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The K-Food Playbook

A crash course in Korean cooking and culture.



Paulig PRO helps professionals to create flavourful, sustainable and profitable businesses.



Korean food in a nutshell

It's a bit tricky to sum up what defines the Korean cuisine. Because K-food is a lot of things. It's a way of cooking that features everything from hearty and umami-rich to vibrant and acidic. There are loads of treasured classics like bibimbap and bulgogi, but also fun and quirky fusions like noodle-coated corn dogs and rice rolls stuffed with spam. This cuisine is proud but open-minded, traditional but creative. It's basically a giant playground with something for everybody to enjoy.



Bulgogi with Tenderised Beef and Chili-Fried Zucchini



Korean Corn Dogs with Fermented Chili Mayo

Influences

Korean food is clearly influenced by the Mongolian invasion in the 1200s and the Japanese colonization 1910-1945. It also features American influences from the Korean war in the 1950s.

Flavours

The Korean cuisine is famous for its heat, savoury notes and tangible umami. Compared to the neighbouring culinary superpowers China and Japan, generally offers spicier food. The umami taste is usually created by using fermented products, mushrooms and sesame oil.

Health benefits

The traditional K-food is low in animal fat and red meat, but high in vegetables, fibers, legumes, fish and fermented ingredients. This diet has multiple scientifically proven health benefits.

K-FOOD ESSENTIALS

Doenjang Fermented soybean paste, similar to miso.

Gochujang Sticky paste made from fermented red chili.

Ganjang Soy sauce which is relatively light.

Ssamjang Spicy soybean paste mostly used for dipping.

Gochugaru Specific kind of crushed and sundried chili.

Other common seasonings are:

perilla oil, ginger, black pepper, garlic, sesame seeds, sesame oil.

Korean cooking techniques

The traditional Korean cooking techniques are deeply rooted in the country's history and culture. These techniques, combined with the use of diverse ingredients, bring a characteristic mix of simple and complex flavours to the table.

Fermentation

Due to a tricky climate, Koreans once started fermenting grains and vegetables to preserve them. And they still do. Some of the most famous and desired examples are Kimchi, Doenjang and Gochujang.

Grilling

Bulgogi is one of the most traditional Korean dishes. It literally means "fire meat" because it's made by grilling thinly sliced and marinated beef or pork. This technique adds smoky notes to the meat and is the main cooking method at Korean BBQ restaurants.

Steaming

Korean dumplings (mandu) and rice cakes (tteok or tteokbokki) are usually steamed because it's a healthy cooking technique that preserves the natural flavours and nutrients of the food.

Stir-frying

Bokkeum is a Korean stir-fry that generally includes meat, greens and a flavourful sauce. This quick, high-heat cooking method helps you keep the crisp texture of the vegetables while infusing them with the savoury sauce.

Braising

Jorim refers to dishes that are braised in a sauce, typically made with soy sauce, garlic, and other seasonings. This technique allows the ingredients to absorb the flavours of the sauce, creating tender and flavorful dishes.

Simmering

Guk and jjigae are Korean soups and stews that are simmered for a long time to develop rich flavours. Ingredients like seaweed, tofu, and various meats are commonly used in those comforting dishes.



A traditional Korean meal

Just like sushi is categorised after the number of pieces, a traditional Korean meal (bapsang) is named after the number of side dishes (banchan). Those little sides usually accompany rice (bap), some kind of soup-like dish made with broth (guk) and the more or less mandatory kimchi.



The typical Korean table setting includes:

- A bowl of rice (for yourself)
- A bowl of soup (for yourself)
- Several bowls of bite-sized side dishes (to share)
- Chopsticks for side dishes
- A spoon for rice and soup

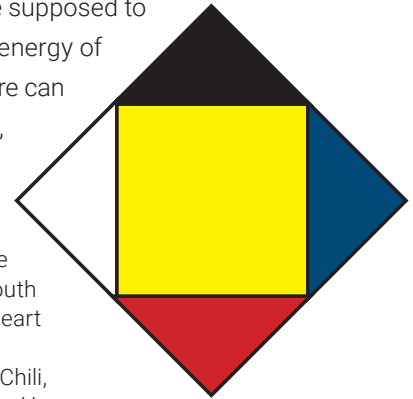
Fun fact!

12 is the number of banchan historically served to the Korean Royal Court. It's known as "surasang".

