



OUT OF THE WAY EATS

by Heather Berry
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Growing up in South Korea, Chong Moore was no stranger to the kitchen. Many an hour was spent with her mother there, where she was taught how to prepare Korean dishes the traditional way, incorporating big flavor into simple foods such as rice, noodles and vegetables.

"I like to stay in the kitchen," says Chong (pronounced "jung"), the owner of Café Korea in St. Robert. "Our restaurant is a good way to share the Korean culture and our food."

If you've never tried Korean food, imagine your favorite Chinese dish, then

add a little kick to it. Most traditional Korean dishes are spicy, although Chong is quick to add that customers can have their dish spicy or not since everything is cooked to order.

You'll find that garlic adds flavor to most dishes, while red pepper flakes, ginger, onion and soy sauce are favorite seasonings used in Korean dishes, too.

The aroma of these ingredients floating in the air with the smell of vegetables sizzling in sesame oil will make it difficult to choose a dish. For those unfamiliar with Korean food, the menu features images of the dishes.

According to Chong, 70 percent of the menu features traditional Korean entrées, with the remainder consisting of Chinese favorites, such as General Tso's chicken, for those who might be a bit skittish of trying new fare.

Start your meal with yaki mandu, a crispy fried appetizer filled with noodles, vegetables and meat. Think of it as a spring roll in a triangle.

Ever want to try sushi without the raw fish? Then try kimbahp, which is rice rolled up in seaweed and stuffed with seasoned vegetables, a bit of cooked egg, pickled radish and a piece of chicken or other cooked meat.

Of course, there's always homemade egg drop soup for those who crave the staple dish.

"Mandu soup is my favorite dish," says John, Chong's husband. Retired after 20 years of military service, John now works as a civilian at Fort Leonard Wood, located less than a mile from Café Korea. He and Chong met 25 years ago when he was stationed in South Korea.

Chong prides herself on offering her customers the freshest food. Each morning, she scours the produce at local grocery stores, buying what's needed for the day, much like people would do in Korea. Then it's off to the restaurant where Chong and her staff slice and marinate the meats needed for the day.

The kitchen is a quiet hive of activity as everything from steamed mandu filling (dumplings) to kimchi jeon (Korean pan-fried pancakes) is methodically prepared for the day.

Don't be alarmed when the waitress brings six side dishes, known as banchan, to the table. These are



Join editor Kyle Spradley on his visit to Café Korea in the online edition at www.ruralmissouri.coop.



photo by Kyle Spradley

John and Chong Moore are proud to offer fresh, authentic Korean dishes to their patrons at Café Korea in St. Robert.

Café Korea

The best of Korean cuisine in the Ozarks

brought with any meal and — if you're dining with others — are intended for all to share. Kimchi (spicy, fermented cabbage) will show up, along with radish and cucumber kimchi, an omelet-like egg dish cut into bite-sized pieces and teriyaki potatoes.

Whether you're there for lunch or dinner, you can have beef, chicken, pork or shrimp in a number of dishes, including bulgogi, teriyaki, yaki soba, stir-fried, fried rice or as a salad.

"Most of our customers come here for bulgogi," Chong says. "A lot of people like spicy food, so we recommend the pork bulgogi."

The fresh, thinly sliced meat in the bulgogi entrée has been marinated in a mixture of spices that make it so tender you wouldn't dare ask for a knife.

The daily lunch special comes in a beautiful, lacquered box similar to a school lunch tray and comes with a bulgogi or teriyaki meat of choice, rice, fresh spring roll, yaki mandu, kimbahp, crab rangoon and a salad with a spicy dressing that Chong says "people love to take home."

"Most of our customers are regulars. Some come daily," adds Chong, smiling. "Everybody here is like family."

A family atmosphere is an understatement. One day, a customer brought homemade treats for Chong and her staff, while a soldier from the Army base came in just to say goodbye. He said he was shipping out soon and will miss them.

Quite content to leave the cooking to Chong, John is supportive of his wife and applauds the great success Café Korea has enjoyed since opening two years ago.

"I think you'll get a much better feel for traditional Korean food here than you would in a huge restaurant where food is mass produced," says John.

So if you're traveling down Interstate 44 and pass through St. Robert, stop by Café Korea. You'll be greeted with a smile and treated to some authentic Korean dishes. It's sure to be "ma shee suh yo," which in Korean means delicious.

Café Korea

Specialties: Traditional Korean dishes including beef, chicken or pork bulgogi, yaki soba (meat, vegetable and noodle dish), mandu gook (dumplings in broth) or galbi (marinated beef ribs).

Price: Entrées from \$6.99 to \$12.99; lunch specials from \$7.99. Cash and checks only; ATM on premises.

Details: Open Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Closed on weekends. Seats 50. Takeout available. No smoking; no alcohol served.

Address: 839 VFW Memorial Blvd. in St. Robert.

Contact: 573-336-3232; www.cafekorea.net.

