

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

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24 Hours in L.A.'s Koreatown with Native Son Roy Choi

By JENNIFER SALERNO

The food truck chef tells us about his new restaurants and his favorite things to do in K-town.

Roy Choi is a multi-faceted chef and entrepreneur, a law school dropout who helped launch the food truck trend with his gourmet Korean taco trucks. He still goes by his street name: Papi. Known for his culinary daring, the outspoken chef recently advised Jon Favreau on the movie *Chef* and has a new show, "Street Food," on CNN. But despite his recent Hollywood pedigree, Choi's roots are in the city's Koreatown, where he once stood guard during the L.A. riots.

In recent years the neighborhood has been transforming from a land of Korean BBQ and kitschy karaoke bars into a scene of sophisticated lounges, restaurants, and artist spaces. Choi's new restaurants, Commissary and POT, are a mash-up of these colliding cultures, urban oases on a landscape of grit. Both eateries are located in the urban-rustic Line hotel (think unfinished concrete walls, modern wood furniture, and sweeping views of the Hollywood hills). Commissary is set in a poolside greenhouse and offers a menu that puts fruits and vegetables front and center. Choi sees the space as a commentary on L.A. culture.

"I got pissed about private clubs and aloof hipster vegetarian altruism while all my friends working on farms were struggling to survive," he says. "I was working out my demons, excising my anger over inclusiveness versus exclusiveness, and generally making veggies more fun."

POT offers a similar peek into the chef's vision for L.A.'s future. (The restaurant's cheeky name is no accident: a sticker adorning the bar reads, "Marijuana is not a crime.") Down-home Korean fare like hotpots, barbecue, and fried chicken are served



alongside beef tartare studded with rice chips and heirloom tomatoes dressed with yuzu vinaigrette. Like his Kogi trucks, which offer a blend of high and low culinary culture as well as a fusion of cuisines, Choi's concepts create "a sort of bridge" upon which the city can change.

As for the neighborhood, he believes it's pretty much the same as always, just growing. When pressed on recommendations for first-time visitors, he says, "Eat, walk the streets, cruise in a car with the windows open, skate, go to a spa if that's your thing, visit our markets and cafes, get sweets, eat, drink, party, sing." So that's exactly what I did. Notice he said eat twice.

Eat: Commissary

Surrounded by greenery in this glass dome on the roof of the Line, you'll sit next to tourists, artists, and the suit-and-tie set at communal tables. Order from the farm-driven menu of partly vegetarian, partly French comfort food that appears on the back of an envelope, and bliss out to cool music and sunshine filtering through the ceiling. Ride: A Swedish bike

Though this 1.3-square mile "city within a city" is technically

walkable (unlike other L.A. destinations) a little extra locomotion never hurt. Linus bikes come gratis with your stay at the Line and are not only cool but also easy-to-ride and equipped with a side satchel and bell. Take a ride down 6th Street to the historical Chapman Market, a 1929 fortress and enclave of hip restaurants and chic boutiques.

Get juiced: Harbin Deer Antler Trading Co.

The proprietor may ask for your acupuncture license, but no matter, the floor-to-ceiling walls of ginseng, rose bud, licorice root, and a million other traditional herbs are available to the layman too. But deer horn is why you come here. Mixed with tea, the stuff is rumored to boost energy and aid healing, and has been deemed an illegal performance enhancer in professional sports. Antlers come in slices like dried abalone but you can get a few spoonfuls ground with ginseng. Tread carefully.

Snack: Iota Cafe

Bing soo, or traditional Korean shaved ice, is like ice cream with angel's wings. The fluffy sweet snack is ubiquitous at K-town's famous cafes and bubble tea houses. Have it at layered with milk and toppings from fresh fruit to chocolate and green tea. At Iota Café, the coffee service is top notch too, with both pour-over and siphon options.

Play Golf: Aroma Driving Range

A spa and fitness center flank this four-level practice range that juts out over a parking lot in the middle of town. Come tighten up your swing or just peep the Korean LPGA players-in-training.

Eat Lunch: Guelaguetza

All 120 seats are packed at 2 pm on a Friday, so arrive early for this award-winning Oaxacan restaurant, rumored to be one of the best in the country. Go for the rich, complex, traditional moles and stay for the two full pages of Tequiladas and Mezcaladas. Attentive staff and colorful artwork heighten the experience.

Skate: The Collective Shop

Clothing, sneakers, watches, and skate goods line this "skater-owned establishment" on West 6th Street, which is run by locals for locals. Pick up a deck and find some art in motion.

Walk: Koreatown Plaza/Koreatown Galleria

With art deco theaters in robin's egg blue (The Wiltern) and imposing Fountainhead-esque structures from the '70s, the neighborhood is a study in architecture. Two destinations of note are Koreatown Plaza and Galleria—the first for puffy king dumplings at Pao Jao; the second for its mammoth grocery store.

Eat: Sun Ha Jang

Korean barbecue joints dot K-town like palm trees line the sidewalks. Sun Ha Jang stands out for its duck. Order the breast, which is quickly seared and comes with a green salad and a host of banchan. When the server asks if you want rice, say yes. She'll dump a bowl of steamed rice on the grill that gets deliciously crisped in the fat.

Drink: The Walker Inn

Only a reservation will get you into this bar-within-a-bar by the team who brought us Death & Co. The evocative, omakase-style

menus last six short weeks before disappearing forever. The PCH menu took us to Malibu with a pink coupe of grapefruit, pisco and tequila alongside coconut chips and grapefruit "sand." The Big Sur, made with Douglas fir eau de vie, was smoky with a black tea mist.

Sing: Break Room 86

The '80s may be gone forever but the Houston brothers have brought it back in style and upped K-town's karaoke game simultaneously. A secret, back-of-house entrance leads to an '80s-style bar serving spiked push-up pops and housemade wine coolers with walls lined with boom boxes and cassette tapes. You're sure to sing whether in one of the private rooms, or at the main bar.

Get naked: Wi Spa

Complete the day's indulgences with a visit to Wi Spa, a 24-7 traditional Korean-style sauna with mandatory nudity on the men's and women's floors. Cleansing salt saunas, geode-lined rooms, after-treatment sleeping areas, and a rooftop terrace are just a few of the upscale amenities.