

Nouvelle Seoul by Stephanie Han

Sunny Huh Byung-Sun has a beef — the public’s perception of Korean food. “A lot of people think it’s just meat and grill,” says the chef and part owner of the “contemporary Korean” restaurant, PAA, on Hollywood Road. “I’m a little upset that they don’t know about the other things. It’s like an Italian chef who has to deal with the fact that all people know is a pizza.”

While PAA serves excellent grilled beef and other meats, Huh and his counterparts at Mr. Kim’s in Lan Kwai Fong, and the Jin Luo Bao Korean Restaurant in Causeway Bay are slowly changing local expectations of Korean food.

It seems many Koreans are as ignorant as foreigners of their nation’s cuisine. Many of their traditional and court recipes have been lost and forgotten in the turbulence of the past centuries politics. One woman, for instance, recalled how she assumed the sprinkling of barley on white rice at school lunches was a Korean tradition. Years later, she learned the practice stem from a government campaign to promote barley consumption.

Korean cuisine has been revived with the lighter taste, even though it now takes longer to prepare. The traditional flavors of garlic, ginger, hot pepper and soy sauce remain but, as at PAA, without the taste-altering monosodium glutamate that may cause diners discomfort after a typical Korean meal.

Koreans are also celebrating the return of “country cuisine” with dishes such as *sam gye tang*, a chicken soup Huh used to eat at his rural home. At PAA however, Huh has adapted the date-and-ginseng-flavoured recipe to Hong Kong diners by replacing a whole chicken with boneless, skinless breast.

“It was messy, so... Modern touch,” he says, explaining how a delicate eater might not enjoy the potentially messy prospect of grabbing the fowl’s carcass from a bowl.

Many people assume Korean food is meat based, even though it actually plays a secondary role to a wide variety of vegetable dishes. Mr. Kim’s and PAA highlight dishes that cater to a non-meat-eating clientele. “We believe certain items can be done in a modern way. Like salads,” says Mr. Kim’s spokesman Ben man. “Traditionally, Koreans don’t have solids in the way we think of them. And we thought of certain items, vegetarian dishes from the Royal Palace cuisine, to create something new for the customers.”

Another difference between the typical Korean establishments and these new restaurants is their menu offerings. Even today in Korea, people seek specific restaurants for their particular eating desires. If you crave grilled chicken, you go to a place that serves grilled chicken. If you are in the mood for soup, you go to a soup restaurant. When Korean restaurants became popular overseas, however, they did not have the luxury to cater to such specific desires. Restaurants emerge that served a multitude of dishes – without necessarily the proper execution.

“If you have 200 items on your menu, how do you get quality control?” says Huh. “I personally prepare every sauce. In many restaurants to people bring out a table of dishes and the Westerner has no idea which dish to eat first or how it should be eaten. What we want to do is not to scare them but introduce them to our food and we do this through our Western presentation.” For Man, a variety of dishes and minimal grilling make good business sense. “When you allow people to just grill the food themselves too, it jeopardizes the turnover ratio. We needed efficient service.”

If the cuisine seems contemporary, Mr. Kim’s and PAA look different to their smoky-grill counterparts. Their interiors are sleek and elegant and feature contemporary music, interesting art or photographs on the

walls and the food arrives on ceramic ware which shows off the neat portions of *namul* (vegetable side dishes). Ceramic ware is traditionally used in the summer, silver or brass in the winter to retain heat, and the former's use in Hong Kong is appropriate. The meal is served course by course and Western utensils are provided with chopsticks. "It is our job not to educate the customer, but to provide a different atmosphere," Man says. "They feel it's different. We wanted the modern design and features, but in general we prefer the traditional cuisine. People want an updated look. This is Lan Kwai Fong — they expect something stylish, cutting edge."

A current fusion trend in the West is the promotion of flavored sakes. Huh has taken this step further at PAA, creating his own flavored *shoju* (potato spirit) in ginseng, coffee, green tea, cucumber and *omija*-a Korean berry flavours.

Johnny Woo, co-owner of Jim Luo Bao Restaurant in Causeway Bay, has a different take on Korean cuisine. While he has a few dishes in the Royal style such as *los pyun chae* (smoked beef wrapped around vegetables" and also features lamb on the menu, he insists his food is traditional and crowds of Korean diners endorse the authenticity of his smokeless-grill restaurant. Jin Luo Bao has a contemporary Korean look with the dark-wood interior, red fixtures and contrasting aqua seats, but serves food that does not stray far from its origins, right down to the stainless steel chopsticks that are ubiquitous in Korea but are rarely seen abroad as they are difficult to handle. At dessert you may also find a little plate with a slice of watermelon, a single cherry tomato and two orange Jell-O cubes; and on serving by Western standards, but not surprising here. Jin Luo features the style of food with which many Koreans are familiar.

At the heart of the nation's cuisine is kimchee — side dishes of a spicy pickled cabbage or turnip. Some take weeks or months to ferment, others are freshly tossed before serving. For all of the new modes of presentation, the kimchee at PAA and Mr. Kim's remains true to the classic form which has its fiery roots in the 17th century, although the plane, salted vegetable can be traced as far back as 683.

The new Korean restaurants feature *bulgogi* (grilled beef) and *dolsot bibim bab* (stone-pot rice), traditional Palace cuisine and also some new dishes that fuse the past and present, such as the delicate lobster spring roll at PAA or the *sang sun mari tui gim* (deep-fried group of rolls) at Mr. Kim's.

Your assumptions about Korean restaurants will be challenge. "Sometimes, people come in and asked to see me; they want to make sure there is a Korean chef," Huh says. "But people have to take a risk. At first they are hesitant, seeing all this, Koreans especially," he adds pointing to the restaurant interior. "But you know after they eat here — 100% for sure — they always like it."

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