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**KOREAN FUSION:
CONSUMING A GLOBALIZED KOREA THROUGH FOOD AND MUSIC**

by

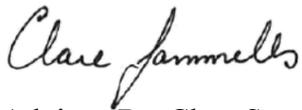
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A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Anthropology

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Abstract

In Koreatown, Los Angeles, one of the largest centers of Korean immigrants in the Western hemisphere, restaurant owners are constantly creating new forms of Korean cuisine that both challenge and preserve traditional methods of Korean culinary methods. Based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted in Koreatown, Los Angeles in December 2020, I examine how Korean restaurant owners are navigating the current food scene while also maintaining their ethnic identity in a globalized landscape such as Los Angeles. I conceptualize the idea of a “*twist*” which can be understood as components of fusion food that allow Korean restaurant owners to cultivate and preserve their culture while simultaneously creating a new type of Korean cuisine. This study demonstrates how Korean fusion exists within a larger web of complex relationships between Korean food and Korean music within migrant communities like Koreatown. I also explore how these global food practices are intertwined with music in a dialectical manner. Restaurant owners effectively utilize popular Korean media, specifically Korean Pop (K-Pop) music, to maintain their ethnic and cultural background. More importantly, K-Pop has become a crucial vessel through which restaurant owners commodify Korean culture in a holistic Korean dining experience. This research contributes to the anthropological study of foodways by reevaluating the act of consuming global culture in a local context through reimagined forms of fusion food.

Introduction: Korean Food in a Global Context

Korean food is a dynamic culinary tradition that has changed throughout various historical moments and adapted to different regions. In Los Angeles specifically, Korean food has been in conversation with its surrounding communities, especially other migrant communities. Today, Los Angeles is home to the largest center of Korean people in the US, if not the world (outside of Korea). The immigration of Koreans to the United States dates back to the late 19th century and began with a sizable Korean population in Hawaii. Since then, the Korean diaspora, as well as Korean food, has reached global proportions.

I will be considering the role of historical events that have shaped the perception and consumption of Korean food. First, I will consider the history of Koreatown in LA from the first Korean American immigrants to the vibrant Korean community that exists today. I will then use this historical background to analyze the ways in which food, culture, and “authenticity” intersect in Koreatown. However, as it adapted to a different landscape and culture, Korean food in the U.S., and consequently in Koreatown, has transformed into an entirely new and unique form.

Korean fusion cuisine has dominated the latest trends in the Koreatown food scene. Within this cultural movement, K-Pop plays an important role in creating a “new” type of Korean food. Moreover, this fusion cuisine is constantly evolving as it responds and exists within a larger framework of global food consumption. The idea of fusion, however, is understood in different ways by the consumers of fusion cuisine as well as the producers of it. Through the stories of eight restaurants in Koreatown, I intend to demonstrate how consuming Korean food and its “authenticity” is catered to and consumed by various audiences.

To fully understand the extent to which K-Pop is influential to Korean fusion cuisine, we must first understand the origins of K-Pop as it relates to Korean culture and identity. To present a condensed origin story, K-Pop originated as a hybrid form of the popular J-Pop (Japanese Pop) (Lie 2015, 96). K-Pop, as a concept, was coined in 1998 and was a clear way of adopting the pre-existing J-Pop. K-Pop, apart from its stylistic approach as pop music, was also created after an image of nuanced Hip-Hop and R&B genres of music. As Lie points out, this conceptual image of K-Pop was “crystallized in the course of the first decade of the twenty-first century, severing itself from earlier genres and styles in South Korean popular music” (2015, 97). In doing so, record companies effectively branded K-Pop as a polished combination of Dance-Pop, Hip-Hop, and a perfected image of teen idols (Lie 2015, 97). In understanding the genesis of K-Pop as it is shared today, we see how the genre of K-Pop is itself a form of fusion; a concept that was born of various genres and characteristics and then carefully crafted into a holistic image.

Not only is K-Pop a genre of musical fusion, but it was also strategically forged to appeal to a global audience. The equation for a proper boy band or girl group reveals how strategic member placement is within a group. For example, many times there are members who are not Korean as well as members who are part of the Korean diaspora. Therefore, although the members may look physically similar, the group as a whole is composed of diverse members (Jin 2016, 127). Additionally, these groups are accommodating to English speakers as they incorporate many English words into the chorus of the songs and recruit members who can speak English. Ultimately, K-Pop has been crafted as a fusion of musical genres and artists to be palatable for a global audience.

The impact of K-pop has become evident in the US since Psy’s hit, “Gangnam Style” in 2012. Demonstrated by its popularity and infiltration into American pop culture, K-pop music

and idols are no longer limited to the small boundaries of the eastern hemisphere. In the restaurant industry in Koreatown, Los Angeles, this impact has become more and more prominent. Not only are many restaurants associating themselves with this global movement through media sharing and recreation, but they are also recognizing that music is an essential part of the decor that makes a restaurant a Korean restaurant.

This paper will illustrate how Korean food, as served in Koreatown Los Angeles, intersects with the global genre of K-Pop music. More specifically, within this migrant community, we see how music is strategically employed to help create a Korean dining experience. Restaurants in Koreatown not only play Korean music but also use this Korean music to mark themselves as Korean restaurants. Thus, we see how K-Pop as a form of fused musical genres that has made a global impact is intimately linked to the representation of Korean fusion food.

Methods

This research began in the summer of 2020. Data collection for this project spanned from the summer of 2020 through January of 2021 in Koreatown, Los Angeles, California. The basic methods employed were participant observation and interviews. Because this research occurred during the pandemic, I was limited in physical contact with restaurants and participant observation by safety regulations. During winter break, the months of December and January, all restaurants in Los Angeles were shut down, including outdoor dining. Although in-person dining was not allowed, the restaurants were still operating for take-out or delivery. Therefore, some of my data was limited to virtual contact like phone interviews while others were obtained through socially distanced, in-person interviews at the restaurants.

During the beginning stages of data collection, I used websites such as Google Maps to locate and create a spreadsheet of 60 Korean restaurants located within the boundaries of Koreatown. The physical space of Koreatown, for the purposes of this study, is limited to the 2.7 square mileage defined by 3rd St and Olympic Blvd and Western and Vermont Avenues. Once documenting these restaurants, I also categorized them by the type of restaurants and food that they served. I then called each restaurant to ask the owner or manager for an interview. I eventually interviewed 9 restaurant owners and managers using snowball sampling. Through a known contact, I was able to get into contact with other restaurant owners who agreed to in-person interviews. For all my interviews, I scheduled an interview date and time with the restaurant owner and met them in person at their restaurant.

Because in-person dining was closed, I collected fieldnotes on the interview site and restaurants. Although I was not able to observe customers eating in the restaurant, I was still able to observe the interactions of the employees. To complement my ethnographic data and interviews, I conducted a literature review of Koreatown's history as well as the global phenomenon of K-pop. I collected images of 62 menus of Koreatown restaurants using websites like Google Maps and Yelp, then coded them to analyze patterns in the use of images and language using NVivo.

History of a Globalized Korea

The first Korean immigrants came to the US as early as the late 19th century. They arrived 6 years after the US annexed the Hawaiian Islands in 1898 and several years before Japan annexed Korea in 1910. Under a plan orchestrated by an American ambassador for Korea, Horace Allen, about 7,500 Koreans immigrated to supply the demands of labor on Hawaiian sugar plantations. However, these Korean immigrants came from better parts of the peninsula and tended to be more educated than their Japanese and Chinese immigrant counterparts, who came from rural farmlands (Ryang 2015,17). Therefore, when they became financially able, most of these Korean immigrants took their education and skills and made their way to the mainland. By 1904, a majority of the Koreans in Hawaii had already migrated to the mainland, to both San Francisco and Los Angeles (Yu 1985, 34).

Beginning in the late 19th century, many US missionaries became more involved in the missionary work of converting Koreans to Christianity (Kang 2013, 10). As a result, Koreans who were influenced by this missionary work decided to immigrate to America and began forming Christian communities. By 1904, Korean church groups in Los Angeles began to meet regularly to help each other with English as well as to worship. This meeting spot that took place on Magnolia Avenue ultimately became the Korean Methodist Church (Kang 2013, 10). Other Korean faith-based gatherings also became churches, such as the Korean United Presbyterian church, which is still standing in Koreatown, Los Angeles. Eventually, these churches became cultural centers. Thus, an early iteration of a Koreatown emerged around this area of Downtown Los Angeles, near the University of Southern California (Kang 2013, 10).

