

A STAGGERING FIND

WOO LAE OAK, IS the classiest Korean restaurant in town. It's also the best, albeit not altogether authentic, which makes it the most singular and dramatic restaurant of its kind.

Restaurant Report

The streamlined, brick-walled dining room is titanic in length and largely faces a bustling open kitchen from an infinite line of chic brown banquettes and granite tables fitted with cooking grills. Not surprisingly, this venue is generally packed with casually dressed animated yuppies, young professionals, trendies and hipsters, a neat trick in

these highly uncertain days of restaurant madness. Subdued lighting complemented by spots over each table give the restaurant a neat, sophisticated, contemporary demeanor. Private dining rooms can serve twenty to sixty guests.

While waiting for food, have the bartender toil over the elaborate arrangements that go into making his house special cocktail Chanjinisulro Sojo, a tall, stylish, skillful mix of distilled rice, barley, sweet potato and neutral spirits.

Appetizers include exquisitely fresh sashimi delivered on a magnificently huge, thick slab of rock ice that has no equal anywhere for sheer show-



manship or mouth watering succulence. Dungeness crab and leek wrapped in diminutive spinach crepes are deftly seasoned and sensitively cooked.

Fans of eel looking for a melt-in-the-mouth experience, must sample the broiled version prepared here in sweet soy and served atop a scorching hot stone. For traditionalists, go for the jumbo shrimp and vegetable tempura enfolded in the flakiest batter and proudly standing tall on the plate. Vegetable soup comes in an eye-popping flaming silver bowl offering a wonderful aroma and spicy, slightly tart taste—a must.

A major player among entrees is the flaming table

grill barbecue. Unless you are an aficionado of raw beef tongue grilled tableside (we found it exasperatingly chewy), it should be bypassed in favor of everything else: tender juicy slices of filet mignon, sweet firm shrimp, shitake mushrooms, boneless duck, and cholesterol free ostrich, to mention just a few choices. The barbecue can be administered by your server or you may opt to grill on your own.

Seafood items are extremely fresh and carefully prepared. Black cod simmered in a sweet spicy garlic soy reduction is irresistible, as is soul-satisfying scallop, shrimp and shitake mushrooms sautéed in a

(Landwehr con't. on pg?)

(Landwehr con't. from pg?)
spicy sauce, and the hands down winning dish of freshly cooked, cut up lobster supported by crisp asparagus. Or try the flash fried mixed seafood imparting rich, deep flavors.

Choices from the pastry chef include sensationally good, silky textured creme caramel embroidered with sweet, snow white meringue and crystallized ginger, the specialty of the house and certainly worth sampling. An apple pie--a really glorious interpretation--lifts your spirits with its incredible fresh-

ness, flavor and super-savvy apple filling. Guests are almost visibly drooling as they sniff the lovely fragrance gently wafting across the table as the unbelievably light Chocolate Desire is set before them, enticingly warm and soft chocolate cake--a study in contrast, the cold richness of vanilla ice cream against the warmth of the cake. The wine list is surprisingly narrow but good.

Woo Lae Oak is often underrated by my peers, possibly because it stands for something in a time when most restaurants

don't. Whether or not its style is to one's liking, no serious eater should miss the opportunity to visit this restaurant.

★★★★ *Woo Lae Oak, 148 Mercer Street, New York. (212) 925-8200. Lunch & dinner daily. Dinner entrees \$10-\$25. Accepts reservations, major credit cards.*

© Sheldon Landwehr 2002

WHAT THE ★★★ MEAN

- 0- Farkackt (Beneath contempt)
- 1- Unremarkable but acceptable
- 2- Good
- 3- Very good
- 4- Outstanding

FOR THE RECORD

Restaurant reviews in this column are in no way paid advertising. Restaurants are selected at Landwehr's sole discretion and praised or panned accordingly. Feedback is welcome. Write Landwehr at 823 11th Ave., NY 10019 or call (212) 956-1882 or check-out his web site @ www.SheldonLandwehr.com; Email Sheldon@Sheldonlandwehr.com.