



Welcome to K-Town

There's something in the air and it's Korean flavoured. *Zeren Wilson* finds out why Korean cuisine is the food of the moment

Korean food is on the march. A couple of years ago even the most ferociously committed UK restaurant lovers would have been hard-pressed to give knowledgeable answers to any or all of the following questions: What is gochujang? Which vegetables are used to make kimchi? What is bibimbap? Heard of bulgogi? What is bo ssam? Have you ever tried Korean fried chicken?

Many of these ingredients and dishes are now filtering into the mainstream and are no longer the preserve of those making regular forays into 'K-Town' in New Malden, Surrey, home to one of the largest expatriate communities of South Koreans in Europe and one of the most densely populated areas of Koreans outside South Korea.

"Korean food fits nicely with consumers' search for new and exciting ethnic flavours and a love of heat and spice, and it has progressed from being a very niche cuisine to making mainstream menu appearances," says Nicola Knight, director of services at food-service sector analyst Horizons.

Data analysis on the number of Korean dishes on the menus of some mainstream brands (carried out as part of Horizons' Menurama survey) saw numbers jump from zero dishes in summer 2012 to nine by summer 2014. Examples included Korean spiced wings at John Barras pubs; sticky ribs and kimchi ketchup, and pork ribs with maple and chilli glaze and homemade Korean ketchup at Pitcher & Piano; Korean barbecue pulled pork quinoa rice pot at Pret; pork bulgogi wraps at Wagamama; and at Wasabi the appearance of a side of kimchi with its teriyaki chicken donburi, as well as sachets of Korean chilli sauce.

Sourcing the sauce

So why is the surge onto the high street now in full flow? "One of the reasons is the supply chain", says Young Park, owner of Bibimbap restaurant in London's Soho. "There are now several large wholesale suppliers importing Korean goods. These have their own chain of retail outlets around London and the UK and they have grown into supplying the bigger supermarkets. As a result, it has become much easier to source Korean ingredients."

"Here in London, customers are looking for new gastronomic experiences after Chinese, Japanese and Thai cuisines," says Lee

Korean fried chicken at On The Bab

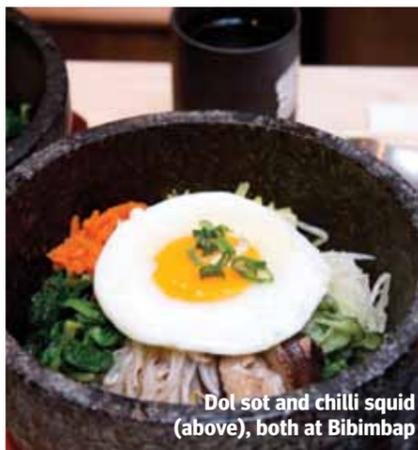
Seonghyuk, general manager of Bibigo in Soho. “Along with a strong identity, there is a great variety, from fermented sauces to fresh ingredients; from spicy to sweet, raw to slow-cooked. Korean food and cuisine have developed over a long period so we have a great gastronomic tradition.”

Leon Foong, co-founder of Jubo restaurant in Shoreditch, London, sees several strands coming together for the sector right now: “Traditionally, the majority of operators have been very much barbecue-centric and tend to be very ethnic – albeit authentic in their positioning. Korean operators have never seen the need to integrate their cuisine and this is where there is opportunity, particularly in the London market,” he says.

A major global player

But it is slowly changing, he adds: “Korean food just has not been explored or experimented in the UK in the same way as its Asian counterparts, and to many entrepreneurs that’s the gap in the market that is being filled. The rise in Korean technology, media and culture has also increased its relevance as a global player.”

Linda Lee of On The Bab has just opened her second site in Covent Garden: “Demand for Korean food is gaining momentum,” she says. “Korean restaurants have been growing in number and have proven a big hit in London.”



Dolsot and chilli squid (above), both at Bibimbap

Typical Korean dishes

Kimchi – fermented vegetables, primarily cabbage

Bibimbap – rice hot pot

Bulgogi – Korean-style marinated beef, typically grilled

Bo ssäm – ssäm means ‘wrapped’, usually leafy vegetables wrapped around meat with ssamjang (a spicy Korean paste made of gochujang and doenjang)

Korean fried chicken (yangnyeom) – double-fried chicken

Bokkeumbap – fried rice, often with kimchi

Galbi – marinated beef or pork ribs in ganjang sauce (Korean soy sauce)

Mandoo – Korean dumplings, served with kimchi and dipping sauce

Yukgaejang – spicy Korean beef soup

Jjigae – Korean stew

One of the most recent arrivals in London is Jinjuu from Korean-American chef Judy Joo, and she feels the trend was always ripe to break into the UK. “It was only a matter of time before Korean food trend penetrated the UK,” she says. “The ‘Korean wave’ has hit the States and Europe just had to catch up.” Certainly, there’s a sense that the influence of restaurants like David Chang’s Momofuku in New York have helped to inform some of the Korean dishes appearing, such as bo ssäm.