This Korean faith-based community-building eventually made way for other activist groups to form. Dosan Ahn Chang Ho was an early political activist who led the Korean Independence Movement. He was born in Korea and immigrated to the United States with his wife in search of better education and worked as an unofficial ambassador. In 1903, Dosan Ahn founded the Korean National Association in San Francisco, which was the first Korean political organization in the US. However, Kang (2013, 13) notes that, by the 1930s, this organization relocated its headquarters to Los Angeles as more and more Korean immigrants found job opportunities in Southern California. This shift effectively made Los Angeles an immigration center for Korean immigrants.

By 1945, Korea finally gained independence from Japanese annexation with American aid. This allowed for a second wave of Korean immigrants to the United States. Between 1954 and 1960, the US allocated \$60 million to aid and encourage Korean students to study and pursue an education in the United States (Kaijo 2015, 6). Koreans who worked in education, medicine, engineering, and other technical fields were recruited by American experts to study at American universities. This large-scale nation-building program was even incentivized with guaranteed jobs following graduation. And, of the 15,000 Korean students who participated, only 10% returned to Korea (Kaijo 2015, 5). Thus, marking this period as an important historical moment for Korean immigration to the United States of America.

In the 1970s, the Korean population in the United States and Los Angeles shifted dramatically. After the 1965 Immigration Act that effectively abolished previous immigration quotas for ethnic groups, the Korean population in Los Angeles increased by almost 500% between 1970 and 1980 (Yu 1985, 29). As racially discriminatory housing rules eased, ethnic groups, like Korean Americans, were allowed to move out of the confines of their older

neighborhoods and migrate to the area we now call Koreatown. In 1980, the city of Los Angeles officially designated the area of Koreatown as a community (Tangherliini 1999, 152).

When the riots occurred in response to the public beating of Rodney King, rioters were confined and blocked off by the police. Because roads to the wealthier parts of Los Angeles, like Hancock Park, were blockaded, rioters were led to other neighborhoods like Koreatown (Tangherliini 1999, 151). As a result, small mom and pop shops in Koreatown endured a disproportionate amount of damage and many small convenience stores, supermarkets, and businesses were destroyed. In the wake of this tragic event, Korean Americans from all parts of California felt the personal effects of the riots and identified this area of “Koreatown” as a marker of Korean American identity (Tangherliini 1999, 151). However, Kang explains how this tragic event also created the opportunity for inter-ethnic coalitions such as the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA). Thus, the Rodney King Riots of 1992 effectively established the area of “Koreatown” as a physical representation of Korean American identity (Tangherliini 1999, 149).

In the early 2000s, a revival in *hallyu* (Korean wave) sparked the global consumption of Korean culture. More specifically, *hallyu* is characterized by a mass consumption of Korean popular culture. Korean pop, generally characterized by catchy and danceable melodies performed by multi-talented, good-looking girl or boy groups, was popularized in the 90s and continued to grow in popularity through the early 2000s (Jin 2016, 119). However, Korean pop (K-Pop) reached beyond Korean borders as many K-pop groups gained substantial popularity in Japan, China, and even the US in the early 2000s. Jin (2016) points out some notable examples such as Girl’s Generation, a popular girl group, who performed on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. In 2012, the *hallyu* wave reached a peak with Psy’s global hit, *Gangnam Style*, which

gained 836.5 million views on YouTube only 3 months after its release (Jin 2016, 124). This *hallyu* wave was largely capitalized by the industry that recruited, trained, and created these groups. In order to reach a global audience, these groups are intentionally composed of diverse members who are not native to South Korea (Jin 2016, 126).

This *hallyu* movement is not only about music, however. Along with the rapid spread and consumption of Korean music and popular media also came a growing interest in the Korean foods promoted by these celebrities. With the rising popularity of K-Pop, South Korean agencies strategically began taking steps towards creating a global market for Korean culture and capitalizing on this trend. In the early 2000s, the Korean government pushed forward with government-funded projects that sought to put Korean food on the map (Chung 2016, 94). In 2011, the National Assembly passed the Food Service Industry Promotion Act in order to help the food service industry compete in the global market (Chung 2016, 94). Chung also details the establishment of the Korean Food Foundation which was founded in 2010 with the hopes of positioning Korean food in the top five ethnic cuisines worldwide. This foundation also created several guides that aimed to standardize Korean cuisine and promote Korean cuisine abroad. It is no coincidence that the push towards a global Korean cuisine occurred contemporaneously with the global move of K-Pop.

The conceptualization of Korean fusion comes together within the larger cultural context of Korean media, Korean pop culture, and Korean traditional culinary practices. As these different facets of Korean culture converse with each other, fusion food is born. However, like the wide reach of K-Pop extended past its industry of mere entertainment, Korean fusion food is also constructed at the intersection of different forms of fusion. We witness how K-pop as a cultural form with global reach is paralleled by the food and concurrent food scene. In addition,

the Korean restaurants I interviewed also described their menus as having a “twist”. Restaurant owners’ conception of Korean fusion cuisine was defined by their unique methods, Korean ingredients, and multi-cultural background. Thus, K-Pop culture is revealed as a twist that is an essential part of Korean food and the creation of fusion cuisine.

The Anatomy of a Korean Meal

A *twist* is an emic term used to describe a nuance in the ideas of “traditional” Korean cuisine and culinary practices of Korean restaurant owners. This nuance can range from a small change, such as the choice of using Asado-style beef ribs instead of thinly sliced beef ribs, to an elaborate combination of Japanese-Korean-Vietnamese fusion food like *shabu-shabu*. For there to be a *twist*, however, there must also be a pre-existing, acknowledged idea of what Korean food is *without* a twist. Thus, the commonly understood idea of a Korean meal must also be reinforced (Douglas 1972).

Food is composed of identifiable parts that coherently make up a whole and different cuisines have a unique logic to creating a meal (Douglas 1972, 62). In this section, I explore how Korean restaurant owners in Koreatown understand the concept of fusion as it relates to “traditional” Korean food. By taking apart the various parts of a Korean meal, I will demonstrate how Korean fusion food maintains its status in a place that is in between two types of cuisine while simultaneously encompassing multiple types of cuisine. More specifically, I will dissect the Korean meal to reveal how fusion food adheres to the traditional elements and equation of Korean food.

The basic structure of a Korean meal consists of rice as the main element. At a traditional Korean *bap-sang*, literally translated to “rice-table,” rice is served in individual bowls. To the right of the rice bowl, there is usually an individually served bowl of soup. A spoon and chopsticks are placed to the right of the soup; the spoon is used for rice and soup; chopsticks are used for the other dishes. Usually, the oldest man in the family is seated at the head of the table while younger family members are seated at the sides. Additionally, proper table manners

require those seated at the table to wait until the elder or head of the table takes their first bite before commencing the meal. Thus, we see that the structure of a Korean meal is reliant upon hierarchy.

The next component is *banchan*, the side dishes. Although the term *banchan* is commonly translated into English as side dishes, it can be understood more comparably as tapas or a Mediterranean mezze. *Banchan* are usually vegetables or meat that is prepared with seasonings, fermentation, or cooked as stir-fry. These *banchan* are placed in the middle of the table and eaten out of their respective dishes directly. The dishes range in variety; they can be something as simple as pickled radishes to something as luxurious as marinated raw crabs. Different *banchan* are variations of the same seasoning combinations such as garlic, rice vinegar, sesame oil, soy sauce, and chili powder -- these hidden ingredients are the foundations of Korean cuisine that translate across various fusion foods.

While these different *banchan* come in a variety, they are all savory additions that are meant to complement the rice. For example, meat dishes like stewed beef, marinated crab, and grilled fish are considered to be more “luxurious” than their vegetarian counterparts like cucumber salad and spinach salad. For special occasions like feasts, a Korean meal consists of special side dishes called *jeon*. Loosely translatable to English as pancakes, *jeon* can be almost anything like meat or vegetables that are battered in flour, egg, and then pan-fried. One example of *jeon* is a popular dish called *saengsun jeon* which is a fish fillet that is coated in flour, egg, and pan-fried. This same method can be applied to other things like zucchini and sweet potato and are mostly prepared for special occasions. Other types of *jeon* are made with flour batter and filled with vegetables like kimchi, potatoes, or even seafood. A particularly special dish is *galbi*

jjim, braised short beef ribs, marinated in a sweet soy sauce and stewed with potatoes and carrots.

