array OF TASTES

From the pickled to the spicy, Korean starters pack a flavorful punch

by Seánan Forbes

When you think about it, the idea of Korean "appetizers" as defined as Westernized as the *banchi* taco:

"Asian food is not typically divided," observes Rodelio Agbibot, Corporate Executive Chef of BLT restaurants. "There are just full meals, and they happen to be big or they happen to be small."

Rachel Yang of *Joule* in Seattle agrees; "Koreans are not really people who have three-course meals. They [don't do] appetizer-entrée-dessert. It's just one big table covered with all kinds of food," she says. "It's the ultimate small plates. all at once, in your face." Pretty much the only thing guaranteed is *kimchi*' spicy, pickled and as habit-forming as French fries.

In the West, where appetizers are expected, these Korean small plates and bar foods come into play—and they win. "Korean appetizers are on the edge of being a little spicy," Agibot says, "and also pickled." Those two flavors leave the mouth wanting the next bite, and the next course.

SMALL ORDERS

"There's a lot of Korean food that works as appetizers," says Yang. "Pancakes, *kimchi*, stir-fried vegetables, tofu dishes—lots of small dishes work as starters, but lots of times, they're also condiments. It's fun because you get to try different things, from a mild pancake to spicy *kimchi* and fermented fish." When there's only a bite of something new—acorn jelly, for example—Yang believes patrons are likelier to try it.

Her black bean and squid pancake ($11, recipe, p. 86) introduces classic Korean flavor combinations: Squid, black beans, mung beans, garlic and ginger. Her smoked tofu with *hoshimeji* confit, soy truffle vinaigrette ($9, recipe, p. 85) is one of Joule's most popular dishes. "People who don't like tofu try it and love it." Customers accustomed to bland bean curd get a surprise. "We use medium-density tofu," says Yang, "and we steep it in seasoned soy sauce, and then we cold-smoke it." Cold-smoking maintains the tofu's soft texture while imparting a smoky taste. The smoked curd is topped with a *hoshimeji* confit with shallots and soy-truffle vinaigrette. "You get this smoky, earthy, nutty flavor."

Bacon-wrapped rice cake (*duk*) with jalapeño ponzu sauce, $3; Chef-Owner Debbie Lee, *Ahn Jou*, Los Angeles. RECIPE, p. 85.

Smoked tofu, *hoshimeji* confit, soy-truffle vinaigrette, $9.; Chef-Co-Owner Rachel Yang, *Joule*, Seattle. RECIPE, p. 85.

SO MOCHI MORE

That kind of inventiveness is good for chefs, too, as with Yang's ever-changing *mochi* dishes.

Mochi have a chewy texture that's unfamiliar to American palates. "People are a little startled when they have it," she says. "We crisp it up in oil, so it's crunchy on the outside, chewy on the inside, and it takes up the flavor of sauce."

Yang has paired her *mochi* with chorizo in sweet chili sauce. She adds cabbage and sesame [perilla] leaves—which are like shiso, "but with more flavor." The *mochi* are constants; the things they're served with change. Yang isn't afraid to pull in seasonal items and pair them in unconventional ways.

CELEBRATING PUB GRUB

Debbie Lee runs *Ahn-Joo*, a food truck in Los Angeles, so small plates are all she sells, ranging in price from $3 to $7. "*Ahn joo*?" Lee explains, "is a snack you would eat while drinking at a Korean cooking house." Some days, Los Angeleno queue for over an hour to get Korean pub food. "We park at pubs, where they don't have food," she says.

It started when Lee was invited to set up a "cool little food truck concept" for the LA Film Festival. It made economic sense, Lee thought; it would save money on renting a kitchen when catered. "What started as a no-thought process has become a brand," she says.

Lee's found a balance that pleases just about everybody. "I get the young, the old, I get every walk of life, all cultures."

Lee and her staff make a point of telling new customers how people eat in a Korean drinking house. "You start with the skewers, typically. You maybe get a little something on the side to nosh on—cucumbers or a pickle of some sort. You move on to dumplings and maybe a pancake, [then] the spicy stuff."

Her food's not complicated. Much of it, like her bacon-wrapped rice cakes or *duk* ($3, recipe, p. 85), is based on her grandmother's cooking. When Lee was small, her mother would drop her off at her grandmother's early in the day. Her grandmother would make her a snack with bacon, "because," Lee says, "I would eat anything with bacon." Lee decided her *duk* would be further improved with a bit of acid. "I had the luck to work with some great Japanese chefs," Lee remarks, which meant she could make her own ponzu sauce. *Duk* are traditionally eaten just into the new year in a bone marrow broth with egg drops; they bring good fortune. Lee also makes another holiday food, *shrimp jeon* with ginger soy vinegar ($8.95, recipe, plateonline.com). Lee's interpretation of that traditional dish includes shrimp, egg and chive: satisfaction with a snap of gingered soy.

