

# Diners warm up to Korean dishes

*Spicy fare tailor-made for cold season*

"It is very cold," our gracious and gorgeous hostess says sympathetically the night we take our seats at this pearl of a place hidden deep in Edmonton's southern warehouse gulags.

"Exactly," my friend declares, as he shrugs off his overcoat.

"And why are we here?"

The smile holds, the eyes reveal nothing. There is a short silence.

"He means why are we here, in Edmonton, not your very fine restaurant," I explain to her.

This is no time for grand metaphysical questions, nor misplaced grudges over that pudgy troublemaker in North Korea. On an evening so sub-zero the mercury has blown town the four of us find plenty of warmth in the B-Bim-Baab — from its servers, its roaring central fireplace and its tremendous menu.

Can it be that this restaurant has been operating on this bland industrial sidestreet since 1979, for most of that time as the Korean Gardens, and somehow escaped our detection? Apparently so. Big oversight on our part; we're definitely coming back.

B-Bim-Baab — it's fun to say, isn't it? — is a dish apparently known to every Korean but few others, although it's becoming trendy in parts of the United States. As I understand it, the "b-bim" means "mixed" and the "baab" means "cooked rice," particularly the short-grained sticky variety the Koreans favour. Light and satisfying, B-Bim-Baab is a bowl of pearly, steamed rice, topped with a rich mix of mountain vegetables, seasoned and raw, along with a bit of egg and a spicy-sweet chili sauce. A dash of sesame oil adds a subtle nutty flavour and you can add a bit of seafood or meat, if you like. The vegetables include strands of carrot, cucumber, radish, soy bean sprouts and spinach, but you'll also encounter bellflower root and fern bracken, the latter harvested from some high glade in British Columbia and brought to Edmonton once a year by the B-Bim brigade. You stir the ingredients together, using a long-handled spoon and dig in.

The four of us opted for Dolsot B-Bim-Baab (\$10.50), a version of the dish served in a heavy iron bowl heated to such a high temperature that the egg yolk and vegetables continue to cook after arriving at the table. The rice forms a crunchy, golden brown crust. Healthy dining is rarely this delicious.

Another dish not to be missed is the Seafood Pa-jeon (\$10.99), a green onion pancake lightly pan fried and filled with little bits of red pepper, shrimp and mussels — we passed on the squid. Big enough to feed four hungry mouths, the pa-jeon is more like a quiche than a traditional North American pancake.

Among the appetizers, try the Goon Mandu (\$4.99), eight crispy pork and vegetable wontons with dipping sauce that go down easy. But take a pass on the Twikeem or vegetable tempura. The batter was a bit too heavy and greasy for our taste.

The soup selection is pretty wild at B-Bim-Baab. We ordered the Sam Kye Tang, which at \$19.99 seemed a bit rich at first, particularly at a restaurant that entices with low prices. But this is quite a dish. A whole Cornish hen, stuffed with sticky rice, young ginseng roots, garlic and jujubes (Korean dates), arrives at the table in an earthenware pot. You lift the lid to find the contents boiling madly away in a clear stock. Here is a soup tailor-made for the cold season.

Despite the server's cautions, none of the dishes we sampled packed oppressive fire power. Even the kimchee, the obligatory pickled cabbage that comes with every meal, wasn't particularly fiery. You get the sense that the spicy stuff here may have been toned down a bit for western palates. Don't be afraid to mix in a little red pepper paste or chili sauce where you can, but, make no mistake, this is a warm place in every other sense. Highly recommended.

## DINING OUT

RICHARD HELM

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### B-Bim-Baab Restaurant

**Address:** 9543 42nd. Ave.

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**Cost:** Dinner for twok without wine:  
About \$40