

eat & drink

Fusion at its finest

Bulgogi
cheesesteak



Kimski seamlessly blends Polish and Korean cuisines in Bridgeport

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

If you've ever wondered what Logan Square or Wicker Park looked like before hipsters, all you have to do is spend some time in the neighborhood surrounding Kimski, a new Korean-Polish fusion counter at Maria's Packaged Goods & Community Bar in Bridgeport. There, you'll find Section 8 housing, a metalworking shop, cops, politicians, blue collars and white collars—a true-blue Chicago neighborhood bursting at the seams.

If Bridgeport had a mayor, the role would be split between brothers and Maria's owners Ed and Mike Marszewski. Half-Polish, half-Korean, the Marszewskis ran a regular KoPo (Korean-Polish) night at the bar where they served Polish sausages topped with kimchi kraut. That's where chef Won Kim—a recent champion of Food Network's "Cutthroat Kitchen," local urban muralist and longtime pop-up restaurant contributor—met Ed and the crew.

"I liked to make a regular habit of what I call getting 'Maria's drunk.' You know, totally blasted out, where you make a lot of bad decisions on the way home," Kim said. "One night I was helping out and started plating the sausages all arty and in smaller portions to prevent all the drunk people from taking three sausages at a time. That's when Ed and I started talking about his idea for Kimski."

The scene

While Maria's is a perfect blend of old-man dive bar meets darkly lit Prohibition-era speakeasy, Kimski is an airy warehouse-like space outfitted with bright yellow industrial stools, a sleek wood bar and mod-style booths. You'll find some of Maria's grizzled regulars, but there's also a stroller or two accompanying young families.

The food

It's rare to find something truly original in Chicago, land of all restaurants. But Kim has managed to create a concept that didn't already exist. His food is its own thing, a true 50-50 situation that your babcia (Polish grandma) or halmoni (Korean grandma) would appreciate. Maria's Standard (\$8) is the perfect example: a fat, smoky Polish sausage bursting with garlic and spice that's remixed with a soulful, rice-perfumed, soju-infused mustard and tangy kimchi kraut.

Then there are the vegetarian potskis (\$7), aka deep-fried dumplings, which are a cross between a potsticker and pierogi. They're packed with earthy shiitake, zingy sauerkraut and crumbly farmer cheese. Each pocket ends on a creamy note courtesy of smoked soy sauce- and sesame oil-infused sour cream.

Kopo Wangs (\$8) are smoked, roasted and deep-fried, and the skin on each piece of poultry is so crisp that it eats like a chicharon or pork rind. The juicy flesh drips in house "AP" sauce made with honey and fizzy fermented gochujang, a lip-smacking spicy red chili paste. While the sauce is distinctly Asian, the chicken is reminiscent of the fulsome turkeys my Polish grandparents put on the Thanksgiving table every year.

The bulgogi cheesesteak (\$10)—a weekly special made with Kim's mom's marinated



LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS

grilled ribeye recipe—is very Korean, but skews less Polish and more Philadelphia with a blanket of Muenster cheese and golden caramelized onions. Instead of insipid green bell peppers, Kim sprinkles the bun-swaddled sandwich with bright, grassy ribbons of shishito pepper. A stroke of gochujang butter puts the whole thing over the top.

The only dish that felt like a stretch in the fusion category was the kimchi fried rice (\$7). Technically, the housemade “kraut-chi” adds some Polish flare, but the fried egg, scallion and greens make it a pitch-perfect facsimile of meatless Korean bibimbap.

The drinks

A chalkboard menu lists 24 draft beer choices, an ample selection of lagers, bocks and IPAs from usual local suspects such as Three

Floyds Brewing Co. and Goose Island Beer Co. as well many other regional American and European breweries. Still, I stuck with the sodas, which included a sweet, pecan-infused root beer from Fest Cola and an elderflower and rose sparkling lemonade (both \$1.99 each) that tasted like a refreshing mashup of prosecco and rosé spiked with lemon.

Bottom line

Kimski's KoPo cuisine is something you've probably never seen or tasted in Chicago. Throw in a patio-outfitted dining space and a killer beer list and you've got the hottest place to be this summer.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

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