It has also been interesting tracking the appearance of Korean dishes and ingredients in non-Korean concepts, and one of the early exponents in London has been Ross Shonhan of Japanese Izakaya sites Bone Daddies, Flesh & Buns and Shackfuyu.

He identifies more reasons for the gear shift: “The Korean government is pumping huge cash into promoting Korean foods. Also, chefs are looking for ingredients and flavours to separate their food from others and social media means sharing experiences are instant – people want to have what their friends are having in LA, Hong Kong and Sydney. I think it will continue and I think these Korean ingredients will become as common as sweet chilli, soy sauce and miso.”

Meanwhile, Neil Rankin’s Bad Egg diner menu has a rich seam of Korean influences: “Most of the new cuisines are coming to our attention because of the street food scene. Korean has always been a strong player in street food and I think we understand that side of it far more than traditional Korean food, which is still difficult to find in central London,” Rankin says.



This image and above: Korean fried chicken at Jubo



The Psy sour at Jinjuu

“I would say to just try it. No education necessary. Just be bold, don’t over-think it and taste everything. There are no rules”

Judy Joo



Bibimbap (top) and ‘On The Bab on the rice’ at On The Bab

Korean restaurant operators on the rise

Jubo

Sites 68 Rivington Street, London EC2A 3AY

Founders LK Foong, Lyall Schwass and Diego Salazar

Concept Perfecting the art of KFC (Korean fried chicken) alongside ssäm, barbecued galbi and bokkeumbap rice dishes

Typical dishes Korean fried chicken in soy, garlic, hot or volcanic variations; ssäm (steak and pork); steamed buns (pork or bulgogi chicken); bokkeumbap; and barbecued galbi

Bó Drake

Sites 6 Greek Street, London W1D 4DE

Founder Jan Lee

Concept East Asian barbecue, combining elements of Korean street food, smoked meats and Mexican influences

Typical dishes Korean lamb cutlets with nashi pear; kimchi nachos; kimchi quesadilla; smoked ribs with Korean pear barbecue sauce; sweet potato fries; and kimchi aioli

Jinjuu

Sites 15 Kingly Street, London W1B 5PS

Founder Judy Joo

Concept A modern and wide-ranging menu, including Korean fried chicken; bulgogi sliders and tacos; and traditional dumplings along with a strong focus on cocktails and Korean drinks

Typical dishes Whole Korean fried chicken; bulgogi beef tacos; bibimbap; ssäm platters; and mandoo

Bibigo

Sites 407 St John Street, Angel, London EC1V 4AB and 58-59 Great Marlborough Street, London W1F 7JY

Owner CJ Group

Concept This is the first European foray from Korea’s largest food company, CJ, serving traditional dishes in a bright, modern setting

Typical dishes Traditional bulgogi; hot stone galbi; bo ssäm; bibimbap; kimchi stew; and yukgaejang (spicy beef soup)

On The Bab

Sites 305 Old Street, London EC1V 9LA.

A second site is due to open soon in Wellington Street, Covent Garden, London

Founder Linda Lee

Concept Korean street food restaurant and

takeaway. Casual dining focusing on Korean tradition of Anju (Korean drinks with food)

Typical dishes Bibimbap; kimchi jjigae; kimchi jeon (pancakes); and Korean fried chicken

Bibimbap

Sites 11 Greek Street, London W1D 4DJ, and 10 Charlotte Street, London W1T 2LT

Owner Young Park

Concept A contemporary approach to Bibimbap dishes with 10 different varieties

Typical dishes Bibimbap; kimchi pancake; spicy rice cake; and jap chae (glass noodles)

Kimchee

Sites Kimchee restaurant: 71 High Holborn London WC1V 6EA; Kimchee To Go: 388 Strand, London WC2R 0LT and 106 New Oxford Street, London WC1A 1HB

Founder Dong Hyun Kim

Concept Restaurant and takeaway concept Kimchee to Go, offering traditional Korean dishes

Typical dishes Hot pot bulgogi; tofu bibimbap; raw beef bibimbap; dwenjang jjigae (soybean paste stew); yukgaejang; and tofu kimchee

Flavour revelation

With the influx of dishes and ingredients in a hitherto unfamiliar UK audience, there is also a challenge of education alongside the thrill and novelty of 'the new'.

Jan Lee, owner of the recently opened Bó Drake in London's Greek Street, takes this on board, while feeling optimistic about diners experiencing a certain 'conversion' moment. "Korean food is new and unfamiliar to many people here in the UK. Once people open their minds and take the leap into trying the spicy, funky, fermented kimchi that fizzes on your tongue, they will find it addictive and won't be able to get enough."

