

The biggest mistake one could make when eating at downtown Eugene’s Noodle Bowl is to order a noodle bowl. It’s a delicious dish but a safe Americanized choice as *EW*’s Best of Eugene Korean gem. “When the people come, if they want to try Korean food, I want them to ask the servers and get a recommendation rather than just getting a noodle bowl,” says Jae Lee, server and son of owner Sue Lee.

In 1999 the Lees moved from Seoul, South Korea, to Eugene, and Sue Lee decided to open a restaurant out of love for traditional Korean cuisine and to teach her son how to run a small business. Her philosophy: serve good, honest food and create a unique dining experience for Eugeneans. “It’s definitely out of their comfort zone, but eventually I want it to become their comfort food,” Jae Lee says.

Contrary to what Americans generally define as comfort food, the Korean take is low in saturated fat and extremely nutritious, not to mention flavorful. In an attempt to enhance the dining experience, laminated sheets line each of the booths and explain the health benefits of two Korean staples: dwenjang, a traditional fermented soy bean paste used in soups, and kimchi, a side dish made from cabbage and fermented chili peppers. The restaurant prides itself on making both dishes from scratch, which Jae says is rare for most Korean restaurants due to the tedious fermentation process that demands at least four to five workers. In addition to providing authentic kimchi and dwenjang, the restaurant is constantly boiling beef short rib to ensure a rich, savory flavor in all its beef-based soups.

The attention to detail shows in Noodle Bowl’s wide array of soups, rice bowls and meat entrées. Most meals come with traditional side dishes of cool beans, two kinds of kimchi, tofu, potatoes and seaweed salad that act as appetizers or add-ons to the meal. The bibimbap, a traditional rice dish with mixed vegetables and a fried egg, provides the perfect crispy, gooey, spicy and savory combination in a single bite. The distinct sour and spiced taste of authentic kimchi is amplified in the flavorful, well-seasoned kimchi jigae, or kimchi soup made with tofu, pork and garlic.

Whether it’s educating about kimchi, encouraging family-style eating or providing recommendations, this mother-and-son team finds happiness in sharing their definition of comfort food with others. “It’s kind of cool if I see other people coming in and just being mind blown by the food,” Jae Lee says. “For me it’s always been around. It’s like the same as hamburger and pizza, you know what I mean?” ■

Noodle Bowl is open 11:30 am to 9 pm Monday through Saturday at 860 Pearl St., 686-1114.

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