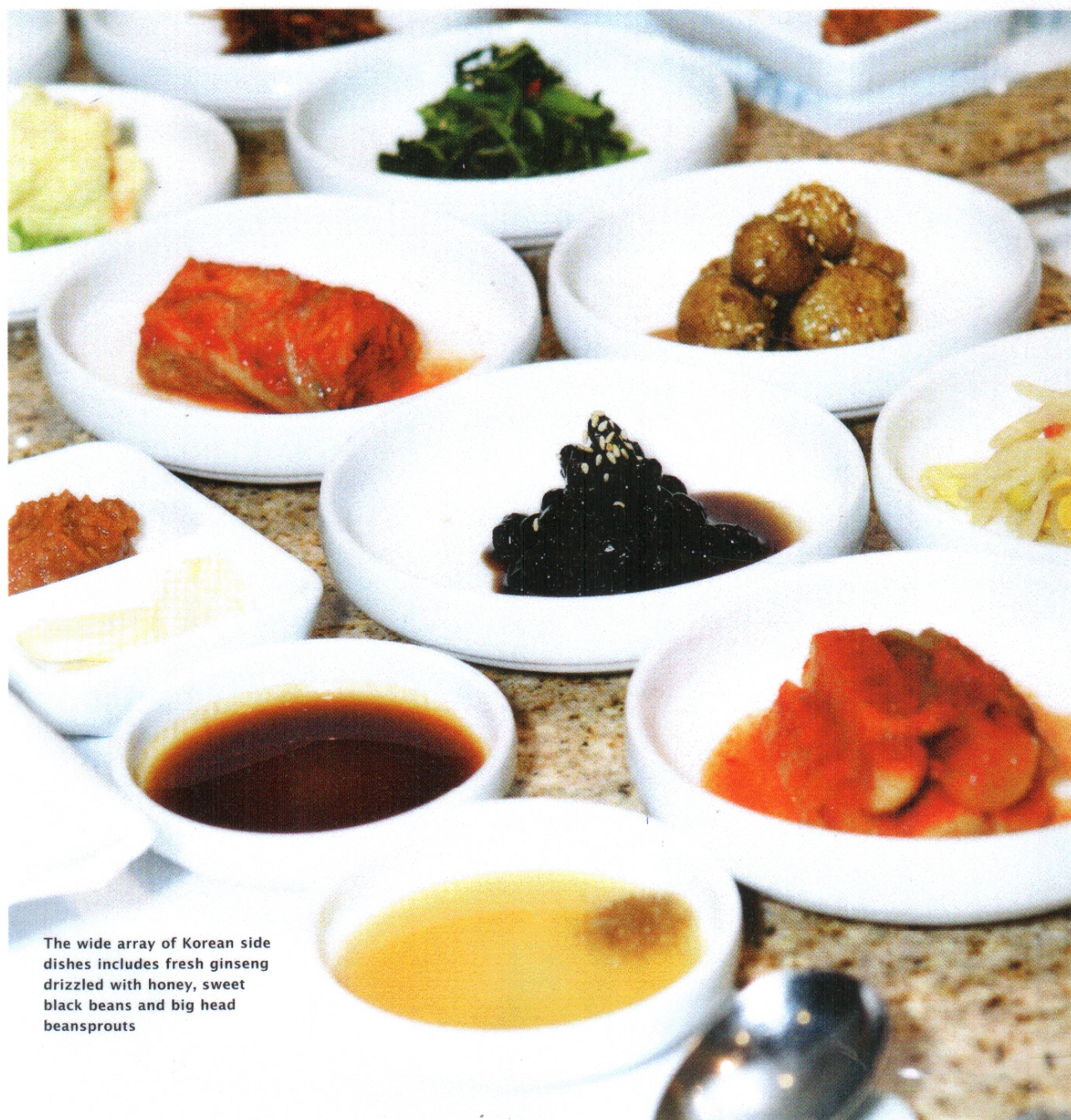


IN KOREAN SEVENTH HEAVEN

The goodness one gets when dining at Da On extends past great taste to include good health and a wonderful complexion, thanks to ingredients in its dishes that range from ginseng and ginkgo to gold flakes!



The wide array of Korean side dishes includes fresh ginseng drizzled with honey, sweet black beans and big head beansprouts



Immersion in Korean culture

WALKED out of Da On on level 6 at Pavilion Kuala Lumpur with renewed vigour and a promise of youthful skin after having lunch there recently. It was the fresh Korean ginseng and *Seoljung Mae Gold*, a fragrant plum wine with gold flakes, that did it for me.

Slivers of fresh ginseng drizzled with honey were among the array of side dishes set in front of us on a long table. "It's ginseng that's two and a half years old," said Lee Nan Kyoung, who together with Yan Siew Wan, owns the fine dining Korean restaurant.

The ginseng has a slight bitter edge, which blends delightfully with honey. "In ancient Korean herbal books, ginseng goes well with honey," she said, and I'm reminded of the hit Korean drama series *Dae Jaeng Geum* (Jewel in the Palace).

Ginseng was in my tea with pine nuts in it, and in the *Sam Gye Tang*, which once eaten is never forgotten. It's a spring chicken stuffed with glutinous rice and fresh ginseng, ginkgo and red dates and double boiled, expressing a soup that exudes light ginseng hints. I enjoyed the glutinous rice in the soup which is done without salt, but you could flavour it with the sea salt presented with it. It's just so good and nutritious.

