



Oh Chung, left, CEO of KOOD Inc. and his wife Park Kyoung-won, creative food director at Si-Wha-Dam smile while talking about "hansik" or Korean food at the restaurant in Itaewon, Thursday.

Korea Times photo by Shim Hyun-chul

Si·Wha·Dam, poem, painting, story on food

By Kim Ji-soo
janeek@ktimes.co.kr

This is the first in a series of interviews with "power couples" leading in their respective fields. — ED.

Power Couple

We usually eat to keep hunger at bay. "Si-Wha-Dam" is one of those restaurants that inspires a deeper enjoyment of dining far beyond the basic need of eating to survive. The husband-and-wife couple who own and run this 50 seat restaurant, provide customers with a chance to appreciate a life made richer because of food.

Of course, the fare on offer is extraordinary. Not only is each dish tasty and beautiful to look at, there is also a story behind it. Here is a small appetizer about what you can expect there: the restaurant's name is composed of three Chinese characters, meaning poem, painting and story in the order. You will have noticed that there is no reference to food in its name. This is because these three elements coexist with food you are served.

Before an introduction about its proprietor and proprietress, I want you to prepare for the first rule of the house: don't hurry. Sit on a Hans Wegner's sofa with a welcome drink as you are asked and wait for all your companions to arrive before being taken to the privacy of a table in a room.

Let's start a typical day of the two owners, the people behind this interesting culinary haven.

Oh Chung, 47, and Park Kyoung-won, 50, haul out pumpkin leaves from their car in front of the restaurant Si-Wha-Dam in Itaewon, last Thursday.

Pumpkin flowers, white lotus flowers, wood-grown ginseng, Bamboo leaves, Korean angelica leaves, Buckwheat blossoms and wild violets are some of the natural and seasonal ingredients that the couple uses for their fine Korean dining restaurant.

Oh and Park use these ingredients and work with the chefs to add flavor, then put them on matching ceramic plates and accentuate them with a flower decoration or poetry written in sugar powder to make the meal a work of art.

The couple talk constantly as they move around the restaurant, which is how they work

together during long hours.

Talk to the couple about "hansik" or Korean food or food in general, their passion and dedication drown out the passage of time.

The outcome of their joint effort is reflected in the restaurant and its four menus titled: "A Line of Poetry"; "A Piece of Painting"; "A Pleasant Story"; and "Banquet for Gourmets."

The items on these menus read like the titles of short stories. Among the 10 items on "A Line of Poetry" menu, there is the appetizer drink "White Lotus Flower Water," a rice-dish called "Time to Empty Your Mind and Fill it with the Scents of White Lotus," and a pasta titled "When Kimchi Meets Pasta," which features squid-ink-filled noodles with kimchi in rose sauce. The dishes taste good, but the presentation takes the cake. For instance, the "Time to Empty Your Mind" choice is a simple rice wrapped in lotus leaf, but it's presented in a round-dark bowl and the rice in the center, to present the image of a lotus flower floating on a pond and a frog sitting by.

The couple's philosophy and passion moved the heart of President Park Geun-hye. Presidential inaugural dinners were usually prepared by hotels that were given an average two months for preparation, but Si-Wha-Dam was selected 10 days before and the menu was confirmed only four days before.

"For 10 days, we worked night and day to prepare for some 200 guests with the thought that we were serving our nation. Gratefully, it was deemed one of the most beautiful Cheong Wa Dae dinners," said Oh Chung, who jointly runs the restaurant with his wife Park, who is the creative food director.

"We came out with a menu that we felt presented Korea's culture and art," said Park.

The inaugural dinner started with a plate of dried fruit as a snack, then a seafood appetizer, baked garlic milk porridge dubbed "Dangun Mythology," "Rice Cake Sandwich," "Multi-colored Korean Kebab," "Spring Flowers Bibimbap," and "Maewha Tea" and Korean snacks.

"Take the seafood appetizer. I wanted to represent how Korea is surrounded by three areas of sea. So I put clean laver from the South Sea, Shinan salt and shrimps from the West Sea and grilled salted pollack roe from the East Sea," Park said.

For the main beef dish of "Multi-colored Korean Kebab," Park used Korean beef marinated in Korean rib sauce decorated with five cardinal colors.

"The five cardinal colors in Korea mean well-being, serenity and blessing, and this is what I wanted to express," Park said.

"Maewha Tea" made from Apricot flower "is the earliest to herald spring after enduring a harsh winter, akin to the image of President Park," Park said.

Oh nodded constantly as Park explained how the menu was created. The same dynamics is always at work when preparing a menu. Park seeks out new ingredients, matching stories from Korean culture which results in a creative work that takes design and intuition that chefs find difficult to prepare. The restaurant has seven chefs.

"I open my ears to what she says. I know what she is capable of, and what I do is to make sure that her talents blossom," said Oh, who is CEO of KOOD Inc.

KOOD also runs several other food chain restaurants most notably the Sinseon Seolnongtang. The meal "Seolnongtang" is a beef bone soup with rice known for its creamy white-color broth. It is eaten simply with kimchi and slices of scallion. Standing on the success of Sinseon Seolnongtang, which currently has 42 company owned chain restaurants, the two have created a unique Korean dining experience.

For them, food is not only about taste; it's how it's presented and what story it carries. The restaurant takes patrons only on a reservation basis. Prices are expensive too. "A Line of Poetry" is the cheapest choice on the menu; this 10 course meal is priced at 100,000 won (VAT excluded). The most elaborate menu is the 18-course "Banquet for Gourmets" at 350,000 won.

"With Si-Wha-Dam, we are not looking for profit. We operate this restaurant with the notion that when we serve fine beautiful cuisine to the world, we are promoting hansik, Korean food," said Park. "When more people grow familiar with Korean food, which is healthy, we are making the world a healthier place. Korean food can do that."

Oh and Park are not concerned about resistance to paying an expensive bill for Korean food.

"The role of Si-Wha-Dam is to present the food, the culture of Korea with poetry, pictures and stories, usually on ceramic plates that you will not see anywhere else. Because of our presentation, it will take about an hour for a whole meal," Park said, which is ideal for the clientele who are introducing a new level of Korean dining to foreign business partners or visitors or enjoy by themselves.

The couple believes that both the private sector and the government could do more for Korean food.

"We should invite top star chefs to stay in Korea to taste hansik, and ask them to reinterpret it with their sense so that they can promote it when they return to their country, rather than give them Korean food ingredients to prepare their dishes for Korean," said Park. Oh said that he also hopes that more Korea food companies pour their passion and assets into fine Korean dining, "for competition will upgrade quality."



Top: "When Kimchi Meets Pasta"

Below: Charcoal-grilled rib eye with rosemary oil

Courtesy of Si-Wha-Dam



"White Lotus Flower Water" is organic white lotus flower brewed in hot water, with a lotus flower stalk as a natural straw. It is served as an appetizing drink.



"Time to Empty Your Mind and Fill it with the Scents of White Lotus"



Top: Shimbatta! ("I Found the Wild Ginseng!") features five-year-old wood-grown ginseng and homegrown honey
Center: Korean lunch box
Bottom: Snacks for summer, decorated with a poetic line in sugar powder