than others and so I think, then I have to make phone calls and then all these things and so that's, that was pretty prevalent. Yeah, whenever that happens.

JH: It is very, very interesting. Alright, so I have the next question I wanted to ask you is, how do you think the current pandemic will affect the market/small business for the foreseeable future, because obviously there's been a big, a lot of changes going on.

JC: A lot of changes and. Oh man, I mean, if anything, like, especially in our area I think we're kind of relying more on local business so that's been kind of really cool to see because, um, yeah we get like our, our masks and then our big things at like Costco and on target and all these places but for people who. Yeah, I don't know what I feel like, unfortunately through the pandemic. The community has kind of gotten closer to communicating with each other because, you know, now we're like okay not like everyone has to like, you know, be with on the same level to understand what's going on and so yeah I think small businesses are going to thrive within the next year, I think, you know, small niche markets will thrive. With the economy hopefully coming back in. And, yeah, it all, you know, it'll always be an adjustment, you know, but I think...I think Monterey County does a good job of supporting their locals or learning to support their locals a little better. And I think in the last this last year you see a slew of pop ups from people like pursuing their passions or pursuing things they could never have done because, you know, because of the pandemic or because at that time, you know, they're working right but now we're all home and so I think people have kind of had like...reconstructed their viewpoints and mindsets on like....what what what's important. Right. And so, yeah.

HF: Yeah. That's awesome. Um, I, so you've said that your, you know, your grandma used to own it and then now she's, you know, she's retired.. so do you think that or do you happen to know if it's still ran or owned by like... people in your family like did it get passed on to,

JC: Oh okay yeah so what had happened was I think my grandma is 85 now so she was working until she was like 84 and you know and that's her like life and blood and now that she's not but, you know, like I said, her, her memory is going and so like, you know, it was more of like harder for the ladies to like babysit her almost. So, a couple like 5,5,6,7,7 years ago. She had sold it to someone she knew. So someone in the community, but you know she still worked there, received a wage and all of that so she tried to still keep it close. But I mean, the lady who is owning it now does a good job and so, and yeah she does a good job.

JC: Alright. Okay, here's the big transition for you but recently. Here's a little change of tone too: recently there's been a spike in anti Asian hate crime during the Covid-19 pandemic. Has this affected your business in any way?



JC: Um, I think it's opened a lot more conversation amongst amongst amongst the owners especially because I think a lot of times they're like, Oh, it's just happening out in the big city but I think there is like still, like I said earlier, certain sentiments that are carried over because of like historical events like in 92 there was like the riots in LA, and that was a very big thing for small business owners in Koreatown who were, you know, who had conflict with the community because the police weren't helping them and all these things. So I mean, it's open conversation, especially with Black Lives Matter coming in too. And, and just, yeah, I don't know it's it's hard because like I don't think they see it happening here so they're like okay it's here you know but like it just opened a lot of conversations for sure, that are ugly at times, because you have very older traditional mindsets, in a very homogenous society Korea is pretty much all Korean people with some foreigners and even then, they're still like very like you know very racist but unknowingly racist things they don't really talk about right so yeah it's...it's hard because. Yeah, because there is also the layout, there's a lot of factors to it. Yeah.

JH: Yeah.

HF: Yeah, definitely. Thank you for sharing your experience with that.

JC: Yeah, no worries like my parents are business owners too and they've had run ins with people on both sides where the police didn't help or it was, it was people that they were stereotyping or generalizing that only like...strengthens certain stereotypes about certain people right and so it's harder to open that can of worms because there is that history already there.

HF: Yeah. Yeah, definitely. Um going back to what you were kind of saying, a little bit earlier with what you were saying about some of the negative, I guess aspects of being in a food business. I was thinking, have you had to be kind of like a the go between with like being a part of the younger generation like having to kind of translate for like some of your older family members, when you know they're running a business and kind of just having to be the intermediate in between, kind of that language barrier.

JC: Yeah, the story of my life man like my growing up my like all my like school paper forms I had to translate to them and then I had a sign it or you know it's just like, those are the things you grew up with and like. It's only natural at this point to be translating like like you know especially when like the pandemic certainly when it was like full blown like in the beginning and they had to like put up signs and all these things like you know we had to do a translation between Korean and English and I like to do all that. Whenever the health, you know, health inspectors would come in you know and they would

say something they would like record them, like, Hey, what did they say or they'd send me an email, you know, so it's like, yeah, I mean it's not even just the food business I think you have a whole generation in Monterey that just, which is okay, there's this, there's pros and cons right you have a community that joined together. That's like the Asian community but they only kind of keep to themselves right then they only speak that certain language. So then they lose that communication with the county with, you know, government and then they kind of have this disconnect right and so yeah that's that kind of thing they have a very tight bond with each other, but it's like there's a distrust or like a foreignness to like the legality of running a business.

