

A WORLD OF NOVELTIES



Village North restaurateur Steven Ji applies the final touch — a sprinkling of sesame seeds — to his taro cakes.

Recent UCSD graduate Steven Ji has opened **Village North** to showcase the comfort food cooking of his home in a region of China that borders Russia and North Korea. The Convoy Street venue is an attractive spot with an open kitchen, a small stage and many young patrons intently studying their cell phones while awaiting dinner. Many specialties are utterly novel locally;

and the house-pickled cabbage, which the kitchen stews with pork belly, takes two weeks to ferment. Ji claims that he alone serves it in San Diego. There are a lot of flavors in this dish, as there are in the Northern Pork: lightly battered and fried slices of tenderloin finished with a sticky, moderately sweet sauce. Eggplant in soy sauce packs in many more flavors than you might expect. And for dessert with a

difference, dip fried taro cakes sizzling in hot sugar syrup into ice water to create a crisp, sweet shell. Let these nearly combustible discs cool a bit before eating.

IN THE SAME commercial center is **Hive**, a hip, hopping Korean/Asian restaurant, nightclub and karaoke palace housed in a 22,000-square-foot, former big-box store. The cocktail craze expresses itself with mai tais composed with San Diego's own Malahat Spirits rums, barrel-aged old fashioned poured into square glasses partially occupied by a large ice cube and margaritas spiked with jalapeño-infused tequila. The menu rises to the occasion with \$1 oysters and shrimp cocktails during the 5 to 7 p.m. and 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. happy hours. The classic Korean grilled beef called bulgogi stars in many offerings, including a salad, a flatbread and an elaborate pile of french fries also interspersed with sautéed kimchi, a tomato/bacon sauce, sriracha sauce and spicy mayo.

AFTER A MERE 50 YEARS as North County's best butcher and German market/restaurant, John Haedrich's wonderful **Tip Top Meats** now has an independent neighbor devoted to selling and preparing top-grade seafood. Blessedly near I-5 in Carlsbad, in a space behind Tip Top (be careful where you park), **Top Choice Fish** is the kind of place you'd like in your neighborhood. Both a market and eatery, Top Choice revels in mottos like "Fish in Motion" and "Reel Fish — Done Right." A limited number of tables face retail cases full of carefully displayed fish and shellfish, many kinds of smoked fish, and seafood and other types of salads. At a recent lunch, the majority of guests favored the attractive fish and chips platters: bountiful presentations of beer-battered Alaskan cod filets with freshly cut fries. In San Diego County, clam chowder is essential on a menu like this, and Top Choice's is elegant and tasty; bouillabaisse is an unexpected companion to it. Should