



THE INS AND OUTS OF HARDCORE KOREAN

Seoul to Squeeze

By Michael Nagrant

“HARDCORE KOREAN” IS NOT AN ASIAN PUNK BAND. Rather, it’s the style of food that Dan Choi, the fervent owner of one-month-old Korean Seoulfood Café, hopes to bring to Chicago. Choi’s restaurant is in the middle of a food desert at the edges of the Loop, and so he doesn’t get much foot traf-

fic. The Mexican spot that previously inhabited his space disappeared quicker than state tax dollars after a Patty Blagojevich real-estate deal, and so if he sees you peeking in the window, he’ll collar you on the sidewalk and sell his food with the verve of an old Maxwell Street peddler.

What he’ll tell you is: twenty-five years ago he operated a Loop Korean buffet named Orient Express at Chicago and Rush. He eventually closed the business, operated nightclubs and an import/export business, but after watching DVDs of Korean food television and reading books on the holistic properties of Korean food, he was inspired to get back in to the business.

In the old days, he was serving up Americanized versions of Korean dishes, along with a smattering of Chinese-style eats. But these days he wants to go beyond ubiquitous Korean bbq beef and fried-egg-topped rice-filled bowls of BiBimBap, offering dishes like Ojinga Bokum, stir-fried spicy squid and Sangubsal kimchi, pork belly with spicy, fermented cabbage. He laments that Korean joints in Chicago have taken out the spice and added too much salt and butter to traditional dishes to cater to American palates.

In addition to catering to your stomach with authentic eats, Choi is interested in treating the body and mind. Choi says, “You know how there’s that cough medicine scare for babies. In Korea, we cut off the top of an Asian pear, add honey and chopped fresh ginger, and boil, steam or microwave it. Eat that and the cough will go away.” He adds, “We make a chicken soup with ginseng that’s like Viagra.”

If you rely solely on the spicy house kimchi, you might not need any of that chicken soup to perk things up. The fermented cabbage is a cornerstone of most Korean restaurants, though many places buy it from wholesale vendors. At Korean Seoulfood Café, Choi’s chef makes it in-house. On a recent Friday night, a harried Choi carried a five-gallon white plastic bucket of the stuff and walked around the burnished-copper-walled dining room dishing it out to customers. A lot of the kimchi I’ve had around town had been overtly funky or mouth-blisteringly spicy. In fact, until I sampled the version at Seoulfood Café, a fizzy bunch of cabbage punctuated with scallion and fish sauce and a lip tingling amount of spice, I’d never really liked the stuff.

Since the restaurant’s relatively new, the menu’s evolving, and the full complement of items isn’t yet available. Lunchtime loop patrons would be wise to skip the “buffet” and ask for the menu. Better yet, the best time to hit up this spot is at night when you have your choice of two menus—an English language “American” menu, and the Korean regulars “Seoulfood” menu replete with Korean Hangul characters and American translations of edgy and authentic dishes like cow’s tongue soup.

Most of the dishes are accompanied by a few bowls of banchan, or assorted sides, including spicy radish, bean sprouts and excellent marinated mushrooms. Choi says he expects to expand and rotate the banchan selection as the restaurant grows.

Not knowing there was a Korean regular’s menu, I ordered Bulgogi Jeongol, a family-style “casserole” dish off the “American” menu. The dish is a cross between Korean BBQ and a Chinese hot pot. The server brings a silver bowl rimmed with fresh-cut vegetables and noodles swimming in a rich beef broth and sets it on a tableside propane stove (since the restaurant was converted from a Mexican spot, there’s no venting, and therefore no live coals). You also get a plate of spicy marinated beef to grill in the middle of the pot, and as the grilled meat from the Jeongol sizzles away on the propane stove, the juices drizzle into the surrounding vegetable laden broth moat, enriching the already flavorful stock. Once things settle down, you ladle the broth, the veg and the meat into a bowl of rice and now you’ve got the perfect soul-satisfying bowl of food.

Though, if you’re really looking for “soul” food, you should wait a little while before stopping by. Choi told me he’s found a “Korean grandmother” who’s currently working in Champaign, but is scheduled to move to Chicago to work in his kitchen in about a month. He says she’s earned a legendary following for her homemade blood sausage (Sundae) and other offal-style meats. Though this fare sounds more like it would be at home at a South Side spot like Helen’s, it’s all part of Choi’s “hardcore Korean” plan. He says, “Koreans were the original makers of soul food. I mean s-o-u-l food, not S-E-O-U-L. People don’t know it, but we make twenty kinds of chitterlings, ham hocks and pork feet.”

