

# KOREA

## *Comes to the Fore*

With healthy ingredients, simple preparations and flavorful meat,  
Korean cuisine could be the next great Asian inspiration



BY JOAN LANG

If Korean food is not as well known among non-Asians as, say, Japanese or Thai food, just wait a bit; its time is about to come. Korean cuisine is healthy, naturally low in fat, seasonally focused, heavy on fruits and vegetables and full of texture and flavor — all the qualities American chefs and consumers embrace.

Many of the cuisine's most iconic specialties — kimchi, bulgogi and kalbi, bibimbap, mandu, japchae, pajeon — can be made easily accessible to non-Korean diners, as chefs are now demonstrating.

Korean food is known for its simple preparation methods and strong, spicy, direct flavors, attributes that can be both a blessing and a curse. Kimchi (also spelled kimchee), is a case in point. The emblematic condiment consists of spicy, fermented vegetables; Napa cabbage and radish are the most familiar to U.S. consumers. To the uninitiated, kimchi is a strange and strong-smelling oddity. To fans, it is an addiction. Since it's the single item most closely associated with Korean food in many peoples' minds, a culinary public relations campaign is in order.

### KOREAN, SLIGHTLY RECAST

"Korean food is so delicious, but very few Americans have tried it," says Saeri Yoo Park, who recently opened Moim restaurant in the trendy Park Slope neighborhood of Brooklyn, N.Y., with the express purpose of introducing diners to Korean flavors and food. Park went to The French Culinary Institute and then paid her dues as a line cook at several high-profile Manhattan restaurants, including Spice Market, Café Gray and The Modern, but she had her own restaurant in mind the entire time.

The menu at Moim, which means "gathering" in Korean, was designed to reconstruct the time-honored specialties of Korea and recast them in ways that appeal to non-Asians. Menu categories of Nibble Plates, Small Plates, Main Plates and Rice & Noodles break apart the traditional Korean way of dining, which calls for everything being on the table at the same time. This progression introduces Korean favorites in a way that Americans understand, with

**Baby Calamari Dumplings are part of the "Cal-Korean" cuisine at Slow Fish in Huntington Beach, Calif., where a fusion approach also incorporates tenets of the slow-food movement.**

English descriptions and an upgraded presentation style that give the food an aura of familiarity.

The raw beef dish known as yook hwe, for instance, becomes "steak tartare with Asian pear and pine nuts," while Dol Sot Bi Bim Bop is a "hot, stone rice bowl with vegetables and bulgogi," thinly sliced beef that has been marinated and then grilled.

Park thinks that the relatively recent arrival of Korean immigrants is one reason Americans are unfamiliar with the cuisine. "Until the late 1980s and early '90s, Korea had been a relative unknown to most Americans," says Park, herself a native of Seoul. Then, too, with the Korean War and the current political situation in North Korea, there is a general negative image to counteract.

"The success of companies like Hyundai has helped Americans become more aware of Korea as an economic entity," says Park. "But there's still a whole cultural scene to be explored."

The widespread attention being paid to Korean-American chef David Chang and his Manhattan restaurants Momofuku Noodle Bar and Momofuku Ssäm Bar certainly isn't hurting the cause of Korean food in the United States. And while Chang's cooking runs pretty far afield of traditionalism, his eclectic and deeply personal approach to Korean-accented items like seasonal pickles, braised pork and other marinated slow-cooked meats, noodle dishes and the pancake-wrapped Korean "burritos" known as ssäm, have certainly proved that there's an appetite for the stuff.

Like Chang, chef Myung-Sook Lee is credited as being a leader in the development and refinement of Korean

## QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ Kimchi, kalbi, japchae, bulgogi and other key Korean culinary profiles
- ▶ How Korean operators adjust flavors and presentations to appeal to a wider range of American diners
- ▶ Kimchi-mashed potatoes, seaweed rice, barbecued meats and other fusion approaches to introducing Korean elements to menus

# Korea's GREATEST HITS

## A rundown of the country's culinary favorites

*NOTE: Korean words are regional and also have been widely Romanized, so spellings can vary significantly*

