



Chef Hak-Joon Kim (not shown) prepared Korean food for the students at Concord Academy as part of the Global Chef Program. (Janet KNott/Globe Staff)

Getting schooled in Korean cuisine

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By Debra Samuels, Globe Correspondent | December 6, 2006

CONCORD -- Spatula in hand, prep cook Domingos Netos is frying dozens of sunny-side up eggs on the griddle in the open kitchen of Concord Academy's cafeteria. Hundreds more eggs are ready on commercial-size baking sheets. But this isn't breakfast. The eggs will top the Korean seasoned rice dish bibimbap. Dozens of bowls of this Asian classic will be served for lunch today.

The private school is hosting chef Hak Joon Kim of Incheon, Korea, who is participating in the Global Chef Program run by Sodexho, the school's food service. For two days recently, Korean kimchi, the fiery cabbage salad, shared space with the salad bar and cold cuts.

When Kim arrived, Sodexho's general manager at the school, Dennis Gallant, wanted the Korean chef to teach the staff how to cook short grain rice properly. The grain is already a menu staple, and the staff had been using a giant rice cooker, but the students -- six percent come from South Korea -- kept telling the kitchen that something just wasn't right. Kim immediately identified the problem. No one was rinsing or soaking the grains before cooking, resulting in very sticky rice. Yes, short grain rice is called sticky rice -- but it should not be sticky enough to elicit comments.

For this lunch, Kim seasons a fresh bone-in mackerel stew, called mugulguk, with a piquant sauce of red pepper paste scattered with scallions. A radish and oyster soup, along with kimchi, round out the menu.

Before students and faculty come in for lunch, food services manager Herb Read is helping spoon the now perfect rice into black plastic bowls for the bibimbap, while Kim adds a savory mixture of vegetables and beef, then tops each with an egg. The kitchen is filled with the aromas of sesame oil and soy sauce. Kim garnishes a big bowl of kimchi with a yellow rose carved from a turnip-like vegetable. Read, watching, says that Kim "treats all food with respect."

To serve the students, the Korean chef takes a spot at the counter alongside an interpreter. Curious students ask questions and take some of everything on their trays. No one makes a face and all seem intrigued. Some of the Asian students chat with Kim in Korean.

Lewis Selas, a sophomore, usually has pasta for lunch, but today he is trying fish. "Holy mackerel! I don't eat fish," he exclaims. Senior Annie Lobel says "This is amazing. They should do it every day."

While one group of Korean students comments on the authenticity of the bibimbap, junior Hae Sung Kim is munching on a quesadilla. "The line was too long," he says.

Holly Fowler of Sodexo's Education Division is here to see how the program is working. "Typically you think students won't try [unfamiliar] foods," she says. "We do those programs in many schools and they eat until the food is gone!"

A few stragglers make their way to the counter. Not a grain of rice is left. Dinner tonight for the school's boarding students -- and day students who don't want to miss out -- will be dwaejigalbi-jjim (braised spareribs of pork) and doraji and oi-saengchae (seasoned bellflower root and cucumber). Rice is soaking and Netos is prepping vegetables.

Kim, energized by the response of the students, says, "It was an explosive experience for me." ■

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