Fortunately, Joo was used to it. She had worked on Wall Street. Today, she is one of the four resident chefs on “Iron Chef UK” and executive chef of London’s swanky Playboy Club. It has been a surprising journey for the self-described “geeky” daughter of Korean immigrants who grew up in New Jersey wanting to be the next Madame Curie.

At Columbia Engineering, her professors’ enthusiasm drew Joo to engineering, operations research, and computers. She spent a summer building web pages at an investment bank, then tried the financial side the next year. The industry’s frenetic pace proved addictive, and she joined Morgan Stanley upon graduation.

Her career eventually led her to San Francisco. The office ran on New York time, so Joo had to be at work by 3 a.m. to prepare for 7:30 a.m. New York strategy meetings. After nearly five years, she was ready for a change. She quit and returned to New York to pursue her passion, cooking.

“I like cooking because it is science. The kitchen is a laboratory; you have catalysts, controls, acids, and bases,” she said. That attitude helped Joo land a position in the Savour test kitchen after graduating from the French Culinary Institute.

It was a true laboratory. “They would send a writer to some small town, and they would return with a recipe written in a foreign language on a napkin by a grandmother who was partly blind and going senile. Many of the ingredients were unavailable here. We had to find the right substitutes, methods, and techniques to make the recipe come out perfect,” she explained.

Joo left after one year, when her husband transferred to London. She freelanced and wrote restaurant reviews. Then one night, when she was dining at one of London’s top restaurants, the owner came out to greet guests. When he learned Joo was a chef, he asked why she was not working for him. Within days, she was whipping up pastries while enduring the verbal lashes of senior chefs—and loving the intense, charged atmosphere.

She began appearing on television, a chef from a top restaurant demonstrating how to make her mother’s specialties in a city where Korean food was essentially unknown.

She continued writing. The Wall Street Journal essay attracted the attention of an agent, who sent her to a casting call for the British franchise of “Iron Chef.” She was a natural—witty, articulate, and with a different cooking style than the show’s other Iron Chefs. She was also the only woman in the lineup.

Her new stage enabled Joo to launch other projects. Most recently, she signed up as executive chef of the soon-to-open Playboy Club in London, where she will serve upscale versions of American comfort foods.

For that geeky girl from New Jersey, it has been a fast and thrilling ride.