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Diners and Dinner, Close to the Flame

By JULIA MOSKIN

SOME American cooks believe that grilling is the national pastime. But it's also a passion in Korea and Japan, where cooks enjoy a particularly cozy relationship with the fire.

In Korean restaurants the grill is in the middle of the table, where everyone can reach it.

"Cooking together and serving other people are part of the barbecue experience," said Max Han, who runs an online guide to Korean-American culture at newyorkseoul.com. "It's one of the ways we Koreans feel jeong, a bonding, a connection that's very important in our culture."

New Yorkers already choose Korean barbecue when they want to go from the frying pan to the fire. When Nobu Matsuhisa opens Nobu 57 this summer, it will have a 12-seat table around a Korean-style charcoal grill.

More and more, though, New Yorkers are seeing takes on a Japanese version of grilling, robatayaki (or robata for short) in refined but rustic Japanese restaurants where food is cooked in front of the customer and served with excruciating simplicity. Tokyo robatas - as restaurants that specialize in this food are also called - are nostalgic upscale places like Daigomi and Inakaya. They grill ingredients including prime Matsusaka beef and Australian prawns over a premium charcoal called bincho-tan, which costs \$4 for a single stick. In New York the recently opened Japanese restaurants Ono, Megu and Komegashi all have robata selections.

"Right now in Tokyo robata is very elegant, very trendy," said Jun Hashimoto, a sales associate at the Korin Japanese Trading Corporation, a restaurant supplier in TriBeCa. "That's why all the Japanese chefs here want to do it."

Masaharu Morimoto, a star of "Iron Chef" on the Food Network and an owner of Morimoto restaurant in Philadelphia, plans to open 12 restaurants nationwide called PauliMoto, with robata and sushi bars. "The most important things in robata are charcoal and prime beef," he said. "The flames, the smoke, the dynamic action of the chef: this is something that Americans already like."

Robatas ("ro" means hearth, or fireplace) are descended from simple beach restaurants where fishermen cooked their catch over an open fire, with only an oar as a cooking utensil. (Robata chefs still use a wooden paddle to pass food to customers.)

At Ono the executive chef, Scott Ubert, stores ingredients in brine until just before they go on the grill, to replicate the flavor of seawater and keep them moist on the grill.

Traditional robatas have a horseshoe-shaped bar wrapped around a hearth; ingredients like whole fish, chunks of prime meat, shiny green shishito peppers, corn on the cob and enokitake mushrooms are set

on ice, and customers pick. Chefs thread the food onto long metal skewers using delicate techniques like the stitch and the fan.

"A robata is a place of great ceremony and also great noise," said Steven Raichlen, a grilling expert who has traveled widely in Japan, referring to the boisterous shouting of orders between the cook and the waiters.

Mr. Morimoto and others say that no true robata exists in the United States. New York's so-called robata grills are enclosed within other restaurants, like Megu and Ono, which use bincho-tan charcoal to grill luxurious ingredients like foie gras and Kobe-style beef. Jewel Bako Robata, a rigorously authentic robata in the East Village, closed last month. It just reopened as a Korean barbecue place, Grace's Kalbi Bar.

While Japanese grilling is preoccupied with pristine ingredients and ever-fattier beef, Korean grilling is dedicated to garlicky, spicy marinades and smoky flavor. Charcoal is considered a necessity for good grilling in both countries, something to which American grill snobs can relate.

Kunsup Chong manages Kom Tang Soot Bul in Midtown, one of the few Korean restaurants using only wood charcoal in table grills. (Most have switched to gas, or gas and ceramic charcoal.) He said the flavor from charcoal is irreplaceable: "Fire. Heat. Smoke. There is no substitute for that."

The Japanese chain Gyu-Kaku, which serves its popularized version of Korean barbecue (including thin slices of beef tongue and house-made pork sausages) at 800 branches in Japan, just opened its first New York restaurant in the East Village. Managers patrol aisles with buckets of hot charcoals, replacing dying ones as needed.