The basic culinary structure of a Korean meal, however, is made up of two essential elements: *kimchi* and rice. These two elements are the foundational building blocks that are then built upon with other *banchan* such as seasoned roots, sprouts, cooked vegetables, and stir-fried meat. *Kimchi* is also a side dish. Although there are many variations and types of *kimchi*, it is typically spicy fermented cabbage seasoned with chili paste and chili powder. However, *kimchi* differs from other *banchan* because it is always a staple component of the meal. Once the base, rice, and the staple side dish, *kimchi*, are placed at the table, a basic Korean meal is complete. This combination is commonly understood as a “poor man’s meal” (Han 2011, 150). As more side dishes are added, the meal becomes more complex and “luxurious.” Some side dishes are valued higher than others and this depends on the ingredients that it is made of. The composition of a Korean meal is made whole by several elements but made identifiable by the staple of rice and *kimchi*. Interestingly, *kimchi* is considered still to be an essential part of the meal; any meal is incomplete without it. And yet, it is still categorized as *banchan*, a mere side dish. Considering the various types of *banchan* and their varying levels of luxury, *kimchi*, though essential, is still treated as peripheral; it cannot stand on its own and must always be eaten with something else (Han 2011,151). Thus, *kimchi* exists as a basic dish that is necessary to complete a Korean meal but is not as highly valued as other dishes are, such as those that are made with different ingredients like meat or special roots. Ultimately, *kimchi* in a global sense is an extension of Korean cuisine and at the same time, representative of Korean cuisine as a whole.

This basic structure is evident in all Korean meals. A casual breakfast meal might consist of rice, soup, and *kimchi*. A fancy dinner, on the other hand, may consist of rice, soup, *kimchi*, as

well as six other side dishes to complete a luxurious, seven-dish meal (Han 2011, 150). This structure, however, is not static. The “main dish” can be switched out to noodles like knife-cut noodle soup or even grilled meat. For example, in Korean BBQ restaurants in both South Korea and Los Angeles, the main dish of rice is switched out for the meat varieties that are served.

While side dishes like *kimchi* remain and are served gratuitously, the main dish here is substituted with the meat that customers order and grill for themselves. Rice is available upon request but is displaced from the meal by the meat itself while the side dishes that come as a part of the meal are the essential elements. In this case, replacing rice with meat is a modification of the structure of a Korean meal. Even still, the basic structure is maintained when rice is missing.

Fusion from Cross-Cultural Interactions

Korean cuisine is, like other ethnic cuisine, not stuck in time. Rather, it is constantly changing, interacting, and traveling according to current trends. The restaurants and Korean dishes in Koreatown demonstrate the natural process of globalized food and once again, reveal how food intersects with other facets of globalization like music, popular media, and even war. The restaurants in Koreatown, Los Angeles are uniquely positioned in a liminal space between Korean and American cuisine. While many restaurants label themselves, specifically, as “fusion” restaurants, the others who don’t are still engaging in the broader field of global foodways. By understanding how Korean cuisine is perceived as something that is global but also local, traditional, and even “authentic”, we are able to witness how individuals view their food and the ways that Korean restaurant owners create “fusion” food in LA.

The conceptual definition of a Korean meal can easily be identified by the simple layout of rice and side dishes. However, even these traditional methods of preparing and consuming Korean food are not stagnant. Rather, they are drawing on contemporary practices and changing in response to current events. Thus, the concept of Korean food, even “traditional” Korean food, is in constant conversation with the local Korean people who produce the food and the global consumption of Korean food as a whole. More specifically, we see how various dishes that have been made popular as Korean cuisine is a direct result of global interactions.

Food is an essential part of making global connections. The term “global,” however, is nothing more than a large space where hybrid forms interact with each other (Wilk 2006). For example, *kimchi*, the national dish of Korea, is relatively new in Korean cuisine. The chili pepper

and fermenting technique that are crucial in making *kimchi* was only introduced after the Korea-Japan War at the end of the 16th century (Han 2011, 148). *Kimchi*, a dish that is now essential to making a Korean meal complete, is in reality, relatively new to South Korean cuisine and born of Japanese influence. As demonstrated by this history, we see how even the “traditional” components of Korean cuisine are as constructed as the fusion.

Wilk (2006) uses the term glocalization to describe the process by which global foods are made more local. Similar phenomena have also occurred in Korea. For example, the introduction of McDonald’s in Korea didn’t change the culture or make them more “western.” Rather, they transformed the “western” into something more palatable for Korean people and therefore, more “local” (Watson 2006, 141). This “glocalization” is also revealed by popular street foods like cheese corn dogs, cheese on spicy foods, and egg sandwiches. In South Korea, these common street foods are the Korean renditions of American and Western foods such as corndogs and breakfast sandwiches. The same phenomenon can be seen in a popular Korean cafe in Koreatown that is serving various street foods. In this specific case, the street food that was developed in Korea is brought over from Korea and introduced to non-Koreans in Los Angeles. This multi-level form of global-fusion food demonstrates how “glocalization” occurs and then moves around different spaces.

Another example of this can be seen in the popular dish, *budae jjigae*. In English, this translates to “army base stew”. Originating in the 1950s in the wake of the Korean War, *budae jjigae* is a spicy stew made from American ingredients like Spam, Vienna Sausages, and American cheese combined into a warm stew with *kimchi*, Korean chili paste, and ramen (Woodcock 2018, 135). Although this stew’s genesis occurred at the intersection of food, war, and cross-cultural interactions between Korea and the US, army base stew is now a staple

Korean dish in both the United States and South Korea. *Budae jjigae* is so salient because of the ways that it is connected to a crucial moment in Korean history, the Korean war. Considering the origins of army stew as a creation made from US army reparations, we can see how this dish can be understood as the original “Korean-American” dish (Woodcock 2018, 137).

In Korea, army stew is consumed as a type of comfort food that is warm and spicy. In this way, army stew has become a way for Korean people to memorialize the war in the form of food (Woodcock 2018, 36). In Los Angeles, on the other hand, it has become very popular among non-Koreans. According to BBQ Chicken’s, a fried chicken chain restaurant, menu, army stew is described in-depth as “a fusion dish that incorporates American processed meats such as Spam, bacon, and hot dogs into a Korean Kimchi stew.” In addition, the menu seeks to educate its audience about the stew by explaining that “budae(부대) is a general term for a military base in Korean” and “Jjigae(찌개) is a term for soup/stew.” As demonstrated by this menu, the Korean stew, influenced by American foods, is now being reintroduced in America as a Korean dish that is made with both Korean and American ingredients.

At Chef Bang’s Seoul Kitchen, army stew is an especially popular dish. Chef Bang, who prides himself on creating new and delicious combinations of Korean food, described army stew as one the most popular and staple dishes that they served at the restaurant. When I asked him to describe how popular it was, he said:

“Okay, here's the thing, let’s say a non-Korean comes here, and if they’re eating a soup, right. Let’s say we sell 100 soups, right, to non-Koreans. I would say 80 of them are Army Stew. Yeah... it has become *really* popular. I think it has all the flavors of what non-Koreans want. Okay, Koreans, when it's a soup-base, I know there’s meat included in it, right, but it’s more like a lot of vegetables, right? But for Army Stew, it has everything. So, it has Spam, it has sausages, it has cheese, it has noodles, and it has good broth and it's that combination of everything that works together. I think that’s the reason why non-Koreans are loving it so much.”

For Bang, army stew is popular because of the American ingredients that make the stew more appealing to a non-Korean audience. Although his experience with serving Korean army stew was dominated by the way that non-Korean consumers encountered this dish, Chef Bang demonstrates why something like army stew is notable across cultures. More importantly, however, Bang's experience with the popularity of army stew among non-Koreans reveals that this Korean dish made of American ingredients is popular because it is a dish that emerges out of a shared history between the USA and Korea.

