

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a white rectangular plate. The plate contains several small, dark, roasted fish (smelts) arranged in a row, garnished with fresh green lettuce leaves. The person is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. In the background, other plates of food and a pair of wooden chopsticks are visible, suggesting a dining setting. The overall lighting is warm and focused on the food.

TASTE

in translation

Roe-filled smelts are a specialty at Korean barbecue spot, Everyday Good House.

Eating Korean with Peter Serpico

BY JOY MANNING ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEAL SANTOS

At Everyday Good House, a Korean barbecue joint in Olney, Peter Serpico and two other chefs from his eponymous South Street restaurant stare intently into a platter of rice cakes—those starchy, chewy Korean dumplings made from rice flour. A vermilion sauce made from fiery chili paste and pungent anchovy coats the white cylinders. The dish is salty, spicy and deeply savory.

Serpico's deputy chefs, Jae Hee and Alex Yoon, mine the layers of flavor for potential menu inspiration. Both cooks come from Korean families and have a special affinity for the bold, fermented flavors of this cuisine. They tease apart the components and talk ideas, but Serpico himself dismisses the notion of inventing some version of this recipe for his menu.

"We've been trying to do something with the idea of this dish, but it's hard," says Serpico. "We just keep coming back to this same flavor profile."

He explains that in order to create a riff on this familiar Korean dish, or any familiar dish, he'd have to feel confident his kitchen took the inspiration and radically remixed it into something new. "Something *interesting*," says Serpico. Something distinctly not Korean.

We're all eating together at Everyday Good House because I asked Serpico if he would take me on a tour of his favorite Korean restaurants in Philadelphia. I had read that, as a New York City transplant, he was surprised at how good and authentic Philly's small Korean joints were. He asked to bring along his fiancée, Julie Choi, as well as Yoon and Hee—all hail from Korean families and speak the language fluently.

But not Serpico, whose Wonder-Bread-padded childhood was lived out in suburban Maryland. A white couple with Italian and Polish roots adopted the Korea-born Serpico, and his parents were thoroughly American. "I have no connection to Korean anything," says Serpico. The food of his childhood was hamburgers, pizza, and macaroni and cheese. Like many Americans, his language skills are limited to English.

The day's eating itinerary wasn't Serpico's design at all. Yoon and Hee picked out the restaurants we visited—they've been Serpico's guides to Korean food in his new town. Yoon grew up in the Philadelphia area and his family ate at places like Everyday Good House all the time. Going out to eat always meant Korean barbecue.

"If my parents went out to eat at a restaurant that *wasn't* Korean, we'd have to eat Korean food after," says Choi, who came to the United States at age 1 and hails from New York. Though Serpico

seems to hold his Korean identity at arm's length, he's surrounded himself, perhaps unconsciously, with people who celebrate it.

In between bites of barbecue, Choi pulls out her phone to show me photos of her most recent trip to Korea. She wants me to see how they serve this type of meal a little differently there, at least in terms of the lettuce wraps provided for wrapping up your morsels of grilled beef or pork belly. "This is just some neighborhood place, nothing special, and look—six or seven different kinds of greens," she says scrolling through the verdant images. "Beautiful, right?"

Her love for Korean food and culture is unambiguous.

Choi and Serpico met when they both worked at Momofuku

Ko, the Michelin-starred, David Chang-owned restaurant in Manhattan that brought Serpico into the national food spotlight. (And earned him a James Beard award.) Over time, he became the culinary director for Chang's empire—easily one of the most influential positions in food in America. It was reported that he was so obsessed with his work and put in such long hours that he slept at the restaurant instead of renting an apartment.

"At Ko, everything was very chef-driven, to the point where I taught everyone the POS [point of sale] system," says Serpico. He was responsible for many aspects of the restaurant beyond the kitchen. Choi said it's when he was training her that he caught her eye, with his kindness and patience. She smiles dreamily as she recalls that time in 2005. Serpico's face remains composed. If the memory stirs his emotions, he doesn't show it.

It's not just romantic memories that make Choi's eyes sparkle. An aura of friendliness and warmth surrounds her. There's a New York City sheen of style superimposed on her but, unlike her fiancé,

she's approachable. During the meal she carries the conversation while unobtrusively stacking empty bowls and serving from shared plates, her training as a server still with her though she's now in nursing school.

"We're polar opposites," says Serpico about her friendly, outgoing personality. In fact, even though he's now fully immersed in the Philly restaurant scene—distinguished by its chummy camaraderie among chefs—Serpico has few industry pals.

"Look, the fact is, other chefs are competitors, not friends. There are only so many potential diners, and it's not like they are going to eat two or three dinners a night." He thinks maintaining his distance from the herd might give him some critical edge, and besides, he says he knows too many people in general as it is. "I want it to start going in the other direction. I'm ready to know *fewer* people," says Serpico.



Serpico serves his fiancée noodles in black bean sauce at Yong Hwa Roo;





A bowl of soup at Yong Hwa Roo; Banchan at Everyday Good House



Part of the prickliness stems from his fiercely competitive streak, but some probably was born of a longstanding sense Serpico has of himself as an outsider. Growing up, he was told on occasion by other Koreans that he wasn't "really" Korean, yet he clearly looked different from his white classmates. "I've never felt like I fit in anywhere—only with other adopted people and there aren't all that many of us," he says.

