Brian Goldberg
Founder & Chief Growth Officer
Mr Bing Foods

Interviewed by William Zhang
Edited for length and clarity

As the Founder and Chief Growth Officer at Mr Bing Foods, Brian leads a team of passionate individuals who share his vision of bringing the rich flavors of East Asian street food to home cooks, professional kitchens, and grocery stores.

With 10+ years of experience in this role, Brian has successfully expanded the Mr Bing product line from Hong Kong to the United States, where their line of Chili Crisp, Asian BBQ sauces, Sriracha & seasonings can be found in over 10,000 retail stores, foodservice venues, online, and as a core component of other brands products.

Brian's journey with Mr Bing began in 2012, originally as a grab & go restaurant in Hong Kong. It was inspired from time studying in Beijing in 1998, where he fell in love with the humble 'jianbing', a traditional Beijing street crepe. Mr Bing's mission is to create mouth-watering foods inspired by Asian cooking that are healthy, sustainable, and accessible to as many people as possible.

Brian had previous careers in finance, TV media, and professional sports. He worked for 9 years in Asian equity sales & trading as a Greater China specialist for three global investment banks. Prior to that, he worked in media for Channel News Asia (reporter), CNBC (producer), and NBC (Page Program).

He also spent three years competing on the World Cup Luge circuit, qualifying for the Winter Olympics in 2002. Swimming has been a lifelong passion, and he currently trains with the NYAC Masters swimming team.

He holds an M.A. in East Asian Studies from Columbia University, a B.A. in Chinese Studies from Brandeis University, and speaks fluent Mandarin and conversational Spanish.

William: Hello, Brian. It's great to have you for this interview. Uh, I do have some questions prepared, and let's get started then.

Brian: Thank you, happy to be here.

William: Thank you. All right, for the 1st question, please share a little about yourself. So as a co-founder of Mr Bing Foods, what inspired you to pursue this culinary adventure?

Brian: So, I'm born and raised in New York, but I majored in Chinese in college as an undergrad, uh, at Brandeis up in Boston in the late 90s. And as part of that, uh, studied abroad, uh, for 2 semesters, um, in Harbin, in North, extreme Northeast China, in Beijing as well. So during that time, uh, this is like 1998, uh, every day before school started like Chinese class, we'd go out, we'd be kind of hungry for breakfast and we would have jianbing. There'd be like this lady on the back of a cart, uh, like making these savory Chinese breakfast crepes called jianbing, and that became like our favorite, our favorite street food in Beijing. And you can also get them in Shanghai, except they do them in like different styles. And now they've kind of spread all over China and even around the world now, people have opened up jianbing kiosks in stores and stands and it's become kind of like a popular thing. So that was the original inspiration, but also just ate a ton of awesome foods in China and then eventually, you know, I worked and I lived and I traveled all over. I lived in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Japan, traveled to Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, just kind of all over Asia, really. And ate so many good foods and just really loved it. And, uh, eventually I, well, I had an idea to start a jianbing business or to bring jianbing back to America and introduce it as like a, a new food. Um, in a branded way because previously, you can only get jianbing sort of on these, like, kind of rustic mom and pop, like, hole in the wall sort of stands, right? And I wanted to, sort of, um, clean it up, if you will, and like brand it and make it a more interesting, uh, experience, and while preserving the authentic nature of the food, and that became like my passion project, which then became my career, because I was doing other things, but this was all about, this was all like kind of for fun and talk for a while. But then eventually after having quite a bit of work experience and saving up some money and being a little more mature and I was kind of in my mid 30s at the time, 35. But I decided to start the business in Hong Kong. But, uh, that's kind of the real passionate, uh, the real story behind it is, is really that passion for the food, for that experience, living in Asia, that adventure, the traveling, night markets, you know, not just the cities, but the countryside, and then not just northern China, but southern China and other countries in Asia and there's, it's just such a foodie culture. And I mean, I knew what Chinese food was growing up in America, but it's different, right? It’s Chinese American food and we didn't have, in America at that time, the authentic, uh, diversity. The diversity of authentic Asian foods that we do now. So, but it's also about the environment. It's not just the food. It's like sitting out in street stalls, at hawker centers, you know.