Korean Food as a *Twist*

Everything has a *twist*. But what exactly does this *twist* look like? A *twist* is an emic term used by restaurant owners and can be synonymous to fusion food. However, while the term *fusion* is used as a way to market specific cuisine to a wider and more diverse audience, a *twist* differs in that it is understood by restaurant owners as a way of maintaining their Korean identity within the context of global food entrepreneurship. Thus, this *twist* identified as an essential part of Korean fusion cuisine is something that does not necessarily belong, according to the basic structure of a Korean meal, but rather works itself seamlessly into the culinary palette of Korean food. More specifically, a *twist* can be understood as components of fusion food that allow Korean restaurant owners to cultivate and preserve their Korean identity while simultaneously creating a new type of Korean cuisine. In the following section, I will identify and demonstrate three types of *twists*: cooking methods, imported ingredients, and *kimchi* as they pertain to the construction of Korean cuisine.

Cooking Methods

When considering how something as universal in the culinary world as beef, what about that cut of meat distinguishes it from any other ethnic food dish or culinary style? For Min Soo, the owner of Mountain Grill, it is the method of cooking. In her case, it is not cooking on the part of a chef, but on the part of the customers who are dining in and grilling their own meat. For this small restaurant that specializes in Korean barbecue, the nuance in culinary genres come from the cooking method. When asked about her menu, Min Soo didn't seem eager to boast or make grandiose claims about her food. Rather, the food was, like the atmosphere, comfortable and

low-key. One remarkable comment, however, was about her specialty. Min Soo's barbecue place was one of the most popular in town for the asado-cut beef ribs. This specific cut of meat, Min Soo explained, was inspired by Brazilian and Argentinian-style barbecue. And even though beef ribs are popular in Korean cuisine, this particular cut is not. However, it is transformed into Korean cuisine by the particular grilling method where the customer cooks their own meat on a personal grill and then eats it with the Korean side dishes that come with a typical Korean barbecue spread. Thus, a form of Korean-South-American fusion cuisine is born out of the methods of cooking and preparation.

In the case of a hot new izakaya restaurant, the owner Mark, believed that his food, although inspired by Japanese cuisine, was "more Korean-style." Izakaya was a Japanese way of eating small dishes with alcohol, in a casual setting. For Mark and his partners, the food itself was a manifestation of the teamwork involved in developing the menus that they changed every month. The chefs and restaurant partners came together to create a new menu to keep the atmosphere fun and interesting for their customers. As Mark explained, a lot of the fusion food dishes and inspiration for their top selling items like *bulgogi hot pot* or *cheese spicy chicken skewers* were created by Korean chefs who were trained in Korea and "emos," who are traditionally older Korean women who work in restaurant kitchens. In this regard, even though the food itself is inspired by Japanese cuisine, the methods behind curating a menu of Korean-Japanese fusion is literally shaped and invented by the hands of Korean chefs and *emos*.

Emo literally translates from Korean as "maternal aunt." In Korean custom, it is also another way to cordially address an older woman. Typically, this includes waitresses, grocery store workers, and small business owners or vendors. Many times, the *emo* who works in a restaurant is also the owner, cook, and waitress; this woman represents the comfort of home-

cooking. Although she may not be professionally trained, her training comes from experience and care in the kitchen. Thus, she comes to symbolize a method of cooking that is linked to comfort, home, and tradition. As Mark pointed out, the time, effort, and experience that *emos* share in the kitchen effectively mark their Japanese-inspired dishes as Korean fusion with “house sauces” or made “house-style”. In this case, the form of food presentation and consumption is inspired by a specific type of Japanese cuisine but the influence of Korean *emos* is what shapes it as a “Korean-style” Japanese place.

Another way that methods of cooking are essential parts of Korean fusion cuisine is evidenced by the specific process that goes behind making a dish that separates it from its counterpart and makes it uniquely Korean. For example, the notion of Korean fried chicken, though fairly new, has become a popular part of the Koreatown food scene, according to Jennifer who managed a Korean fried chicken restaurant. She explained to me that the main difference between Korean fried chicken and American fried chicken, apart from the sauces, is the method of preparing and cooking. She also explained that “American fried chicken uses dried batter, but Korean fried chicken uses wet batter” which makes it crispier. Here, there is a clear understanding that the specific way that even the batter is made changes the ethnic composition of the fried chicken. More specifically, the method is notable as it highlights a more fundamental and tangible difference between the two types of cooking, making one more uniquely Korean than the other. And, in this case, the method as well as imported ingredients are integral to the creation of Korean fusion cuisine.

Imported Ingredients

At Jennifer's Korean fried chicken, we see how ingredients play a role in determining and distinguishing Korean food from other cuisines. When I asked her about the restaurant, she told me that it was a popular franchise from Korea and many people, including non-Koreans, enjoyed the food because it "tasted better than American fried chicken." I asked her to explain what made Korean fried chicken what it is. After a minute of deliberation, she answered that everything from their menu was from Korea, everything except the chicken, of course. For this restaurant, according to Jennifer, *everything* such as spices, sauces, and batter are all imported from Korea and based out of a central kitchen. In addition to the ingredients that physically come from Korea, the franchise itself is also Korean company. In this case, the imported ingredients were both indicative of the Korean brand that this chain belonged to but also demonstrative of the concrete link between the food that was served in Los Angeles and ingredients that are from Korea. Thus, the physical location and origin of the ingredients that go into the food itself become markers of nationality and ethnic cuisine.

This can also be seen in Mr. Choi's K-Pop Cafe. Right outside of his large and colorful cafe is his newest installment: a street food stand. Featuring popular street food items like honey pancakes, Korean corn dogs, and fish cake soup, this stand consists of a small counter under the large canopy on the right side of the cafe patio. Under the red canopy, two middle aged Korean women stand behind a large grill, flipping pancakes with skilled experience and making more as people line up outside. As Mr. Choi explained, "this street style was just for survival, but I want to introduce it to my customers." While this pop-up was a simple way to "survive" the financial struggles caused by the pandemic, it was also a way for Choi to share his passion for Korean food culture. He described the style of his street food stand as analogous to those in

Myeongdong, a large shopping and street food center in South Korea. By creating a food scene that emulated a popular Korean street food environment, Choi emphasized his desire to draw on “Seoul influence to brand K-Town as the best place in LA.”

In order to do so, Choi effectively emulated the aesthetic of a small food stand that serves fresh food. However, this was also complemented by the food itself that was considered to be “Korean street food” as it was made fresh to order. Not only was it branded as Korean food by the types of food that were served as it mimicked the same types of dishes served in Korea, but also specifically by the ingredients that were imported. Mr. Choi believed that the ingredients were an important part of his food stand and were the key factor in distinguishing his street food from others in Koreatown. He explained that “even the pancake batter is imported from Korea. Every month [Mr. Choi] gets a shipment of pancake batter that flies in from South Korea. That’s why it tastes so good.” Here, Mr. Choi’s understanding of Korean ingredients highlights the ways in which imported ingredients are somehow better and more “Korean” than its counterparts that come from other countries.

Ultimately, origins matter. As evidenced by Mr. Choi’s street food endeavors and Jennifer’s KFC (Korean Fried Chicken), the imported ingredients provide a crucial distinction between making something identifiably Korean. For Mr. Choi, his decision to use imported pancake batter was just another way to demonstrate his dedication to providing an experience that more accurately represented the street food market in Myeongdong, Korea. With Jennifer’s chicken, the batter, spices, and sauces that were imported from a central kitchen in Korea was not only a way for the company to consistently create and export Korean food, but also a means of establishing a distinction from other types of fried chicken. Because food is a physical way that we interact with the world around us, it is also a way for us to connect the symbolic to the

economic as well as a way to link ethnic and national identity to food (Wilk 2006). Therefore, it is important to focus on what kind of ingredients are being imported. Although the same ingredients are available in Los Angeles, the fact that some are imported from Korea suggests that there is a commonly understood value in imported goods from Korea when making Korean food.

