



K-TOWN COOL

Veteran band tour manager Rick Marino - who hosts a travel TV show called "State x State" that airs on the Planes, Trains + Automobiles network as part of Delta's in-flight entertainment - drives us to **KOREATOWN** for traditional barbecue.



Couldn't make to Seoul for the Winter Olympics this year? No worries. Did you know that Los Angeles is home to a vibrant Korean community? Koreatown, or K-town, has been one of my favorite parts of LA since I first discovered Korean barbecue back in the '90s.

It always seemed to have a New York kind of feel to it. Lately, I have been spending more and more time discovering hidden gems tucked into mini malls full of dessert and coffee shops, dive bars, speakeasies, hip hotels, karaoke bars, Korean fried chicken spots and food courts, as well as hundreds of barbecue joints. The list goes on and on!

Now, Los Angeles is big and beautiful and scary and fun - sometimes inspiring and sometimes annoying - but it is my hometown. I was born in a hospital on Sunset Boulevard! But since moving to the desert some years back, I've really missed the ethnic neighborhoods that I feel make LA one of the world's greatest cities. You can travel the globe and never leave Southern California!

Between downtown Los Angeles (or DTLA, as it's known now) and Hollywood lies Koreatown, a true melting pot of cultures. There are some parts of town where you'd never know you weren't in Asia! There are two hotels I recommend for an overnight, both centrally located just a block away from each other and within walking distance to some good times. First, the Line Hotel on Wilshire is a hip spot that used to be a Radisson back in the day. It kind of started K-town's new era, with a slick lobby bar and a beautiful restaurant called Commissary.

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Hotel Normandie is the old-school LA classic built in 1926. The new owners are very tastefully restoring it. You can grab cocktails at The Normandie Club, or head to Cassel's for breakfast, lunch and dinner. It's open late for pies and coffee! Side note: A rad, tiny French joint called Le Comptoir is around corner, but it was not open yet. I have to go back!

OK, so where is the Korean food, Rick? Well, a walk along Sixth Street is a food lover's dream. Chapman Plaza, built in 1929, was one of the first drive-in markets in U.S. The classic Spanish Revival building is now home to many restaurants and bars. Quarters is a modern take on Korean barbecue; Kang Ho-dong Baekjeong is a loud and smoky hip barbecue place that I like for the scramble egg soufflé incorporated into the grills; plus, Snow Monster has huge ice cream sandwiches and dessert drinks served in giant light bulb glasses!

What is Korean barbecue, you ask? Only the best thing ever. It starts as soon as you sit down with banchan, small plates of side dishes including salads, pickled vegetables, kimchi and soups. You can have as much as you want, and every restaurant has its own selection. Then comes plates of meats to grill in the center of your table. Sometimes they are gas grills, and old-school places like Soot Bull Jeep use charcoal.

As for the meats: Bulgogi is perhaps the most famous. This steak is thinly sliced and marinated with a sweet soy sauce. Some places also have seafood, chicken, pork or duck. There are many all-you-can-eat places as well. Enjoy with a large, ice cold Hite beer to share or Soju liquor (a Korean rice spirit). Most places are open past midnight!

Some of my favorites include: Chosun Galbee on Olympic Boulevard, a Koreatown classic where the staff wears traditional clothing and you can sit inside or outside on the patio, and Park's BBQ on Vermont, which tops most lists of best barbecue spots. (The quality of the beef is the reason.) Other Korean specialties are available at all these restaurants. Try japchae, a stir-fried, clear noodle made from sweet potato. This is always on my table! Also, bibimbap, a rice-type of casserole served in a blazing hot stone bowl that crisps up the bottom layer before you mix it all up.

Soups are another big draw around town, from noodle shops to the 24-hour diner called BCD Tofu House, famous for its seafood soups filled with clams and served bubbling in a stone bowl. (Most soups are served like this around town.) There are also many Japanese-style places for sushi and ramen. Korean-style fried chicken wings are easy to find. KyoChon has people lining up for its twice-fried that's extra crispy then brushed with sauces like soy garlic, super spicy or the famous honey style. It is that good! (Go between lunch and dinner to grab a seat.)

And now a word on desserts: I've spent a lot of time lately going to K-town for soft serve. On Western, SomiSomi offers flavors like black sesame, green tea, true milk and ube. They're served in a fish-shaped, freshly made waffle cone that can be filled with Nutella, custard or red bean paste. CottonHi is another favorite, with organic soft serve in a cup topped with more than a dozen different flavors of cotton candy – or my usual Mango Cheese Delight. Other ice cream places I like are Bumsan Organic



Milk Bar on Western, and Drips & Swirls on Eighth Avenue. There are also bakeries with light whipped cream cakes, and coffee houses with shaved ice sundaes and dragon's breath (puff cereal in liquid nitrogen).

But K-town isn't just about great food. There are scores of health spas all around too. Wi Spa is open 24 hours for a Korean-style soak, offering wraps, scrubs and even an in-house restaurant. Other folks go to Grand Spa and Hugh Spa. You will be amazed at how affordable these places are compared to what hotels and resorts charge.

Shopping can be fun as well. Koreatown Plaza on Western is a fun place to check out. It's great for housewares and kitchen supplies. Plus, there is a large Korean supermarket to browse. My favorite store is Bodyfriend, a high-end massage chair retailer. I almost bought one – go just to try it out for 30 minutes. I had no idea how great those things have gotten over the years!

I can go on and on about this bustling part of LA that is well worth the adventure. I have only scratched the surface of places to check out. Downtown LA is still experiencing an amazing renaissance, plus I've got to explore the new Chinatown of the San Gabriel Valley. After all, they are just a road trip away! 🌱

Follow Rick Marino's travels on rickmarinotravels.com or on Instagram @rickmarinotravels. You can also write to him with questions at rickmarino@att.net.