

# SEOUL FOOD

WRITTEN BY ETTIE BERNEKING  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN GAYMAN

*Chong Moore is satisfying southwest Missouri's craving for from-scratch Korean dishes*



*It's 5:30 in the evening, and the gravel parking lot outside Cafe Korea is full.*

Inside, customers are slurping bowls of spicy, bright red *soon doo boo* stew, and tables are littered with *banchan* served in tiny white dishes filled with kimchi, bean sprouts, pickled radish and more. Back in the kitchen, owner and head chef Chong Moore is running the show. A little more than 5 feet tall with a friendly, throaty laugh, Chong is far from intimidating. But her unflagging determination and prowess in the kitchen have made her a heavyweight in St. Robert, Missouri.

Home to some 5,000 residents, the small town in southwest Missouri is the gateway to Fort Leonard Wood Army base. Chong's husband, John, is a retired Army serviceman, and there are salutes to the military throughout the restaurant. There are also photo collages taped to the walls. Each collage is from a different year and displays photos Chong snapped of smiling customers. She loves pointing out the ones who eat lunch at Cafe Korea every day.

Chong has been serving her customers authentic Korean food since she opened the restaurant in 2010. Within the first two years, the cozy restaurant doubled in size, but the small kitchen remains the same. There's barely room for the giant dishwashing station, the two prep tables and the 12-burner gas stove. It doesn't help that everything is lower to the ground to better accommodate Chong's diminutive stature. She even had the stove legs chopped off a few inches to bring it down to her height. Add the two other Korean-American cooks who help Chong, and the small kitchen suddenly feels even tighter.

Chong just laughs about the close quarters. "I wanted it this small," she says. "I've worked in larger kitchens, and with all the running around, I got so tired." There's hardly room to turn around, but Chong and her team know the layout by heart. "We have good teamwork," she says.

The tight-knit group of female cooks first met at church, and, as a result, the tiny kitchen is constantly filled with laughter. "It has to be fun," Chong says. "If I don't like cooking, I don't have a reason to open this restaurant." A smile spreads across her face and she lets out a warm, friendly laugh.

## HOME COOKING

Growing up in the small town of Jinju, South Korea, about 20 minutes from the coast, Chong learned to cook by watching her mother. Every day, her mother would make lunch for the bankers who worked next door. When Chong got home from school, she helped wash dishes and clean the house, which was also owned by the bank. Eventually she also began helping her mother cook meals. "There were probably 20 people during lunch," Chong says, remembering afternoons filled with soft, sticky rice, hot fish and a seemingly endless array of pickled veggies, kimchi and braised



potatoes. To make sure the meals were profitable and sustainable, Chong's mother eventually began charging for lunches at the beginning of the month. This way, if some of the bankers didn't show up one day, she wasn't out any money. Just like at Cafe Korea, the family's kitchen was small. There wasn't room or money for a freezer, so every day the ice box had to be refilled. It was in this kitchen that Chong learned to make giant vats of tender rice and how to properly chop vegetables.

"When I was a little girl, we only had one knife," Chong says as she mimics a rapid and precise chopping movement. "We chopped everything by hand." Even today, you won't find a knife set in Chong's kitchen. Each of the three cooks has her own knife, including Chong, who protects hers by hiding it in the restaurant when not in use.

Years later, Chong met and married John, who was stationed at an Army base near her aunt's home in Korea where Chong lived during college. The couple eventually moved to the U.S. where they raised their three children who are now in their 20s.

Chong still jokes about how marrying John was her answer to the Korean social system. "In Korea, the bride's family has to spend thousands of dollars on gifts for the groom," Chong explains. Chong's family didn't have much money, so true to her independent spirit and character, she decided to buck tradition and marry an American. "I'm very lucky I married my husband," she says as a smile cracks across her face. "I didn't have to pay any money!"

In the early days of their marriage, on John's nights off, Chong cooked him dinner and slowly began introducing him to her favorite Korean dishes: Spicy kimchi pancakes and braised short rib soups were the norm. It was just what Chong wanted – a captivated audience who enjoyed her cooking.