HF: Yeah. Very interesting. Because I think, at least, just from what I've kind of seen is that a lot of younger generations are having, like, you know, like you said the story of your life having to do that, like their parents or stuff like that.

JC: Yeah, and it's actually because of the pandemic you do have a slew of younger generations coming home to Monterey County or like, you know, like people have been helping out. Whether it's because of a pandemic or they lost a parent or like they, you know, they're back to help the business and so it'll be interesting to see what these markets will transform into because a lot of these people who have been owning them are really old, like old. Yeah. And so, Yeah, we'll see.

JH: So do you think there's going to be some change in the Korean market scene in Monterey, coming up in the future?

JC: I... I would hope so. As much as we want to preserve a lot of what's already been going on like, I would hope so because, you know, there are a lot of these businesses that are very, it's not like the biggest profit in the world right. It's what they've done for all their lives and like, what else are they really going to do that's kind of the mentality, you know you sticking an industry long enough, you're like I don't know anything else, just going to do this forever and until my next life right so it's a. I would hope so. Right, I would hope that there would be a change, where there is a balance between their life, because a lot of, you know, doesn't matter what industry of workaholics that are consumed. I would hope so. Yeah. Yeah. We'll see. We'll see. Yeah.

JH: Hannah did you have any more questions?

HF: Um, I don't think so. I don't know if you had any others,

JH: No I think basically covered up to some of the side notes that I had that I really wanted to ask.

JC: Yeah. If you have any other questions in the future too I don't know when this project is due, but feel free to like, email me I can hop on to another thing so if you guys need more context on things that's all good.

JH: But I really appreciate this, you know I have a lot of respect for what you're saying because I do have some Asian family that has a restaurant in Atlanta. And I've spent a lot of time working there as well. And there's definitely, I see a lot of parallels for what, from what you've said today.

JC: On top of that, working with families.

JH: Yes. Another thing that's and that's another thing. Yeah. Actually, my family's architects right now and they want me to get involved so.... No, but so I understand I want to kind of stay away. Here I want to keep a distance in between. So, so, I totally understand where you're saying today. Yeah, really appreciate it.

JC: No problem. But yeah, thanks for having me and yeah that was, I mean, yeah, like you can need any more context, let me know. I'm around, always.

JH: I really appreciate you coming out today.

HF: Thank you so much. Yeah, this is really helpful and beneficial for not only us, but just for our class and, yeah, it's great to hear your perspective.

JC: For sure and yeah like what's, what are so these projects are they like you can direct them how it how you want, like I read it but I was like, do you have more control over the narrative or like how you want to present it or is everyone kind of there's a generic way to hit these points.

JH: So basically we're just getting an interview from different parts of California and different Asian markets. Throughout the California coast, it's just like a way to compare and evaluate how people are doing in the current pandemic and how traditions from family and generations have come through and how they compare to others, I guess.

JC: Yeah. Have you hit up any of the others like towards the bay or are you just keeping down here on the coast line of Monterey?

JC: We're just focusing on this area but there's people in our class that are going all the way from

down to like San Diego up to Northern California and I believe yeah. We're all over the place.

JC: Whoa. Yeah, well, you're gonna see a lot of similarities and a lot of differences depending on what city you're hitting up, especially like the bigger cities. It's interesting, because you get markets opening up, even in the pandemic like huge markets and I'm like, all right.

JH: Yeah.

JC: All right, dope, um, any other questions, anything else you guys want to hit up?

JH: I think we're good.

HF: Yeah. This has been great. Yeah, thank you for taking the time out of your day to help us and, yeah thank you.

JC: Yeah. When are you gonna be a paper, like, I don't know how you guys are all documenting

JH: Oh so we're just gonna post this as an interview. and yeah we're going to write a transcript.

JC: Okay, perfect. That sounds good. All right.

JH: So thank you for coming today. Appreciate your time.

HF: Thank you.

JC: Alright, have a good one.

JH: Have a great day.