Kimchi

The word *kimchi* today is understood by most people and sparks several ideas such as spicy fermented cabbage, Korean national dish, or even healthy probiotics. Despite its understood link to South Korea, *kimchi* is actually relatively new in Korea's culinary history. As I mentioned before, it was only introduced at the end of the sixteenth century as a result of the Japan-Korean war (Han 2011, 150). Traditionally, *kimchi* was produced in a communal setting and the women of a village or family would gather during the fall to mass-produce *kimchi* for the winter months (Han 2011, 151). This process is defined by Han as a "kimchi network" where the methods behind making *kimchi* are part of a social network that teaches young women how to make *kimchi* (Han 2011, 152). Thus, in Korea, *kimchi* has become a significant marker of family and tradition. It is, then, no surprise that it is also an indicator of class; where one purchases or gets their *kimchi* from indicates class and status. For example, *kimchi* that is made from scratch, at the hands of one's mother or grandmother is more valuable than *kimchi* one can buy from the supermarket. Within that category of purchasing *kimchi*, Han (2011, 156) outlines the different brands that are more expensive and highly valued than others; the main indicator being the location of production and manufacturing. *Kimchi* that is made in Korea is more expensive than that which is imported from places like China. And, many restaurants in Korea now import all of

their *kimchi* from China because it is cheaper to do so than to purchase locally. Despite *kimchi*'s deep history of Japanese influence and local community building, it has since become a global phenomenon that is now reaching unprecedented popularity and prevalence.

After the 1989 Olympics in Korea, *kimchi* catapulted onto the global map and became synonymous with Korea. Within South Korea, food manufacturers led a national movement geared towards making *kimchi* more palatable for the younger generation of *kimchi* consumers (Han 2011, 154). This movement marked a change from previous government efforts that encouraged conservation and less spending during the war. Thus, marketers of Korean *kimchi* manufacturing companies spearheaded ads that depicted *kimchi* as a symbol of home, comfort, and motherly love. Before the Olympics, global exposure to *kimchi* was insignificant. In reality, there are multiple types and variations of *kimchi* that are made from radishes, green onions, and even cucumbers. However, following the Olympics, the globally understood idea of *kimchi* was consolidated into the uniform and easily identifiable red, napa cabbage that is now identified as a Korean national dish.

Today, *kimchi* is the national mascot of Korean cuisine, but it is also representative of everything else that *kimchi* symbolizes such as the feeling of home and health. In many ways, *kimchi* has taken on a similar role as olive oil. Because olive oil's global popularity stems from a widely understood and assumed idea of what an olive represents, in the food world, it has also come to represent the whole of Mediterranean food; it is something that is healthy and beneficial to the body (Meneley 2007, 678). In this way, we can use olive as a framework to understand how *kimchi* carries an analogous meaning for Korea. In the case of olive oil, its symbolic consumption as a Mediterranean health food stems from the origins of the olive as a symbol of love as well as the studies of Greek people's superior health (Meneley 2007, 681). Likewise,

kimchi and its symbolism as a health food can be linked to the rise of K-Pop culture and Korean media as it demonstrates the “healthy” appearance of Korean people. Beyond *kimchi* as a form of nutrition, it is also linked to Korean beauty and skincare as it relates to food consumption.

Because of the ways that *kimchi* has come to represent the whole of Korea and Korean culture beyond just its role as an essential side dish, it is easily translatable to other cuisines and is an effective way to add a Korean twist to a dish. Thus, *kimchi* becomes representative of the entirety of Korea; having *kimchi* with a meal or dish makes it Korean.

Kimchi has become a salient indicator of Korean cuisine; the mere addition of *kimchi* to other ethnic dishes effectively marks the dish with a “Korean twist.” One familiar and common dish I noticed at Korean fusion restaurants is *kimchi* pasta. In my personal experience dining out at Korean restaurants, these come in a variety of forms; *kimchi* carbonara, *kimchi udon pasta*, or *kimchi-cream* spaghetti. For the pasta dishes, the base is an Italian, flour pasta, typically penne or spaghetti, topped with a sauce that is a mixture of *kimchi*, Korean spices like chili powder, and cream. Kay’s Fusion Eatery, for example, serves a *kimchi udon pasta* that happens to be one of her best-selling dishes. The reason this dish works so well, as Kay explains, is because the dairy base tones down the harsh flavors of the fermented cabbage and also makes it less spicy, making it more palatable for non-Koreans. As an Asian-American, she found that the Korean restaurants before never served food that she wanted. Thus, the flavors of her childhood, like cream pasta eaten with *kimchi* as a side dish, came to life in her version of *kimchi udon pasta*. Kay also noted that “people are ordering food that they are familiar with that have that Korean twist.” During my first encounter with *kimchi udon pasta*, I learned that the base isn’t an Italian pasta but Japanese udon noodles. Although they seem different, these pasta dishes mostly taste similar and are essentially variations of the same dish. And, at first sight on a menu, it may not seem like the

most appealing combination of cream, noodles, and spicy, fermented cabbage. However, when cooked together, the sauce and noodles blend together for a balanced tangy and spicy but also rich and creamy taste.

In the same way, Korean tacos are a form of fusion food with a Korean twist. Made popular by celebrity chef, Roy Choi, Korean tacos are a take on Mexican street tacos that are made with Korean-inspired ingredients like *bulgogi* and topped with *kimchi* (Pilcher 2012, 148). According to Chef Bang whose newest endeavor is also Korean tacos,

“these tacos are made like regular street-style, carne asada tacos but with a Korean twist. I kept some of the things that is Latin traditional, which is like tortillas, and the toppings like pico de gallo, or salsa. But the way that the meat is marinated... Like *galbi* taco. Like Korean pork bulgogi taco, which is like Korean pastor. Or like *gobchang*, like tripas, but it’s flavored like in a Korean way. And when you combine those two things together, it like clicked off. People are loving it so. And... one of the key things is stir-fried kimchi, instead of pico de gallo on top of it. And um, even Koreans, they like it but other nationalities, they love it. So, it has that sourness, and it has that you know Korean fermented flavor with the Korean meat flavor, combined with that Latin sauce, spicy sauce, and the tortilla together, I think it makes a really good flavor.”

In this case, although *kimchi* is not the sole ingredient that makes this traditionally Latin taco into a Korean one, it still plays a key role in making these tacos identifiable as Korean. In addition, Chef Bang’s use of stir-fried *kimchi* as a substitute for pico de gallo demonstrates how using kimchi is a way to replace certain aspects of other dishes in a way that still fits into the culinary grammar of that dish. Ultimately, the *kimchi* that is topped on the taco is the “twist” that makes this Latin dish, Korean.

Not all these twists, however, are culinary. They can extend beyond the borders of food and fusion cuisine. Within the context of Korean fusion cuisine, I have outlined the various forms that twists can embody. In the same way that *twists* can make a Latin street taco into a

fusion Korean taco, *twists* can also be revealed in other aspects of Korean culture like K-Pop. K-Pop, beyond its global reach as popular media and entertainment, is also playing into the representation of Korean culture. More specifically, K-Pop plays a crucial role in solidifying the relationship between fusion food and Korean national identity.

Field Research Data

In this section, I will portray eight different Korean restaurants and how they embody Korean culture through their physical space and the food that they serve. More importantly, I will demonstrate how these eight restaurants in Koreatown embody the relationship between K-Pop and food. Through their individual stories and restaurants, we will learn how these restaurant owners are also working as food entrepreneurs as they are tasked with the job of producing and introducing Korean food in a globalized space like Los Angeles' Koreatown.

Kay's Fusion Eatery

Kay, who I mentioned briefly, runs a small but popular restaurant in the heart of Koreatown. Located in a crowded and busy plaza in Koreatown, this modest eatery is filled with a lively atmosphere. When I first ate at this restaurant in 2019, the wait itself was more than thirty minutes for a Friday night dinner. There were groups of people waiting to eat, chatting outside, and enjoying the city atmosphere. Right at the entrance, there were two doll machines that carried cute stuffed animals of Korean cartoon characters. Inside, the restaurant was small and could only accommodate about seven to ten parties. People were crammed in but nonetheless enjoying the food, loud music, and casual conversation. When I returned in 2020, however, the restaurant was not the same. During the pandemic, Kay's fusion eatery had turned from a bustling joint to a humble takeout restaurant. The doll machine was still there but several tables had been removed and rearranged. She had used the tables to blockade the entrance and create a makeshift counter where to-go orders would be picked up. Along the side of the dining room were piles of boxes and to-go containers, utensils, and plastic bags. The few tables that were left were used to accommodate friends and family who she would invite to dine-in.

Although the space had completely transformed, it still seemed to be operating; the two TVs were playing a music video featuring the K-pop group BLACKPINK and people were coming in and out to pick up their meals.

