

Korea in London

4 Oct 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

The connection between a new hotel with excellent desserts and pâtisserie, Arsenal football club and the first modern central London restaurant specialising in Korean food may not be immediately apparent. But this is the story of my journey between these seemingly disparate establishments.

It all began towards the end of a meal at Aperó in the basement of the recently opened Ampersand Hotel close by South Kensington tube station.

I began to notice a smiling female pastry chef wearing a striking white and green bandana and carrying plates of pistachio and olive cake with griottes cherries and a saffron panna cotta with nectarines and honey to adjacent tables. I was able subsequently to ascertain that they tasted as good as they looked.

On the way out I bumped into the hotel's general manager Roberto Pajares (son of Ramon, formerly GM of the Four Seasons and The Savoy) and asked him who this intriguing pastry chef was. 'Come and meet Ji-Sun', he replied with pride and enthusiasm and led me over to the marble counter that shows off more examples of her sweet handiwork.

Here were laid out plates of salted peanut butter florentines; strawberry meringues; coconut financiers; a peach and raspberry tart; macaroons of many flavours; and some tangy lemon profiteroles. And just to the left, carrying a plate of scones for that afternoon's tea service, was Ji-Sun Shin herself (pictured above, courtesy of Steve Ryan).

Happily, Shin had some time to spare in her busy production schedule so she was able to begin the tale that was to take me from her desserts to a taste of bulgogi, the spicy, marinated Korean beef which she and her sister, Mi-Sun, serve to Arsenal supporters before a home match. And from there, to Bibigo restaurant, which CJ, Korea's biggest food company, has just opened in Soho.

My interest was piqued from the outset and not just because of my powerful memories of eating out in Seoul two years ago. For perhaps even longer many in the restaurant industry have talked of Korean food as 'the next big thing', the even hotter sequel to Thai, Chinese, Japanese and Vietnamese food, all of which have now attained such wide appeal. Korean restaurants have, by contrast, resolutely stayed within a small radius of where Koreans live and work, most notably New Malden, Surrey, in the UK and Koreatown in Los Angeles.

When not working as a pastry chef, the two Shin sisters team up with their respective partners to introduce bulgogi, one of Korea's most popular dishes, to Arsenal followers. It began when they moved to live close to the Emirates stadium and noticed their Jamaican neighbours preparing jerk chicken and selling it successfully before every game.

They decided to follow their example, Korean style. They marinate large pieces of feather blade beef (from the shoulder so it has lots of flavour) for 24 hours in sesame oil, fruit puree and beer, then cook it slowly, slice it thinly and then, somewhat less authentically but to enable it be enjoyed on the hoof, pack it into a sliced baguette and serve it from the front of their house.

This interpretation of a household Korean dish has proved so popular that the Shin sisters are now selling 500 portions before every game at £4 each. And they have generated such a loyal following that they only hear vociferous complaints whenever the football season draws to a close. But for those with a penchant for this style of cooking, the new Bibigo will come as an exciting addition to the London scene.

Bibigo stands on the site of the former Ran Korean restaurant that was distinguished by a rather dark, gloomy interior and equally off-putting photos of the dishes it served hanging in the window. Bibigo, by contrast, is much lighter and brighter with a large window on the far wall that allows clear views into the brand new kitchen. The only health hazard eating at Bibigo presents is that the large-format menu is too flimsy and drops far too easily on to the candles on the tables.

And while the cooking style does involve certain concessions to a Western penchant for food that is less hot and spicy than the Korean norm, the dishes still pack a punch. Among the starters at Bibigo this was particularly true of a dish that

combined tofu, diced pork belly and bean sprouts and another of squid with okra and fried crushed garlic, while prawn dumplings with pea shoots and chili soy dressing were considerably milder. A rendition of the traditional bibimbap, rice topped with beef or tofu, was excellent, as was the sweet, slow-cooked beef ribs with daikon, shallots and chestnuts that packed lots of unctuous, lip-smacking flavours.

Service was a combination of Korean deference overlaid by French professionalism supplied by an enthusiastic manager from Alsace who fell for Korean food after falling for his Korean girlfriend. He has also compiled a wine list of note, although confessed that it is a challenge to please both Western palates in search of gentler tastes with the Korean penchant for strong flavours with every mouthful. But this is a difference in taste worth exploring.

Apero, The Ampersand Hotel 10 Harrington Road, London SW7 3ER; tel 020 7589 5895. www.ampersandhotel.com

Bibigo 58 Great Marlborough Street, London W1F 7JY; tel 020 7042 5225. www.bibigouk.com