Kom Tang, Gyu-Kaku and most other restaurants in New York that grill with charcoal use the American hardwood variety. But chefs who have cooked with imported Japanese bincho-tan are fascinated by it. Made from oak, it is so hard it rings when you knock two pieces together. Mr. Raichlen said it burns at 1,200 degrees while American charcoal burns at about 800.

"There is literally no smoke" from the bincho-tan, said Mr. Ubert of Ono. "It's hotter and adds no flavor to the food. It's totally different from what we think of as grilling."

Mr. Raichlen said the absence of smoke flavor and the clean quality of the food are prized in Japanese cooking. To Americans used to sauces, spice rubs and wood smoke, high-end Japanese grilled food can seem a little plain. Served with just salt, pepper and hot pepper mix (shichimi) - with an occasional lemon wedge for a gamy piece like liver or gizzard - the food must speak for itself. New York chefs avoid this by devising inauthentic but appetizing dipping sauces.

Japanese grilling is hardly new to the United States. Manhattan, especially the East Village, has long been well stocked with cheap and raucous yakitori places that specialize in skewers and beer. But newer restaurants that focus on grilled organic chicken and imported Japanese mushrooms are arising, often using the more expensive charcoal. One, Yakitori Totto in Midtown, has raised yakitori to an art form; at Komegashi thin slices of pork belly are expertly grilled to a crust on a cast-iron grill.

It can be difficult to sort out the taxonomy. "In the hierarchy of Japanese grilling yakitori is the simplest, then kushiyaki, and robatayaki is the Cadillac," said Jack Lamb, an owner of Jewel Bako. Yaki simply means "grilled," and tori is chicken; yakitori places specialize in grilling all parts of the chicken, but serve other dishes as well. Kushiyaki refers to skewers of seafood, meat and vegetables;

the Japanese character for the word looks like skewered food.

Small Japanese grills are often designed for skewers: narrow and rectangular so the ends of the bamboo are not exposed to the heat. Americans call such a grill a hibachi, but the Japanese call it a konro. "In Japan a hibachi is a bowl of coals that you would use to heat your room, and you might drop pieces of paper or even cigarette ashes in it," said Jun Hashimoto of Korin. "But it's not a cooking method."

Teppanyaki, introduced by the Benihana restaurants in 1964, is cooked on a griddle called a teppan. But that does not qualify as grilling to American cooks, for whom the occasional smoky flare-up when juice and fat drip on the coals is part of the fun.

That's probably why Korean barbecue is already a favorite with New York carnivores: it's experienced through the eyes, nose and fingers, as well as the mouth. (Diners wrap hot beef in lettuce leaves with grilled garlic, kimchi and a dab of doenjang, or bean paste.) Even barbecue palaces like Dae Dong in Bayside, Queens, and Picnic Garden in Flushing are often packed, especially after Korean church services on Sundays. Bulgogi - "bul" means fire and "kogi" means beef - has become part of the social fabric of South Korea, used to mark occasions like birthdays and business deals.

"Barbecue is the proverbial hearth around which our people conduct all matters of business," said John Woo, a Korean-American from Brooklyn who plays guitar in the band the Magnetic Fields.

It is traditional in Korean restaurants for waiters to do the grilling. But some New Yorkers find it difficult to relinquish control.

"I've been thrown out of every Korean restaurant in New York: I always think they put the food on the grill too soon," Jack Lamb said. He shares ownership of Jewel Bako and its sibling restaurants with his wife, Grace, who grew up in a Korean-American family in New York.

The new restaurant's recipe for kalbi (short ribs) was still being developed last week. Ms. Lamb's mother and an aunt were debating over the marinade, which traditionally includes fruits like pears or apples along with soy sauce, sesame oil and garlic.

"That's a fight I'm staying out of," Mr. Lamb said.