

Seoul Food

Everyone's crazy about the new sensation – Korean food is spicing up the world. **Robert Carmack** reports.

It wasn't so long ago when Korean food was misunderstood and considered too pungent, too sour, too garlicky, just too, too everything.

Nowadays, with fermentation the coolest trend in Western cookery, Korea's Asian perspective of fermented food takes on a world leader-like quality. And it can all be summed up in just two syllables: kimchi.

Korea, and especially its capital Seoul, has become a food destination. Not only that, the craze of Korean eateries has taken all of East Asia by storm, with malls from Thailand to Singapore to Indonesia – all supporting vast, modern Korean restaurant chains – serving pickles, hot pots, wrap-and-roll beef bulgogi cooked on braziers and 'Mongolian' barbecues, ginseng baby spatchcock, bibimbap and panjeon pancakes – these are just some of the more popular offerings. And that's not to mention the country's exquisitely beautiful royal foods. Then there is K-Pop to spin things along, and you have a world-wide phenomenon.

For the uninitiated, kimchi, or kimchee, are pickles of various seasonal guises, and often but not always, chilli hot and fiery – most commonly made of Napa or Chinese cabbage and garlic, but also mustard greens and root vegetables and alliums from radish, daikon and onion, and more. Much more. Today, such fermented ingredients are credited with pro-biotic health benefits for fighting cancer or promoting longevity. Recent research even credits it to lowering cholesterol suggests they can lower cholesterol.

Arguably Korea's national dish, kimchi is also considered the sixth cardinal taste: 'pungency' – to

complement more traditional sweet, salty, sour bitter and hot/spicy categories. By contrast, the Japanese contend the sixth flavour is umami, akin to the soft undertones of msg; while the Chinese contend that soft gelatinous texture warrants its own flavour profile. But then, these countries have been fighting cultural and land battles for centuries, so it's no surprise that each nation's culinary profile diverges uniquely as well.

While the Korean Wave has almost eclipsed Motown on the music front, the rise of Korean victuals seems to have run a parallel, but more recent, course. From 2003, it seems all of Asia and much of the Middle East was enthralled with a lavish court soap opera, *Dae Jang Geum*, translated variously as 'The Cooking', and 'Jewel in the Palace'. In this series, orphaned Jang Geum and a cadre of women cooks present visual masterpieces to the 16th Century Chosun/Joseon dynasty court, plus folkloric naturopathic medical advice. And in the process, the program whetted the appetite of the world's most populated continent. Soon, fashionable and modern Korean restaurant chains started springing up in malls everywhere, ironically, all thanks to this program's portrayal of traditional Korean culture. So it's little surprise that the country's latest new soap, *My Love from The Star* is credited worldwide with elevating Korean crispy fried chicken to competition with Colonel Sanders

So it seems fitting that, like Jang Geum, an American-Korean adopted baby would return to his roots to run that country's leading food-as-culture tour company. O'ngo was founded just a few years ago (2007) by marketer Jia



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MORRISON POLKINGHORNE



Night walking tour.

Choi, and is now run by Daniel Grey. The program's scope varies, but always with a food focus – from on-premises cooking classes, to market 'crawls' where attendees progressively sample street foods around the city. Our first night's crawl started with Mongolian barbecue. The grilled marinated meats, were accompanied with a triptych of drinks more suited to a fraternity initiation than to a varied group of professionals, including on my night, World Bank participants representing four different nationalities and continents. Gogingamrae is made by inserting two small shot glasses into a larger but tight fitting tumbler: the first shot glass is filled with cola, the second atop with fiery soju distilled liquor spirit, and finally beer. The trick is to scull it at once, with fresh cold beer awakening the palate, soju numbing it, and Coke for a sweet finale. The experience was like reliving a drinking party at 18, with the same predictable sensation the morning after. Our group finished with Kkanbu chicken, a famous chilli-fried boneless chook, accompanied with kimchi of course.



Night tour of the market.

Then it was back to flagging a taxi, surprisingly easy in Seoul, and cheap too. We never paid more than \$8-\$10 dollars for cross city jaunts, and an even quicker experience (albeit with confusing transfers) can be had on Seoul's vast subway system. •

Writer's blog:

[@] www.GlobetrottingGourmet.com
and [@] www.Bric-a-Brac.asia



Ginseng Chicken.



Night tour of the market.

TRAVEL FACTS

O'ngo tours and cooking classes range from approx. \$30-\$70, or more for private classes and tours. They run daily and nightly programs. Itinerary and reservations at [@] <http://www.ongofood.com>

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