

In Hawaiian Gardens, do as the natives do: Go to J Korean BBQ Restaurant

by RENE VILLAROMAN

HAWAIIAN GARDENS – There is no denying that all-you-can-eat dining is the most attractive culinary invention during the last two decades or so, with hundreds of these restaurants sprouting like mushrooms in the Los Angeles basin. The early players, which opened their restaurants in the early 80s, have ruled the restaurant landscape and have retained their distinct markets. However, the phenomenon had also given birth to a sub-specialty – Korean-style Barbecue all-you-can-eat dining. During the intervening years between the early 80s until the late 90s, more and more all-you-can-eat restaurants of different persuasions had been established, some specializing in Chinese, Thai, even Filipino foods. The Japanese food industry took a while to jump into the fray due to the more expensive ingredients required in Japanese all-you-can-eat dining. But a few daring Japanese establishments were forced to join the fray in order to retain their competitiveness.

I am not the typical all-you-can-eat gourmand, in the sense that my capacity to ingest pounds over pounds of food is limited to a certain degree by the slowly receding size of my stomach, and so I am on the look-out for all-you-can-eat establishments that do not pursue the practice of unlimited dining because it is fashionable and it is what other restaurants do.

My recent meanderings had taken me to the city of Hawaiian Gardens, close to the city of Cerritos, where J Korean BBQ Restaurant was in the thick of introducing a very popular beef barbecue (in South Korea). Andy Moon, the amiable owner, informed me that *kalbi* (barbecued marinated rib-eye steak) is the most popular barbecue item in his homeland South

Korea. Not that Andy is new to *kalbi*, and *boolgogi*, two very popular and succulent barbecue iterations. It is because he wants to live up his business and to cater to another segment of diners that prefers all-you-can-eat dining, minus the related excess and unchecked gluttony that are associated with buffet style, stuff-as-much-food as you-can style dining that are the stock-in-trade of other bigger establishments.

Over at J Korean BBQ, the concept is pursued not with wild abandon, but with a little more restraint. Don't get us wrong here. J subscribes to the concept, the only difference is that his servers, and sometimes Andy himself, would be on hand to serve every customer's pick for as many times as the customer asks for the array of meat barbecues and other delicious barbecue entrees, including pork and chicken. Just like in other all-you-can-eat restaurants, the customer pays a fixed amount.

When I dined there one afternoon recently, I was very lucky to find Andy. There are three large television screens tuned to Travel Channel and Animal Planet. The restaurant serves liquor and other alcoholic beverage, and is open for business from 10:30 am until 10:30 pm everyday. The

tables are large and can accommodate six to eight diners, and most of them are topped with built-in gas-fired hibachi grills. After he receives his uncooked order, the customer proceeds to grill the meats himself.

The entire dining area can accommodate about 90 diners at one time. When a customer orders a particular entrée, say the newly introduced *kalbi*, a server brings a tray of the marinated rib-eyes steaks and sidings that include pickled radish diced red chili; cucumber pickles, soy bean sprouts, potato salad, and kimchi – fermented napa cabbage. There is also a green salad with vinegar, soy sauce and sugar dressing and steamed rice. This combo is quite substantial: the rib-eye steaks alone weigh approximately two pounds, or one kilo. That's pretty big. Here's the surprise: the whole package is only \$21.95 plus tax.

From my point of view, that one combination should suffice to feed me and my family (wife and daughter), leaving just enough space for the desserts (not included). But, that is not the *coup d' grace*. It's the taste and the rib-eye's reputation as one of the most tender beef cuts of all. Andy, in his desire to prove the superiority of his culinary offerings to me, made me taste *kalbi* that's been marinated for 24 hours versus *kalbi* that's been soaked in its marinade just minutes before grilling. Well, the difference is like night and day. The beef that's been marinated for 24 hours was the hands-down winner.

Andy tells me that they make the marinade from scratch. He was even generous enough to tell me what ingredients went into the marinade. I would want you to go to J Korean BBQ to savor Andy's *kalbi* barbecue in person. However, having said that, I would tell you that it was one the best rib-eye steak barbecues I ever had. I also enjoyed all the sidings, particularly the

pickled radish and the kimchi.

If you are not into *kalbi*, or *boolgogi* (\$9.99 per person indefinitely), you may opt for the other all-you-can-eat offerings, like the thin-sliced beef brisket, sliced pork neck, marinated beef, non-smoked bacon, and marinated short ribs for \$14.99; the thin slice beef brisket, sliced pork neck, marinated beef, non-smoked bacon, marinated chicken, marinated pork, marinated beef short rib, sliced beef tongue and beef tripe, for \$16.99.

For pickier eaters, there is the thin-sliced beef brisket and non-smoked bacon, for just \$9.99; and *bulgogi* special marinated beef, also for \$9.99 for an indefinite period.

J Korean BBQ is located on the southeast corner of Norwalk

Bl. and Carson St., in the city of Hawaiian Gardens. It is about a three-quarter mile east of the Hawaiian Gardens Casino. "This restaurant has become a regular with casino dealers," says Andy. "They come here to dine after their shifts."

For somebody who routinely drives some twenty odd miles to have an enjoyable dinner, I am not at all discouraged by J Korean BBQ's distance from my home in Glendale. After all, on weekends, when there's relatively little traffic on the freeways, almost every point in Los Angeles County feels like a twenty-minute drive. J Korean BBQ is on 11201 Carson St., Hawaiian Gardens, CA 90716, with telephone number (562) 865-1178.

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