Bibigo's Lee Seonghyuk says: "I see that Korean cuisine is relatively easy to eat in terms of taste, but many UK customers did not know that the best way to enjoy it is to share it – similar to a Chinese feasting table – rather than ordering individually."

"Also, there are combinations of dishes that work well together, such as grilled meat with a ssām basket and kimchi, or bibimbap with a fried egg on top. We try to educate our customers about getting the best out of Korean cuisine by combining dishes directly in the restaurants as well as through storytelling on the menus and in social media."

For Joo, the unfamiliarity brings the frisson of adventure; an opportunity to try something new: "I would say to just try it. No education necessary. Just be bold, don't over-think it and taste everything. There are no rules."

Leon Foong of Jubo agrees that the UK market can easily assimilate an emerging category:



Brisket bao at Bó Drake



Bó Drake



Cocktails at Bó Drake

Judy Joo



Judy Joo



Jinju sae-woo pops

American-born Judy Joo is a chef and host of the cooking and travel TV show *Korean Food Made Simple*, which premiered on the Cooking Channel in the US in April 2014 and aired on the UK's Food Network in January 2015.

After earning an engineering degree from Columbia University and spending years trading and selling derivatives at Morgan Stanley, Joo decided to enrol at the French Culinary Institute. She went on to work as a recipe developer and contributor at *Saveur* magazine before moving to the UK and making a name for herself as the only female Iron Chef UK. She was also offered a role as a resident judge on *The Next Iron Chef*, *Iron Chef America*, *Kitchen Inferno* and competed in *Battle Iron Chef UK vs. Iron Chef America*, making her one of few participants to serve as chef, judge and challenger throughout the series.

After a period as executive chef at London's Playboy Club, she opened Jinju in London's Soho at the start of this year with the help of business partner Kia Joorabchian – football agent and founder of the Babbo Group. The restaurant means "pearl" and showcases Joo's interpretation of Korean street food.



Smoked ribs stack at Bó Drake

"It very much depends on how Korean food is redefined, how it's positioned, the format in which it's served and how much it can be integrated into a system that will serve the interests of British and European customers. If one takes a purist approach, the market will always be niche and hence more education will be required, particularly with respect to no-compromise, authentic cuisine."

"If you integrate Korean recipes into a format that is easily accessible, delicious and familiar, then very little education will be required. The contemporary British diner is a lot more sophisticated and adventurous compared with a decade ago."

The next big thing

It's indicative of this appetite that the first nascent Korean chains are beginning to evolve, spearheaded to some degree by an operator like Bibigo, which Horizons feels "could be the first national Korean chain". Owned by CJ Corp, one of South Korea's largest food manufacturers, Bibigo first announced plans to launch in the UK in 2012, with the aim of opening several sites in the capital before turning its attention to other cities.

With the bigger players poised to take advantage, there is plenty of optimism to take brands to other parts of the UK: "There are many markets where Korean cuisine may fit, such as Manchester and Edinburgh. Many UK cities apart from London are already international, so there is potential for Korean cuisine to market in those places," says Seonghyuk. Jan Lee agrees: "The interest and appetite for Korean food will keep expanding and I have seen new Korean restaurants popping up in Scotland and the north of the UK, where I am from, which is encouraging."

While the rise of Korean dishes and ingredients increases, there can be potential issues regarding achievable margins and sourcing.

"The ingredients from Korea and Japan are not cheap unless you get Chinese versions of them, so it's not a great margin-driven food,

"If you integrate Korean recipes into a format that is easily accessible, delicious and familiar, then very little education will be required"

Leon Foong

agrees Shonhan. "We are driven by flavour. It is difficult to get a lot of foods from Asian countries as so many use non-EU-approved ingredients, but it's also about constant supply."

Bibimbap's Park adds: "We had to be creative with some ingredients as the cost and difficulty of obtaining them meant they were not financially viable. In some instances we had to use locally sourced products instead."

Joo agrees that sourcing can be an issue: "The availability of ingredients is a challenge. Our suppliers cannot keep up with demand, and they regularly run out, which is frustrating. Hopefully, as the market grows, the type and variety of imported products will grow."

Rankin is upbeat about the challenges: "Korea Foods imports almost everything you could need, and the ingredients are relatively easy to get, although obviously more expensive than buying them in Korea."

While the challenges are there, there is a buoyant sense that the Korean sector has plenty of scope. "I don't see how any cuisine style or food type can have limits. If it's delicious, accessible and executed in the right format, there will always be room for sustenance in a global city like London", says Foong.

"I think customers will be happy with their first taste of Korean food, regardless," enthuses Joo. "It's the best thing they haven't tried."

K-Town is on a mission: coming to a town near you, soon.



This image and below: Bibigo

