



Korean Cuisine in New York City

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*Freelance writer, Former production editor,
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If 20 years ago, someone had asked Ruth Reichl, then The New York Times' chief restaurant critic, to stake her fortune on the future tastes of New York City's diners, she wrote that she would have bet on Korean food over Japanese and Thai cooking. What happened?

In 1993, The New York Times' chief restaurant critic wrote, "Why hasn't Korean food become more popular in New York City?"

A few years later, the same critic asked again in her column, "Will Korean food finally attract an American following?" The answer was a resounding "NO." Reichl is now the Editor-in-Chief of Gourmet Magazine, and Korean food still remains a mystery to most non-Korean diners.

For more than half a century, Chinese food has been the favorite Asian cuisine and the only Asian cooking being regularly enjoyed by American diners, especially in New York City. But starting about 25 years ago, fickle diners began to discover China's regional specialties. Instead of the long-popular Cantonese "comfort foods" -- like chow mein, spare ribs, chop suey and shrimp-in-lobster sauce -- New Yorkers sought more exotic dishes from Szechuan and Hunan provinces; Cantonese cuisine has not yet recovered.

Gourmands are very fickle, always looking for the next exciting fad that will titillate their taste buds. Well, what is more challenging to the American palate than raw fish? When sushi was introduced in the U.S., the public went wild. Sushi eaters became obsessive and, almost daily, long lines formed as Japanese food suddenly became the "in" cuisine. In Manhattan, it seemed sushi restaurants appeared every few blocks and the 80's raw-fish phenomena still continues.

As the Japanese explosion raged on, Chinese restaurant owners noticed their declining number of customers, and the clever ones sent their chefs to one-day sushi schools and began serving raw fish as well as the traditional standbys of fried egg rolls and General Tso's chicken. Even Western restaurants began offering raw-fish appetizers the most popular dish being "tuna tartar."

The next trendy food rage? Thai, of course . . . and once again, restaurants sprouted all over town serving "pad thai."

Last year's Zagat Survey of New York City Restaurants contained approximately 2,100 establishments. Among its more than 200 Asian venues, Chinese leads with 60, followed by Japanese at nearly 105, Thai 50 and only 19 Korean eateries. Already, another Asian food has passed Korean's meager numbers: Vietnamese cooking is the latest to excite New Yorkers and, with over 30 restaurants already open, yet another Asian cuisine has overtaken Korean's popularity contest in the Big Apple.

So, what's the story? First of all, the leading objection to Korean cuisine seems to be that it contains "too much garlic and chilies" and "the room's aroma is too overpowering." Yet, if one studies a list of ingredients, the majority of dishes should appeal to the Western palate: fresh, healthy vegetables and roots; tabletop barbecues of lean beef and other offerings, accompanied by robust condiments. It is mystifying that Americans haven't caught on to this!

Over the years, I have taken several New York Times restaurant critics to Korean restaurants and every one of the reviewers wrote about how pleasantly surprised and happy they were to discover Korean cuisine . . . all over again; in fact, they wondered why they had not returned more often.

Interestingly, each writer also commented on individual characteristics of Koreans, noticing behavioral differences from Chinese and Japanese people. According to non-Korean diners, there is an atmosphere of an exclusive camaraderie among customers in the dining room, even though they didn't seem to know other tables and, usually, the room is full of warmth and laughter emanating from tables of mostly Koreans, reminiscent of their robust native cuisine. Even looking at the menu, always a long list of offerings, there is a sense of secrecy when one sees several dishes not translated -- some diners feel "left out."

On the brighter side, in 2007, New York City's Korean restaurants have welcomed more non-Asian diners and there are other small positive signs of recognition:

For one, the aging generation of "baby boomers," having reached age 60, are seeking more bold and unusual flavors to spice their dull palates, and the media has been attempting to fulfill their curiosity with articles featuring or highlighting ethnic mysteries. For example, at the moment in New York City, there has been an influx of Korean fried-chicken diners, even causing long lines of hungry gourmands, thanks to the media coverage.

Another interest in the media has been Korean-American chefs, especially David Chang, who is today's leading rising star in the world of haute cuisine. The 30-year-old chef has brought new excitement and energies to his no-nonsense facilities for fickle diners of all ages. In 2004, he opened the Momofuku Noodle Bar, which became an instant hit, and two years later, Momofuku Ssam Bar & Ramen Bar opened attracting New Yorkers of all types to enjoy his always original creative dishes.

A garlic is a garlic is a garlic! That cannot be eliminated however, recently, the public has become more aware of garlic's nutritional merits, and the food industry should emphasize garlic's positive benefits. Korean community needs clever public-relations team to broadcast to the world all the health-related advantages of eating Korean food. Another means of continuing the interest would be to conduct culinary tours locally and to Korea. To further inform and tempt the public, participate in city's food fairs and schedule cooking classes in local restaurants.

Ruth Reichl once wrote, "I could easily sit here all night, sipping soju between bites of barbecue and tastes of pajun -- and I cannot imagine why everyone else in New York hasn't joined me."