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Korean bakeries cooking in Atlanta

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Kyong Han chats with his son and munches on a sweet roll filled with cream at the White Windmill Bakery on Buford Highway.

He reminisces about Korea, where young people gather at bakeries to see and be seen.

"I met my wife at the bakery," Han recalls. His son's eyebrows arch in surprise. David Han, 31, hasn't heard this story from Dad before.

"People like to gather there before they go to a restaurant," said Han, 60, as he enjoys the peanut-taste of a "Shucream" roll.

In Duluth, Suwanee, Johns Creek and along Buford Highway, fancy Korean bakeries are popping up like Waffle Houses. As metro Atlanta's Korean population increases, so do the stores and services catering to them.

Five years ago, maybe five European-style Korean bakeries operated in metro Atlanta. Now there are about 20 and counting. They serve the estimated 37,000 Koreans here, plus growing numbers of other Asians.

Georgia is home to the nation's third-fastest-growing Asian consumer market. Asian buying power in the state was \$8.1 billion this year, up from \$1.1 billion in 1990, according to statistics from the University of Georgia's Selig Center for Economic Growth.

In metro Atlanta, Asians had \$6.7 billion to spend this year.

That's a lot of dough.

Many of the Korean bakeries tout Germanic and French names: Cafe Mozart, Hansel & Gretel, White Windmill, Tous Les Jours and Crown.

The cuisine is a fusion of European-style breads, cookies and cakes with Korean ingredients, such as red bean paste and sweet rice. There's green tea chiffon cake covered with pistachio nuts and a chocolate mousse creation filled with white cream and a taste of raspberry.

The bakeries follow a style that first took hold in Japan.

"Japan learned from France," said Seong Kim, founder of White Windmill bakery. "Koreans combine French and Japanese styles together and make their own style."

Customer Sung Yoon Ahn, 35, a recent immigrant from Korea, is here with her husband, who is studying for an MBA at Emory. She's not crazy about American food.

"American bread is so sweet and artificial flavor," she said.

Roxane Caspary stops frequently for the pumpkin bread at Bakery Cafe Maum, a new Korean establishment further down Buford Highway.

"I'm glad this is happening," Caspary said of the expansion of Korean bakeries. "I grew up in New York with the neighborhood areas with ethnic foods like Chinatown and Little Italy."

White Windmill was one of the first European-style Korean bakeries in the metro area, starting in the Nukoa Plaza in Duluth, a strip mall with mostly Korean stores.

Then Cafe Mozart Bakery opened. That store began to franchise and now has seven locations. It's opening two more locations near Dallas, Texas.

The Kim family, owners of Cafe Mozart, bakes the bread at its flagship store off Pleasant Hill Road in Duluth, where colorful artwork by daughter Grace Kim, 25, decorates the walls. The bakery has the feel of an art gallery, with high ceilings and stone textures on the walls.

Many Korean customers come at night and stay to socialize, Grace Kim said.

"We have to kick some people out because they don't leave," she said, adding the bakery is open later than Starbucks.

The Korean bakeries have opened near where many Koreans live and shop.

There are a half dozen bakeries along Pleasant Hill Road in Duluth and near the intersection with Peachtree Industrial Boulevard.

"Duluth is becoming a second center for the Korean community," said Sydnic Lim, owner of Bakery Cafe Maum in the Global Forum Shopping Center. She built the shopping center and the bakery with her husband. Lim has already rented space on Steve Reynolds Boulevard to open her second bakery.

Among the most coveted spots for Korean bakeries are near metro Super H-Marts, a large Korean grocery chain that attracts customers from miles around.

Cafe Mozart has a bakery counter inside Super H-Mart on Pleasant Hill Road. White Windmill has a store outside.

Another group of Korean bakeries appeared like pilot fish around the newest Super H-Mart in Johns Creek.

Super H-Mart now has an agreement with a corporate bakery based in Korea — Tours Les Jours — to take the spot inside its Johns Creek and Riverdale locations.

The increase in the number of bakeries in metro Atlanta stems from an evolution in the business model.

Several of the mom-and-pop businesses have evolved into chains. Cafe Mozart and White Windmill franchise the stores and require owners to buy the bread from the flagship store.

Andy Kim, a global consultant with the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce, thinks the market may have reached saturation in Gwinnett County.

"At this moment, if they are just dealing with the Asian market, yes, I would say so," Kim said.

"If they do successful marketing to reach out to mainstream market, there is more opportunity to expand," he added. "They have to diversify their customer base. The Americans, they don't know about the Korean bakeries."

Seong Kim, of White Windmill, says she opened her newest store on Buford Highway to attract a wider audience. It's a light and airy shop with upholstered chairs with modern geometric designs.

"Lots of white people coming, looks like middle age," Kim said through her brother. She's surprised at the diversity of her clientele and leaves out samples for them to try.

The word is trickling out slowly to a larger market.

"Americans, they like our cakes," Cafe Mozart's Grace Kim said. "They're trying to be healthy and are always on a diet. Our cakes are very light. It's more like a kind of spongecake."

Candace Green, 54, visited Cafe Mozart off Pleasant Hill Road last year when she drove from Savannah for her daughter's soccer tournament. She insisted her family drive out from Athens after the Georgia Bulldogs football game one Sunday in October so she could get a fix.

"I remembered the cream bread and the fruit tart," Green said.

The family bought some yogurt cream bread, a chestnut soft cookie and a loaf of wheat bread.

"I wish I lived near this place," Marshall Green, 18, said.

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