William: Like the atmosphere of it.

Brian: Atmosphere. The atmosphere is a big part of the experience. Yes.

William: Okay, sounds like you definitely had, like, a lot of enjoyable experiences in Asia. Um, sounds really fun. Maybe I'll grow up one day and I'll also try traveling around the world like that.

Brian: You should. You should. I think your dad's taking you around a bit, though. You've traveled already, right?

William: Yeah! Okay, question number two. Do you know another language? If so, how did you learn it and can you share a little bit more about your expat experience?

Brian: Right. So, yes, I'm, uh, pretty, pretty fluent in Mandarin Chinese, not perfect. Uh, but I majored in Chinese in college in Mandarin and took academic classes in, in Boston at Brandeis to get a base. I also took summer session classes at Berkeley, uh, UC Berkeley nearby where you are, uh, to get a base, and then when I studied abroad in Beijing and Harbin, that's when it got really intense, and, uh, we lived with uh, like native Chinese speaking roommates who didn't speak English. We signed a contract, like not to speak English, pretty much for the duration of the program, which is really hard and it forces you to learn the language, even if you can't get something out. You need to ask how, figure out how to say it without speaking English and it forces your brain to adapt and to, it's like a, it's like a muscle that you're flexing in your head that's different. Uh, when you learn a language, easier when you're younger than when you're older, but, um, so that's what I learned and I learned reading and writing and, um, my reading and writing is not nearly as good as it used to be, but I can still speak a lot and listen. Uh, my vocabulary is more basic for, it's not as, it used to be a lot better, but I still use it a lot, a little bit every day somewhere. Uh, but I, before that, I grew up studying Spanish. Like my dad was a high school Spanish teacher, uh, for many years. So I know this, this interview is about, well, it's for [The Polyglot Initiative], right? So it's about being bilingual, multilingual, uh, which I love to hear. I really love that. Language is a big part of my life. My dad being a high school Spanish teacher. Uh, you know, had a lot of influence on me. I studied Spanish. I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed speaking another language. I enjoyed perfecting the dialect or perfecting the accent and pronouncing things correctly. Being able to use it with strangers that you don't know that speak those languages, right? And, um, I also grew up with a little bit of Hebrew going to Hebrew school a little bit when I was younger. Oh, but that was more just reading and writing. It wasn't conversational. So, but Chinese became my biggest thing. So Chinese is Mandarin Chinese is my best second language and then Spanish after that. Um, and I did take some Japanese classes as well before. So I was in Japan for a bit doing some competitive sports in Nagano and when I used to do winter sports. Um, and so I learned some basic Japanese as well. And there's kanji characters, which are like Chinese characters that they use in Japanese. So that helped a bit, but yeah, so languages really, really great and a lot of fun. It opens up your world a lot to meet people and try different things and to travel and to, like, flex this muscle in your brain. That's like

the language muscle. And it's almost like you have a different personality sometimes when you speak a different language. And, um, it's just a really wonderful, wonderful thing.

William: Right. I mean, it's always good to see how other people, like, view the world and be in their shoes. All right. So, for the third question, I was wondering how has incorporating Mandarin Chinese supported your field of work?

