

[SPECIAL EDITION] Exploring the Flow of East Asian Food Culture

Korean Cuisine and Food Culture



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The Korean Cuisine Boom

With Japan and Korea jointly hosting the 2002 World Cup, Japan is enjoying a "Korea Boom" with particular focus on the cuisine of Korea. Although neighboring countries sharing a similar lifestyle, comparison of the food cultures of the two countries shows a wide range of differences.

Upon visiting Korea, people are without a doubt impressed by the large number of dishes and large volume of food served from the Korean course menu called *hanjonshik*. While this is a characteristic of the Korean culture, the Japanese point of view wonders, if there is too much food to be eaten, why not decrease the quantity and lower the price? The extravagant Korean course menu adheres to traditional convention by mustering rice, soup, kimchee, *namuru* (seasoned vegetables), *chige* (a stewed dish), *chimu* (a steamed dish), *kui* (a grilled dish), *pokkumu* (a fried dish), *chorimu* (a boiled dish), *chon* (a seared dish), *je* (sashimi or raw fish), *chokkaru* (a salty dish), and more for course meals. The highlight is a large number of trays with a variety of dishes presented. So many dishes are presented that it seems that the legs of the table will break with their weight and the food is rarely all eaten, but the pure lavishness of it all is truly impressive.

Besides the course menu, Korean menus also offer such set options as *beppan* (white rice) sets, *yakiniku* (grilled meat) sets, and tofu (bean curd) sets with a variety of dishes prepared with grilled meats or tofu as their base. These set menus also include so much food that it typically can't all be eaten, and leave the impression of having enjoyed a splendid meal.

The presentation of the dishes has its roots with the nobles and upper classes of the Choson Dynasty. The format of presentation, generally called *sancharimu*, is based upon the number of dishes to be served, with a different name for 3, 5, 7, 9, and 12 separate dishes. During the Choson Dynasty, the social status of a household determined the number of dishes served at meal time from a covered container called a *choppu*. 3 separate dishes was the norm for commoners, although wealthy commoners were permitted to serve up to 9 separate dishes. The serving of 10 dishes or more was reserved for the nobles, while the emperor's daily menu, called *surasan*, consisted of 11 separate dishes.

This large quantity of dishes and the way of presenting them is influenced by the *hanjonshik* tradition. The value placed on laying an extravagant table at mealtime has its roots in Confucianism, which gained a strong influence during the Choson Dynasty.

From a Buddhist Culture to a Confucian Culture

Buddhism first spread to the Korean peninsula in the fourth century. Before Buddhism took hold, Koreans enjoyed eating meat, and livestock was a valuable asset. With the spread of Buddhism, the killing of animals, and therefore the eating of meat, was strictly forbidden. By the second half of the sixth century, Buddhism had become the state religion of the entire Korean peninsula, and the eating of meat was minimal. This near vegetarian diet continued through the first half of the thirteenth century. This food culture was changed



Autumn in Korea...Harvesting and sun-drying red peppers

by the Mongol invasion and lasted for the 130 years of Mongol control.

The meat-eating culture of their new nomadic rulers had a wide impact on the mostly-vegetarian food culture of the followers of Buddha. Taking into account the deliciousness and the health aspects of eating the meat forbidden under Buddhism, the Korean peninsula saw a revival of the food culture

which existed before the introduction of Buddhism. Buddhist mandates against eating meat were destroyed. The roots of the meat-eating food culture deepened even after the 130 or so years of Mongol rule ended.

This food culture was strengthened by the administration of the new Choson Dynasty. Buddhism was rejected and Confucian principles adopted as the pillar of the new government. The Buddhist mandates against eating meat were also discarded by the general population.

With the beginning of the fifteenth century, the Choson Dynasty blossomed as a Confucian culture. However, simply because eating meat was permissible for the public does not mean it was always eaten. Rather, as meat was a valuable asset, it became a high-class food. As a valuable commodity, the wise use of meat in ways in which it would not be wasted was developed. Techniques for utilizing every part of the cow or pig, from head to hoof, were developed for cooking. A wide range of cooking techniques such as boiling, grilling, steaming, drying, pickling, and the serving of raw dishes were also developed. The items to be found in today's yakiniku (grilled meat) restaurants are the accumulation of techniques developed since the Choson Dynasty, and can be found nowhere else. We must realize that the deep influence of the Confucian lifestyle shows its affect on even a single meat dish.



