

"The restaurant chef doesn't grill it for customer? What's that about?!"

(Left in the photo) During dinner hours, most of the parked cars belong to Koen's customers. It took seven years to achieve this level of popularity. Although it was closed for two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has now become a thriving restaurant, with 4 to 5 table turns on weekends and around 300 customers. The average spending per customer is between \$30 and \$35. (Right in the photo) A local customer enjoying the "Koen Premium" course. Customers of all backgrounds are now enjoying Asian-style beef. The large platter presentation resembles a sushi assortment, giving diners the feeling of eating steak as if it were sushi — a key factor in Koen's popularity. Koen offers two types of full-course meals: a Japanese-style course and a Korean-style course, both priced at \$85. The Japanese-style course, "Koen Premium," does not include Korean side dishes (banchan), as some white customers are not fond of them. On the other hand, the Korean-style full-course, "KBBQ Feast," comes with banchan. Many Americans associate BBQ with Korean cuisine, and thanks to the recent popularity of Korean movies and K-pop groups like BTS, Korean food is gaining more attention. Just as sushi once served as the gateway to Japanese cuisine, Koen's BBQ may become the entry point to Korean cuisine for residents of Lincoln.

Koen's challenge: Spreading the message that "It's better than steak."

Lincoln is the capital of Nebraska and has a population of 300,000. While major cities have seen a boom in dining out and ethnic cuisine, Lincoln had remained largely unaffected by such trends.

Starting a yakiniku (Japanese BBQ) restaurant in a city like Lincoln, where people tend to be conservative about food, came with constant worries about whether the locals would accept it.

"Some customers assumed that the chef would do the cooking at the restaurant, so even after the meat was brought to their table, they just sat and waited without grilling it themselves." "On Valentine's Day, a young couple sat holding hands over the grill plate for a long time." "I was surprised to see someone place their ordered sake on the grill plate to warm it up like hot sake." In the early days after opening, customers unfamiliar with Japanese-style BBQ often did unexpected things.

Outdoor BBQ is a traditional part of American cuisine. However, when it comes to yakiniku, even though it's still BBQ, the experience is quite different. The confusion stems from the fact that indoor BBQ, like yakiniku, is similar but fundamentally different. The biggest difference is that you grill the meat yourself. The beef comes pre-sliced into small pieces, and because it's thinly sliced, it requires more attention to cook properly. But the upside is that you can enjoy bite-sized pieces of beef while they're still hot. As a result, many customers are delighted, saying, "This tastes better than the steak I usually eat. The flavor and aroma are on another level."

At first, even those who are curious about yakiniku tend to order sushi. It's usually after their second or third visit that they start ordering yakiniku. Even in groups, there are always some who only order sushi. But after watching their friends skillfully grill the



meat, or tasting some yakiniku shared by others at the table, many of them end up becoming fans of yakiniku themselves.

The shift from steak to yakiniku is spreading in the heart of America. The deliciousness of yakiniku has the power to drive that shift.



Photo 1: The owner couple. Brian Choi (right, age 46) and his wife Inez Choi (age 39). Photo 2: Server Dowson Parks (age 23), announcing a customer's birthday inside the restaurant. He has already been working here for four years. "I really enjoy introducing BBQ to the local community. It's such a great feeling when customers get used to grilling for themselves and say, 'This tastes better than steak! That's why I don't want to work at any other restaurant. The tips aren't bad either,'" he adds with a smile. Photo 3: "Short rib" is gaining popularity because it tastes even better than steak, despite looking similar. Since it's grilled directly over the flame by the customer, it can be eaten while still hot. The rich, savory aroma unique to beef is one of the main reasons for its popularity. Photo 4: The Kovar couple celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary. They have already visited Koen four times. Mrs. Sonin Kovar (age 54), who is originally from Brazil, is interested in Japanese culture. She says, "I really appreciate that Koen's meat dishes don't produce smoke. I don't have to worry about smelling like oil afterward."