



Sushi Chef Dae-il Choi

Friends had been telling me to try this sushi restaurant in Shin Chang-dong for a while if only to marvel at how authentic the taste was compared to other sushi restaurants around town. They also mentioned its chef, Daeil Choi, a personable young chef originally from Gwangju whose work has taken him to Los Angeles, Las Vegas and back working among some top Japanese sushi chefs. I asked Daeil if he'd be interested in being interviewed for *Gwangju News*. He agreed so I came back to ask him a few questions about sushi and his time in the United States.

A few weeks later I chatted with him at his restaurant, and found out Choi is a licensed Korean-cuisine chef who moved to Los Angeles when his brother left to pursue his education there. He also traveled there on a student visa. "I needed money [eventually]," he said flatly. Choi says he actually found it easy to find jobs working in Asian restaurants and started working alongside some of the city's foremost sushi chefs.



Learning the ropes from the ground up, Choi moved up through the ranks learning the basics of Japanese cuisine and acknowledged to me the inherent differences between Korean and Japanese style sushi.

Little known fact, he tells me: many Koreans might be averse to Japanese style sushi because the rice is cooked in vinegar and not the sesame oil they are used to in their beloved kimbap rolls. "They don't like the taste," he says. This hasn't deterred Choi whose popular Japanese sushi restaurant has a growing word of mouth following among foreigners in the vicinity since it opened about a year ago. "But the cultures are very similar," he assures me. "Sashimi is very similar [in both Korea and Japan]," he says.

The small restaurant is bright, and modern complete with a sushi conveyor belt reminiscent of a trendy Tokyo sushi bar. If you come, Choi might sit you down at a booth himself and immediately give you an English menu of his offerings. The menu also proposes a fine

assortment of Korean and Japanese drinks including beer, soju, plum wine and sake. The California rolls (minus the usual avocado) were very fresh, and my new favorite, salmon tempura rolls, always hit the spot. Overall the sushi remains true to its Japanese roots without giving in to the temptation of Korean accoutrements imposed elsewhere in the city. Tempura appetizers, *udon* and *soba* noodle soups are also offered along with *miso* soup that accompanies every order.

Besides learning how to create sushi, Choi reveals that he learned other things also, "I met Jewish people for the first time. They don't eat pork, so that was very interesting. They eat a lot of sushi." Coming from New York, I was struck by the innocence of this comment having never really thought how exotic Semitism might be to an outsider. Choi continues telling me about his travels. How he eventually left Los Angeles and went to Las Vegas. Although, he didn't work in a fancy high-end casino, he did work in a popular restaurant near the Vegas strip and lived quite comfortably.



Chef Choi hard at work in his restaurant Alva French



Top: Shrimp Tempura, Bottom: Assortment of Korean and Japanese drinks Alva French

"[Eventually] it was very difficult ... too hard and a lot of money," he laments at one point. "Why?" I ask. "I had many [immigration] problems," he admits. Choi wanted to stay in the United States and continue working, and had even considered opening his own place. Despite having thrived in the States for over four years, however, he applied for a green card and was unsuccessful. "If I had a green card, I would go back," he says, but he gave up attempting to secure one and eventually packed up his things and returned to South Korea. "It is very expensive now," he concludes.

As our interview comes to an end, Choi remarks "I would like to go back [to the United States], but only for a visit." In the meantime, he seems content with the brisk business his restaurant does on any given night.

By Alva French

Daeil Choi's restaurant is located near the Shin Chang Elementary School bus stop (9, 29, 51, 72, 720) diagonally across the street from Paris Baguette and Kwangju Bank, the restaurant is open seven days a week. (tel. 062-956-1006)