

Restaurants

Ruth Reichl

Eating serenely in another space and time, and using all the senses, the Korean way.

The air is filled with music as fresh as the wind whispering through branches in a remote mountain forest. Then it drops until it has turned into the melodic sound of water rushing over rocks. Slippers pad reverently across pine floors and servers kneel to place lacquered dishes on low tables. Wooden spoons slide from scarlet silk bags. Fragrant clouds of steam waft into the serene room as lids are lifted from hot stone bowls.

A meal at Hangawi is an experience of all the senses, a chance to escape, if only for a little while, the stress and bustle of New York City. If you like to travel to exotic places, consider a trip to 32d Street.

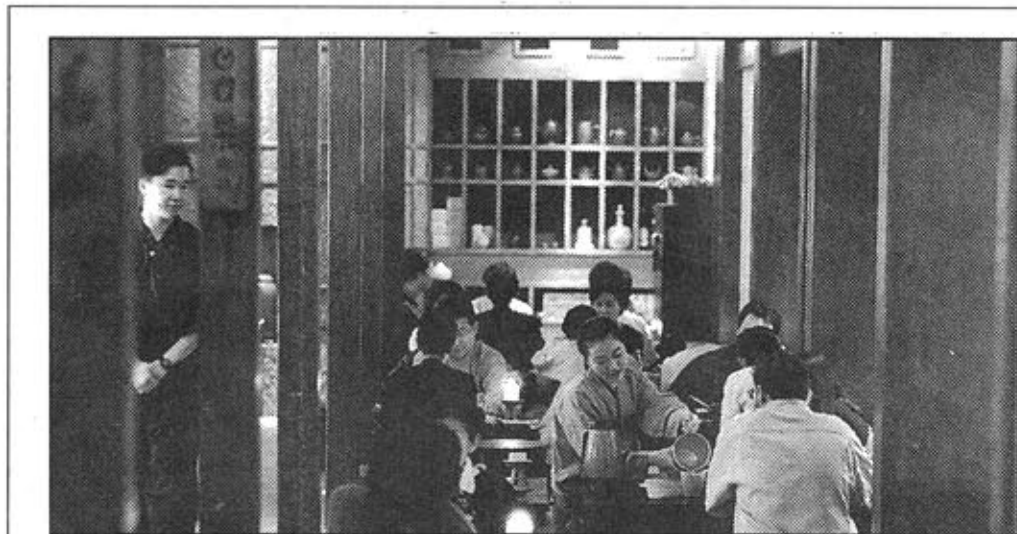
The oversize door is an entrance to another world, an invitation to a place where nothing is familiar. "Even in Korea," our waitress said fervently, "I never saw a restaurant like this one." Dedicated to the ancient principals of Korean cuisine, the restaurant is a shrine to the vegetarian impulse. You have probably never tasted anything quite like these pounded mountain roots and grainy porridges, but if you suspend judgment and take it as it comes, it is a marvelous adventure.

Remove your shoes and watch as they are tucked into little cloth bags and placed in wooden cubicles. Follow the bowing waitress as she leads you to your table. No need to worry about discomfort; although the seats are on the floor, legs can dangle comfortably into the hidden recess beneath the tables. Somehow everybody, from the Korean businessmen at the front table to the students at the next and the four women who look like models in the back, looks comfortable.

Tea arrives quickly, served in rough, hand-thrown ceramic mugs. But what is this taste? It may be lily root, green tea or mushroom tea, known for its restorative qualities. The flavor may be fruity or citric or it may have the strength of a broth, but one thing is certain: it will not be the demure tea that comes with crumpets.

Here is the menu, a beautiful green and copper folder held together with a ribbon. And a problem: most of it is absolutely indecipherable. Grilled lanceolata, acorn delight and stone bowl meals are just a few of the offerings. Fortunately, the restaurant makes ordering easy by offering a few complete meals. Those who choose the emperor or the ginseng have only to sit back and wait for the unexpected.

But first, the drinks. Aside from beer and sake, even these are unfamiliar. Wines come in flavors like litchi, plum and chrysanthemum. Rice wine comes in both the clear chungha and the cloudy white nongju, a lightly alcoholic, fresh-tasting



Thomas Dailal for The New York Times

Hangawi

★★

12 East 32d Street, Manhattan, (212) 213-0077.

Atmosphere: This serene room is as calm and lovely as a Buddhist temple.

Service: Gentle and accommodating.

Recommended dishes: Wild sesame porridge, pumpkin porridge, sweet-and-sour mushrooms, tofu sandwich, Korean vermicelli, stone bowl lunch, ginseng in stone bowl, emperor's meal.

Wine list: There is no traditional wine, but there are fruit wines, sake and the rice wines of Korea, chungha and nongju.

Hours: 11 A.M. to 3 P.M. and 5 to 10:30 P.M. Mondays through Fridays; 11 A.M. to 10:30 P.M. Saturdays; noon to 10 P.M. Sundays.

Price range: Lunch: appetizers \$3 to \$4.95, main courses \$8.95 to \$10.95, desserts \$3.50 to \$4.50, multi-course lunches \$14.95 to \$19.95; dinner: appetizers \$3 to \$4.95, main courses \$12.95 to \$14.95, desserts \$3.50 to \$4.50, multi-course dinners, served only for two or more, \$19.95 to \$24.95 a person.

Credit cards: All major cards.

Wheelchair accessibility: The dining room is up a few steps. Diners sit on the floor at low tables with their legs in a hollow.

What the stars mean:

(None)	Poor to satisfactory
★	Good
★★	Very good
★★★	Excellent
★★★★	Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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cessively greasy.

Assorted tempuras aren't very impressive either; this kitchen shines when it cooks fresh, steamed or grilled vegetables but stumbles when it cooks in hot oil. The fried dishes are heavy and unappealing.

But sweet-and-sour mushrooms are wonderful, a mixture of crisp and smooth textures in a single dish. Some of the mushrooms are all crunch and no taste, others have a strong earthy flavor. Tossed together in a sweet-and-sour sauce, the tastes and textures are endlessly intriguing.

Dishes are quietly removed as each course is finished. More appear. These meals can go on, at their own dreamy pace, for hours. But when the table starts to fill with many tiny dishes of kimchi and namul — the condiments of Korea — you know that the main course is coming. No matter what you have ordered, this is sure to be the most exotic moment of the meal.

Lanceolata? In Korea, this hairy mountain root is called todok; it is first pounded, then sliced, marinated in kochujang, the classic chili paste of

also contained large chewy pieces of ginseng root. Each bite was subtle, refreshing and surprisingly delicious, and eating it left me feeling light and peaceful. I was, I'll admit, less taken with the thin liquid in the stone bowl, so I concentrated on the side dishes. I thought acorn curd, a gelatinous substance much beloved in Korea, was nearly tasteless. But I loved the sweet and salty seaweed salad.

The penultimate course is soup again. I particularly like the one made with fermented soy bean paste and fresh green chilies, a little shock of heat before the cinnamon-scented persimmon soup announces the end of dinner.

If all this seems too much, why not try lunch? It is less of a commitment. The à la carte offerings come surrounded by so many side dishes that each seems like its own small feast. One is mountain vegetables and greens, a mini-version of the emperor's meal. Another is stone bowl with vegetables, a large, piping hot bowl filled with rice and topped with carrots, seaweeds, a couple