

Korean Food

Communal Role of Korean Food in History and Tradition

Village Life

Until the 1950s, most Koreans outside of Seoul's city center, lived in villages. Most villages had local yangban (aristocratic) families. There were traders, merchants, and business owners. But the vast majority of Koreans were of the commoner or peasant class.

Yangban (10% of total population in 1905)

The hereditary aristocracy and ruling class, composed of civil and military officials, who held significant power and influence.

Jungin:

A middle class of technical specialists, such as scribes, medical officers, and those in science-related fields.

Sangmin:

Commoners, the largest class, comprising farmers, artisans, fishermen, and merchants.

Cheonmin:

The lowest class, including slaves (nobi), entertainers, laborers, and outcasts.

Village Life



Yangban had their own wells inside their properties. Almost everyone else, got water from common wells. This lasted into the 1970s and 1980s in most parts of South Korea



Sangmin: integral to village life

Commoners, the largest class, comprising farmers, artisans, fishermen, and merchants. Rice was for rich people. Everyone else ate barley or a porridge of different grains. For commoners, white rice was for special occasions or not eaten at all.

The Korean peninsula has four distinct seasons. Food preservation was vital for surviving harsh and bitter cold winters until modern refrigeration became widespread in the 1980s and 1990s. Preserving food through drying, pickling, or fermentation was often a village endeavor. In particular, kimjang in the fall. Kimchi to feed people through the winter. Kimchi, doenjang (fermented soybeans) stew, and rice or barley supplemented with small amounts of dried vegetables, dried anchovies, and dried seafood create a nutritionally complete meal. Almost nothing grows from the ground during Korea's winters.

The foodways of the Royal Court and Yangban are well documented.

The food ways of everyone else was rarely documented until Japanese Occupation (1910-1945). Korean resistance included uplifting the foods and ways of commoners. Spicy napa cabbage kimchi is the iconic kimchi of Korea. However, this type of kimchi started becoming widespread during the turn of the last century. At about the same time, hot red chili peppers also started become more common.

Kimchi is the universe. It's the cosmos. It's life. It's a lesson in lacto fermentation and community. It is typically not possible for a single, nuclear family to make all the kimchi they need for the winter. Extended family, neighbors, and fellow villagers pitch in. It's also a large family affair for urban Koreans and Korean Americans.



Before modern refrigeration

Ancient ice boxes, underground cool storage sheds, cold caves carved into mountain rock, kimchi buried in the ground, and food stored outside during freezing winter temperatures. Some cold storage facilities were communal.



Underground storage can be cooler than above ground, while maintaining a more consistent temperature, which helps with consistent fermentation and preservation.



Koreans are Boozy People

Homemade alcoholic (sool) beverages were very common until Japanese Occupation. There are hundreds of different types of Korean sool. Most of them are made with rice through a process of fermentation. Distilled spirits, the basis of soju, were introduced by Mongolians, who in turn learned it in what is now modern day Syria. Homemade sool continued to be banned by South Korea's military dictators until the country overcame rice shortages in the 1970s and 1980s. As South Korea became a rich country in the 2000s with an excessive surplus of rice, the South Korean government made it easier for small makers to get licenses to make and sell small batch sool. Prior to this, South Korean corporations like Jinro Soju essentially had monopolies on alcohol production and sales.

Fermentation Vessel of Choice, Onggi: Korean Clay Pots



Onggi are still heavily used in the countryside. City dwellers often have smaller ones on their balconies or roof tops. Kimjang (winter kimchi), doenjang (fermented soybean paste), guk gangjang (Korean soy sauce), and gochujang (fermented chili paste) are all traditionally made in onggi. Onggi is porous and “breathes”. This helps in preservation by reducing the chances of spoilage.

Makgeolli is a fermented rice beverage. The fermentation is aided by adding nuruk, a yeast made with wheat. Traditionally, makgeolli is distilled to make soju or spirits for rich people. Soju or spirits are often infused with herbs, fruit, or berries.



In the past, poor people did not throw away the leftover rice after fermentation. They ate it as food. During Japanese Occupation, the Korean War, and a couple of decades post war– S Korea faced food shortages and crisis. In wasn't uncommon for children from poor families to be fed the leftover boozy rice until the Korean War erupted and the entire Peninsula was devastated and destroyed. Yes, Korean people love to drink together.

Food is Medicine

Food and medicine come from the same source. The idea that food is healing, nourishing, and rejuvenating is deeply ingrained in Korean culture and manifests itself daily. Most traditional foods are considered medicine. Health starts with food and there is a tendency to treat all maladies and diseases with food first.



Samgyetang, cornish game hen stuffed with sweet rice in a broth infused with ginseng, medicinal roots, jujubes, and garlic.