The necessary aging of kimchee (kimchee stocker)

Beverage Culture

With the rise of Confucianism and decline of Buddhism, the custom of drinking tea also diminished. In Korea today, you can drink coffee and all types of teas. While green tea is available, you won't find it as readily as in Japan. Green tea was only recently introduced to Korea. Why is that?

The custom of drinking green tea was introduced with Buddhism from China in the seventh century, and was an indispensable part of Buddhist ceremony. Depending upon the record, it seems that tea plants were first brought to the Korean peninsula by a diplomat and planted in the south on Mt. Chiisan in the year 828. The production of tea began, and a new trend developed. During the Koryo era, all types of tea societies became popular among the royalty, nobles, monks, and so-called upper class. The new "tea ceremony" was developed at Court, and was performed on such occasions as the marriage of princes and princesses. The title of *taban*, or tea master, was created for the person in charge of these tea ceremonies. The use of the word *taban* in reference to tea shops in Korea stems from this tradition.

The tea ceremony didn't stop with Buddhist rituals. In the temples, the monks also incorporated tea into their extravagant entertainments. They developed light snacks, called *taga*, to be served in the areas reserved for drinking tea, or *tajon*, where light meals, called *tashin*, of tea and snacks were offered. Surrounding large temples were tea villages where tea fields with their own supply of water were cultivated, and tea produced. This would all decline, however,

with the fall of Buddhist influence in Korea. The Choson Dynasty made a big push to eliminate Buddhist influence in all aspects of life including government, culture, and the economy.

All aspects of tea cultivation and production made a rapid decline with the seventeenth century and start of the Choson Dynasty with its focus on monks and nobles as a privileged class accustomed to boasting its wealth and prosperity. Today, we see a lifestyle which gave up tea long ago in losing out to the forces of Confucianism.

In recent years we've seen a resurgence of the production of green tea, and portions of society taking an interest in the traditions related to tea, but it cannot yet be said that tea has taken root in Korean society. A variety of teas such as *summyun* (made from burned rice), and teas made from corn, wheat, and barley are used in households for medicinal purposes, but it seems that the negative influence of Confucianism had an effect on even the beverages of Korea.

In Confucianism, the teachings of Confucius and Mencius explained that religion itself is not what is important, but rather importance should be placed on explaining the reasons behind the teachings and the value of respect. A person's life was to be measured in terms of the successful completion of various rites of passage. With many people gathering at the various ceremonies celebrating these rites of passage, the food and drink served was very important. Therefore, mastering the art of cooking was crucial. Since the preparation of the meal for these ceremonies was a cooperative effort, the style of cooking which developed spread widely. It is clear that these Confucian principles introduced in the Choson Dynasty are present even today in Korea's food culture.

With Confucianism placing great value on caring for one's parents and the elderly, respect for such people as teachers, and loyalty to one's master, delicious and nourishing foods were to be served to one's parents and elders before one's self. Courtesy demanded that even if a person didn't have enough food for himself, guests must be served fine food in large quantities. Though somewhat faded, this general spirit continues even today. It is clear in the present food culture of Korea and plainly obvious in the splendid quantity and variety of the Korean course menu. Korean food culture and Confucian culture are deeply intertwined.

Cooking and the Belief that Food and Medicine Are the Same

At the root of Korean cooking is the idea that food has medicinal properties. Koreans recognize medicinal properties in a variety of foods and beverages such as fruits, seasonings and spices, *kochujang*, mineral water and liquors. This strong belief in the positive and negative effects (based on belief in the natural powers of yin and yang, and the five elements of wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) of foods had strong roots even before the introduction and spread of Confucianism. This belief extends from the belief that, as humans are products of nature, it is necessary that we absorb and depend on the blessings of nature. Positive and negative is realized by the workings of the five elements. Within this belief, health is achieved by including natural green-, red-, yellow-, white-, and black-colored (representative of the 5 elements) ingredients in equal amounts in the diet. The expression of these beliefs in cooking can still be seen in the modern Korean lifestyle. A common dish in which the application of these beliefs is obvious is *pipinpapu* or mixed rice. It is often served at yakiniku restaurants, where it is called *korutounpan*, and consists of meat, fish, and vegetables cooked and served on top of rice. It is a dish which clearly displays all five of the elemental colors. In summary, healthy cooking means that with each meal, all gifts of nature should be included.

