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FEB/MAR 2016

## Our K-Town

Chef Deuki Hong celebrates Korean cuisine.

MELANIE REHAK

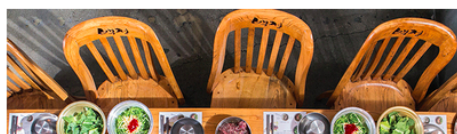
Deuki Hong is throwing chunks of butter into a giant wok. It's a late afternoon in December, and we're in the kitchen of the restaurant Kang Ho Dong Baekjeong, on Thirty-second Street in Manhattan, making kimchi fried rice. Already in the wok are pork belly, onion, kimchi, and cooked rice. The hissing noise the mixture makes as Hong flattens it down with the back of a huge ladle is epic, louder than the music blaring in the narrow alley of cooking space lined with burners, woks, prep stations, and refrigerators. Louder, even, than the vacuums being used to clean several of the barbecue grills in the dining room. The wok's sizzle is the most delicious sound I've heard in weeks. After we have a wonky little chat about ratios of acids to fats—Hong is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) and a veteran, at the age of twenty-six, of both Momofuku and Jean-Georges—Hong reflects for a moment and then gets to the point. "I think butter does a really good job."

Accordingly, Hong uses a lot of it in this dish, which appears in his new cookbook, **Koreatown (Clarkson Potter, \$30)**, written with Matt Rodbard and featuring cameos and recipes from a host of other chefs and purveyors, as well as stories about Koreatowns all across the country. "*José! Dame jugo de kimchi!*" Hong calls out to one of the guys on the line. Then he mashes up the kimchi juice with some softened butter and some Korean chili flakes. This combo will come into play at the end, dolloped on top of the finished rice along with a sunny-side-up egg, scallions, and some shredded seaweed for good measure. Hong is apologetic, because the recipe actually calls for bacon, not pork belly, and he's had to improvise with the pork product at hand. "I wish we had some bacon for that smoky flavor," he says somewhat wistfully as we sit down at a table in the dining room to taste the result, which has been pressed into a wickedly hot round pan with a touch of sesame oil, causing the rice to form a crisp crust on the bottom. Then he mashes up all the ingredients with a large spoon and gives me all the best pieces of pork belly.

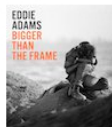
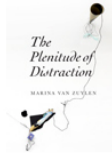
As we eat, it becomes eminently clear to me why this recipe is called Our Mildly Insane Kimchi Bokkeumbap. It's sour and savory and fatty and spicy and crunchy all at once. It's only later, when I read the recipe, that I fully understand the extent of Hong's sorrow about the pork substitution. "Bacon," begins the head note:

We kept coming back to bacon when talking about this kimchi fried-rice recipe. Bacon is quintessential Americana. Our kimchi fried rice *needed* bacon, and for months we tested and were continually disappointed that the essence of bacon—Americana!—was being muted by either too much rice or too much kimchi. Then it came to us. We needed to use more bacon! Like a lot more. Like how French chefs view mashed potatoes: equal parts butter and potatoes. That's scary, right? Also scary good.

Both the voice and the comparisons in this introduction are typical of *Koreatown*. Hong, who was born in Korea but came to the US at a young age—he was raised mostly in New Jersey—first learned about cooking not from his family, as you might expect, but from television. "When I was like twelve or thirteen, Saturdays were spent watching Lidia Bastianich and Rick Bayless and Jacques Pépin on PBS," he said as we swigged club soda and scraped out the rice pan. "It wasn't cartoons, it was that. That was my first exposure to people cooking, and the idea of talking about something while they're making something, and then the final product—that whole process, there was something really beautiful about it." But Hong was already on an entirely different path as a young man—that of an avid and talented athlete. Then fate intervened on, of all places, the baseball diamond: "My baseball coach was partners with restaurateur Drew Nieporent, and he said, 'If you ever want to work in a restaurant, let me know.' I started working at his new place, Centrico, with Chef Aaron Sanchez, who was really a mentor to me and bought me my first knife. I cooked, essentially, every day, and all my breaks were spent at Centrico." When Sanchez told him that he could either remain a line cook or get a formal education, Hong remembers that his first thought was, "I didn't know there was a school for cooking!"

