

Anju review: The best restaurants in Washington, D.C.

[washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/aging-is-a-very-good-thing-at-anju-in-dupont-circle/2019/09/05/f33aa0c6-ca9b-11e9-a1fe-ca46e8d573c0_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/aging-is-a-very-good-thing-at-anju-in-dupont-circle/2019/09/05/f33aa0c6-ca9b-11e9-a1fe-ca46e8d573c0_story.html)

September 5, 2019

This review appears in The Washington Post's 2019 Fall Dining Guide as No. 9 on a list of the year's top 10 restaurants.

9. Anju

(Not yet rated)

Think all fermented cabbage tastes the same? Try the kimchi aged 100 days at this youthful Korean gastropub and let's talk. The powerful nose and distinctive tang alone set it apart from everything younger.

Anju rose from the literal ashes of Mandu in Dupont Circle, also created by chef Danny Lee, and the successor couldn't be more family-oriented. His mom, Yesoon Lee, is the keeper of tradition in the kitchen, and his wife, Natalie, designed the inviting, two-story space. The banchan — pickled cucumbers stuffed with carrot and chives, crunchy sauteed bellflower root and more — are terrific, as are the steamed, seared, super-juicy dumplings stuffed with ground pork and buttered kimchi. Should you eat or drink the egg custard? The bowlful, carpeted with minced garlic, is so silken and slippery, it's hard to tell.

Heading up the kitchen is executive chef Angel Barreto, formerly of the delicious Chiko, and a talent to watch. His twists on tradition share space on the small script with Mama Lee "classics." Braised chicken and potatoes in a spicy, honey-sweetened red gravy are as soothing as a call from home.

Anju: 1805 18th St. NW. 202-845-8935. anjurestaurant.com.

Open: Dinner daily.

Prices: Dinner mains \$18-\$32.

Sound check: 76 decibels / Must speak with raised voice.

The Top 10 restaurants of 2019:

10. Thamee

9. Anju

8. Three Blacksmiths

7. Mama Chang

6. Poca Madre

5. The Restaurant at Patowmack

4. Métier

3. Pineapple and Pearls

2. Rooster & Owl

1. Seven Reasons

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The following preview was originally published on Sept. 11, 2019.

Aging is a very good thing at Anju in Dupont Circle

Kimchi aged up to 100 days. Drinks as considered as the food. Rooms designed to make you smile.

Right out of the gate, Anju is among the most enticing restaurants to open this year, a sentiment sweetened by the sight of one of the owner's moms animating the kitchen and the emergence of a restaurant from the ashes of a fire two years ago. Anju, a friends-and-family collaboration that includes chefs Danny Lee and Scott Drewno of Chiko acclaim, is a welcome successor to the Korean-themed Mandu run for 11 years by Lee and his mother, Yesoon Lee, in Dupont Circle.

Anju references the snacks and small plates typical of those offered in Korean drinking establishments, says Danny Lee. While everything is rooted in tradition, many of the dishes incorporate ideas from staff, including executive chef Angel Barreto, 30, whose talent Lee first observed at the Asian-inspired Source. (Drewno was the head chef there at the time; Barreto was a sous-chef who liked to add Korean flourishes to the plates. The gochujang here and there? The younger chef's addition.)

Do yourself a favor and compare the signature kimchis side by side. Thirty days of aging yields nice crunch and teasing fire. Seventy more days in the crock turns the napa cabbage into something altogether different. The perfume is powerful, the nip lingers, and a subtle fruitiness joins the heat and tang. After tasting the older kimchi, it's hard to go back to anything younger. Anju is particular about the way it makes kimchi. Three days go into fermenting the paste, which includes Asian pear and chile flakes, alone.

It would be easy to graze the night away just with panchan. The collection of small plates includes lightly pickled pieces of cucumber stuffed with carrot and chives, crisp chayote ignited with jalapeño and, best of all, shredded sauteed bellflower root. Meaty and crunchy, the last uses the bitter root of a plant found on seaside hills in southern Korea, where the maritime breezes make for mineral-rich soil, says Lee. (A day-long soak in water and a rub with salt makes the root palatable.)

Forge on. Anju might be serving the best mandu in the region. The dumplings are a Chinese-Korean hybrid, says Lee, steamed to preserve the delicate wrapper and stuffed with ground pork, buttered kimchi and emulsified fatback. The last touch not only binds the ingredients, it makes for juicier eating. After a friend spoons into a silken egg custard covered with a jelly made from chicken feet, he declares it “a new state of matter.” No exaggeration. A carpet of minced crisp garlic and marinated trout roe lend further magic to the steamed custard. Rice fried in a wok and tossed with buttered kimchi and marinated shrimp, scallops and calamari makes for a heady bokum bap.

Until Anju, the Lees didn't write down their recipes. They didn't have to, says Danny, because loyal “staff never left.” Barreto made it his mission to document the oral tradition. Working with Mama Lee, he's at about 50 recipes.

Several of her “classics” round out the selections. The biggest comfort comes by way of dak jjim, braised chicken thighs with tender potatoes in a red gravy lightly sweetened with honey and mirin. You don't have to be Korean to enjoy the warmth in the bowl. (Grit in the clams sharing a bowl with spiced drum and thick sliced radishes was the lone miss of two recent meals.) A late-night menu, written on butcher paper and hanging near the bar, includes those supernal mandu and something sure to give any nearby sausage a run for its money: a kimchi slaw dog, slathered with hot mustard, cradled in a potato bun — yours for five bucks. Slender silver chopsticks and thick gray napkins turn even a quick bite into a special occasion.

The newcomer is Danny Lee's most personal statement to date. Not only was the menu created with the help of his mother, his wife, Natalie Park, designed the 90-seat, two-story restaurant, fronted with a patio. The street level, home to the open kitchen and set off with high tables and a bar, is meant to be casual. Notice the portraits of three dogs in Victorian garb on the wall? They represent the four-legged companions of the owners, including Drew Kim. A flight up is a dining room with intentionally scarred walls and exposed beams, but also skylights, white brick walls and greenery, plus a private space called the Garden Room. Tradition (cranes flying across wallpaper) and trends (a sketch of RBG) mingle well. In all, this is a fetching backdrop for the food and drink.

Tending the convivial bar is beverage director Phil Anova. He's into aging ingredients, too, specifically soju, the clear, clean-tasting spirit made primarily from rice. A drink called Soju Bourbon fills its glass with the essence of the brown spirit. What patrons are actually tasting, however, is soju that has been infused with charred oak and vanilla bean. On tap, there's

Korean sparkling rice wine, makgeolli, which Anova flavors with toasted coconut and strawberries. He even lists a nicely acidic chenin blanc from France. Fittingly, it's from Anjou.