Another popular dish in Korea is called *kujorupan* (see photo). Known as an imperial dish of the Choson Dynasty, nine separate ingredients are presented. Served from an eight-sided, nine-sectioned serving dish with an eight-sided space in the center where white, crepe-like wrappers are placed. Within each of the other eight sections are placed single ingredients, each either green, red, yellow, or black. This dish is eaten by placing a small amount of each item from the eight surrounding sections on a crepe (made of a thinly-fried wheat mixture) from the center section, and then wrapping up



Kujorupan (an imperial dish)

the crepe to a size small enough to be eaten in one bite. As the number 9 is an auspicious number, this dish is included in the menu for events celebrating happy occasions.

Compared to Japanese cooking, Korean cooking uses many more vegetables, and dishes are prepared in much larger quantity. By using vegetables, it is possible to meet the traditional requirements of including ingredients representative of the five elemental colors. A type of dressing or sauce, known as *namuru*, comes in both a "raw" version and a boiled version. However *namuru* is made, though, it always uses sesame oil as its base. It is thought that the use of sesame oil for dressings and sauces has its roots in the pre-Confucian era of Buddhist influence. As the eating of meat was generally forbidden by Buddhist precepts, sesame oil was widely used to compensate for the nutrients missing in their strict vegetarian diet.

The use of sesame oil is not limited to *namuru*, but is a common ingredient in most Korean dishes today. It is thought that this use of sesame oil has been carried forward from the days of Buddhist influence.

Sesame oil is an important part in the creation of Korea's delicious and healthy cooking. Sesame oil, used as a seasoning, is known as *yanyomu*.

This sort of food culture is prone to argument, but you'll often meet housewives proclaiming "Oh! This dish is so good for you," or "This dish is good for such and such," in regards to this legendary cuisine. Such comments are based not on belief in the theories of the positive and negative and the influence of the five natural elements, rather, they are based on knowledge naturally acquired from parents and other elders. Thus, an actual belief in the powers of yin and yang, and wood, fire, earth, metal, and water has become simply a lifestyle.

A Spoon Culture and a Chopsticks Culture

Spoons and chopsticks are used together on the Korean peninsula. Rice is served with and soups and broths are eaten with a spoon. Chopsticks are used only for eating solid foods. In short, spoons take the leading role with chopsticks playing a supporting role at Korean mealtime. Spoons are placed directly in front of each person at the dining table, while chopsticks are placed a little further away. The meal starts by grasping the spoon, tasting the soup, tasting the watery "juice" from the kimchee (if it is the watery type), and taking a bite of rice. Though this way of eating is completely different than in Japan where only chopsticks are used, quite unexpectedly, most people don't notice the

difference.

A wide range of differences between a spoon culture, which uses spoons as the main utensil, and a chopsticks culture, which utilizes chopsticks as the main utensil, are visible. There is a relationship to the size of serving dishes. When eating rice with a spoon, the bowl or plate does not have to be small enough to hold. While simply supporting the bowl or plate with the left hand, rice is scooped up with the spoon and brought to the mouth. Because of this, it is considered bad table manners to hold dishes while eating.

In Japan, where chopsticks are the main utensil for eating, it is very easy to spill food on the way from the dish to the mouth. Therefore, the dish is held closely to the mouth with the left hand while eating. Since the dish must be light and small enough to hold, the quantity of rice is decreased, making second and third helpings necessary. Until quite recently, the spoon culture of the Korean peninsula used large metal dishes to serve large quantities of food. Since second helpings weren't necessary, polite table manners actually required that some food be left over. With recent improvements in lifestyle, many of the old formalities have disappeared with the dishes becoming smaller, the habit of leaving food uneaten has faded, and asking for a second helping is now permissible. Not unexpectedly, old customs and manners can still be seen among many elderly people.

In comparing Japan's chopsticks culture with Korea's spoon culture, the prevalence of fluid dishes is clear. A wide variety of rice-gruel dishes are available. These gruels are not limited to plain white-rice gruels, but also include those made by including meats, fish, and vegetables. This variety has been expanded because of the use of chopsticks.

One Korean dish, which combines rice and soup is called *kuppa-pu*, though it is not a gruel, and is eaten with a spoon. As the soup is made from a fish stock and includes a variety of vegetables, this single dish is very nutritious. This dish cannot be eaten with chopsticks.



A variety of kimchee dishes are always served at Korean meal time

The dish known as *pipinpapu*, which is a mixed-rice dish, is a model of Korea's spoon culture. For this dish, rice is placed in a large bowl and a variety of ingredients with colors representative of the five natural elements are placed on top. Though the rice and topping are mixed together, they cannot be properly blended using chopsticks. Rather, all ingredients are vigorously mixed using a spoon. As it is not possible to eat this dish with chopsticks, a spoon is, of course, the utensil used.