Brian: So, you know, it's had, languages has had an influence on my career throughout all the different stages of my career, I would say, you know, so, um, initially, when I was, so I've done, I did pro sports when I was younger. Then I worked in television and news journalism, then I worked in finance, and then I opened Mr Bing restaurants, and then Mr Bing became a sauce company. So that's kind of been my career, right? Initially, when I was, so I did my grad school in Chinese studies as well, at Columbia. And I was doing pro sports at the same time during the winters, and when I traveled to Japan and Asia, I would translate for the Chinese and the Taiwanese athletes that were competing because our coaches were English and German speaking, they didn't speak Chinese. So while competing and training and practicing, I would also have to translate some of the instructions and the coaching to other athletes because we shared coaches actually at that time. So that's the first thing. Then when I started working in television for NBC, in New York, and then CNBC, in Singapore, of course, the Chinese was helpful. In New York, I was giving tours of the TV studios, usually in English, but sometimes in Chinese, teaching people about the history of television and things like that. And then in Singapore, for CNBC Asia. It's mostly English speaking, but it always helps when you have the Chinese language to speak with people. Sometimes you can get a different angle on a story, or you can just, more importantly, connect with people a little bit more, you can speak their language and it just, it really warms things up, I think. Uh, and then when I transition to finance in Taiwan and Hong Kong, especially in Taiwan, uh, which is a heavy Chinese speaking area with less English. It helped with stock, like studying the market and stock, stock prices and research and news and just hearing, hearing things on the trading floor, hearing things on the street. Our job was to be the kind of the middleman helping buy and sell stocks for international investors who can read everything in English or read it online in Chinese, but it's if you have someone on the ground there who also kind of is tapped into what's happening on the ground and has relationships and you use your language for that. That really helps, right? It also gives you, a bit more, um, like, how do I put it, like, legitimacy/respect or from other people in other countries that are dealing working with you to know that you speak the language, the local language, right? Even if it's not perfect, it still helps. And then, uh, in Hong Kong, same thing, it also helped, but Hong Kong is more Cantonese speaking, but still, Hong Kong was becoming more and more Mandarin speaking, you know, when it returned to, uh, under the China flag, and Hong Kong people would still really respect me for being able to speak Mandarin. I didn't speak Cantonese, you know, so if I spoke Mandarin, I think they would appreciate it, even though it wasn't their first language, Cantonese is, but most of them can understand Mandarin and speak

that even though it has like an accent, but it also just helped in general, even with just taxis and restaurants and ordering food and just making friends. And then when I started opening Mr Bing jianbing restaurants, there was a lot of media coverage around it, including from mainland China and Mandarin speaking reporters. So I was able to do interviews and storytelling in both English and Chinese, and that helped a lot. That was definitely part of our, I guess, uniqueness and popularity was like this American “gweilo”, “lao wai”, like, you know, white guy from New York, selling authentic Beijing style jianbing in Hong Kong. And then they'd see me speak in Chinese on social media or it, it would, like, kind of confuse people, but in an interesting way, and they just, the whole story is just kind of unique. And then when I moved back to the States, you know, we transitioned eventually to selling chili crisp and Asian sauces that come from our restaurants, we closed the restaurants during COVID. We had 5 or 6 of them in New York. We had 2 of them in Hong Kong, big catering business, and a lot of our customers are Asian or native Chinese speakers, um, and it helps, right? And even on our packaging, it's Lao Jin Jian Bing is Goldberg's Chinese crepes, Lao Jin, Jin, or Jin is gold. I'm Goldberg, so that's my name, the family name. Bing is jianbing’s bing. The savory Chinese crepes that that we were known for doing, even though we sell sauce now. Where a lot of people know us and remember us from the restaurant days when we did the jianbing, the crepes, which is why the little man, little mascot man has a crepe spreader in one hand and that's kind of the cutter/flipper that you use to make the crepes too. Um, so there's a whole story behind it. You know, uh, it's fun. It's creative and it, I think, you know, the food makes people happy, but the story, I think, is also entertaining and, you know, we've been through a lot of, you know, ups and downs over the years, you know, evolving the business and surviving some really difficult times, uh, and reinventing ourselves and pivoting the business and it's a good story. But the language, the language is a big part of, you know, speaking Chinese has been obviously a really core key part of how I got into what I'm doing, right? You know, major in Chinese in college opened a lot of doors for me, career wise, relationship wise, business wise, friendship wise, food wise, all of those things. All of those things are impacted by learning another language, right?

William: All right, so speaking to the history of Mr Bing, so how is your vision for Mr Bing like evolved over time? And how do you hope to continue expanding the business?

