



**Food for Thought on
Korean Culinary Culture**

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The Republic of Korea has come a long way over the past several decades. Certainly, as someone who has lived through the Japanese occupation and the cold war years, I can say this with utmost confidence. After all, what country on this planet has seen the level of economic growth that we have? No one. I look at today's Korea with immeasurable pride.

However, no country is perfect, and ours still has a number of improvements to make. And, there is much work left for the younger generation of Koreans to do. One such area that needs improvement is Korea's culinary culture, or food.

The popularity of Korean food, unlike those of China and Japan, are still at an intermediate level in terms of international scale.

Fortunately for us, our ancestors have given us a rich culinary tradition. Walk through the streets of Seoul, Ilsan or Bundang, and you will see countless restaurants serving dishes that will pleasure your palate like no other on the face of this planet. Even a simple tender slab of 'samgyeobsal' can be as tantalizing as a creamy piece of foie gras served at a top French restaurant in London or Paris. Meanwhile, legendary 'naengmyeon' and 'gomtang' houses located in tiny alleyways of Seoul offer dishes that are equivalent to cultural treasure. Go out to the countryside, and you will discover hidden culinary gems scattered throughout the country.

Unfortunately, however, Korean food is still a rarity in Western countries. Our cell phones and plasma television sets developed by our technology and our TV shows and movies developed by our directors and actors they have all entered into the households and living rooms of many across East Asia and now even in the United States and Europe! My son grew up in New York and now he lives in London, two of the most worldly cities in the world. And, he always tells me with amazement and pride at how easy it is to find people New Yorkers and Londoners engaging with something from Korea on a daily basis, whether it's a Samsung cell phone, a LG plasma television or the most recent Korean movie that made headlines across the Western world. Simply, Korea is everywhere. We are everywhere.

While such growth in economic and technological spheres has been most impressive, time has come for Koreans to focus on overseas expansion using another one of Korea's untapped strengths: food. It is time we thank our ancestors for developing a rich menu of culinary delights by achieving progressions in the Korean culinary art on the international stage.

We live in an age when we are competing in a variety of areas with our two great power neighbors, Japan and China. In certain areas, such as consumer technology and shipbuilding, we are clearly more advanced than China, a country that had once subjugated Korea. And, a number of our pop stars and actors have overtaken their counterparts from the two countries, even on their home soil. Yet sadly, it is by no means an exaggeration to claim that Korean culinary art is lagging incredibly far behind those of our two neighbors, especially that of Japan.

Certainly, I am a great admirer and advocate of traditional Korean cuisine. However, at the same time,

I would like to taste and savor a different version of Korean food that is a product of creative artistry by the younger generation.

In civilized societies, eating is not simply a process of nutritional intake nor is it satisfaction of hunger. Eating is a cultural experience. The experience of eating Korean food generates sentiments of nostalgia and belonging, and that is a positive thing. After all, we all grew up eating the same dishes. However, if the experience of eating Korean food lacks anything, especially for Koreans, it is the idea of tasting something new and taking a culinary voyage through uncharted territory.

Today's Korea is a society that strives for positive and progressive change, as well as cutting edge technology. While we treasure our past and our millennia old culture, many of us live with the excitement of achieving new goals and discovering new things. Sadly, our food is an incredibly poor reflection of how we are today. As tasty and enjoyable Korean food may be, it is static. One could even say it is too boring it is not exciting enough to be called Korean. We watch TV shows on satellite DMB phones, while few societies in the world, if any, are truly an information society as today's Korea. However, we eat the same food over and over and over again.

Why are people as innovative and creative as ourselves only enjoying food of the past? Why can't we experience something new?

In the past, there have been professional Korean chefs who have tried to research, experiment and create individualized versions of Korean food. However, I have yet to see someone succeed. Fortunately, I have heard that an increasing number of young Koreans are aspiring to be chefs, and this is a very encouraging sign. For Korea desperately needs creative chefs.

For those who aspire to become chefs of Korean food, I would like to advise them to refrain from what I would call adequatism -- a traditional Korean attitude of being satisfied with what is barely good enough. Learn from your mentors or teachers the centuries-old Korean food preparations. Only then, try to come up with your own way of preparing a new Korean dish through constant experiment and research. After all, cooking is a form of art. Chefs must create their own art, and create their own identity.

Certainly, one should refrain from relying on any form of artificial ingredients, such as Monosodium glutamate, or "miwon," and instead experiment with herbs or other natural ingredients to enhance the taste of a dish.

Mind the presentation of the food, especially the look of the dining table. Different kinds of Korean dishes may require different presentations. Yet, it is rather common that a table of Korean food with a myriad of side dishes, or 'banchan,' has little breathing space. Simply, a table of Korean food often looks like Hannam Bridge during rush hour. For those in search of casual dining, this may not be a problem, especially at restaurants serving 'samgyeobsal.' However, for those in search of fine dining, the appearance of a Korean table can be overwhelming. As the English poet John Keats once said, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." Korean dining tables should reflect Keats's words.

Equally important, Korean chefs should refrain from "fusing" Korean food with Western food. Attempts made at so-called "fusion" cuisine have resulted in unimpressive dishes that are often times anything but Korean. Additionally, those with limited creativity may find it easier to mix and match Korean food items with those Western, but Korean food should not be toyed around with as if trying to dress up a Barbie doll.

Instead, consider the case of Ferran Adria. Adria runs the world-renowned restaurant, El Bulli, outside of Barcelona. And, he is so popular with the gourmets all over the world that one has to book a table

a year in advance. Yet, he opens his much sought after restaurant only six months of the year. For the remaining six months, he locks himself in his culinary laboratory. It is little wonder that he is regarded by many culinary connoisseurs, including some of the chauvinistic French food critics, as quite possibly the greatest chef in the world today.

For those aspiring chefs out there, take maximum advantage of your diligence, hard work, imagination and creativity -- and constantly experiment. We have done it in other areas. There is no reason why we can't do it with our food. If Korea has managed to produce world-class scientists, engineers, artists and performers in the past few decades, I see no reason why we cannot produce Korean food of both superior quality and unmatched innovation.

In conclusion, if you are not doing it already, I would like to suggest the Korean Society of Food Culture make efforts to discover and nurture Korea's young and emerging chefs. Do what you need, whether by holding a cooking contest or by surveying restaurants, and select a dozen or so highly gifted young chefs who aren't just talented, but someone who is also a visionary and capable of realizing such vision. Send them overseas to study other tastes and flavors, so that they know how other cuisines have developed and progressed from the old to the new. Show them the world, and expose them to examples. Use the ambitions of the young for their own benefit as well as those of Korean culture.

Most importantly, we live in a time when our failure to make advances in our own culture could see our culture easily taken away by others. A prime example lies in most of the 'kimchi' served in restaurants across Seoul, as well as across the world. Increasingly, most 'kimchi' is made in China. I believe there couldn't be a stronger warning sign for Koreans that we must get our act together.