When we sat down for our interview, I noticed the K-pop playing on the screen behind her and asked if it was her personal favorite. She explained that she has always put on fun music videos on the several TVs in her restaurant. Although they were not limited to K-pop, it was the preferred music genre because “Americans love K-pop.” In this context, “Americans” means anyone who is non-Korean. Interestingly, a large portion of her customer demographic is non-Korean. So, the K-pop at the restaurant is not merely background noise. It is the representation of Kay’s awareness of her clientele, a manifestation of her perception of her own clientele’s desires.

At this same restaurant, the K-pop is not limited to the music videos that shape the entire dining experience both visually and auditorily. More specifically, the restaurant’s decor also functions as a link to Korean culture. On the large back wall of the restaurant are about fifteen to twenty framed photos starring the owner/chef, Kay, smiling next to Korean celebrities; famous singers, actors, bloggers, and comedians from Korea are all posing, one-on-one, with Kay. When I asked about the pictures, she casually responded that they all loved her food and frequented her restaurant when visiting Los Angeles. Some of them had even become good acquaintances and even friends just from the frequency of their visits. This display is a clear demonstration of the restaurant’s connection to Korea and by extension, Korean food. Kay’s relationship with Korean celebrities is yet another way to both convey her clout and her cross-cultural food as it blurs boundaries between ethnic foods as well as international borders.

Billy and Disco BBQ

By the same token, Disco BBQ is a popular and now franchised Korean barbecue restaurant. When I would come to dine here in the 2010s, the space would become a party scene at 9 pm, made complete with a disco ball and strobe lights, accompanied by loud music, overlapping conversations, and the sound of sizzling meat. Although it was empty when I visited in 2020, as indoor dining was not allowed, the business still seemed to be running; all the lights were on and each of the LED flatscreen TVs was still playing K-pop music videos synchronously. There were a couple employees who seemed occupied doing small chores and answering the phone when it rang. The indoor dining area was spacious, with high ceilings and an open concept. The dining room was filled with large tables, each equipped with a grill and an overhead fan for grilling meat. Everything was dark, the walls and the industrial-style, stainless steel fans; the room, however, was lit up by LED screens that all showed different K-Pop music videos.

The owner, Billy, explained to me that his concept was unique because of the fun and loud dining experience that it offered to his customers. It was the first Korean barbecue restaurant that strategically meshed both Korean music and Korean barbecue. When the restaurant first opened in 2009, and as it continued to expand in other parts of Southern California, its distinguishing characteristics were the multitude of TVs that constantly showed Korean music videos, mostly K-pop. The overwhelming music and lights from the TVs were effectively employed as a way to connect the Korean food to its source via Korean music and people. Other than making the dining experience complete with entertainment and club-like vibes, it also became a constant reminder to the customers that Korean food should be accompanied by Korean music and more specifically, Korean pop music. For Billy and his vision

for his restaurant, K-pop is a means of creating a new type of dining experience where music is an essential part of Korean barbecue.

When restaurants were forced to shut down in March of 2020 due to COVID and eventually move outdoors if they wished to continue operating, Billy had to abide by the safety guidelines and protocols imposed by the city of Los Angeles. Moving the typically indoor restaurant outside meant securing a large enough space as well as basic necessities like tables, chairs, tents, heaters, and of course, six large projectors that could bring the restaurant's promise of entertainment to life, even during a pandemic. The outdoor dining space was completely decked out with different but proper equipment that could still fulfill its role for a holistic dining experience. Although the projectors, this time, played different sports on each screen, Billy didn't forget the music; there were large speakers surrounding the outdoor space with blaring music by the K-pop boy band BTS. In this case, BTS is largely a representation of the most popular and globally significant K-pop group. Along with girl-group, BLACKPINK, BTS has risen to global prominence. The utilization of K-pop, even during the challenge of running a restaurant during this pandemic, highlights the crucial role that K-pop plays in bringing entertainment to customers and lends to the overall atmosphere of Korean dining. Moreover, it also acts as a constant reminder to the customers that they are in a Korean restaurant.

Chef Bang's Seoul Kitchen

Chef Bang's Seoul Kitchen is a large and open space located on a main street of Koreatown. Outside of the main entrance, on the street corner of Koreatown, were several open grills burning charcoal under a large canopy and a banner that read: Korean Tacos. When I walked in, I was overwhelmed by the dark walls and high ceilings. The space was fairly empty,

aside from the couple tables that had to-go meals, packaged and ready to be picked up. At the bar, a woman stood, busy answering calls and a man asked me if I needed help with anything. As I waited for Chef Bang, I watched several workers frantically walk back and forth through the restaurant, restocking items, taking orders, receiving packages, and preparing for the night crowd. When we were finally ready for the interview, Chef Bang took me to the side of the restaurant into a more secluded booth seat.

During our interview, Chef Bang passionately described his personal experience with the impacts of Korean pop culture as it shaped food consumption patterns. Chef Bang's restaurant specializes in a variety of Korean dishes that, according to him, range from the very traditional foods that one "could only eat in Korea" like fermented fish to the wildest combinations of curry and crab "that are not even Korean or American." In his experience, there has been a recent openness from "Americans" to try new foods and side dishes like *kimchi*. Although *kimchi* has become more popular in mainstream cooking, Chef Bang recalled his own childhood when "in [his] high school days, when a non-Korean person smelled kimchi, they said, 'what died'?. And they used to make fun of [him]." Now, as a restaurant owner, he recognizes how *kimchi* has been popularized as a health food, mostly because of the K-pop craze. He says that:

'Yea, it [K-pop] plays a big role... because of the popularity, it caused people to gain a lot of interest, uh, in the star. But the star, whatever he wears, whatever he or she eats and where they go, where they're from and when they get into it, you know, the food plays a lot of part of daily life and they see the different Korean foods and they're like, 'what is this?' and they don't get it because it's in Korean or... Let's say *kimchi jjiggae*, at first, what is that? Okay, *kimchi*, I got it but what is *jjiggae*? And they start learning about the food and as soon as they learn about the food, they kind of learn about the culture too. And kind of after that, they're not afraid to try these foods that is... before they were made fun of but now, they're willing to try it. And some of them like it and I'm very shocked by that.'

For Bang, the global reach of K-pop does not end in the realm of music and entertainment. Rather, it acts as a gateway into the depths of Korean food and tradition. Bang explained to me that because non-Koreans are introduced to K-pop, they are, by extension, also introduced to the many layers that make up K-pop. As they slowly are socialized into Korean culture, through music, they are now less hesitant to try the unfamiliar red cabbage. Thus, beyond the entertainment value of K-pop, the non-Korean fan's investment in a K-pop idol's life is reflected in their own interests and lives.

Min Soo's Mountain Grill

When I interviewed Min Soo in her humble restaurant, the setup was not far from the norm. She ran a small business that my family frequented when I was a child in the late 2000s and eating there reminded me of many other small Korean restaurants, all humble and very ordinary but serving delicious food and a home-like atmosphere. When I returned to her restaurant for the first time in a decade, I immediately felt an air of comfort as I sat at the corner booth. Although some things had changed, like the numerous tables that were cleared out or obviously out of order with chairs stacked upon it, the small TV at the front counter was playing a baseball game; the volume was barely audible, but I could still make out the commentary. Right below the TV was a stand-alone fridge that displayed a wide array of alcoholic beverages like Coke, 7Up, Asian beers such as Hite and Asahi, and of course, the go-to Korean liquor, soju. And although there were no other employees except herself and the menu had been slightly updated, I could still see the little window into the mysterious kitchen where my food would emerge from.

Min Soo's small restaurant specialized in Korean barbecue. Unlike Billy's Disco BBQ, however, Min Soo ran a small and "traditional" Korean barbecue restaurant. Her food reflected the comfortable and low-key dining environment of the restaurant. Her motto was serving high quality food in an easy-going atmosphere. At the restaurant, one is seated at a table that is equipped with built-in grills and overhead fans to absorb smoke. Placed around the round grill are several side dishes including things like potato salad, kimchi, and spicy cucumbers. Customers have the choice of ordering meat options a la carte or as a combination package. The meat is then brought out, raw, and customers are given tongs and scissors to grill it themselves.