Brian: So, that's a good question. I mean, it's, I think at the heart, at the heart of Mr Bing is really this desire and passion to share culinary stories and life stories from Asia, from living abroad, from travel overseas to share it with an American or international audience, right? Spend so many years over there, learning so many things, not just language, but cultural stuff, food stuff, people stuff, business stuff, music stuff, like so many things. And I want to give back by sharing that through Mr Bing, like by bringing Mr Bing here, whether it was the restaurants or now the sauces. It's, you know, that's kind of the reason why I created Mr Bing was to make something memorable, to make something that can, you know, add some goodness to other

people's lives and give back from like what I was so fortunate to be able to experience, uh, for so many years in in Asia. So, you know, first it was the restaurants, it was the jianbing, but then it became the sauces. And now growing the sauce. So there's more, you know, we have Asian barbecue sauces, we have dry spice blends, we have sriracha, like not just chili crisp, right? Uh, we might even bring back the jianbing, not by opening restaurants, but by teaching other cooks and chefs and, uh, like the cafeterias at college campuses or the cafeterias at Google and LinkedIn, uh, or at Goldman Sachs, Morgan [Stanley], like all these places that have these big cafeterias, like teach them how to make the jianbing and the Mr Bing way, and they can have our signage there when they do it. And they can, you know, use our ingredients more. Um, and there's more, I think, cultural things we can do to share our stories, share our cultural stories, share the food, be that on social media, be that, uh, in, you know, pop up activation events around the country at sporting events or at concerts or, you know, um, Yeah, there's a lot more around the culture of Mr Bing to share in different creative ways and music and in, you know, on television or on, uh, even potentially, besides the sauces, we could, there's the crepes that can be sold in a frozen version, potentially, or a refrigerated version that you can, like, instead of having to make a jianbing Chinese crepe from scratch, you can buy a pre-made one and heat it up. Potentially, I'm not saying that we're definitely doing those things. But, you know, that's a possibility, uh, as well as new versions of our sauces, like, uh, chili crisp mayo, chili crisp aioli, uh, you know, we're doing chili crisp barbecue sauces now, and it's not just Chinese. We have Thai flavors, we have Korean flavors. We have, you know, mild ones as well, not just spicy or sweet and spicy. So, there's, you know, that question of, when you develop new products, you have to think really carefully about them, because you can't do too many and go, otherwise you spread yourself thin and you lose focus on your core business. So sometimes you can just be really successful with one or two things, like sriracha, like Huy Fong sriracha, look at it. it's pretty much sriracha. They have sambal oelek, and they have some garlic chili paste, but mostly it's the sriracha, and they don't really do anything else. So for us, we're mostly known for chili crisp, and that's probably going to continue growing. We might have more types of it. But the other sauces, like the squeezable, squeezable versions of our product are growing in popularity and, so, that's what we're focused on that right now, but there is a larger vision for the brand, right, to become more things, but that's over time.

William: So, Yeah, I mean, it's always good to continue growing. Um, and for the final question that I have prepared, it's just, is there anything else that you would like us to highlight, anything you want to share, like is there more inspiration and anything like that?

Brian: Yeah, I would, I would say, you know, be courageous and take some risks, especially when you're younger and expose yourself to new things and new places, even if it's uncomfortable, you can learn from it, and it'll open up doors that you didn't expect, right? And language is a great way to do that. And if you have a chance to study abroad in college or even to go on international trips during high school, um, I would highly, highly recommend that. It's

such a great thing to do to get out of your bubble of where you live and explore other countries, other cultures, other languages, other people. And it really changes your perspective on things and makes you, uh, just a more well-equipped person and to enjoy life, to deal with life, ups and downs, and to be appreciative of what you have. And uh, just encourage that travel. Try new things. Yeah, just especially when you're young, expand your boundaries.

William: Of course. Uh, and I mean, that's it for today. I said, really, thanks so much for agreeing to this interview again. It was really wonderful talking to you.

Brian: Yep, my pleasure. I'm glad you reached out, William. I hope [The Polyglot Initiative] goes well. I think it's a great thing you're doing, promoting, uh, bilingual and multilingualism.

William: Thanks so much. Oh, oh, if that's it, I'll end the recording then.

Brian: Okay.

William: All right, thank you.

Brian: Thank you.