Korean Seoulfood Café, 560 West Van Buren, (312)427-4293

READINGS

THU/8

→ Adrian Tomine

See **Tip of the Week**. *Quimby’s*, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 7pm. Free.

Alan Weisman

The author discusses and signs his work. *Columbia College*, 1104 S. Wabash. 6:30pm. Free.

Jennifer Karmin

The poet holds a poetry writing workshop and open mic. *Mabel Manning Branch Library*, 6 S. Hoynes. 4pm. Free.

Jessie Gruman

The author discusses “AfterShock: What to Do When the Doctor Give You—Or Someone You Love—a Devastating Diagnosis.” *Harold Washington Library Center*, 400 S. State, (312)747-4300. 6pm. Free.

Paula Kamen

The author discusses “Finding Iris Chang.” *Women and Children First Bookstore*, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.

FRI/9

Chicago Writer’s Association

Members of the association read their work. *The Book Cellar*, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.

John Theodore

The author reads from “Evil Summer: Babe Leopold, Dickie Loeb and the Kidnap-Murder of Bobby Franks.” *57th Street Books*, 1301 E. 57th, (773)684-1300. 7pm. Free.

→ Jonathan Messinger

The author and editor reads from “Hiding Out.” *Women and Children First Bookstore*, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.

SAT/10

Lauren Weinstein

The graphic novelist discusses her new comic, “Goddess of War.” *Quimby’s*, 1854 W. North, (773)342-0910. 6pm. Free.

Rick Steves

The author discusses “Rick’s 2008 European Travel Guide.” *Barbara’s Bookstore*, 1218 S. Halsted, (312)413-2665. 7:30pm. Free.

SUN/11

→ Ann Packer

The acclaimed author discusses her work as part of the “Writers on the Record with Victoria Lautman” series. *Lookingglass Theater*, 821 N. Michigan, 312-337-0665. 11:45am. Free.

Julie Sevig

The author discusses “Peanut Butter and Jelly Prayers.” *Women and Children First Bookstore*, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 4:30pm. Free.

MON/12

William Wimsatt

The author discusses “Re-Engineering Philosophy for Limited Beings.” *Seminary Co-op Bookstore*, 5757 S. University. 6pm. Free.

TUE/13

David J. Mendell

The author discusses “Obama: From Promise to Power.” *The Cliff Dwellers*, 200 S. Michigan, 22nd floor, (312)922-8080. 7pm.

Michael Morgan

The author discusses “Discovering Levinas.” *57th Street Books*, 1301 E. 57th, (773)684-1300. 6pm. Free.

TIP OF THE WEEK
ADRIAN TOMINE

It’s amazing what “Optic Nerve” creator Adrian Tomine can accomplish in a mere 108 pages, the length of his new graphic novel, “Shortcomings.” His story of Ben Tanaka, an underemployed 30 year old who is grappling with issues of identity in all forms—racial, sexual and, in the largest struggle of all, personal—reads so fluidly that its economy goes unnoticed, except when you finish and find yourself so fully engaged in the story of this circle of friends and lovers that you thirst for more. Tomine is the master of comic-book reality, with an unrivaled command of pacing, narrative and characterization. This is augmented by Tomine’s drawing style: deceptively simple with clean lines and compositions that reward study without retarding pacing. Deceptively simple means far from generic, though; like that of most great cartoonists, a Tomine page is recognizable with a mere glance. *(Brian Hiegelke)*

Adrian Tomine discusses “Shortcomings” at Quimby’s, 1854 West North, on November 8 at 7pm.

Michele Zackheim

The author discusses “Einstein’s Daughter.” *Women and Children First Bookstore*, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.

WED/14

Alaya Dawn Johnson

The author discusses “Racing the Dark.” *Women and Children First Bookstore*, 5233 N. Clark, (773)769-9299. 7:30pm. Free.

Fractal Edge Poets

Poets read from their work. *57th Street Books*, 1301 E. 57th, (773)684-1300. 7pm. Free.

Local Author Night

Featuring Kathleen Hibbard, David Blixt, Geoffrey Edwards and more. *The Book Cellar*, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.