

## **Celebrate the 2018 bowl season**

### **Korean dish offers ample room for personal taste**

**F**irst you see a bouquet of vivid colors. Then you hear the sizzle. The crackling intensifies as you stir the crunchy rice at the bottom of the black ceramic bowl. A fried egg, especially when it's sunny-side up, adds whimsy to the dish. What you have in front of you is bibimbap, one of the signature dishes from the realm of Korean cuisine.

Bibimbap literally means "mixed rice." Yet, it's so much more than just rice. The rice makes up the base. On top are an array of vegetables, your choice of protein and a Korean-style sauce.

This is a dish that lends itself to customization – by taste, by availability of ingredients, even by color and texture.

The customization aspect is the Americanization of it, says Heather

Chung, owner of Brown Rice Korean Grill, a multi-location eatery in the Baltimore area that specializes in bibimbap. One of the locations opened last August at 401 York Road, in Towson Commons.

Traditional bibimbap in Korea, she says, would have a protein, along with these elements: shitake mushrooms, spinach, carrots, zucchini, onions, pickled radish, bean sprouts and the fried egg on top.

By comparison, the Brown Rice Korean Grill in Towson offers an assortment of 18 fresh vegetable options.

Let's start at the beginning, though. In this instance, the vessel of choice is what the eatery calls a "hot stone bowl." It holds 32 ounces. As you select your style of rice, your server will spread sesame oil across the bowl's interior. The options are brown rice, mixed-grain rice, or mixed sushi (sticky) rice with jasmine rice. You could also select a base of kale salad, or a combination of any two of these items.

Next, your server will ask what protein you'd like. These choices include: chicken, beef, pork belly, beef short

ribs (kolbi), shrimp, salmon or tofu. The meats are available as thin slices that have been marinated and grilled, in a Korean style called bulgogi. Some also come as spicy. Even the tofu comes in different versions – honey ginger, spicy and steamed.

Now, it's time to select items from the veggie bar. You get seven choices. For a blend of the traditional with something for American tastes, you could go with a line-up such as this: edamame, broccoli, julienne carrots, cucumber kimchi, pickled beets, tomatoes and seaweed.

The server will arrange each veggie item adjacent to one another, around the bowl's inside perimeter. If the bibimbap were a pie, each item would be a distinctive slice.

Your bowl is nearly complete. The server is ready to select a plastic squeeze bottle, and squirt out one of the Brown Rice Korean Grill's homemade sauces across the top of your now-filled bowl.

In keeping with an ongoing pattern, you have seven sauce choices. They are: gochujang (a traditional Korean sauce made with red-pepper paste);

bulgogi; spicy mayo; deongjang (bean paste with apple and onion); sesame soy; mango; and spicy citron.

The bowl – now doused with a homemade sauce – goes onto the stovetop. And, a fried egg tops it off. Minutes later, your personally designed bowl of bibimbap comes back to you, sizzling and ready to eat.

Chung, who arrived in the United States from Korea in 1998, emphasizes the balanced portions and nutritious aspects of bibimbap. Before she opened her first Brown Rice Korean Grill several years ago, she had a Baltimore City liquor store. The urge to provide a food product that supports a healthy lifestyle prompted her to start her bibimbap-focused operation.

In keeping with the eatery's mantra for using the freshest ingredients, the Brown Rice Korean Grill does all of its own pickling and fermenting, and creates its own marinade and sauce recipes.

Bibimbap may have started in Korea as a way to scrape together bits and pieces of whatever food was available, Chung said, and then transform the

remnants into a more palatable,  
substantive dish. Or, as the popular  
expression goes: "The whole is  
greater than the sum of its parts."

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