After the initial shutdown, Min Soo's Mountain grill had no choice but to close. The small restaurant couldn't accommodate delivery services and were ultimately closed for 4 months. During that time, she focused on making to-go work for the restaurant. However, the restaurant was a place where customers came in to eat and cook their own meat. Implementing to-go was not an easy process and unfortunately, it wasn't beneficial for the business. Even when outdoor dining became an option, it really wasn't the best thing for Min Soo because it was already so small and the only available space would be the parking lot, which has also limited space. In addition, the cost of hiring more employees as well as the materials needed to accommodate outdoor dining would outweigh any profit that could be earned from it. But after a month or so, she started to open the restaurant to let people dine indoors, illegally. She would allow one to three tables to dine in, per night. Safety was still an issue, which is why only a few tables could be utilized. Min Soo risked a fine to open her business to a few because this was a means for survival. As a small business owner, Min Soo was impacted by the COVID-19 regulations of shutting down restaurants. For her and many others, the only way to survive was by secretly opening her doors to a few clients each night.

Mr. Choi and the K-Pop Cafe

In the case of a popular Korean cafe, we see a similar phenomenon. In Koreatown, Los Angeles, surrounded by various pubs and bars and restaurants lies a large cafe. This cafe, popular for its specialty drink, bubble tea - a dessert beverage with tapioca balls, is uniquely positioned in an open space with plenty of seating indoors as well as outdoors. Once inside, a huge menu is displayed behind the register, consisting of items such as boba drinks, smoothies, coffee, and tea. A glass display is lit up, showcasing various desserts and treats like churros, ice cream, cookies, and macarons. As I walked up to the daunting counter, I noticed the large posters of new drinks plastered on walls along with a standing freezer filled with macaron ice cream sandwiches of different colors and flavors. The most noticeable installment of the cafe, however, are the life-size cardboard cutouts of each BTS member. They stood in the main part of the dining area, smiling at each customer who walked in. During the time I was waiting to speak with the owner, I sat outside and watched the young boys and girls walk in, excited to try a new beverage and snap the occasional selfie or two with the cardboard cutouts. They were clearly a fun part of the cafe environment.

During my interview with Mr. Choi, the owner, I asked about the cardboard cutouts and inquired about the theme of his cafe. He believed that food and spaces like his cafe were crucial arenas that brought together a good blend of Korean food and Korean pop. Everything that he did and brainstormed were for his customers and the passion that he had for educating people about Korean culture. For Mr. Choi, K-pop was a vessel for his cause. The fun atmosphere of this cafe emulated the bubbly and bright characteristics of K-pop and K-pop music videos. It was this whole experience that attracted many non-Korean K-pop fans and enthusiasts to the cafe. And once inside, they would be introduced to various Korean desserts and beverages. In this

way, K-pop was a way to 1) attract customers and lure them into the physical cafe space and 2) help people engage with Korean culture through their own passion for K-pop and Korean food.

Mr. Choi described this space as his personal passion and his desire to share his Korean culture and heritage with others. He expressed that he was “not doing it for the money” but rather, it was a way to build his image of Koreatown as the “best place” in Los Angeles. This idea to use K-pop idols, however, was also categorized as a promotional event. When asked about the role of K-pop in his restaurants, Mr. Choi seemed dismissive and didn’t think it was a major aspect of the cafe; even though, just minutes later, he excitedly asked me about my knowledge of K-pop. And although I shamefully admitted that I didn’t have much, his eyes lit up and he showed me his new idea for promoting his cafe business. As he rambled on about all the different ideas he had for the cafe in the coming months, one that caught my attention was the “birthday event.” This birthday event would entail giving out special little gifts and favors to customers to celebrate the birthdays of each BTS member. On the week of their birthdays, customers who came in would receive a unique and cup sleeve with that K-pop idol’s face printed on it.

Mr. Choi shared with me the various BTS-themed posters, cup sleeves, and flyers that would be used to promote the event and his business. There were seven different cup sleeves, one for each member of BTS. Mr. Choi’s face lit up as he brought out each prototype for the upcoming promotion he would have. In addition to the cup sleeves, he had different themed posters of the band as well, that would come with specialty drink purchases. For Mr. Choi, these forms of promoting his business doubled as a way to convey his connection to mainstream K-pop culture. He explained how his customers loved coming in to enjoy the music and the ambiance that mimicked a bubbly, K-pop aesthetic. In Choi’s case, his dedication to his

customers was conveyed through his desire to give them what they want - K-Pop. As he continued to show me the numerous marketing ideas, all of which pertained to a different K-Pop band, I couldn't help but be impressed by his excitement to share these projects with me. His interest in K-Pop was a byproduct of his passion for his customers, and ultimately, a method by which he could promote his cafe business while also sharing Korean culture.

Jennifer's Korean Fried Chicken "KFC"

In the case of a popular fast-food, fried chicken chain restaurant, the role of K-pop and Korean culture was nuanced. While the restaurant also played K-pop music and drew their overall aesthetic from that of K-pop, their popularity was boosted by cultural moments, more specifically, by a Korean TV drama. In 2013, the popular drama, *My Love From Another Star*, featured the main character played by actress Jun Ji Hyun often eating fried chicken and beer. From this, Koreans named the delicious combo *Chi Maek*, short for chicken and the Korean word for beer, *maekjoo*.

The manager, Jennifer, explained the influence of this specific Korean drama on the popularity of eating chicken and beer. When describing the demand for Korean fried chicken, Jennifer also referenced this popular Korean drama as a cultural moment that shifted how fried chicken was consumed. According to the manager, the sales and consumer patterns reflected the popular trends of pop culture in Korea. For this popular chicken restaurant, the narratives told in other forms of Korean culture like Korean dramas shape both a national and international understanding of food consumption. Although the role of K-pop is not intentional in this case, it is a result of the dispersion of popular Korean culture.

In a more specific case study, the role of K-Pop and K-pop idols are more closely related to the promotion of Korean foods. For BBQ Chicken, another popular Korean fried chicken franchise, both in Korea and America, the marketing techniques rely heavily on collaborations with K-pop group members. In 2016, BTS launched a notable ad campaign with BBQ Chicken, promoting their new Coconut Chicken menu item. In accordance with mainstream trends like ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) that became popular for food, the BBQ Chicken X BTS ad campaign consisted of 7 videos, one for each member of BTS, eating their new coconut chicken, alone at a table. The ASMR style meant that the sounds of their crispy chicken were isolated from any other noises and the close-up shots of the celebrity eating the chicken brought greater attention to their facial expressions of contentment and enjoyment. In another collaborative ad, BTS is featured in a short music video singing a catchy song about BBQ Chicken's new crispy coconut chicken. This collaboration between this big company and a popular K-Pop boy band not only reinforces the connection between K-Pop as a form of branding for Korean food but also highlights the ways that Korean food is tied to Korean cultural forms through popular media like K-Pop.

David's Shabu Shabu

When I first dined at David's Shabu Shabu in 2017, I was immediately impressed by the layers of fusion that made it such a hot spot in Koreatown at the time. The restaurant was very large with both a front and back dining section. When one enters the building from the parking lot entrance, they are forced to walk through the entire restaurant to their table, passing by a wall of lit up, industrial, glass refrigerators. Each refrigerator showcased something different; one was dedicated to canned soft drinks like Coke, Sprite, and Orangina while the others showcased different alcohols like soju, beer, sake, and house wine. The main show, however, was the

numerous plates of colorful vegetables, each arranged beautifully to reflect the bright colors of the rainbow. In the main dining room, each table for four had one electric stove-top and a built-in fan above it. Every party received their choice of two different broths that came in large steel pots to boil at the table.

The premise of the restaurant was *shabu-shabu* which, according to David, is “a Japanese way of eating raw meats and vegetables by slightly cooking it in boiling broth”. In Japanese, the word *shabu-shabu* is an onomatopoeia describing the swishing noise of cooking meat and vegetables in hot broth. However, this was unlike traditional *shabu-shabu*. As David described, this franchise from Korea made it different from its Japanese counterpart by using a flavored broth whereas Japanese restaurants use non-flavored broth. In addition to the broth, their wide array of sauces was “Korean-inspired”.