Another Korean dish, *chige*, is a stew-like dish in which *miso* is used for the soup stock. Known as *tenjanchige* in *yakiniku* restaurants, this is also a common dish in Korean households and cannot be eaten with chopsticks. This dish is enjoyed by thoroughly mixing, serving, and eating with a spoon.

The boiled dish known as *chorimu* is a hearty chowder-like dish which is also eaten with a spoon. Through these examples, it is clear to see the obvious differences in the cuisine of Korea's spoon culture and Japan's chopsticks culture.

Japanese cuisine is often called a beautiful and aesthetic cuisine. Perhaps this is a side-effect of Japan's chopsticks culture.

The firmness, size, and shape of Japanese foods are all requirements based on the use of chopsticks, where the first cut of the knife is conspicuous. These obvious points are applied in the placement of the foods on the serving dishes. Certainly, this is what makes it possible for Japanese cuisine to be a production fit for display. In a spoon culture, foods lacking definite shape are easy to convey from the plate to the mouth. It may, however, be going too far to say that spoon cultures have the characteristic of displaying little concern for the appearance of food.

A Red Pepper and Pickles Culture

A distinct feature of the cooking of the Korean Peninsula is the use of spicy red pepper as seasoning. The model for this is certainly the pickled dish known as kimchee.

The use of red pepper was first recorded in the year 1614 when it was brought from Japan and known as "Japanese pepper." Therefore, it cannot be said that the use of red pepper is an ancient tradition. First thought to be a poison because of the death of some people who drank a mixture of pepper and *shochu* liquor, it was considered dangerous. It took one hundred years for these negative ideas about red pepper to change. The cultivation of red pepper as a crop was first recorded in a 1715 publication, while the first record of the use of red pepper for pickling, as it is used in kimchee, was recorded in 1766.



An explanation of red pepper published in 1614

The introduction of red pepper was a revolution in the pickling process, as well as in the making of kimchee. Red pepper played a large role in broadening the variety of kimchee dishes which previously included salted, *miso*-flavored, and soy sauce-flavored vegetables and water kimchee.

Capsaicin, the component which makes red pepper spicy, acts as a food preservative. Not limited to red pepper, this quality can also be found in other "hot" foods such as Japanese pepper, black pepper, *wasabi*, garlic, mustard, and ginger. Though we tend to think of the use of such foods in cooking as being meant to improve flavor, it is thought that the original purpose was based on the need for a food preservative. Before red pepper was used in kimchee, such spicy ingredients such as Japanese pepper, smartweed and garlic were used in the pickling of vegetables for the purpose of preservation.

Not only were the preservative qualities of red pepper an incentive for its use in vegetable pickling, but the red color also played a large part. The vivid contrast between the color of the red pepper and the greens, blues, and whites of vegetables made the dishes that much more appealing. New variations can also be created by mixing red peppers with garnishes.

Spiciness and saltiness combine to make a good balance. With the use of hot spices, a salty flavor becomes milder. Since spiciness tends to be more noticeable than saltiness, we notice the salty flavor less and the typically simple flavor of pickled dishes broadens into a complex combination of flavors. A decrease in the amount of salt with an increase in the flavor of pickled dishes was made possible by the introduction of red pepper.



An early winter morning... Chinese cabbage to be used for kimchee awaiting shipment

The Developers of Kimchee's Flavor

Another aspect which lends depth to the flavors of kimchee is the variety of salt. Surrounded by the sea on three sides, the cuisine of the Korean peninsula includes a variety of salted fish organs. As a food which is preserved in large quantities, it is often mixed with pickled vegetables. The Capsaicin found in red pepper is thought to be the ingredient which made the combination of vegetable pickles and animal-product pickles possible. Salted fish organs contain fat. Capsaicin, however, prevents those fats from spoiling when the foods are kept for a period of time. Therefore, the inclusion of salted fish organs in pickled dishes adds to the variety of kimchee



Garlic being hung for drying

dishes. Kimchee dishes incorporating seasonings and garnishes began to be added to the previously watery kimchee dishes such as *tonchimi* and *murukimuchee*. With the process of removing the water from vegetables with salt and pickling with spices, the Chinese cabbage kimchee that we see so often today was able to make its debut. The application of seasonings such as powdered red pepper, garlic, salted fish organs, and minced fruits between the large leaves began at the same time as the standard Chinese cabbage kimchee was developed.