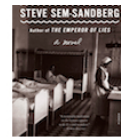


### ADVERTISEMENT





A Korean barbecue banquet at Kang Ho Dong Baekjeong restaurant in Manhattan. John Gemegah



He ended up at CIA, where, among other things, he became one of David Chang's early hires at Momofuku. "I met David Chang when he wasn't David Chang! He came up to CIA, and he was an up-and-coming guy looking for new cooks. I went to work for him for about a year. Momofuku was probably the most fun I've ever had cooking. There was a lot of serious talent." After he finished school, he decided to try something new, in spite of his love for "Momo," as he calls it. The kitchen at Jean-Georges on Columbus Circle was the first really regimented one he'd worked in, where "everyone has the same uniform on and it's 'Yes, Chef!' It's got three Michelin stars for a reason." He was nineteen when he started there, and by twenty-one he was burned out. After a year of cooking for private clients, he hooked up with the mini restaurant chain run by Korean comedian and former wrestler Kang Ho-dong (hence the name of the restaurant; "Baekjeong" means "butcher"), where he's happily returned to cooking Korean, albeit with the occasional American—bacon!—twist. As he sees it, it's the ideal way to combine his true love with his upbringing. "My mom and dad wouldn't allow me to speak English in the house. Korean pride and culture were very big in our household," he says. "I did karate and tae kwon do, and my dad was pretty adamant that I represent South Korea in the Olympics. Or he was like, 'Be the first South Korean baseball player!' He wanted me to represent South Korea in any way. I thought it would be sports, but it wasn't."

*Koreatown* is one more way for him to carry forth that heritage. "I like this book because it's not a Deuki Hong book," he explains. "It's not 101 recipes from Baekjeong or Deuki Hong. It's about something that I feel very passionate about, Koreatown. Matt contacted me and I said, 'Hell yeah I'm interested—it's about Koreatown. Why hasn't anybody talked about the Koreatowns of New York, LA, and also everything in between?'"

The result is a book that's true to Korean cuisine and totally accessible. Take, for example, the duo's recipe for the classic Korean dish bibimbap, which is titled *This Is Not a Bibimbap Recipe*. Instead of being prescriptive, it encourages readers to use up whatever they have lying around the kitchen (the name of the dish translates to "mixed rice" and the book lists lemon-lime soda as an ingredient in the sauce). "We're just like, grab your rice-cooker and clear out your fridge of all the *panchans* [side dishes!]" he tells me. Then, leaning closer, he fills me in on a little cultural context. "There's this thing in Korean dramas where you'll see a Korean girl who broke up with somebody, and she's crying in her house, and she doesn't want to cook," he starts, cracking up. "So she grabs her rice-cooker container and empties out her fridge, puts in some spicy Korean chili paste, maybe fries up an egg, maybe doesn't, and just eats it out of the bowl, like, bawling. That's a real thing." When I observe that it sounds like the Korean version of American women weeping into tubs of ice cream, he nods: "Yeah, like watching a sappy movie and finishing off a pint of Ben & Jerry's. We do that, but we just have rice."

Rice, at least according to Hong, is the lodestar not just of Korean cooking but also of Korean identity. "When I cook, it's rice bowls," Hong says. "Rice, some sort of protein, and two eggs. That's all. I eat that almost every day. Sometimes I'll fancy it up. That's how I know I'm Korean." His hope is to make that same experience available to non-Koreans, if not on a daily basis then at least on a regular one. "I just want it to be a part of the conversation," he says. "Maybe ten years from now, some family in Wisconsin is going to say, 'Let's try Korean tonight!' If we get it to that level, I'd be very happy." For that same reason, in *Koreatown*, he and Rodbard set out to have a lot of fun and also "keep the authenticity in it—we don't want to put bacon in anything." Then he catches himself, laughing. "Well, except we do!"

*Melanie Rehak is the author of Eating for Beginners (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).*

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