- **BIBIMBAP (aka bibimbop):** A group of rice dishes, consisting of a bowl of warm rice served with seasoned vegetables, beef and other toppings, mixed to taste with chile paste. Dolsot bibimbap is a variation served in a sizzling stone bowl and topped with a fried egg that gets mixed into the dish by the diner
- **BULGOGI ("fire meat"):** Thinly sliced beef marinated in soy sauce, sesame oil, garlic, sugar, pepper and other seasonings. Traditional variations include pork, chicken and squid
- **JAPCHAE (aka chapchae):** Stir-fried cellophane noodles cooked with vegetables and sometimes beef, seasoned with soy and sugar and garnished with fresh chiles and sesame seeds
- **KALBI (aka galbi):** Seasoned or marinated grilled short ribs (beef or pork), typically served with lettuce or herbal perilla leaves and dipped in a spicy chile sauce
- **KIMCHI (aka kimchee):** A condiment/relish consisting of fermented chile-spiked vegetables — most commonly Napa cabbage or daikon radish — without which no Korean meal is complete; also part of the array of side dishes known as panchan served with Korean meals
- **MANDU (aka mandoo):** Dumplings, served fried or steamed
- **PANCHAN (aka banchan):** Small dishes of pickled vegetables and other preserved foods that are brought to the table at the beginning of the meal. Can include bean sprouts, hot peppers, squash, cucumbers and other seasonal vegetables, as well as tofu, chile-spiked raw crabs or tiny fish; kimchi is a type of panchan
- **PAJEON:** A hearty "pancake" made of beaten eggs and flour, cooked with scallions and sometimes other ingredients, including squid and various vegetables

cuisine in America, in part through her role as the president of the Culinary Institute of California and as the first Korean challenger on "Iron Chef."

Both Chang and Lee were chef-presenters at The Culinary Institute of America's 2007 Worlds of Flavor conference, held at the CIA's Greystone campus in St. Helena, Calif. "The Rise of Asia," which marked the 10th

anniversary of the celebrated Worlds of Flavor conference series, featured chefs and cuisines from across Asia, including Korea.

At the conference, chefs highlighted three traditional Korean menu items most adaptable to the American foodservice market: japchae, a stir-fried cellophane noodle dish; kalbi, the popular grilled short ribs; and bulgogi, a marinated beef dish.

## BRANCHING OUT

Koreatown in the mid-Wilshire area of Los Angeles is home to the largest number of ethnic Koreans outside Asia, serving as a magnet for Korean food aficionados of all persuasions. A new generation of Korean chefs and entrepreneurs is branching out, geographically and culturally, to create restaurants that fuse Korean flavors and techniques with such non-ethnic amenities as high-style décor, sophisticated wine and cocktail lists and friendly, English-speaking service.

The phenomenon is not limited to Korean-American owners and chefs.

"I'm trying to get to know Korean food better myself," says Cliff Wharton, chef at TenPenh, a pan-Asian restaurant in Washington, D.C.

Wharton recently inaugurated a daily \$21 "blue plate" bento box special. Monday means Korean food, including bulgogi over rice, with pork-filled dumplings, house-made kimchi and a poached pear. Other Korean flavor references include Five-Spice-Chile Tea-Rubbed Beef Tenderloin with kimchi-noodle cake and Korean chile hollandaise. Wharton rubs the tenderloin with black tea leaves, five-spice powder and other seasonings before searing it. He serves it with a crispy cake made of cooked soba noodles mixed with kimchi and a spicy hollandaise with fiery Korean chile paste.

TenPenh's kimchi is the result of experimentation. To capture the full flavor of marination without the infamous funk of some of the traditional methods that involves long fermentation in sealed vessels, Wharton takes a fresher approach. He salts Napa cabbage to remove excess moisture, then rinses it and bathes the vegetable overnight in rice wine, ginger, garlic and fish sauce, with watercress, minced scallion, bean thread and Korean red pepper for an unusually fresh taste.

## 3 KOREAN DISHES TO TRY NOW

JAPCHAE

KALBI

BULGOGI

At the Culinary Institute of America's 2007 Worlds of Flavor/Rise of Asia conference in St. Helena, Calif., these dishes were identified as "must-try" menu items to introduce American diners to Korean cuisine.



LEE KUMI REE

"It's not completely authentic, but it gets the idea across, and it's much more appealing to American diners," says Wharton. "I figure once they've become more familiar with Korean flavors and ingredients, you can start experimenting with special Korean dishes."

David Chang concurs; as he noted at the CIA conference, "[Korean] flavor profiles designed for American palates can be midway and still be authentic."

### EASING IN

This "entry-level" approach is key to the success of many of today's successful Korean crossover restaurants. At RoHan Lounge, a hip "Korean fusion" restaurant in San Francisco, a handful of Korean-style dishes do yeoman's work introducing diners to the flavors and general principles of the cuisine, bolstered by other contemporary Asian specialties.

"We start with traditional Korean dishes, but we give them the RoHan twist," explains Manager John Kim. These include house-made daikon radish kimchi and a Korean-style tuna tartare made with red and green bell peppers and spiced wonton chips.

Korean grill items include kalbi, or grilled marinated beef short ribs, and pork bulgogi, served with the traditional Korean complement of lettuce leaves for wrapping, plus fresh garlic, jalapeños and mak geong (spicy Korean red-bean paste), creating a roll-your-own dinner.

