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CHOW! WINTER 2008

WEST SIDE SLICE

It's a refreshing sight to see a full-service restaurant amidst gas stations, supermarkets and laundromats. In November, **Bene Food and Friends** moved their artisan pizza into the West Eugene neighborhood. When the Oregon Community Credit Union (formerly U-Lane-O) closed its branch on 18th and Chambers, Bene founders Kevin and Erika Cohen jumped on the opportunity to create a restaurant and bar in the vacant space.

"Converting a bank into a restaurant is definitely a challenge," say Kevin. The Cohens redesigned the entire space themselves and successfully utilized the large windows and high ceilings to make a spacious, inviting place for a variety of customers. Warm yellow and brick red walls surround the tables, and vintage 1920s posters complete the art deco theme. However, there is a slight architectural problem: the old vault. "We haven't quite figured out what to do with that just yet," Kevin says with a laugh. By spring, he hopes to have a deck ready for people to sit outside and enjoy the sun.

"It's been really positive," says Kevin. "The neighborhood families are really excited that they have a place to hang out." Bene, which originally opened on Broadway and Charnelton in 2000, knows what Eugeneans crave in terms of cuisine: quality. "This community enjoys and appreciates quality. We recognize that we have access to good local products," Kevin says. The fresh, mostly organic ingredients found in the pizza, calzones and paninis, as well as the bar equipped with local beers like Ninkasi IPA and Willamette Amber, demonstrate Bene's pledge to stay loyal to the locals.

A Portland native and UO graduate, Kevin discovered a niche for gourmet pizza while on business in Eugene. After spending a few years in the accounting world, he left Portland to embark on a more "fun" career in Eugene. Eight years later, Bene can be found at three locations in Eugene. Don't expect any expansions outside Lane County just yet; Cohen hired 40 new employees for the new location. "Our focus is on the community," he says. Bene also works with local charities and organizations. On the opening day of the new space, Bene contributed 100 percent of all sales to the Relief Nursery of Eugene. (1665 W. 18th Ave.; 384-2700) — *Katie Cornell*



Susanna N. Kwon and Kyung Hee Childers

TODD COOPER

GO GA GA OVER GA YA

Walking into the **Ga Ya Korean Restaurant**, it's easy to do a double take. First, the Ga Ya has taken over the former location of the House of Noodle Vietnamese Restaurant; you'll find similar East Asian cuisine, just slightly more centered on teriyaki, yakisoba noodles and *kimchi*. Second, you will be greeted by the two Korean women who run the whole show, Kyung Hee Childers (known as Jackie) in the front as hostess and manager and Susanna N. Kwon in the back as chef — two bubbly, good humored ladies who will lead you through the modest list of entrées, most of which are written out in Korean.

Childers briefly flirted with the restaurant business in 2001 when she ran the Red Pepper at Gateway Mall food court. That business lasted only a few months before Childers began to work the night shift at Hynix as a manufacturing technician. The years passed and Childers, a single mom, grew weary of never being able to see her daughter. When the owner of House of Noodle had to step down for health reasons, Childers was asked to take over. But she wanted to do cuisine from her native country, particularly the food of southern Korea. So she roped her good friend Kwon, who was working in Hynix's cafeteria, into a co-ownership and started Ga Ya, which quietly opened on Jan. 14 just a few doors down from Café Zenon.

As for the menu, *bibimbap* is the specialty dish and includes rice topped with vegetables, beef and egg, served with a scoop of chili pepper paste. For the adventurous, *galbitang* is a cow's joint bone soup Kwon described as a "white soup" that takes over eight hours to simmer. Childers also recommended the beef *bulgogi*, a dish consisting of thinly sliced beef marinated in soy sauce, sesame oil, garlic, sugar, green onions and black pepper. *Bulgogi* means "fire meat" in Korean, but it can be prepared with mild spiciness. Side dishes of pickled seaweed, cucumber salad and *kimchi* complete most meals. And for those anti-MSG crusaders out there, Childers mentioned she doesn't use it. "Never," added Kwon. "Don't say never," said Childers, laughing. "We have it, but we try not to use it." Be sure to specify if you are a lover or hater of MSG, and Childers and Kwon will be more than happy to accommodate you. In the brave world of restaurant enterprise, their enthusiasm may take them a long way. (860 Pearl St.; 686-1114) — *Chuck Adams*