



Sun Min Chun serves up a Meat Jun Plate under the watchful eye of her mother, Byung Ho Chun.

JUN JONESING

In search of “real” meat jun

I’m a *meat jun* snob, rarely ordering the fried beef at Korean takeout restaurants. I turn up my nose at most meat juns because I hate it when the cooked egg batter separates from the sliced meat, forming yellow, doughy ribbons. This “separation” usually tells me two things: very thinly sliced meat and deep frying – two no-nos in meat jun preparation.

“Separation! Separation! People don’t know how good it really can be,” I’ll say to my wife, when I spot an inferior meat jun. Of course, she’ll just shake her head and try to remember why her eat-now-ask-questions-later husband had suddenly turned into a food prude.

The reason is that meat jun is a very special family food. My sisters and I, fourth-generation Korean Americans, would call it “egg meat.” When we ate the very labor-intensive dish, it meant that we were celebrating a birthday, graduation or homecoming. My late grandmother would arrive at our house in the early afternoon and go immediately to the kitchen, where she would slice the beef herself and tenderize each mini cutlet with the edge of a small dish. Then she would hand-dip each slice into a pungent marinade before plunging it into an egg batter a couple of times. Most impressive of all, she would wipe the frying pan clean after each batch because the sugar in the marinade would burn and stain the golden crust.

My grandmother, with my mother as her able assistant, would make a mound of meat jun, enough for several days of eating. There was no need for a dipping sauce. It tasted best right out of the refrigerator.

The Meat Jun (\$6.72) at Sun’s Bentos doesn’t have any separation. It’s not as good as my grandmother’s, but better than most, with the egg adhering closely to the beef, which is sliced pretty thin but still flavorful.

Sun’s, on the corner of Queen and Alakea streets, opened quietly about two months ago. The place is owned by Byung Ho Chun and named after her daughter, who works the counter. It’s in the space that used to be occupied by Teddy’s Bigger Burgers Express, so the eatery with black and white tile floors, stainless steel counters and

primary-colored signage still has somewhat of a malt shop aesthetic.

Entrées at Sun’s come with a choice of three side dishes. To go along with my meat jun, I selected *won bok kim chee*, watercress and cucumbers in a vinegar sauce. All were good. The kim chee is very fresh and crunchy, almost salad-like. I usually like mine a little ripe and sour, but it was a welcome change.

Sun had recommended either the Meat Jun or the Chicken Katsu (\$6.72), the restaurant’s two most popular dishes. So on my second visit, I ordered the *katsu*, even though I usually shy away from the deep-fried dish. There is no family history with katsu as there is with meat jun. However, I’ve noticed that the dish has gone through a similar homogenization.

The chicken cutlets are awfully thin and tasteless at most places, relying on overpowering sauces to liven things up. But Sun’s katsu isn’t like that. It’s moist, meaty and flavorful, tasting as though it has been marinated in something good. The crust is crisp and holds up well while the chicken itself isn’t pounded thin, so the portions look enormous. Not only that, the katsu is kind of attractive. When I opened my plate lunch container, a co-worker said: “That actually looks pretty. It looks like whoever put that together really cared about the food.”

That kind of sums up how I felt about my two meals at Sun’s. Like I said, the jun wasn’t as good as grandma’s, not by a long shot. But overall, for lack of a better word, the food tasted real. It tasted like someone cared. **DP**

Sun’s Bentos

536-6393

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Mon to Fri, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Downtown Planet