# Jinseon Korean BBQ Restaurant, Coventry: ‘Unalloyed enthusiasm’ – restaurant review

Release your inner cave-dweller at this great Korean barbecue diner

[**Jinseon Korean BBQ Restaurant**](https://www.jinseon.co.uk/)**, Unit 5 Priory Place, Fairfax Street, Coventry CV1 5SQ. Small plates £6.55-£12.55, BBQ items £8.95-£11.95, rice and noodle dishes £11.95-£13.55, dessert £6.95, sake and rice wine £9.50 for 125ml**

Modern food preparation technology is to be celebrated: it’s cleaner, more energy efficient and just simpler to use than the old ways. The thing is, it’s not very romantic. No one will ever write emotionally dense prose about the functioning of a 1200-watt convection oven. They might write something full of knowing bathos, but not a sentence to make the heart flutter. Whereas the steel cauldron of glowing coals, brought to our table at Jinseon Korean BBQ Restaurant in Coventry, is the very stuff of legend. By which I mean Norse legend full of vainglorious, blood-smeared men hunkering down by the fire in the night-dark forest clearing, to cook that day’s hunt while telling each other stories of their bravery. As the stocky man dressed in ash-smudged black heaves that cauldron into its resting place, sparks fly and ribbons of white smoke pirouette heavenwards. We feel the heat on our cheeks and our forearms and upon our very cave-dweller souls.

See. Real flames, or man’s red fire as dear King Louie called it in the Jungle Book, just do the thing. It’s rare to see it at the table these days. The last time I came across smouldering coals was at the gloriously mad [Seveni](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2019/apr/07/seveni-bar-and-restaurant-as-boisterous-inside-as-it-looks-outside-review-jay-rayner" \o "), opposite the Imperial War Museum. Before that it was in 2009 at Soot Bull Jeep, a dark cubbyhole of a restaurant famed for being the last BBQ place in LA’s Koreatown to use them. The rest now seem to favour electric hotplates. And yes, I know it’s health and safety gone sane, but still. That said, I do give thanks for the modern, industrial-scale extractor system that dangles down over every table from the high ceiling here at the back. I want to eat my lunch, not be asphyxiated by it.

Jinseon is part of a cluster of Asian restaurants and supermarkets crowded around a modern square opposite the HQ of BBC Coventry and Warwickshire. The existence of these places, serving Chengdu hot pot and the like, is a tribute to a relatively new market created by an influx of students from various parts of Asia; you’ll find them in many, if not all university towns these days. It’s clear that Jinseon is here to serve that customer base with as much unalloyed enthusiasm as possible. The menu begins with various takes on Korean fried chicken, that double-fried wonder doused in enough gochujang-fuelled sauce to paint the entire town centre red.

Attaching morals to food has always troubled me. Sure, you can call me dirty, probably fairly, but a high-stacked burger can no more be dirty than a salad can be clean. The word to describe Korean fried chicken is messy, made more so in the “dirty” offering here, by the addition of melted mozzarella, cheddar cheese and a fistful of jalapenos. Nobody needs the addition of melted cheese to double-fried, highly sauced chicken. But then nobody needs that chicken in the first place. It’s very much in “want” territory. I wanted it.

To go on the grill, we have thin, marinated pieces of beef short rib, sliced through the bone, and similarly buzz-sawed pieces of lamb with cumin, both around £11 for a fair portion. These are not the finest pieces of meat, but once the sugar-rich marinades start to caramelise over the burning coals, who cares? We have a variety of sweet sticky chilli sauces to go with them alongside kimchi and crunchy bowls of iceberg lettuce leaf to wrap them in, if you can be faffed with the admin. As ever, Korean barbecue brings with it an awful lot of admin.

In this case, it also brings a certain amount of work for the kitchen. The wide rim of the steel fitting into which the cauldron fits contains curved metal compartments. A yellow liquid is poured into one from a teapot. It’s beaten egg which, with a little encouragement from our forks, will slowly scramble courtesy of the heat. Another contains sweetcorn kernels with cheese that caramelise. Both are a delightful side show to be picked at compulsively, but I become genuinely anxious about the way they crust the tray. How in God’s name do they get that off? Looks like a boil job to me.

The menu has some intriguing soupy dishes, including Budae Jjigae at £25 for two, described as a “popular Korean-American fusion stew derived after the Korean war”. The main mark of this fusion is the inclusion of spam alongside the tofu, kimchi, ramen noodles and cheese. I don’t fancy spam today, or ever, as it happens. Instead, we have a seafood bibimbap, a furiously hot iron pot full of rice topped with mussels, shrimps and squid. It achieves much of its effect through dollops of sweet chilli sauce, but leave it a while and a slab of the prized scorched rice develops at the bottom that you can fight over. We also have a seafood pajeon, the famed cross between a pancake and an omelette. It has taken us so long to explore the joys of the grill that it has become tepid. We throw pieces of the pajeon over the coals for a few minutes and it crisps up delightfully.

The people behind Jinseon own a café elsewhere in town serving both Korean fried chicken and croffles, which, like the cruffin and the cronut, is a hybrid baked good involving a croissant, in this case shoved into a waffle iron. You get both the requisite flaky lamination and waffle holes to fill with stuff. They are offered here as dessert and strike me as proof of humanity’s unending ability to innovate and embellish, especially when it’s completely unnecessary. I am very much here for the croffle. Ours comes crusted with cinnamon-boosted sugar with a bowl of soft serve ice-cream, caramelised popcorn and a little fruit. Oh, and a ceramic polar bear sitting proud in the middle of the plate. Because, well just because.

I learned about Jinseon from the fine Rugby-based journalist Ellen Manning who blogs at [eatwithellen.com](https://www.eatwithellen.com/). She worried, when I invited her to join me, that it wouldn’t be as good as other Korean restaurants I’ve tried. It really is, in a fully engaging way. Anywhere that can still be bothered with the faff of burning coals is good by me. But also, in truth, we know the best Korean barbecue is probably somewhere in Korea. What matters is that Coventry has this rough wood panel-clad space offering a very good time to anyone up for the joys of cooking their own lunch.