SMALL MENUS, BIG SUCCESSES

You don't need to be in a big city to make this work. Yong Suk Kwon, chef-owner at The Golden Pig in Cecil, Pa., always has a packed house. "My customers love pancakes," Kwon says. She gives them a choice of mixed vegetable or *kimchi*: same base, but with different ingredients stirred in. She serves *mandu* in egg soup, and two potatoes: fried or sweet.

"It's simple," Kwon says. But it has to be; she has a tiny kitchen and just two tables in the front of the house.

People come to The Golden Pig for straightforward Korean food—nothing adapted or Americanized. "I don't change anything. I do it the way we eat," she says. In the beginning, she was nervous, thinking people might not like full-on Korean food. But her customers wait for hours to sit with strangers—and there's no formality. "People share food, they talk to each other—they become friends."

FINDING BALANCE

Korean appetizers sell well in food trucks, family restaurants and upscale hotels. Kristine Subido is the executive chef of *Wave*, in the W Chicago Lakeshore, and she's all about appetizers. "Wave is a small-plates restaurant," she says, "designed for sharing. It's more fun [to not] have one dish in front of you."

Although the restaurant's core menu is Mediterranean, Subido draws on Asian influences.

"[I like that] Korean food can be spicy, but it always balances with a sweet element, and there's also a pickle."

Her spicy Korean chicken wings ($9, recipe, plateonline.com) achieve that balance, while remaining traditional, "I wanted it to have more crispness, a crunchy coating." She also added honey. "I wanted it to be sweet and spicy."

Subido also starts diners off with classic beef lettuce wraps with New York strip ("So it has a good amount of marbling"), crusted with salt and Korean hot pepper, seared and sliced, served in Bibb or Boston lettuce with radish *kimchi* and garlic *kimchi* ($12, recipe, plateonline.com).

WEST MEETS EAST

Peter Mah, owner of *Bo Ju Ju* in Chicago, takes a similar approach. "We've Westernized the menu, but we've kept all of our dishes very authentic in taste." He plays to the family-style tradition, encouraging people to share with dishes like his *tuna mandu* ($7, recipe, p. 20), a popular Korean dumpling.

"We have *mandu pajun*, which is a scallion pancake, *bim bap*, which is similar to *mak*: a seaweed roll. Koreans put beef in there instead of fish. It seems like something you'd share, so we put it in the appetizer category."

"We separate it by dish," he says, "even though Koreans don't do it that way. We wanted it to be less intimidating, and we wanted guests to be able to navigate the menu easily.

Jin Ju's menu changes seasonally—as food does in Korea. "That's the *banchun* part, which are sharable side dishes. If bean sprouts are in season, they'll make a bean sprout side dish. It's part of every Korean meal," says Mah.

Pajeon, the popular bean sprout pancakes, originated in North Korea. In 1948, when Korea was split into North and South Korea, North Koreans who were trapped in Seoul without any opportunity to go home began to cook these pancakes on the street, in the area now home to the famed Kwangjang Market.

It's cleaning up of small bites on the table are enticing diners to delve into Korean flavors, textures and ingredients.

Agibot explains, "It's a combination of great, approachable food; a warm environment—and you have to become a part of the culture of your market." Spark your customer's attention and they'll not only come back, but they'll stay—just one more small, spicy dish at a time.

Seánan's Forbes likes the rice scraped off the stone bowl at the end of *bibimbap*. ☆ For recipes from this article visit plateonline.com.

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Mandu

Owner Peter Mah, Jin Ju, Chicago

Yield: 3 servings

Menu price: $7; food cost/serving: N/A

Beef, ground	1 Lb
Vegetable oil	as needed
Sea salt	as needed
Freshly ground black pepper	as needed
Cabbage, head, shredded	1 each
Mung bean sprouts	5 Oz
Onions, finely chopped	1 Oz
Tofu, finely chopped	2 Oz
Chives, green, finely chopped	2 Oz
Mandu wrappers	24 each
Soy sauce dipping sauce (see note)	as needed

1. In a frying pan, brown ground beef in oil, then season with salt and pepper and reserve.

2. Blanch cabbage for 1 to 2 minutes, drain and reserve.

3. Blanch mung bean sprouts in boiling water 20 to 30 seconds, drain and reserve.

4. To make filling, combine cabbage, mung beans, onions, tofu and chives and squeeze out water with cheesecloth. Toss with beef.

5. Wet edge of *mandu* wrapper with water by running finger across. Add 1 tablespoon filling, fold in half to close and pinch ends. Drop *mandu* in hot vegetable oil for about 30 seconds until golden brown. To steam, drop prepared *mandu* in boiling water for 2 to 30 seconds, then place in bamboo steamer and microwave for 1 minute.

Note: See plateonline.com for soy sauce dipping sauce.

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Black bean and squid pancake, garlic chive, pickled ginger, $11, Chef Rachel Yang, *Joule*, Seattle. RECIPE, p. 86.