"Meals in Korea are social events," John says. "The rice is yours, and the soup is yours, but the rest is shared."

In no time, Chong had John hooked on kimchi and kimbap. "He's not picky," Chong says. "And since he can't cook, he eats mostly Korean food now."

That also elicits a big smile from her.

#### MIDWEST BOUND

After bouncing around to a few different U.S. Army bases, Chong and John ended up in St. Robert. By the time they settled there, Chong had spent about 10 years working in restaurants as a server, a partner at two restaurants and owner of another, so when the opportunity came about to open a new place – a place to cook and share the Korean food she loves so much – she didn't hesitate.

But not everyone in St. Robert was ready for the spicy, largely unfamiliar Korean fare she dished out. For those customers, Chong developed and added a selection of popular Chinese and Japanese menu items including



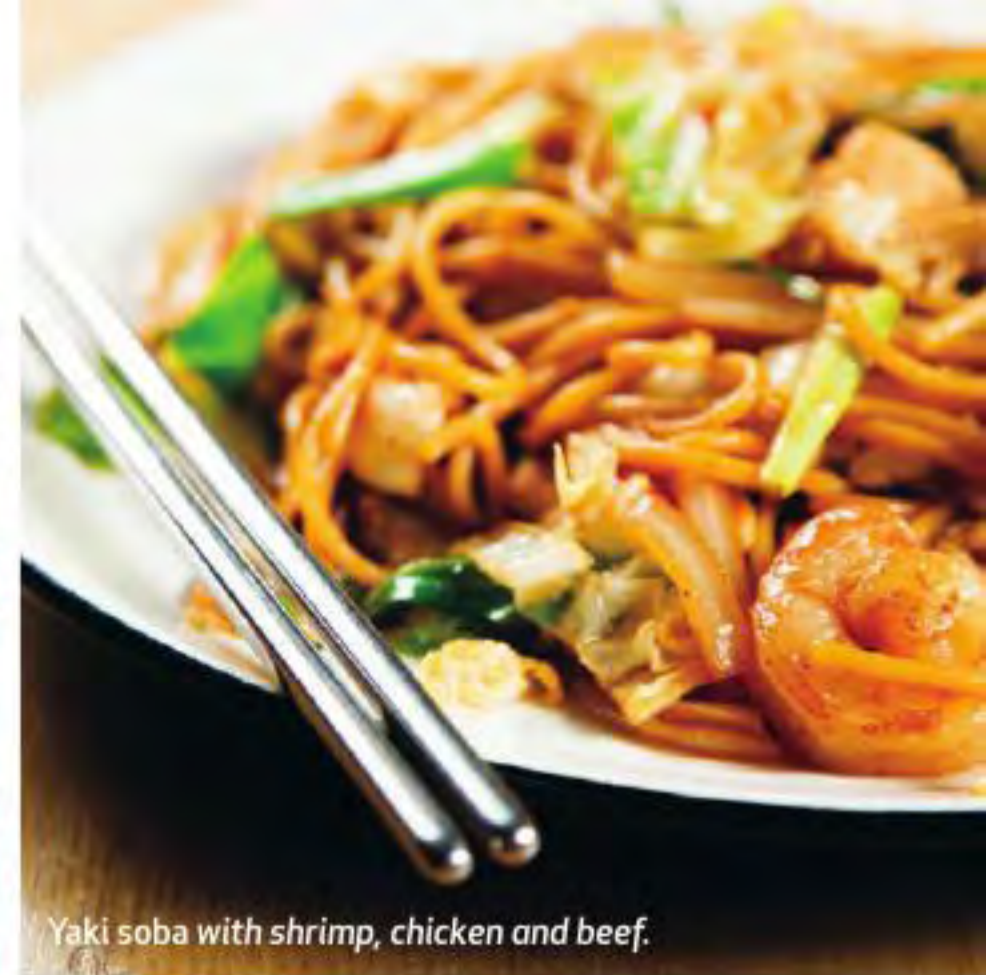




Beef Bulgogi



Chong Moore prepping beef for bulgogi.