But Serpico seems to have found a place to belong with his fiancée and cooks, all of whom clearly love spending time with him. "Mine and Peter's next trip together will be to Korea," Choi says, looking at Serpico, who nods in agreement.

Serpico hasn't returned there since being adopted all those years ago, though he's traveled widely and draws culinary ideas from other far-off destinations. He cites Japan as a source of inspiration—one of many, he says. If there's anything the chef wants to avoid, it's being pigeonholed into one type of cuisine. He tells me that Serpico is not a Korean restaurant more times than I can keep track of, and he tells me stories of him telling other writers, editors and reporters the same. "It's an American restaurant," he says, when pressed to label his food.

One meal at Serpico, and you don't have to be told the food is tough to categorize. There are pasta dishes that are assertively non-Italian, like a nest of hand-torn noodles decked with snail sausage and bits of fried chicken skin. There are raw fish dishes whose tense interplay of sweet, sour and spicy don't evoke sashimi. There's a deboned, deep-fried and glazed duck leg served on a potato roll

KIMCHI JJIGAE | Serves 4

Recipe courtesy of Julie Choi

- ¼ pound pork belly, sliced thin and cut into 1-inch pieces
- ½ onion, chopped
- 1½ cups kimchi
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- ½ teaspoon minced ginger
- ½ cup kimchi liquid
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 1 cup water
- 1 teaspoon doenjang (Korean fermented soybean paste)
- 2 teaspoons gochujang
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- 1 teaspoon mirin
- 1 to 2 tablespoons Korean chili powder
- 7 ounces firm tofu, cut into cubes
- 1/2 teaspoon sesame oil
- Scallions, for garnish

Arrange the pork belly slices on the bottom of a stockpot over medium heat. Cook, turning occasionally, until the pork fat begins to render, about 3 minutes. Add the onion, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion softens and pork belly has browned, about another 5 to 8 minutes. Add the kimchi, garlic, and ginger and cook, stirring occasionally, until the mixture is fragrant, about 2 minutes more.

Add the kimchi liquid, chicken stock, water, doenjang, gochujang, soy sauce, mirin, and chili powder. Bring the mixture to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cook until slightly reduced and the flavors have blended, about 10 minutes. Add the tofu and cook until just warmed through, about 3 minutes more. Off heat, drizzle with the sesame oil and garnish with the sliced scallions. Serve over short-grain white or brown rice.



Serpico's stylish dining room

that, the chef says, is inspired by Peking duck but unlike any you've likely tasted before. And new to the menu is a technique-driven fried chicken wing whose batter is so greasless and crisp even the famous wings from Café Soho that inspired them seem wan by comparison. There's no mistaking the place for a Korean or pan-Asian restaurant.

And yet, there's the kimchi in his pork-and-seafood stew. The spicy fermented cabbage condiment is made in-house, using Hee's mom's method. "It's not a recipe. Korean ladies don't use written recipes. I learned how to make it watching her make it for years," says Hee. Its soulful, layered flavor brings complexity—and contradiction—to the highly refined dishes it laces.

It's not like Serpico's kitchen brigade is dominated by Korean faces, but it is true that he chose to fill two roles—sous chef and commis—with Korean chefs. At Everyday Good House, when Serpico steps away from the table for a few moments, Hee, one of Serpico's early hires, explains how Yoon became part of the team.

"He kept calling and sending his résumé. Over and over. We finally called him and asked him to come in one day the next week, but a day or so later we called and asked him to come in on the spur of the moment. We were very impressed he was willing to go with that kind of last-minute change of plan. It was kind of a test. It showed he was committed," says Hee.

Later Serpico tells me a similar story about how he chose Hee as his second-in-command—repeated calls and emails. He just kept showing up. "I don't want to stereotype at all, but persistence might be a Korean quality," says Serpico. It's also a trait Serpico has cultivated in himself.

On his rare days off, Choi cooks for the couple. Most often she makes kimchi jjigae, a Korean comfort food that's essentially a stew. "I like it because someone I love makes it for me," says Serpico. Choi is currently working through a batch of homemade kimchi her aunt sent her—when it runs out she may use store-bought or ferment a batch herself. Serpico doesn't have any of the nostalgic attachment to this dish that Choi does, but he doesn't get tired of it, either. Though he used to eat what he describes as "way too much fast food" when he wasn't working, kimchi jjigae is becoming a comfort food for him as well.

"I don't want to say that I'm trying to find my Korean identity," says Serpico. "It's just happening naturally." ■

SERPICO

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THE SHORT LIST: KOREAN RESTAURANTS

These are the restaurants that come recommended by Peter Serpico, Jae Hee and Alex Yoon.

Cafe Soho	468 W. Cheltenham Ave.	215.224.6800
Everyday Good House	5501 N. Front St.	215.276.7942
Kim's Restaurant	5955 N. 5th St.	215.927.4550
Yong Hwa Roo	6779 N. 5th St.	215.224.4414