"Last *Hari Raya* we sold out all our 80 bowls of *Sam Gye Tang*," said Lee, who still sounds surprised at this. During lunch, she had also brought out a bottle of winter plum wine — *Seoljung Mae Gold* — that had gold flakes in it. "In the old days this was given to the queen. The gold in it keeps her skin young."

Indeed. I enjoyed this exquisite, very fragrant wine, and whether it gives my skin a boost is just secondary. It was not enough to feel this, and the good effects of ginseng coursing through my veins, I had to reinforce that by chewing on the sweet black beans, one of the side dishes.

"It's good for the blood and developing children's brains," added Lee.

Kimchi, spinach tossed in sesame and sesame oil, boiled big-head beansprouts, cucumber, crabstick with seaweed and fried anchovies were among the little platters of starters that are frequently changed. Marinated new potatoes and mashed potato also cater to younger diners.

Jap Chae is glass noodles made from sweet potato and is vegetarian. Fine strips of black fungus, carrot, onions and spinach are tossed together with it in soya sauce and sesame oil. It's smooth, chewy glass noodles in a very tasty combination. It's the favourite of a certain VVIP, Lee tells us.

Modum Jeon is assorted Korean pancakes — zucchini, tofu, fish crabstick and *kimchi* with seafood are dipped in a light batter and deep fried. It's all about natural ingredients and food without guilt



Barbecuing beef on a high-tech grill



Jap Chae or glass noodles

but still high in flavour. That also applies to the superb cuts of beef for the barbecue: there's Australian wagyu that's on the marble score of nine (top!) and US Angus beef. There's also the marinated beef that has fresh pear juice as a gentle tenderiser. "For Koreans, the beef cannot be too soft like wagyu," said Lee. "They like it with bite."

We had started the barbecue with bite, from the slivers of ox tongue. These were superb in texture. Slices of wagyu, then Angus beef, were grilled and placed on our plates. The wagyu offered creamy bites: the beef tastes excellent just dipped in the ground sea salt with sesame and sesame oil or wrapped in lettuce, dipped in a fermented bean chilli paste with a slice of garlic.

The Angus beef has bite: its pure meat has all its attendant natural flavours. Again I liked it with little or no embellishments.

If, besides this beef, you have ordered a dish of marinated meat, it would be cooked last, mainly because you should really savour the goodness of the natural beef first. The beef slices are marinated with onion, garlic, pear juice, sesame and a light soya sauce. There is a lightly sweet flavour with this fragrant beef.

Most Koreans would finish the barbecue and drink the *Sam Gye Tang*, but we had already had ours at the start.

If you are focused on dessert, nothing is better than the unique *kimchi* ice-cream! It stretches your taste faculty with a vanilla-based ice-cream, a slight hot aftertaste, a hint of garlic and with crunchy bits of *kimchi*. "We sell a lot of this," said Lee. I loved the Lemon *Soju*, a fine sorbet with clean, slightly tart and refreshing flavours. Da On does a wonderful black sesame ice-cream, with a silky texture and immense fragrance that reminds me of the *chee mah woo* (black sesame soup) of my childhood in Ipoh.

Lee tempted us with a dried persimmon tea with cinnamon (*Soo Joong Gwa*) and *Shik Kae*, a fermented rice drink with pine nuts after this, and I was sold on their subtle embrace on my palate. The first, with its stronger cinnamon flavour, is designed to clear the taste of barbecue from your mouth.

It's an immersion in Korean culture dining at Da On, though the restaurant has a contemporary décor. Lee explained about the big celadon vase that sits on a black stand in front of the restaurant. Made by an old Korean artist who has since retired, it has 500 male and 500 female phoenixes imprinted on it. It stems from an old Korean belief that if you fold 1,000 phoenixes, your prayers will be answered.

Lee also will tell you that Da On means all goodwill and fortune will come your way, and all your dreams and hopes will come true. Bear this in mind when you need a dose of good luck, or when the next Chinese New Year comes!

A few Korean doors are hung from the ceiling: "They signify hope and opportunities. It's the door to the new world and society," said Lee. We were sitting in a room and behind us was a screen with 10 panels, beautifully embroidered with scenes from nature that represent the four seasons. It's a feast for the eyes before we launched into the feast itself.

This room with its solid walls (not conjoined ones) is the favourite of top political and corporate figures and royalty, probably for its sound-proof and utter privacy qualities. But there are four more rooms which can be opened up to seat 60 and the *tatami* room with lattice screens on the wall that are full of symbolism.

You need not fear about food smells clinging to your hair and clothes after the Korean barbecue. Da On is fitted with high-tech grills with strong suction beneath that drag all the cooking smells away. If it still worries you, the cooking can also be done in the glass-enclosed kitchen within the restaurant and the food served at the table. This is also done for those who desire utmost privacy.

A set lunch priced at RM40 is also served at Da On. It comes with barley tea and coffee, and ending with fruit. You could have the grilled beef ribs with *Dolsot Bibimbap*, grilled beef ribs with soy bean paste soup set, grilled hairtail fish with soybean paste soup set or grilled *unagi* with sweet sauce and egg (RM45).



The Angus beef has bite



Sam Gye Tang, double-boiled spring chicken stuffed with glutinous rice, red dates and ginkgo nuts