



diningout

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The stir-fried squid at Ahjoomah's Apron is bathed in a sweet and spicy chili sauce. | BRIAN JACKSON-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

KOREAN DELIGHTS

Restaurant long on hospitality, top-notch eats

Trying Korean cuisine for the first time is like reading Kafka as a middle-school student — disorienting and unfamiliar. Usually sandwiched in strip malls, often next to karaoke bars with signs written in what look like hieroglyphics, Korean restaurants often feel like secret clubs. And once you actually walk in, you're often the only non-Korean in a smoke-filled room that seems to have a hundred different rituals: *War and Peace*-sized menus, and often waitstaff that acknowledges your presence when they feel like getting around to it.

But Korean food with its fizzy fermentation and smiting chili, is some of the most satisfying in the world. To live without it is not an option. Other than Hot Pockets and frozen pizza, Thai and Korean is what I return to most on my days off.

Usually, Hae Woon Dae is often one of the first recommendations I make when someone's looking for something new. And yet I know I'm often making someone take a leap, and that they must be adventurous to really enjoy the experience. But no more! Thanks to Ahjoomah's Apron, an excellent new Korean restaurant in Chicago's Chinatown, is finally a great Korean spot that doesn't skimp on hospitality, education or authenticity, a place novice and expert Korean food aficionados will love.

"Ahjoomah" is an affectionate nickname for a middle-aged Korean woman, the kind of women who often cooked for and taught owner Mickie Lee about Korean cuisine. Now she's teaching all comers like the ahjoomahs before her.

The walls of this zen lair — outfitted with lacquered wood benches and indus-



Dolsot Bibimbop is a sizzling clay pot filled with rice, sesame-sprinkled spinach, carrots, marinated beef and a runny egg.

trial pendant lamps — features an arty Wikipedia-like wall installation educating diners on the origins of *kimchi* and *bibimbop*. According to one of the wall signs, *doenjang*, a fermented miso-like soybean paste, has been known to reduce visceral fat, at least in lab rats.

This is good to know, for the food here is so tasty, you run the risk of packing on a few pounds. The Korean seafood pancake — a custardy omelette, stuffed with thick pieces of squid — is caramelized and nicely charred and crisp at the edges.

Kimchi chigae, a stew, is delivered bubbling, with a perfume of chili and vinegar that roils from its rim. Tender hunks of spicy pork mingle with scrims of melting cabbage.

Dolsot bibimbop is a sizzling clay pot



Tender hunks of pork with a kick mingle with melting cabbage in the stew-like Kimchi chigae.

filled with rice, sesame-sprinkled spinach, sweet julienned carrot, marinated beef and a runny egg waiting to be breached and added to the comforting mix. Dig deep and you'll find crispy baked bits of rice, a treasure of contrast to the steamed grains above.

Stir-fried squid is tender and girded by fat knobs of mushroom and bathed in a sweet and spicy chili sauce.

Jopchae, or vermicelli potato noodles, are saccharine and mushy — really the only miss during my entire meal.

One of my befuddlements at Korean BBQ restaurants is knowing how to cook the marinated meats without having the stuff stick to the table-top, self-service grill. At Ahjoomah, they do the grilling for you, bringing tiny filets of already-cooked *kalbi* — smoky cross-

AHJOOMAH'S APRON ★★½

218 W. Cermak
(773) 326-2800;
www.ahjoomahchicago.com

Hours: 11 a.m. – 10:30 p.m. daily

Prices: Appetizers and soup: \$5.95-9.95; entrees: \$8.95- \$24.95; desserts: \$2-\$4

Try: Korean seafood pancake, Kimchi chigae, Stir-fried squid

In a bite: A welcoming Korean restaurant experience in Chinatown. Approachable for novices, but serving high-quality dishes that will satisfy jaded foodies.

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

cut, bone-in-short ribs whose juice dribbles down your chin.

And the *banchan* (Korea's answer to Tex-Mex's free chips and salsa) — tiny bowls of kimchi, fermented sprouts and other cold salads — is well-curated. I pop the sweet soy and black beans (Kongjaban) in my mouth like I consume Junior Mints at the movie theater.

To behold the stylish servers here — many wearing dark glam eyeglasses, slouchy-leather boots and sharp cashmere tops — being so attentive is like theater. Most are young, none old enough to be called an ahjoomah. And yet the way they pour hot refills of complimentary green tea, and bring additional napkins, or ask if you have any questions, they are just as attentive as the restaurant's namesake, that dotting middle-aged Korean lady.

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

SIDE DISHES



Diners at San Soo Gap San can make Sout Tue Gung — Korean barbecue with bacon — on a tableside grill. | RICHARD A. CHAPMAN-SUN-TIMES

After a visit or two to Ahjoomah's Apron, you'll be a Korean expert, ready to forge into the wider Korean offerings of Chicago. Here's where you should go:

HAE WOON DAE, 6240 N. California; (773) 764-8018

Vibe: Features private shoji screen-divided grill rooms, and "Brady Bunch"-worthy reddish-orange Formica-topped tables.

Flavor: This is my go to spot for DIY tableside grilling. Everything's great, but the basic marinated short-rib or *kalbi*, featuring a little red chili paste and sesame oil is the place to start.

SAN SOO GAP SAN 888, 5247 N. Western; (773) 334-1589

Vibe: Black metal chairs, wood panels and a healthy coating of orange paint, this spot is pretty utilitarian.

Flavor: In addition to Hae Woon Dae, this is one of the few spots that still features live-coal, tableside grilling. The *sout tue gung* or sliced bacon is the thing, because, well, even Korean BBQ is better with bacon.

DAK, 1104 W. Granville; (773) 754-0255; www.dakwings.com

Vibe: Tiny storefront with clean-honeyed wainscoting, silvery-industrial chairs and a chalkboard menu.

Flavor: The chicken wing is certainly the thing here, but so too is the bulgogi dukbokki, a heaping pile of grilled beef tossed with chewy, chili-slathered rice cakes.

— Michael Nagrant