The other linchpin in the RoHan concept is the soju bar, soju being the traditional Korean liquor distilled from rice, barley and sweet potato. Although classified as a wine because of its relatively low (24 percent) alcohol content, soju behaves a lot like vodka. It offers an array of crisp clean tastes and an inherent mixability that makes it perfect for cocktails like the Happy Family, which blends soju, koko cream, fresh pineapple and orange juice with a splash of grenadine and is served on the rocks.

### MEAT-CENTRIC MENUS

Like RoHan, many of the contemporary Korean restaurants opening in recent years have focused on grilled meats — an interesting development, since meat is very expensive in Korea, and going out for barbecue in that country is akin to going to an ultra-high-end steak restaurant here. As in Japan, restaurants in Korea are highly specialized, serving one type of food — such as bibimbap (the classic rice dish seen in different regional guises with different toppings throughout Korea) or grilled meats — rather than a broad spectrum of choices, as they do here.

E3rd, a new steakhouse and lounge in Los Angeles, employs a meat-centric strategy for introducing American diners to the wonders of Korean fare.

"There are many wonderful Korean barbecue restaurants in Los Angeles, but many Americans are afraid to go to them because

The variety of grilled meat dishes is one Korean culinary approach American palates can easily embrace.

# CASE STUDY

## Korean goes fast-casual

BY STEPHEN GOLDMANN

The Culinary Edge, a San Francisco-based culinary development firm, recently helped define and launch Seoul Brothers Korean Grill, a fast-casual concept based in Pasadena, Calif. The founders, brothers Alex

and Andrew Hong, had a very close personal connection to the authentic dishes that initially inspired them, so the firm's task was to help them translate these culinary inspirations into a scalable concept with broad appeal for both Korean food aficionados and the uninitiated. The menu-development process took

into account five main attributes The Culinary Edge addresses when bringing a cutting-edge concept to market.

**1. CRAVEABILITY** — In any concept, the food must be appealing and fill a need. For Korean food, the traditional sweet, grilled meat balanced with spicy chile and garlic offered a delicious option that is easily understood, but minor tweaks to sugar and salt helped ensure that this spoke to the American palate.

**2. INCLUSIVENESS** — In an upscale, business-centered section of Pasadena, Calif., the lunch crowd would provide an important target customer. In order to compete here, an operator needs to offer both fast service and an easy-to-understand menu that has something for everyone. The menu needn't be long or complex but thoughtful in addressing potential concerns and eating styles.

**3. AUTHENTIC APPROACH** — To a Korean, *panchan*, the myriad small plates that accompany almost any meal, provide a yardstick to measure both the skill and generosity of an establishment. At Seoul Brothers, *panchan* make up the toppings for embellishing the grilled meat and rice combinations, adding an colorful display with which diners can customize their meal. For those new to Korean dining, this creates an active display; for the experienced diner, it is reassurance that the traditional approach is understood.

**4. ONE STEP, NOT TWO** — Grilled Korean steak would be delicious on a salad or in a sandwich, but for Seoul Brothers, this leap to fusion did not make sense. While we might sway meat-and-potatoes eaters to try a Korean-style steak, teaching them to accept Korean and then fusion is two steps too far from their comfort zone.

**5. OPERATIONAL SCALABILITY** — Keep it simple. Consistency and quality are key to growing a concept grow quickly and profitably.

STEPHEN GOLDMANN is a chef and principal of The Culinary Edge at [www.theculinaryedge.com](http://www.theculinaryedge.com). He can be e-mailed at [stephen@theculinaryedge.com](mailto:stephen@theculinaryedge.com).

they are such an unknown," says owner Jason Ha, the son of a Japanese father and Korean mother, who came to the United States 20 years ago. "I wanted to make a casual, inviting restaurant that would be comfortable for Americans and still share the strong Korean tradition of marinated, grilled meats."

Ergo, the E3rd menu has a number of meat dishes that are bathed in more-or-less traditional marinades, blending the Korean elements of fruity and sweet with salty and spicy. Kalbi, or short ribs, are very popular, although they are called E3rd Rib Steak and Imperial Ribs and are served two different ways.

One version is sliced thin, marinated overnight and grilled to order; another is cut into 3-inch-thick pieces, braised for several hours in flavorful liquid until melt-in-the-mouth tender, then crisped on the grill at the pickup. In either case, the marinade and braising liquid consists of a traditional mixture of soy, honey, pineapple juice, ground Asian pear, spices and a hint of sesame oil, which penetrates and tenderizes the meat and also helps the surface to caramelize on the grill. Similar treatment is given to pork steak, ribs and chicken.

For true beginners, there is also a popular Kimchi Filet Mignon appetizer, in which the meat is thinly sliced, seared and served with kimchi-mashed potatoes. Ha is particularly proud of the potato dish.

"Kimchi is very important in Korean culture, where it is eaten with a simple meal of rice to add flavor, spice and crunch," says Ha, "so we took that idea and applied it to potatoes, which every steakhouse must have."

The kimchi is chopped and stir-fried, then mixed into very smooth, buttery mashed potatoes, which neutralize the pungency but benefit from the spiciness and crunchy texture. Ha believes the mash has helped make E3rd's signature Traction Kimchi Burger (rib-eye mixed with kimchi, served with the potatoes and onion rings) a best seller.

Korean chef Sean An, who helped Ha develop the recipes at E3rd and at Ha's sushi-intensive Zip Fusion, went on to supervise the kitchen at Slow Fish in Huntington Beach, Calif. This new "Cal-Korean" restaurant celebrates the slow-food movement; not surprisingly, An's signature kiwi-marinated Slow Beef Tender Ribs are prominently featured



NAMU

At Namu, blending Korean and Japanese influences with local ingredients brings sophisticated flavors to the San Francisco scene.

in a menu that also includes spicy marinated pork, bulgogi, fusion specialties like black-rice sushi and creative small plates and salads.

“The two-step cooking process [12 hours in the marinade, then two to two-and-a-half hours braising in the same liquid] makes the meat very, very tender and flavorful,” says An. “If you just cooked it without marinating it first, the flavor wouldn’t be nearly as intense.”

#### ASIAN CROSS-POLLINATION

Even owners of the most traditional Korean restaurants are beginning to change their thinking in order to appeal to Westerners.

“I know Japanese food is more well-known than Korean,” says Sang Han, the owner of Kimchi Korean Restaurant in State College, Pa. “I think it is because the food looks very simple and clean, especially the sushi.”

Han, who has been in business for two years, strives to make his food fresh and high in quality, even though the wide-ranging menu lists more than 70 different items, most of them traditional Korean specialties.

Han plays up the healthiness of Korean food, with many vegetarian dishes and lots of fresh vegetables in the stews, hot pots, noodles and other items. Menu copy is in English, not Korean. There is a section of appetizers (pancakes, dumplings and rice cakes), lunch specials and a kid’s menu.

Spicy and slightly spicy dishes are carefully marked. Bibimbop — four different varieties, variously topped with sliced beef, short ribs, tofu and seafood — is always a favorite, probably for its comfort-food appeal, according to Han, who notes that 60 to 70 percent of Kimchi’s customer base is non-Asian.

“Americans like the food. They come here once and like it, because there’s so much variety, and there are many vegetables, so it’s

healthy,” Han says. “They are getting more familiar with Korean food.”

At Namu in San Francisco, owners and brothers Dennis, Daniel and David Lee take their inspiration from Korean and Japanese ingredients, philosophy and techniques.

“We are authentic, but not traditional,” explains Dennis, who is also one of the chefs. “As Asian-Americans, we have been exposed to a lot of other Asian cultures, and we feel that Korean food is underrepresented in the United States. Fusing it with more familiar Japanese food is the way to go.”

There’s plenty of historical logic to support this approach. Korea and Japan have long traded many elements of their cultures across their shared boundaries of the Sea of Japan and the Korea Strait. Koreans also eat sushi, for instance, although it is called gimbap (“seaweed rice”) and is much less dependent upon raw fish than Japan’s version.

Namu’s Lee brothers are pressing the point, however, to help make the Korean part more accessible. Korean-influenced menu items include a Banchan Plate sampler of seasonal vegetables, Spicy Pork Ribs with Kojichan sake marinade, and Kalbi Style Skirt Steak and dumplings.

A variety of shared plates was designed to emulate Korean anju — small plates of flavorful food eaten while enjoying cocktails, like tapas or the pub-style snacks served in the Japanese izakaya (tavern).

Japanese items include albacore tuna tataki, yakitori and miso-marinated black cod served in a bento box with side dishes and rice. However, Dennis Lee makes it clear that he and his brothers have high hopes for bringing Korean items to the forefront.

The learning curve will shorten this summer, when the Lees use a fleet of street carts to offer Korean-style barbecued meat specialties, perhaps in sandwiches and salads. They also may explore the possibilities of bibimbap, the traditional rice dish.

“If you can get people to sample the food, then they fall in love with the flavors,” says Dennis Lee. ☺

JOAN LANG, *founder and editorial director of Full Plate Communications in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, can be e-mailed at joanmlang@aol.com.*

▶ **SAY KIMCHI:**

Pickles are hot, and global versions offer welcome flavor variations

- ▶ **GRILL MARKS:** Add some Korean barbecue flavors to your next steak sauce