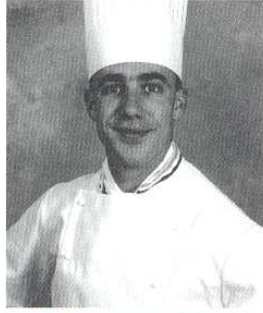


ROBERT DANHI



WE

WERE ESCORTED PAST LUSH GARDEN FOUNTAINS, LARGE CROCKS OF *KIMCHI*, AND FERMENTED BEAN PASTE HANGING TO DRY IN THE OPEN AIR, AND INTO THE ENTRANCE OF NOLBOO RESTAURANT IN SEOUL, KOREA.

A barrage of bows greeted us as we entered with Jin-Kwon Oh, the president of the Nolboo Restaurant empire.

Behind the reception desk are signed currency notes from across the globe - evidence that people have travelled from various countries and sampled Nolboo's Korean specialties.

As we walked up the stairs where the wall is studded with famous Korean personalities, we begin to encounter a bombardment of aromas: garlic, ginger, sesame oil, fermented bean paste, *kimchi*. These aromatic ingredients form the foundation of Korean cuisine.

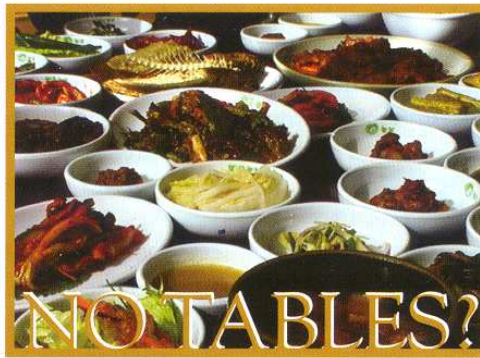
We walked down the corridor past several dining rooms decorated with museum-calibre antiques that included a Singer foot-powered sewing machine and looms for making silks. Some rooms were empty and others had guests gathered around tables sitting on large colourful thin square pillows.

Then something struck me as odd. Even though the dining room was only 10% full, tables were provided only to those who were present. I pointed out to my wife Estrellita that the other dining room had no tables. Mr Oh answered my inquiry with the simple reply: "The tables come to you already loaded with all the dishes."

"Twenty-four side dishes per person," Young-Wan Yoon, managing director, proudly stated.

We sat down on our pillow. As this was only my second day in Korea, I was still getting used to sitting cross-legged on the floor. I found myself shifting positions occasionally as pain started to build in my arthritic knees.

The table arrived, carried swiftly by two young Korean men with the strength and agility of trapeze performers.



What a sight to behold: the table was covered from end to end with an array of small round white dishes.

The familiar items first caught my eye. *Jap chae*, sweet potato cellophane noodles, coated with a sesame-soy sauce. Winter cabbage, slathered with fiery hot chilli paste. Then a white radish *kimchi* spiked with

one lone green chilli, infusing more flavour than bite.

What is this? I said it looks like a type of *kimchi*.

Bella Oh, the president's daughter and currently a student at the Culinary Institute of America in New York, responded that it is made from the innards of cod mixed with chopped garlic and ginger, sliced scallions and red pepper powder.

I can't say I approached this *kimchi* with the same enthusiasm as the cabbage, but it was not as bad as it sounds. There was a slight brininess, with the aromatic garlic and red pepper dominating its flavour.

For the next hour, I continued to ask and then sample.

We also drank traditional Korean wine - a fermented rice wine infused with more than ten different Chinese medicinal herbs. Enormous amounts of ginseng are consumed in Korea via wine, tea, *kimchi*, and infused soups.

Running through my mind were thoughts of over indulgence that may lead to an expansion of my waist size. I hastily convinced myself that feasts like this are opportunities that we must embrace when they arise. After all, when will be the next time I will be whisked around from one restaurant to another sampling their specialties? I can only hope it will happen in the near future. RD

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