Food that helps you absorb the energy of the universe

Don't let the fuzzy headline scare you.
This is pretty interesting!

The concept of balance has definitely influenced Korean culture and lifestyle through the years. A clear example is the national flag, which has a ying and yang symbol right in the middle of it. Another example is the traditional colour palette called Obangsaek. It's a model of five colours, each representing to one of the five elements, but also a cardinal direction, a part of the human body and a specific taste. By using these colours in your cooking you are supposed to protect the function of the related body part and absorb the energy of the universe. No matter what you think of this philosophy, it sure can help you create dishes with interesting flavour combinations, high nutritional value and visual appeal.



Black

Element: Water
Direction: North
Body part: Kidney
Taste: Salty
Ingredients: Black rice, black sesame, seaweed

White

Element: Metal
Direction: West
Body part: Lungs
Taste: Spicy
Ingredients: Rice, garlic, potato

Red

Element: Fire
Direction: South
Body part: Heart
Taste: Bitter
Ingredients: Chili, red pepper, red bean

Blue/Green

Element: Wood
Direction: East
Body part: Liver
Taste: Sour
Ingredients: Cucumber, green onion, zucchini

Yellow

Element: Earth
Direction: Center
Body part: Stomach
Taste: Sweet
Ingredients: Soybean, sweet potato, squash



Bibimbap is one of the Korean dishes that incorporate Obangsaek the best.

What to drink with Korean food

Different varieties of **tea** are the most common beverage pairings for Korean dishes. But just like with many other foods, you can't go wrong with a regular **lager beer**. Pairing K-food with wine is harder but far from impossible. In general, acidic and semi-dry **whites**, like American, French or German **Rieslings** break the spicy flavours of the food in a nice way. Korean fish dishes pair well with **Sauvignon Blancs** from New Zealand and Chile, while fruity and full-bodied **Shiraz** and **Zinfandel** wines are perfect for bulgogi. Light **rosés** and fresh **Pinot Noirs** also match the Korean flavours well. Overall, you should avoid tannic wines when serving Korean food because they enhance the spiciness rather than balancing it.

ALSO TRY THE TRADITIONAL BEVERAGES

The Korean cuisine offers a wide range of traditional drinks that are both refreshing and culturally significant.

Makgeolli

Milky, off-white and lightly sparkling rice wine with a slight sweetness. It's traditionally made from rice or wheat mixed with nuruk, which is a Korean fermentation starter.

Soju

Distilled, clear and colourless beverage that's made from rice, wheat, or barley. Soju is the most popular alcoholic drink in Korea, and it's usually consumed straight up.

Bokbunja-ju

Korean fruit wine made from fermented black raspberries. This drink is known for its sweet and smooth taste.

Sikhye

Sweet rice beverage normally served as a dessert. It's made by fermenting rice with malt water.

Sujeonggwa

Spicy and refreshing punch that's served cold and made from dried persimmons, cinnamon and ginger.



Omija-cha

Summer tea made from magnolia berries and known for its unique five flavours: sweet, sour, salty, bitter and pungent.

Insam-cha

Ginseng tea that's usually consumed for its health benefits. Serve either hot or cold.

Oksusu-cha

Roasted corn tea made from corn kernels, corn silk or a bit of both.

Ever heard of Hallyu?

Hallyu is also known as the Korean wave that's been showering the world since the 90s. It's a phenomenon in which the interest and popularity of South Korean culture has boomed massively. This wave, which is now bigger and more powerful than ever before, is driven by K-pop bands like BTS, K-beauty brands like Lagom and K-dramas like Squid Game. But also tech giants like Samsung and Kia.



K-food is smoking hot thanks to the Korean wave

The huge fascination of Korean culture has made K-food smoking hot. Trend scoutings in Los Angeles, New York and London have made it very clear to us that Korean is one of the most popular cuisines there is right now. According to a study by The Bucket List Company, where they gathered positive engagement data from social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok and Reddit, Korean is actually the most popular cuisine in the world.



*Korean Popcorn Chicken
with Fermented Chili Sauce*



*Kimchi Pancakes
with Shrimps*



*KoMex Nachos
with Kimchi and Gochujang Sauce*

한국 음식 맛의 핵심

KEYS TO KOREAN TASTE



Use these to ride the Korean wave.

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