



The smoked pork ribs at bellyQ come with luscious, pine-scented rosemary hoisin barbecue sauce.

BETTER WITH AGE

With bellyQ, Bill Kim's restaurants hit the spot third time around

The double smoked bacon and kimchi pancake is a delightfully original success from bellyQ's kitchen.



My honesty came down hard the last two times Bill Kim opened restaurants (Urban Belly and Belly Shack). I thought the flavors were muted and the food was expensive at the former, and I thought the questionable decor at the latter was a bad parody of some non-existent Abercrombie-and-Fitch-meets-a-skateboard-store clothing catalog. Seems the third time's the charm. Chef/partner Kim's bellyQ is fantastic. I'd sort of seen this coming.



Chef Bill Kim stands in the dining room of bellyQ, 1400 W. Randolph.
RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

I moved to Logan Square six months ago smack between Urban Belly and Belly Shack and frequented them a bit more. Though most restaurant owners contend that restaurants get better with age, my experience is that they usually level or drop off. But somehow the broths at Urban Belly got more soulful, and the dumplings were springier. At Belly Shack, they put cool old skateboards on the wall over some of the faux graffiti I once thought was cheesy. And most

important, whether it was tangy Brussels sprouts with chorizo or a seasonal riff on Mexican *elotes*, the food at both places had become some of the highest quality and value in Chicago. The lessons learned from the first two restaurants were not lost on Kim in creating bellyQ. Urban Belly got more soulful, and the dumplings were springier. At Belly Shack, they put cool old skateboards on the wall over some of the faux graffiti I once thought was cheesy. And most

cheese on display. Though it's a huge warehouse of a space (the former One Sixty-blue) potentially prone to being hollow and cold, it's well divided by rows of banquettes, a sleek stone bar and a sliding glass wall featuring a graphic of running wild horses. The side lounges outfitted with shiny ottomans and dark walls are intimate. The lighting sculpture in the center of the room made of blown glass orbs enclosing exposed light bulbs channels a gossamer as-

sortment of sky lanterns (those traditional makeshift Chinese hot air balloons powered by flickering candles). Unlike the early days at Urban Belly, the flavors at bellyQ are assertive. The dishes represent a fusion of sorts of Kim's gourmet sensibility (he once cooked at Charlie Trotter's) and his Korean heritage. I'm guessing some of my peers will suggest this is fussy or inauthentic, but to me, at least this time around, it's delightfully original.

A perfect example is the double-smoked bacon and kimchi pancake. Korean restaurants usually serve this up under the name "jeon" or more often "pajeon" when scallions are incorporated into the batter. It is not a traditional flour-based pancake, but more like an omelet. The ones at Korean restaurants are often a little overcooked and the curd is tight and stuffed with second-rate seafood. Kim's pancake is custardy and piled high with tangy bitter greens, bright

BELLYQ ★★½/2

1400 W. Randolph
(312) 563-1010; bellyqchicago.com

Hours: Monday-Wednesday, Sunday 5 p.m.-11 p.m.; Thursday-Saturday 5 p.m.-12 a.m.

Prices: Shared plates: \$3-\$23; Dessert: \$6

Try: Almond Caesar, olive oil poached shrimp, tea-smoked pork rib, passionfruit ice boba

In a bite: Fusion food often leads to dining confusion, but this Asian BBQ spot from Chef Bill Kim is the right melting pot of French technique and Korean, Thai and Chinese flavors.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★★★★ Very Good; ★★★★★ Good; ★★★★★ Zero stars: Poor

pungent pickled cabbage and thick, juicy, smoky lardons. Likewise, Kim's Thai-style fried chicken isn't the primal bone-in experience you might get at Andy's Thai Kitchen. For lack of a better term, the boneless hunks of poultry at bellyQ feel a bit "nuggetized." But unlike nuggets, the juicy flesh of Kim's chicken isn't processed, and the thick batter is reminiscent of what you'd find at a good fish and chip shack. Better still, the chicken's showered with a confetti of stinging chilis and citrus-bursting bits of lemongrass. A sweet-sour sauce punched up with lime cuts through the richness of the dish.

There's also an almond Caesar salad featuring crisp sheets of romaine tossed with creamy almond oil-infused dressing, a wispy hail of Parmesan and cracklin' fried chickpeas. You definitely won't see this at any Asian restaurant. In fact I've never had a Caesar like it. The chickpeas alone in their saltiness and relentless crunch remind me of a better version of the drugstore Corn Nut (of which I'm a huge fan).

Plump briny curls of delicate olive oil-poached shrimp enrobed in rusty-colored curry sauce pack a nice lip-tingling



You may never see — or taste — another Caesar like bellyQ's almond Caesar salad.

heat that is cooled down by limey bed of papaya salad. This is a nice mash-up of a Thai Som Tam and a light Mediterranean tapas treat.

If any of Kim's food is impeccable, it's spinach with dried shrimp and Chinese sausage that's bland and tossed with what tastes and looks like wet quinoa. Also, his hot pot is one spicy backnote that seizes up the throat a bit and is filled with too much gummy rice cake.

But even these few missteps are redeemed by a pork rib with a nice bit of chew and plenty of dripping, luscious, pine-scented rosemary hoisin barbecue sauce. The only problem is I'd ordered the lamb ribs, which I'd eaten on a previous visit. But they'd changed over recently to pork ribs and though the menu clearly said "lamb," my waiter didn't warn me of the shift. He

just delivered the pork ribs as if they were lamb (the bill said as much and I called the restaurant to verify). Good thing I wasn't keeping kosher.

This same waiter also set a piping-hot bowl of seafood hot pot in front of my young son two minutes after my father-in-law told him to "keep all the dangerous stuff away from the baby." On an earlier visit, our waiter forgot part of my table's drink order.

Service miscues aside, Kim is taking care of business. As with Belly Shack and Urban Belly, he's pursuing his own voice, a thing I usually love. I'm not sure why it didn't work for me at his first two spots at first, but the balance is right at bellyQ.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.



Chef Bill Kim's Thai-style fried chicken has a thick batter and is topped with a confetti of stinging chilis and citrus-bursting lemongrass.