



*Christine Hà had plans to go into business and finance before discovering her love of cooking and losing her sight. Today she is defying the odds as a renowned chef and restaurant owner.*

*Photo courtesy of John Suh.*

# How “The Blind Cook” Christine Hà Gathered the Ingredients for Greatness

*By Katherine R. Galland*

Imagine cooking without seeing the ingredients, the measuring utensils, knives, pans, or burners on the stove. Add to that, the kitchen is considered one of the most dangerous rooms in the home with house fires, burns, spills, and cuts all being possibilities that could arise. Although cooking can be enjoyable and rewarding, some people find food preparation to be a daunting task under the best circumstances, but for people who are legally blind, putting together a meal can be especially challenging. Only about 4,000 people in the United States live with neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder (NMOSD), the condition that caused the first and only blind *MasterChef* winner, Christine Hà, to lose her vision. Hà once compared her declining vision to “looking at a very foggy mirror after a hot shower.” She navigated the *MasterChef* kitchen using a masterful sense of touch – one that might fool an audience into believing she has been blind her whole life.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Long Beach, California, in 1979, Hà and her family moved to Houston for her father’s work when she was two years old. Although she was not fond of the city when she was young, Hà later found Houston’s diversity inspired her love for the city. Another attractive feature, she added, is that Houston has “this big city feel, but, at the same time, it has the southern charm.”<sup>2</sup>

Hà left Houston to attend The University of Texas at Austin (UT) where she received a bachelor of business administration degree in finance and management information systems in 2001 and unexpectedly found her passion. When she had to move out of her dorm, following her freshman year, Hà no longer had easy access to food, so she decided to learn to cook. She began buying cookbooks, reading recipes, and whipping up their contents. She found a love for cooking that reminded her of her mother, who died when Hà was a teenager. Hà felt inspired to return to her roots and learned to cook the Vietnamese food she grew up eating. She explained, “I enjoyed being able to make raw ingredients into something that could feed people.” Trying everything she could afford to make, Hà’s much-loved hobby soon developed into skills that allowed her to strengthen the valuable connection between her family and culture.<sup>3</sup>



*Christine with her mother and father.*

*Photo courtesy of Christine Hà.*

After completing her bachelor's degree at UT, Hà had job offers in Austin and Houston. Reflecting on past times, she said, "I can pick a single moment that made me decide to move back to Houston." As she found herself walking through an Asian grocery store in Houston, she realized how much she missed access to the foods she loved. She explained, "This was before I got into the culinary arts. I was coming out of undergrad with a degree in business and about to work in oil and gas, but the food was what made me come back to Houston."<sup>4</sup>

Though Hà found she loved cooking as a hobby, and food was the reason she returned to Houston, she did not immediately enter the culinary scene. Instead, she pursued a master's degree in creative writing at the University of Houston (UH) in 2013, which was state funded because of her impaired vision – something that was not offered for culinary school. It was at UH that she began navigating her significant vision loss.

Hà's journey with NMOSED began with impaired vision, but it was not her only symptom. Initially her vision changed in one eye, which she first thought was simply a dirty contact lens, but the issues persisted. After a few years of dealing with the change in her sight, Hà noticed bouts of paralysis in her arms and legs. "In your twenties, you're supposed to feel invincible, but while my friends were building careers, I was losing my vision and my ability to move," she remembered. She eventually was diagnosed with NMOSED, a disorder that attacks optic nerves and nerves in the spinal cord. She described her vision loss as making her feel like a fish out of water at UH, and said, "I had just learned to read braille, to navigate with a white cane, and figured out the public transportation system to get from home to campus."<sup>5</sup>

When Hà could no longer drive, she utilized METROLift to get to campus, which allowed her to schedule when and where she would be picked up, so she did not have to worry about navigating other aspects of Houston's public transportation system. Although she did not have to deal with



*Hà competed, judged, and appeared as a guest on various cooking competition shows before being a cohost on a Canadian cooking program, Four Senses, for four seasons.*

Photo courtesy of Varner Productions LTD.

transferring between trains or buses, METROLift required Hà to schedule her rides two hours in advance, which meant planning ahead. Although she had access to on-campus accommodation through the Center for Students with Disabilities (now known as the Justin Dart Jr. Accessibility Center), a variety of difficulties persisted.



*Chef Tony Nguyen, Christine Hà, and John Suh, Christine's husband and business partner, collaborated to open Xin Chào, a modern Vietnamese restaurant, in 2020.*

Photo courtesy of Xin Chào.

Hà recalled being thankful for her small class size in the graduate program and believed that navigating larger classes would have been more difficult. She worried about some of the decorative fountains, at least one of which did not have a railing around it then – and still does not – which meant she could step or fall in when walking on campus. When reflecting on UH's accessibility at the time, she noted that Manhattan is easier to navigate.

While completing her master's degree and coping with NMOSED, Hà auditioned for *MasterChef*. She attended not expecting to win, hoping simply to return home with some useful content to write a story. Nevertheless, she was chosen to compete, and won that season. Ever humble, Hà explained her mantra in life is to "hope for the best but to expect the worst" and that she would have been happy if she finished each day simply knowing that she did her best and gave it her all.



*Christine found a love of cooking as a hobby that reminded her of her late mother. Here, the two enjoy a trip together in 1985.*

Photo courtesy of Christine Hà.



Hà's insecurity during the competition can partially be attributed to her vision loss, as she had no way to evaluate how successful the other contestants were in the heat of a challenge. This forced her to focus on herself and her abilities, putting her best foot forward. Unlike the other contestants, she had to cook using intuition, but it paid off for her. Her win and presence on *MasterChef* propelled her culinary career forward into judging on *MasterChef Vietnam* in its third season as well as co-hosting a Canadian cooking show, *Four Senses*. Hà led the show alongside *Top Chef Canada* winner, Carl Heinrich for fifty-two episodes from 2014 to 2017.