A group of housewives washing Chinese cabbage for use in kimchee

This new process had a dramatic effect on the way kimchee was made as well as its flavor. Previously, with only salt and a small amount of seasonings used, the chief flavor was salty, slightly spicy, and with the acidic taste of fermentation. It was a very simple flavor. The addition of strong spices increased the flavor.

The amino acids which break down the proteins in salted fish organs help to bring out a variety of flavors in pickled vegetables. Depending on the garnishes and seasonings used, and the way it is made, there is now great variety in the flavors of kimchee. A lot of planning has gone into the development of such variety in kimchee dishes.

One type of kimchee developed since the introduction of red pepper is called *kattougi*. This version is made with large cubes of daikon radish. The white of the daikon radish contrasting with the vivid red of the pepper is very beautiful. The dish was included in the imperial menu, and it is said that this "instant" kimchee was developed by a court lady who wanted to gain favor with the emperor. It is possible that this version was developed more for its appearance than its flavor. These days, salted fish organs are added and more care is taken with the flavor of the dish.

The Value of Kimchee

Another important seasoning in Korea is garlic. Though garlic is a necessary ingredient in Korean kimchee, it is possible to find many varieties of kimchee in Japan which don't include garlic among their ingredients. It is possible that this is due to the strong aroma of garlic which is very much disliked in Japan. However, in Korea, where kimchee originated, the use of garlic is undeniably linked to both the flavor and value of kimchee.

The sterilizing powers of alicin, a component of garlic, also acts as a natural preservative. Garlic also contains large quantities of vitamin B1, which is considered very healthy. It is no mistake that the addition of garlic increases the value of kimchee. Garlic lends a subtle flavor, providing a different stimulus than red pepper. "Kimchee flavor" is the combination of the flavor and the unique aroma of garlic. To people accustomed to the aroma and stimulus of garlic, kimchee which doesn't

include these factors is not kimchee.

Another value of kimchee is that it is a fermented food. Fermented foods contain a high quantity of lactobacilli. The health benefits of lactobacilli in such foods as yogurt and lactobacilli drinks are well known. Though varying slightly, the high quantity of lactobacilli present in the juices of kimchee allow it to be considered a "health food." Vitamins and minerals which may be lacking naturally in vegetables themselves are supplemented by the fermenting process.

Capsaicin, a natural component of red pepper, is recognized as having the ability to burn fat. By stimulating the stomach, secretions necessary for proper digestion and absorption are increased. This aspect further increases the value of kimchee when it is included as a side dish at mealtime. In short, capsaicin works by increasing endorphins, also known as "pleasure hormones." It helps to relieve stress and induces a general feeling of well-being. A rise in body temperature and sweating are the proof that capsaicin is at work in the body.

Kimchee has made a sudden and dramatic advance into Japan. Consumption in 2001 was 320,000 tons, making it the most popular in the pickled-food industry. Though kimchee has been ranked number one in the consumption among pickled foods since 1996, actual consumption over those five years has increased by 300%. This is proof that not only is kimchee popular among Japanese consumers, but also proof that the high value of adding kimchee to the diet is well recognized. Kimchee, with its incredible value, has long maintained the health aspect of the diet of those living on the Korean peninsula.

With the beginning of the nineteenth century, red pepper-*miso* began to be used in Korea. Previously, *choshi*, or *miso* containing Japanese pepper, was available. Since the substitution of Japanese pepper with red pepper was first recorded in the region known for this *miso* production, the process spread across the peninsula. This is the origin of today's red pepper-*miso*, known as *kochujan*. Used for flavoring in all types of dishes, *kochujan* is an invaluable condiment. It can be said that the use of this spicy and general purpose condiment contributed to the general spiciness of Korean cuisine.

With the establishment of a meat-eating culture came the use of a



Varieties of kimchee crowded together in a market store-front

variety of spices and seasonings, including black pepper. However, as black pepper was an expensive imported commodity that could not be grown privately, red pepper, which was also spicy and could be grown privately, was used as a substitute. Further, as the unripened fruit of the red pepper plant is not spicy, it could also be used as a substitute for other vegetables in the summer. We should understand that though an intertwining of a variety of factors made Korean food the spicy cuisine that it is today, the history of this tradition does not extend so far back. It can be seen that kimchee and *kochujan* are mealtime staples throughout Korea, with the entire family participating in the making of these dishes. The flavor of kimchee and *kochujan* differ with each household. It is not going too far in calling kimchee and *kochujan* representatives of Korea's food culture.