Traditional Korean Kitchen: Cooking Together and Eating Together

Chuseok, a harvest moon festival in the fall, exemplifies our culture of cooking together and eating together. Chuseok is not “Korean Thanksgiving.” It falls on the 15th day of the 8th lunar month. Extended families gather for at least three days for a marathon of cooking and eating together. Chuseok dishes are typically labor intensive with expensive ingredients and require a lot of hands. Different kinds of rice cakes and jeon (fritters or pancakes fried in oil); beef dishes (beef is considered a luxury meat); at least three types of namul (vegetable side dishes); japchae (glass noodles with vegetables); guljeolpan (platter of 9 delicacies); and beef soup are common dishes.



Ancestral Rites: The culture of eating together follows us into the afterlife. Foods are offered to ancestors. The setting can be highly formal or casual.

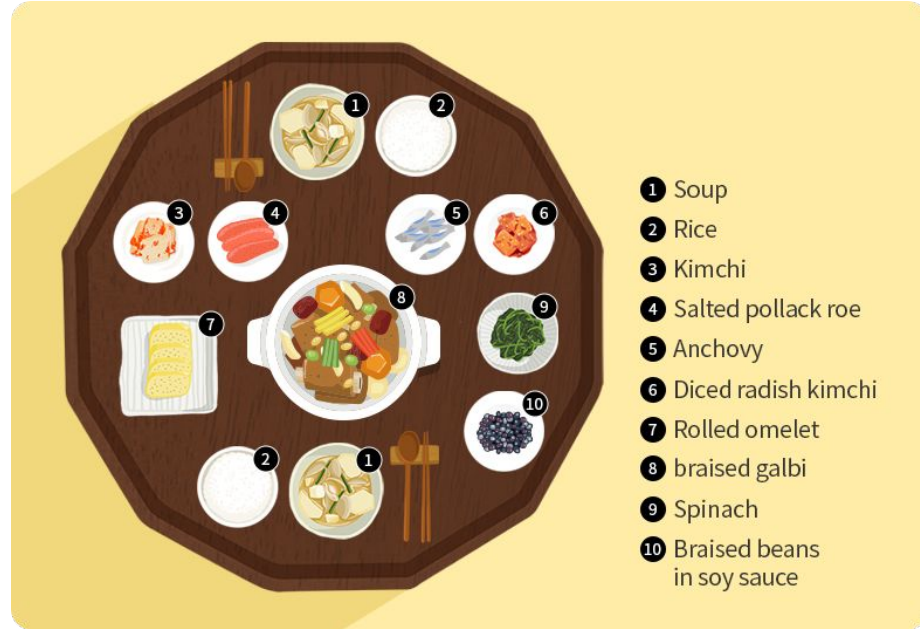
- Jesa (제사): Performed on the anniversary of a person's death, usually by the oldest son. However, changing attitudes have made it acceptable for daughter's to lead this.
- Charye (차례): A simplified version of Jesa, often performed on major holidays like Seollal (Lunar New Year) and Chuseok (Harvest Festival).
- Myoje (묘제): Graveside ceremonies held in the spring or fall.



Bapsang

Bap=rice or food and sang=table. The trifecta is rice, soup/stew, and cabbage kimchi.

Rice is the focal point and the star of the show. A soup or stew is the main side kick and it's served to the left. Banchan, side dishes, are served in front of the rice and soup. Kimchi is the star of side dishes. Side dishes are meant to be eaten with rice. They are not appetizers. Koreans typically eat rice with a spoon. Chopsticks are for side dishes. When side dishes are shared, the rule of thumb is that you take whatever morsel of food that you first touch with your chopsticks and do not fish around for your preferred piece of food.



K-Food Evolution

Food in South Korea has evolved more in the past 50 years than it has in the 500 preceding years. Rapid modernization; the widespread availability and affordability of ingredients; and introduction of western foods all happened during the last 50 years. A surplus and abundance of ingredients and foods happened in the past 10-15 years. SPAM didn't become widely available in South Korea until 1987. In 1988, 77.8% of South Korean households still used charcoal for cooking. Cooking oil and commercially made soy sauce were not affordable until the mid 1990s. Commercial refrigeration was not available on a mass scale until the mid 1990s. Kentucky Fried Chicken influenced what is now known as Korean Fried Chicken, the other KFC. American soldiers didn't teach Koreans how to make fried chicken. What chickens? What flour? What cooking oil? What benevolence?

Korean Fried Chicken, the other KFC



Cultural Context

Core business in traditional Korean diasporic communities are farming or community gardens and food mills



Kim Bang Ah, a Korean food mill, opened in LA in 1967. The owner sold meju, the primary ingredient needed for Korean jang; and gochugaru, the primary spice needed to make napa cabbage kimchi. Typical home gardens grow Korean white radish, chili peppers, zucchini, perilla leaves, and minari (water parsley). Korean immigrants in LA foraged for dandelion greens and nettles in the 1960s-1980s.