Yaki soba with shrimp, chicken and beef.



sweet-and-sour chicken, fried rice, broccoli stir-fry and the popular *yaki soba*. This savory noodle dish is a customer favorite thanks to the special sauce Chong uses in it. There are some 20 ingredients in the sauce, but like all of her sauce recipes, it's a secret. Despite the Americanized dishes, the majority of hungry customers who line up for lunch each day are craving Korean food. For those unfamiliar with, say, kimchi, Chong says it only takes one order to win them over, "Once they eat it, they're hooked."

To ensure her customers leave happy and full, Chong has made a few changes to the recipes her mother taught her all those years ago in Jinju. She sometimes changes the spice levels, and she's added more meat to the menu – dishes like beef teriyaki, chicken yaki soba and even hot wings. "In Korea, you would usually get fried fish, rice and tons of sides," she says. "But in the States, you have to have meat."

She even changes up the banchan depending on who is ordering it, and since Chong knows just about everyone who walks in the door, she has come to know her

customers' preferences. Some want extra spice, some want salty-sweet and others – mostly Korean-American customers – just want something that tastes like home.

#### MADE FRESH

For an authentic taste of Chong's home, order the *bulgogi*.

Just like everything served at Cafe Korea, the bulgogi is made fresh every day. First, giant chunks of beef are trimmed of excess fat and then placed in the freezer for one day. When the meat is ready, Chong hauls it over to the meat slicer. This is her toy, as she calls it, and no one else is allowed to touch it. Once the blade is running, Chong pushes the block of frozen meat back and forth, and thin slices of beef fall onto a tray below.

The sliced beef is pushed into a massive bowl that's about 3 feet across, and the 10-gallon bucket that sits nearby is opened to reveal the bulgogi sauce. The top is an opaque layer of pulverized fruit and vegetables. (The key to the semisweet flavor and wonderfully tender beef is kiwi.) With one swipe of a wooden spoon, Chong

parts the mixture to reveal liquid the color of molasses beneath.

A bowl is used to ladle the sauce over the sliced meat, and sesame oil and sugar are added. Chong pulls on thick, red rubber gloves that reach her elbows and gets to work mixing everything together by hand. The bulgogi is then packed into a container, covered with plastic wrap and stored in the refrigerator for one day to allow flavors to marinate before it's ready to cook.


"If we cook it like this, it's no good," Chong says as she opens the fridge to reveal tomorrow's bulgogi, wrapped and ready to go.

Every day is like this in the kitchen at Cafe Korea. Chong wakes up at 6AM and heads to the grocery store to get what she will need for the day. Once at the restaurant, everyone gets to work chopping vegetables for *bibimbap*, soups and stir-frys.

When the lunch rush dies down, the cooks congregate at a table in the dining room and assemble the *yaki mandu* (a fried appetizer that's kind of the Korean equivalent of an

eggroll). Even the customers join in on the fun. If it's slow enough, Chong has them pull up a chair and demonstrates how to wrap the delicate parcels of cabbage, carrots, rice noodles and ground beef. Chong loves doing this and laughs about the number of times she's taught customers how to make sushi. Most chefs don't regularly invite diners into their kitchens, but Chong's kitchen is always open – even despite its cozy size. When a customer asks how she makes bulgogi or *bibimbap*, she invites them in for a lesson and loads them up with to-go boxes before they leave.

This is what Chong loves – to pass along her mother's recipes and share her passion for cooking and Korean food with people. For Chong, it all comes back to the communal style of cooking and dining in Korea.

"Korean people love to eat," Chong says. "Any place you go, people will be hanging out and talking...but they're always eating." 

**Cafe Korea, 839 VFW Memorial Blvd. #9, St. Robert, Missouri, 573.336.3232, [cafekorea.net](http://cafekorea.net)**