

eat & drink

FIRE STARTER

Can this new Korean barbecue live up to its legendary address?

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

I rarely watch a movie or dine at a restaurant twice. There are too many new movies to see and so many new restaurants waiting to be discovered. But there are exceptions to every rule. I lost exact count a while ago, but I know I've seen "The Karate Kid" (the original) more than 30 times and I've dined at Hae Woon Dae, a stellar Korean barbecue joint in West Rogers Park, at least 10 times; it was one of my favorite spots until it closed in February. There was little time to mourn, though. Pete Cho, who, with his mom, Stella, owns the nearby Korean bar Yeowoosai—and once DJed at Lollapalooza—picked up the space and recently opened Gogi as a tribute to his late father, Tiger, who passed away in June. "My dad always wanted to open a Korean barbecue spot or a combination bar/karaoke joint," Cho said. "When Hae Woon Dae closed, they asked him if he wanted the spot and my dad asked me if I wanted to be involved." I stopped in to see if Cho's new Korean barbecue spot could fill the void in my stomach and my heart.

Gogi
6240 N. California Ave. 773-274-6669

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Give it some time



● The scene

The worn orange laminate tables and chipped bamboo accents of the old Hae Woon Dae dining room have been transformed. In their place, Cho's uncle installed sleek black tables, leather booths and white pendant lights. The dingy private grilling rooms have been punched up with bright crimson paint. Gogi channels a chill cocktail lounge and bucks the trend that traditional Korean barbecue only happens in neglected utilitarian spaces.

● The meat

The marinade on the bulgogi, a thin cut of sirloin (\$18), was a tasty mix of soy, garlic, chili and sugar; while the flavor was punchy, the grilling process at Gogi was flawed. Hae Woon Dae used to have blazing hot pre-fired buckets of charcoal brought tableside by big, burly dudes who

used a couple of thin pieces of cardboard to protect their fingers from the searing heat of the buckets as they carried them. The bulgogi at Gogi was placed in a lukewarm cast-iron skillet shaped like a pig-cow (the body looks like pig, but the face looks like a cow) heated by a weak gas flame that went out twice while my bulgogi steamed in a grayish mass on the cooktop. The same skillet was used to fire up the samgyeopsal (pork belly, \$18), which did caramelize on



the skillet, but was relatively flavorless. "The old charcoal starter wasn't working, but we recently fixed it and now we're using charcoal on the kalbi [barbecued beef short ribs]," Cho said. "We still use the skillets for bulgogi and other meats because some people like the fatty bits and if it gets too hot, the fat melts away."

● The sides

If you've always wanted to know what it's like to be a celebrity who is recognized mid-meal and then peppered with a ton of dishes "com-

pliments of the kitchen," then Korean barbecue joints, which send out a battalion of free vegetable sides and salty snacks (called banchan) no matter who you are, are probably the closest you can get. The banchan at Gogi is as good as any in town. Of the 16 or so plates, I especially liked the smoky perilla leaves (Cho said these are tough to get and people love them, so they aren't always on offer), the fizzy-spicy kimchi and a salty, pungent bowl of crispy anchovies. With all the sides and the grilled meat, it's usually tough to order much more, but haemul pajeon (a crispy omelet-like pancake stuffed with shrimp, scallion and faux crab meat) is one of my favorite things, so I fought through the stomach pain and ordered one. I'm glad I did, because the version at Gogi (\$12) is crisp and light, one of the best I've had in town.

● The drinks

Gogi has a healthy Korean beer list that



Kalbi (barbecued beef short ribs) at Gogi
KAITLYN MCQUAID PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

includes regional favorites OB and Hite (\$5), but my favorite thing to drink with Korean barbecue is Hitachino Nest white ale from Japan's Kiuchi Brewery (\$7), which is spicy with a touch of coriander and citrus. Gogi also serves sake and wine, but the most oddball feature might be water served not in the usual carafes, but in plastic sports bottles that feature the cheerful face of Psy—yes, the “Gangnam Style” guy.

● The service

Service at a lot of traditional Korean barbecue restaurants can be an exercise in neglect. “At most spots, the servers always dropped off the meat and walked away. We want to be more welcoming to newcomers,” Cho said. “You can cook the meat if you want to, but a lot of people don’t know what to do, so we want to make it easier for them.” With that mindset, Gogi has the right idea, but service was inconsistent during my dinner. I like that

servers grill meats for you instead of letting you fend for yourself (I’ve almost smoked out a few Korean barbecue joints with my own tableside grilling techniques), but my server crowded the meat and didn’t wait for the grill to get hot enough. After the meat was grilled, she disappeared and it was tough to hail her for extra napkins or the bill.

● Bottom line

Gogi is one of the sleekest Korean barbecue joints in the city. Its vegetable side dishes and the marinade on its bulgogi are first-class, but the meats, which are the centerpiece of any Korean barbecue spot, aren’t yet on par with the smoky, well-browned treats I loved at Hae Woon Dae.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK