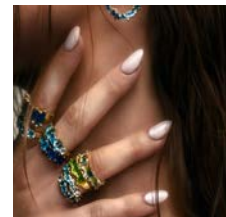


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# JANKEN

*An Incredible Taste of Asian  
in Downtown Portland, Oregon*

| BY TRACY ELLEN BEARD

Janken is an elegant and sophisticated restaurant serving Japanese/Korean cuisine. After opening in late 2022, the restaurant continues to be a hot spot for visitors and local diners. The cherry blossom tree is the restaurant's focal point, creating a serene dining experience. My daughter Brittney and I recently visited Janken, and I later interviewed Executive Sous Chef Juah Oh.

We dined on numerous dishes; each was Instagram-worthy and delicious. Everything that Brittney and I ate was decadent. However, two plates stood out from the rest. The first was the crispy prawns wrapped in noodles, fried until crunchy, and then served with pickled Fresno chilis, cilantro, and sour dashi. Our second favorite dish was the miso black cod seared to perfection, topped with crispy leeks and a side of tasty miso sauce.

## AN INTERVIEW WITH EXECUTIVE SOUS CHEF JUAH OH

### Are there traditional dishes or techniques used at Janken?

Yes, I want to highlight our fermentation, preservation, braising, and steaming techniques.

We have a pork belly dish on the menu. Braising is a common technique used in Korea and Japan. We also incorporate sautéing, steaming, fermentation, and preservation techniques from those countries.

The veggies and herbs we use for garnishing the steaks and for the Japchaes, a traditional Korean dish with sweet potato noodles, wok beef, carrot, red peppers, and egg, are traditionally cut scallions and julienne-cut cooked egg.

What people may not know is that a lot of time goes into every dish.

For example, making a garnish for one dish can involve 2-3 days of prep work alone. Certain items require numerous

steps with days in between them. For example, drying the miso garnish involves mixing it and then drying it again for 2 - 3 days before it is ready to use in a dish.

### How do you feel that dining at Janken transports diners to Japan and Korea?

We do that through the ingredients, flavors, and sushi on the menu. The goal is to make guests feel like they are enjoying a meal with the same flavors they can experience anywhere in Japan and Korea.

For instance, most of the fish is imported from Japan, and we use Japanese and Korean ingredients in the sushi rolls and A5 Wagyu steaks.

Being on the West Coast, we have the luxury of being right across the ocean from Japan, which gives us a significant advantage as we can source some of the best quality fish from Asia, specifically Japan. The Bluefin tuna, Hamachi, madai, shima aji, hirame, and uni are from Japan, and so is the soy sauce.

The Miso, yuzu kosho, and sushi rice are from Japan, and the chili paste, sweet potato noodles, acidic vinegar, and soybean paste are from Korea.

### Where are you from?

I am originally from Seoul, South Korea. I lived in Miami for five years before moving to Portland.

### When did you discover a love of Japanese/Korean food?

Most of my passion for cooking came from cooking Korean food. My dad and grandma cooked very well, so I started cooking when I was very young.

My grandpa is from North Korea (my grandma taught me) and showed me the traditional North Korean ways of making dumplings filled with kimchi, pork, green onions, noodles, and tofu.

I have always loved to feed people. My friends loved eating my dumplings, "mandu," filled with pork and veggies.

I started working in Korean restaurants when I was 17 years old and learned to cook all kinds of Korean foods and then I came to the United States in 2013.

### What is your favorite Japanese or Korean dish that you make?

Personally, my favorite dish to make is Miso cod, including the citrus miso sauce that is served alongside it.

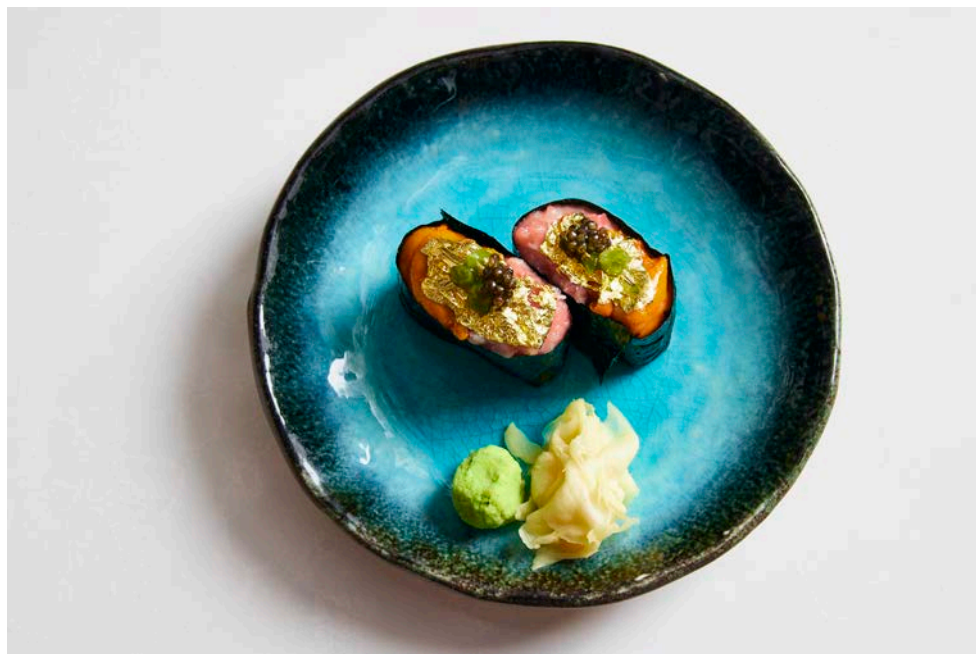
### Where did you train for this type of cooking?

I trained in Korea and learned traditional techniques working in restaurants and going to school there. I took culinary classes in high school and attended Osan University for culinary school.

### How do you inspire creativity in the kitchen, and how does your staff contribute to new dishes?

I like to try new things, and I enjoy a variety of foods. I like to see and hear about





the experiences of others, and I am always asking the team for their ideas, as everyone has a different pallet and something unique to bring to the table.

A lot of our new items come from an idea that is bounced between members of the team. We then try to execute it, test it, and modify it until we either find something we are content and excited to introduce in the restaurant or go back to the drawing board and start over with a completely new idea or inspiration.

**What is your process for creating a new signature dish?**

Though I collaborated on this menu, I did not create it on my own, so I can't speak Janken's entire menu, but I did create the Korean dishes.

When I create a new dish, I'll think about what people like and what things they keep asking me to make. It then comes down to execution and feedback. What can we not only make but make repeatedly and maintain consistency. We also want to ensure new items are inspiring for our guests and make sense with our menu. Some of the items I have been directly involved in creating are dishes like Korean Fried Chicken and Japchae.

**How would you describe your leadership style in the kitchen?**

I like to keep everything consistent and create systems to follow. I am very collaborative and like to learn every day. Just because I am a chef doesn't mean I know everything. I am always working with the staff and encouraging them to share their ideas.

**Did anyone in your past influence your love of cooking?**

My grandma and my dad were the most significant influences, but I also learned a lot from my old friend, Young Hee Cho, who had a lot of experience in Korean fusion cooking. She took me under her wing at work when I was very new. We didn't work together long, but she taught me always to be humble and never to stop learning.

**What is the hardest part of the business?**

The hardest part of the business is maintaining consistency with people and food. It's very difficult for me because not everyone has the same work ethic or standards. I must address staff regularly. Keeping consistency in the restaurant and quality systems in the kitchen is essential, but it's also very challenging.

**If you could change one thing about the menu or the restaurant, what would it be?**

I want to incorporate even more traditional techniques and ingredients.

**What is the best part of your job and why?**

The best part of my job is seeing people happy eating my food. I love seeing people coming back because they love the food and the restaurant.

**Is it challenging to find the ingredients you want?**

No, what is difficult is finding these ingredients at good or great prices. Because of the size of our restaurant and the volume of guests we serve, we have had the opportunity to work

with numerous suppliers to add items to their inventories or to bring in items directly for us. Our goal is always to source the best quality items, keeping the price factor in mind as that will translate into the cost of our menu items.

**How do you want your guests to feel when they leave?**

I want them to think, "I want to come back." We want our guests to leave feeling inspired, savoring the flavors they experienced, and excited to return because of something they tried before or a desire to expand and try something new; this is a luxury we offer as we have such a diverse menu with so many selections available.

**What do customers say they like best about your restaurant and service?**

Customers say that the service team is very helpful in navigating the menu, especially when they are not sure where to start. Obviously, tastes and palates vary, but guests also love the food. We have gained a lot of regulars who have favorite dishes that they order time after time and others who love the chance to explore their options based on the occasion.

Janken is the perfect place for a special occasion or a simply delicious meal. This Asian-fusion restaurant offers excellent quality at a reasonable price. ❖