In the case of David’s *shabu-shabu* restaurant, fusion food consisted of a type of ethnic cuisine that was nuanced with Korean influences and “twists”. The restaurant, although labeled as a Korean health-food restaurant, was known for having various types of Asian influences such as Japanese *shabu-shabu* and Vietnamese spring rolls. Besides the *shabu-shabu*, David’s restaurant took it one step further; customers had the option of using the meat cooked in the broth at their table to make spring rolls. The spring roll orders included rice paper and an assortment of vegetables like onions, cabbage, and carrots so that customers could wrap their own Vietnamese-style spring rolls. At the end of your meal, instead of dessert, waiters would come around and make *pho* in the remaining broth that had soaked up all the meaty flavors from the dinner. Finally, they add in their house porridge, made in the individual pots, topped with egg and sesame oil. Here, the fusion that makes up the concept of “fusion food” is a motley of various ethnic cuisines that were brought together to make something new. And even though

these Vietnamese and Japanese influences were incorporated into the basic concept of the menu, the restaurant was still considered to be serving Korean food.

John and Karaoke Star

John owns a karaoke bar/restaurant in Koreatown. When I visited during December of 2020, the height of Covid-19 in Los Angeles, the entire place was shut down; even the gate guarding the private parking lot was closed off and locked. When I arrived, he unlocked the gates and as I entered the parking lot, it felt weird to be alone in such a large space. It was deceiving how desolate the restaurant looked; upon entrance, I was greeted by a spacious outdoor patio, equipped with patio seats, heat lamps, and decorated with twinkly lights. When I walked in through the main entrance, I noticed the long hallway lined with private karaoke rooms and passed by a fancy bar, equipped with top-shelf liquor. We then sat at a window table that opened up the space with natural lighting and a view of the patio dining. And, although there were no customers dining at the moment, I soon became distracted by the streetcars and bustling activity of people coming in and out of the restaurant with deliveries and instructions from John. Like many other restaurants I visited and interviewed, John's was also open secretly, taking in as many patrons per night as possible. After all, John's restaurant was one of the few restaurants in Koreatown that offered karaoke and dinner.

Karaoke is not a new concept in the US. It was first introduced in the US as a karaoke bar in 1982 and gained popular attention in the early 2000s (Brown 2015). However, karaoke does not occur in the same manner as it does here. The Korean way of karaoke blends the fun activity of singing with a casual dining setting. However, it is private; Korean karaoke allows customers to take up their own rooms and enjoy this within the privacy of their groups. The concept of

having private karaoke rooms within a larger setting of a bar/restaurant establishes a dual function of the restaurant. Because this setting of karaoke and real food, aside from small snacks and beverages is already limited and somewhat uncommon, the mere availability of this specific experience makes this a unique restaurant. During my interview with the owner, he shared with me his desire to create a concept for “easy dining” - a place where people can eat good food in a casual environment. However, aside from the overall concept of the restaurant, they also implement private karaoke rooms, expanding their restaurant to also pass as a form of nightlife.

The private karaoke rooms are available by reservation and customers are charged by the hour. These karaoke rooms are also special in that they offer a wide range of music and song choices. Apart from USA Top Charts, these karaoke machines are also equipped with a variety of Korean songs, old and new, pop songs as much as ballads. They are only an extension of the main restaurant, but he described it as a place where “friends and family, they can have the food in the private room, and they can also enjoy the karaoke. That’s more like the Korean style.” The notion of a “Korean style” establishes a distinction between “Korean style” and the unspoken “American” or “Korean-American style.” Thus, the specificity of Korean style karaoke rooms and experience are commodified as a unique and rare experience within the Los Angeles food scene.

K-pop, while acting as the primary source of musical entertainment and even as the subtle backdrop to these various Korean restaurants, is also commodified as the product available to customers. Aside from the actual food that is offered, the cultural aspect of entertainment and music become the product of Korean restaurants. To explain further, Karaoke Star, popular for good food and drinks, but even more popular for its entertainment demonstrates how culture is commodified within the Korean restaurant industry. In the case of this particular restaurant, we

see the process of commodification occurs on two separate levels; on one hand, there is the Korean practice of private karaoke, and on the other, the accessibility of Korean songs, not limited to K-Pop, for karaoke.

Conclusion

Music plays a big part in every dining experience. This music, however, is not simply employed as background noise or mindless entertainment. Rather, it is a serious part of the commodification of a holistic dining experience as well as the presentation of food. As the concept of Korean food and Korean fusion food is constantly crafted and reinforced, the music that accompanies this cuisine is not incidental; it is an intentional force that both shapes and is shaped by the cuisine in a dialectical manner.

Korean restaurants strategically use music in their restaurants; the restaurant owners I interviewed explained how music both helps create a specific dining atmosphere as well as influence the feelings or moods of the customers. For example, when these restaurants were busy and needed tables to open up to make space for those waiting, they tended to play louder, fast-paced music that subconsciously made customers eat faster. In the case of Korean restaurants in Koreatown, the K-pop music that is usually played in the background has a very important role in creating a Korean restaurant that appeals to a global audience. As K-pop becomes more global and widely enjoyed by a large population, it then becomes a deliberate way to reflect this global attitude onto the restaurant itself and the food they serve.

When collecting my research, I noticed that many restaurants, although they were closed for dine-in, were still running their TVs to play K-Pop music videos or even play K-pop music in the background. For these restaurant owners, the explicit demonstration of K-Pop music and music videos as a form of entertainment became a way to mark themselves as Korean. In a similar way, K-Pop can be used to appeal to a larger audience by catering to and communicating

with K-Pop fans through food. More specifically, this connection between K-Pop and Korean food is manifested and demonstrated in the menus of Korean restaurants in Los Angeles.

One notable restaurant menu featured a monthly special. This cafe that specializes in a variety of sweet beverages like bubble tea (boba) and desserts also strategically implemented aspects of K-Pop in their menu. This menu sheet is a white 8.5 x 11 piece of paper entitled “NCT’s Favorite Drinks.” A simple chart, this promotional menu was a small cheat sheet that listed each member of NCT, a K-Pop boy band, and on one side, it lists the member’s favorite boba drink. On the other side is the cafe’s equivalent of that beverage. While this was a way to help customers pick which beverage to pick from the wide variety, it was also a visual connection between K-pop and Korean food. Here, the menu is a clear representation of K-pop’s influence on the drinks and the popularity of the drinks. This menu also highlights the underlying connection between K-Pop as a global phenomenon that has influence beyond the realm of music and entertainment; it also has a strong impact on the consumption of Korean fusion food.

In addition to the K-Pop beverage cheat sheet, some menus are more explicitly making the connection to K-Pop. A popular Korean fried chicken restaurant called BBQ Chicken, for example, has a menu that features bold titles of menu sections called “K-FOOD” and “K-DRINKS.” Just like K-Pop is derived from the pre-existing concept of J-Pop, BBQ chicken is using the “K” as it stands for Korean to parallel the term “K-POP.” The letter “K” followed by another term has become a way to suggest Korean heritage. Other examples include things like “K-Beauty” or “K-Dramas.” This naming technique effectively makes people who are familiar with K-pop more inclined or comfortable trying something that may be more foreign to them. By making these somewhat foreign fusion dishes relatable to something like K-Pop, restaurants like BBQ Chicken are constructively likening the popular fusion of K-Pop music to their fusion food.

Although it may not be explicitly intentional, the restaurant owners I spoke with seemed to have a general understanding that K-Pop is what the customers want to hear, especially at a Korean restaurant. For the various restaurants I visited, every single one had K-pop music playing in the background. The prevalence of K-Pop in Korean restaurants interestingly highlights the overwhelming role that it plays in creating an atmosphere of Korean dining. In some ways, these specific examples demonstrate how K-pop has become a way for restaurant owners and managers to reflect both their personal and restaurant's Korean pride. This phenomenon is also an observable manifestation of the underlying equivocation of Korean music and Korean food. Thus, Korean music becomes a crucial part of the blueprint of Korean restaurant culture.

Within the specific context of Koreatown, Los Angeles, this association, and utilization of K-Pop underlines the complex relationship that exists between food and music. As shown in my research, we see more clearly how Korean food is interacting with and responding to current music trends in popular Korean culture. More importantly, Korean restaurant owners in Koreatown are explicitly thinking about the ways in which K-Pop is tied to their food. And ultimately, Korean cuisine exists within a larger web of complex relationships between Korean food and Korean music within migrant communities like Koreatown. Thus, Korean fusion food, accompanied by cheerful K-Pop tunes and served with various *twists*, is representative of a globalized Korean culture.

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