

July 21, 1995, Friday

## Restaurants

By RUTH REICHL

Great carved dragons guard the entrance to Korea Palace, giving the restaurant a fancy and slightly forbidding air. The limousines parked in front only add to the impression. So it is surprising to walk inside and find that the restaurant has the casual, bright, utilitarian look of a converted coffee shop. The tables are bare and the small colored lights dangling from the ceiling look left over from the 60's. And while the air is perfumed with garlic, chilies, sugar and sesame, the efficient metal hoods over each booth inhale all the smoke generated by customers' barbecuing their own meat.

If you would like something a little more upscale, that can be arranged. The entire back of the restaurant is occupied by small private dining rooms, each equipped with an intercom. But the private dining rooms can be hot in the summertime, and even in winter Korean meals are entertaining enough to make it far more fun to sit in the large dining room where you can watch what everybody else is eating.

Great carved dragons guard the entrance to Korea Palace, giving the restaurant a fancy and slightly forbidding air. The limousines parked in front only add to the impression. So it is surprising to walk inside and find that the restaurant has the casual, bright, utilitarian look of a converted coffee shop. The tables are bare and the small colored lights dangling from the ceiling look left over from the 60's. And while the air is perfumed with garlic, chilies, sugar and sesame, the efficient metal hoods over each booth inhale all the smoke generated by customers' barbecuing their own meat.

If you would like something a little more upscale, that can be arranged. The entire back of the restaurant is occupied by small private dining rooms, each equipped with an intercom. But the private dining rooms can be hot in the summertime, and even in winter Korean meals are entertaining enough to make it far more fun to sit in the large dining room where you can watch what everybody else is eating.

This can vary considerably. The menu at Korea Palace is large, ranging from the standard Korean barbecue dishes to more esoteric fare like spicy cod soup. The food, in fact, is so varied and so appealing that it is hard to understand why restaurants like Korea Palace have not proved more appealing to a non-Korean clientele.

My mother's best friend offers a clue. "A Korean restaurant, dear?" she said when I invited her to dinner. "I don't think so. Why don't you try one of your younger friends and save me for another evening?" I promised that I would not ask her to eat anything strange. She was not persuaded. Finally, I threw in an offer to take her to Rumpelmayer's for a hot fudge sundae if she was still hungry after dinner. That clinched it.

She immediately put aside the long metal chopsticks at her place and asked for a fork. The waitress smiled politely and brought one, fussing over the old lady with such concern that she elicited a smile. "You'll like those," the waitress promised when I ordered the dumplings called mandoo gui and the noodles known as chap chae;

Mom's friend looked dubious. Nevertheless, she was crazy about the small meat-filled pan-fried dumplings, pronouncing them "better than Chinatown." And the clear, delicate noodles stir-fried with tiny strands of meat and vegetables were also a hit. "Delicious!" she said.

Still, she looked doubtful when the waitress started setting panchan, the small plates of salads and pickles that are the heart of every Korean meal, on the table. I quickly slid the spicy pickled cabbage kimchi to my side of the table, along with a dish of tiny fried fish the size of pins. I left the cool water kimchi on her side, along with a small dish of poached watercress with sesame. "Hmm," she said, "pleasant salads." Meanwhile, I was inhaling a plate of Chinese cabbage sparked with bright red chilies.

For the main course, I thought we should try one of the barbecued meats, but I wasn't sure whether to order marinated short ribs, kalbi, or sliced rib-eye steak, bulgoki. The waitress had another suggestion. "Try the seafood," she said. "The lady will like it."

The lady did, watching attentively as the waitress melted butter and carefully cooked scallops, shrimp, clams and lobster tail. When they were almost ready and the muscles had relaxed, she snipped the clam shells in two with a small scissors and cut the lobster tail into neat pieces, solicitously placing them on our plates. "Delicious!" said my mother's friend. "So plain and simple." Afterward, when we were eating the little dishes of lemon ice that the waitress brought us for dessert, she said, "You know, I can't understand why I have never had Korean food before."

The problem, for me at least, was that the meal had left me hungry for the big, fiery flavors that I have come to love in Korean cooking. So the next night, I returned with a more adventurous group. We started the meal with a fine assortment of sushi. Then we had haemul pajun, the seafood and scallion pancake found all over Korea. This version was crisp and greaseless, and dipped into the soy sauce on the side, I found it irresistible.

I loved nak ji bokkeum, stir-fried tiny octopus mixed with spices and vegetables and served with thick, white noodles. But even doctored with kochu jang, the red chili paste that is the national sauce of Korea, it was not sufficiently spicy for me. "Have the kimchi chigae," said the waitress with a sly smile. I did, inhaling the spicy cabbage, chili and bean curd casserole until the tears streamed from my eyes. It was hot; I loved it.

And then we had bulgoki, barbecuing the sweet, pungent marinated meat ourselves. We snatched each slice from the grill and rolled it up in slices of lettuce spread with hot bean paste and sprinkled with slivered scallions.

"Is there anybody who wouldn't enjoy this meal?" I wondered, taking a sip of soju, the cold Korean sweet potato vodka, and putting another piece of meat onto the grill.

There are restaurants on 32d Street in Manhattan and in Flushing, Queens, that offer a more satisfying assortment of Korean salads or a more exciting menu. But it would be hard to find a better introduction to the seductive cuisine of Korea than this pleasant restaurant. After all, if Korea Palace can please my mother's best friend, it can probably please anyone. Korea Palace

\*

127 East 54th Street, Manhattan, (212) 832-2350.

Ambiance: The front is bright, open and casual, but there are also many small private dining rooms.

Service: Unlike many other Korean restaurants, everyone speaks English. But like many other Korean restaurants, everyone is extremely helpful and attentive.

Recommended dishes: Mandoo gui (dumplings), chap chae (stir-fried clear noodles), sushi, haemul pajun (seafood pancake), Korean barbecue, stir-fried pork and kimchi, stir-fried octopus and noodles, kimchi casserole with bean curd, bibimbab (Korean rice with various toppings).

Wine list: The wine list is well chosen and inexpensive, but soju, the Korean sweet-potato vodka, or beer are better matches for this powerful food.

Hours: 10:30 A.M. to 10:30 P.M. daily; lunch specials 11:30 A.M. to 2:30 P.M. Mondays through Fridays.

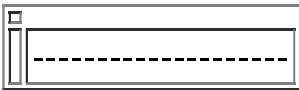
Price range: Appetizers \$8.50 to \$15.95, entrees \$8.95 to \$50.95 (for more than one person), desserts \$2.50 to \$13.

Credit cards: All major cards.

Wheelchair accessibility: Separate entrance for wheelchairs. Bathrooms for handicapped.

What the stars mean: (None) Poor to Satisfactory \* Good \*\* Very Good \*\*\* Excellent \*\*\*\* Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction primarily to food, with ambiance and service taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.



Past reviews. Hundreds of Times restaurant reviews are available on line from @times, an arts and entertainment guide on America Online. Software and information: 1-800-548-5201.