When discussing Hà's time on *MasterChef*, judge and Michelin-starred Chef Gordon Ramsay said, "The lady has an extraordinary palate, a palate of incredible finesse. She picks up hot ingredients, touches them, and she thinks about this image on the plate. She has the most disciplined execution on a plate that we've ever seen. But the palate is where it's just extraordinary. And honestly, I know chefs with Michelin stars that don't have palates like hers."<sup>6</sup>

Advocating for those with disabilities is particularly important for Hà, a discovery made after her *MasterChef* win on September 10, 2012. Following the show's completion, she realized that many people viewed her success as a chef, and her overall spirit, to be very inspirational. Since then, she has channeled this inspiration throughout her career, often speaking at events during National Disability Employment Awareness Month in October. She explained the importance of normalizing the discussion about accessibility, stating, "[Disability awareness] is still a conversation that a lot of people are uncomfortable or ashamed of having." She hopes that by being vocal she will inspire awareness, which will hopefully inspire legislation to remedy many issues that disabled Americans face.<sup>7</sup>

Though there may be many people who are not currently living with a disability, Hà pointed out, "Our population is constantly aging, so at some point we will all know someone who is disabled, whether it be our parents, our grandparents, our friends, even our children." The needs of people with disabilities cannot properly be addressed if they lack avenues to express themselves. Thus, Hà constantly pushes



An example of Hà's palate is her signature "Mom's Eggrolls" a dish she offers at her Houston restaurant *The Blind Goat*.

Photo courtesy of The Blind Goat.

and many other things." She went on to say, "I'm excited to be part of this initiative and to hear how others living with NMOSD define themselves, outside of the condition. For anyone who is part of a rare disease community, it's a shared diagnosis that brings us together, but I think it's through our individual triumphs and journeys that we can really learn from one another."<sup>9</sup>

Beyond her advocacy work, Christine Hà now splits her time between restaurants that she co-owns with her husband and business partner, John Suh, in her beloved city of Houston. *The Blind Goat*, which reopened in spring 2023 at its new location in Spring Branch, offers "food that suits chef Hà's goal of casual 'nhau' dining, of the sort you'd find at Vietnamese street or seaside joints," notes *Houston Chronicle's* Alison Cook.<sup>10</sup> In 2020, the restaurant was a James Beard Award semifinalist for the best new restaurant in the country.

*Xin Chào*, on the other hand, offers a contemporary take on Vietnamese food using locally sourced ingredients. The spot is more upscale and has the duality of being a neighborhood spot as well as a place to celebrate special occasions. It was a semifinalist for the James Beard Award in 2022. Recently, Hà created a limited time ice cream flavor in collaboration with Van Leeuwen for their Montrose store. Inspired by her favorite childhood snack, "Bananas and Cheese" is made of Gouda mascarpone cheese with banana jam swirl, "plus some chocolate chips for a lil' extra."<sup>11</sup>

*The FOB Whole Fish at Xin Chào* is a daily "fresh off the boat" market fish selection.

Photo courtesy of Xin Chào.





Christine Hà's first cookbook is a New York Times bestseller.

Photo courtesy of Christine Hà.

Hà's culinary success shows no signs of slowing down. With two booming restaurants and several awards under her belt, this Houston chef continues to flourish, fusing local influences and cultures. In June 2023, she and husband, John Suh, launched a sandwich shop, Stuffed Belly, steps from The Blind Goat in Spring Branch. Bao Ong reports on the new eatery, "[T]hey're departing from a playbook of classic and modern riffs on Vietnamese cuisine." Hà told Ong, "We love sandwiches because it's simple comfort food. ... I've also always wanted to break out of the mold of banh mi. I didn't want to be pigeonholed into Viet sandwiches." Stuffed Belly is a drive-through concept restaurant offering deliciously executed classics, including smashburgers and chicken and egg sandwiches accompanied by expertly seasoned tater tots.<sup>12</sup>

Hà still loves cooking but indulges in other creative endeavors to "keep her mind fresh" off the job. She enjoys reading, and writing, and has used that creativity along with her skill set from her master's in creative writing to secure multiple publications, including a *New York Times* bestselling cookbook, *Recipes from My Home Kitchen: Asian and American Comfort Food* released on May 14, 2013. Additionally, she is writing a memoir and a second cookbook in which she hopes to focus on cooking intuitively, an essential for her and a valuable skill for people looking to become proficient in their kitchen.

As a chef, writer, and person, Christine Hà's love for her community and her desire to inspire radiates through



The drink selection at The Blind Goat offers an array of familiar favorites in addition to innovative new combinations, such as the popular, taro colada.



Hà's vision for her first Blind Goat location in Bravery Chef Hall was a "place to kick back, enjoy the everyday, and celebrate the joys in life, both big and small."

Photo courtesy of Christine Hà

everything she does. She has built popular socializing spots through her restaurants, emphasized the beauty of life through her writing, and shown everyone that if you put your mind to something, nothing can stop you from achieving your goals. She has persevered through her life-changing vision loss and shined. Her story sends a powerful message to us all – sometimes in life you need to put your head down and focus on you,

sometimes you need to hope for the best but prepare for the worst, and other times you need a little love and a lot of good food to pull you through. 🍷



Christine Hà turned her favorite childhood snack into a menu item, bananas and cheese ice cream crumble.

Photos courtesy of The Blind Goat.