Personal Impact

My family moved (immigrated) from Seoul to Los Angeles in 1975. My parents had no choice but to make their own jang (fermented sauces), kimchi, pickles, and salt preserved seafood. When they bought their first house in 1977, the first thing they did was plant perilla leaves, zucchini, and onions. At one point, we celebrated all major Korean and American holidays. Then one day, it all went caput because we decided that it was too much hard work.

Today, I perpetuate traditional Korean foods through my classes and workshops on Korean food; my jang making at home; and taking my children on heritage trips to South Korea.



Cultural Appreciation

Cultural appropriation happens when members of a majority (dominant) group adopt cultural elements of a minority group in an exploitative, disrespectful, or stereotypical way. It also imposes on another person to explain their culture to you, in particular through your lens or framework. This is “othering” by assuming that your understanding of the world is the objective, neutral reality and other cultures that are different must explain these differences to suit your world.

Cultural appreciation is when someone seeks to understand and learn about another culture in an effort to broaden their own perspective. Listen first and listen with your eyes. Unpack your own culture and assumptions. Cultural exchange is reciprocal. People from cultures you appreciate might not want to share in exchange.



Cultural Appreciation Continued

Respecting diversity:

It's meeting people where they're at. It's not cherry picking what you like and ignoring a whole human being and their experiences. Cherry picking is othering, exoticizing, consumeristic, and commodifying.

Breaking stereotypes:

Stereotypes are stagnant (flattening), oversimplified, and reductive. It's assuming that dominant or colonizing forces only influenced a cuisine or culture without extracting from it or exploiting it. Imperial Japan gave Koreans commercial soy sauce! Imperial Japan also extracted or exploited natural resources such as rice from Korea. Rice shortages persisted in South Korea until the early 1980s. The negative impact caused widespread seasonal famines. It impacted traditional Korean sool making culture. Imperial Japan also took culinary and cultural influences from Korea. In particular, yakiniku, bulgogi, and kimchi (called kimuchi in Japanese). American beef teriyaki is a Korean immigrant influence on Japanese American restaurant food. The two countries continue to influence each others foods.

It doesn't have to be complicated:

It's okay to enjoy Korean food without having insights or cultural understanding. However, it is important to be aware that when you're at a Korean restaurant or market, you are in a Korean cultural and linguistic space.

Cultural Appreciation

Moving past Korean BBQ and Kimchi:

The South Korean diet has changed dramatically during the past 10-15 years. As South Korea became a rich country with an abundance or surplus of foods. However, if we look at the traditional Korean diet, it's high in consumption of vegetables, seafood, grains, fermented foods, and pickles. Meat consumption was extremely limited. Traditional poultry of choice was quail. Chicken was consumed more often than pork or beef. A family who could slaughter a pig once a year was considered well off. Beef was for rich people.

Diaspora connections:

Korean communities in the diaspora adapt by recreating village life. Most notably, Korean Americans tend to replicate this in Christian church life. However, it is important to note that Christianity isn't ingrained in Korean culture like Buddhism, Shamanism, and Confucianism are. It's also important to note that this trifecta of beliefs has continued to evolve in South Korea and in the Korean diaspora.



Korean diaspora communities

It's complicated. The Korean American diaspora in Los Angeles is the largest and has been the most impactful on South Korea.

Koreatown LA's influences to South Korea:

-LA Galbi. LA stands for Los Angeles. It doesn't stand for "Lateral Axis" cut. There is no such nomenclature in butchery in any language.

-Japanese American style sushi

-Hot dog meat in gimbap, hot dog banchan, and Japanese style seasoned tofu covered broccoli banchan

-Korean bbq table top grilling set up

LA County and Orange County have several smaller Koreatowns

Koreatown LA is usually the first Koreatown to receive new trends from South Korea

The global Korean diaspora returned to South Korea to introduce Italian dishes, pizza, versions of American fried chicken, Mexican tacos, etc..



Korean BBQ restaurant table setting like this was born in LA's Koreatown

Korean BBQ marinade for LA Galbi

3 ½ lbs of Korean ribs

1. Soak beef in cold water to remove excess blood and impurities. Drain and pat dry.
2. Add ⅓ cup soy sauce, ⅓ cup water, ⅓ cup sugar, and 1 ts ground black pepper, 8 cloves of garlic, and 1 medium sweet onion to a blender and puree.
3. Optional ingredients: Korean pear, mirin, rice syrup, honey, brown sugar, sesame oil, sesame seeds, ginger, or green onions.
4. Secret ingredients: molasses, coffee, cola, or 7-up.
5. Marinate in the refrigerator for at least one hour.
6. Remove excess marinade from rib. In a dry frying pan or grill, cook on each side over medium heat for 3-5 minutes. Increase heat to medium high and cook for an additional 2 minutes on each side.

