



GROWING UP IN A KOREAN KITCHEN

—A COOKBOOK

BY LAUREN S. AHN

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Gourds and woven baskets hanging from the ceiling of a village home in Chungmuro.

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The author's mother posing in front of her childhood home in Chungmuro of Jung-gu District in Seoul, South Korea.

To my mother who prunes the roses, waters
the orange tree, and feeds the stray cats
that roam our backyard,

To my mother who makes fresh lemonade for
the gardeners, plumbers, and construction
workers,

To my mother who invites the next door neigh-
bors to home-cooked meals and family barbe-
ques,

To my mother who always offers tea and neatly
sliced fruit to guests— even to those unwel-
comed or unexpected,

To my mother who trips over English conso-
nants and vowels yet manages to keep her
composure,

To my mother who smacks her lips and chews
with her mouth wide open,

To my mother who values eating as tradition—
one that involves hours of light conversations
and hearty laughs with family and friends,
Thank you for teaching me that food tran-
scends differences and that the best way to
bring people together is through a meal.

I've learned that serving others first is a humble
form of resistance in this capitalist society that
values self-interest over community and money
over culture.

You somehow always made sure our plates
were colorful and our stomachs full before
yours.

Your selflessness inspires me to care and love
others deeply and I appreciate the sun and
trees as much as you do.

I love you.

Foreword



The author at her home in Berkeley.

In August, I took a dusty old cookbook from the study room of my friend's co-op. I politely asked my friend Ariel if I could take the book for an undisclosed indeterminate number of days, months, years, etc... so perhaps the word "stole" is more appropriate because I have no intention on returning it.

But the book was practically calling my name. Its cover poked out beside a messy pile of items scattered across the room. Stained tutus, distressed denim, outdated econ textbooks, awkwardly cut fabric, and Halloween costumes made lumpy mountains about the same height of the low lying book shelves. Yet my eyes fixated on the book's cover. In bold white letters, it read **Growing Up in a Korean**

Kitchen— A Cookbook. I flipped through the pages, obviously looking for pictures, got bored, then shoved the book in my backpack where it stayed until the following month when I got off the waitlist of ESPM 155 AC and learned that one of the final projects of the class would be a cultural cookbook.

Frankly, I never expected myself to read the cookbook front to back but I needed a foundation, a starting point I could clearly define before I embarked on this journey. I flipped through the pages first then examined each page carefully, gaining inspiration from the layouts and recipes. But I felt deep disappointment that the author didn't critique American views of Korean foods and how this per-

ception has shaped and restricted so much of what Korean food culture is and what it could be in the US. I took notes and made sure I would add this imperative component to my work.

Writing this book/zine/cookbook—whatever you want to call it (I'd prefer zine due to its informality) — wasn't easy and it took drafts on top of drafts and messing around on InDesign to create what I wanted. Still, I'm not satisfied and it's a working document I'll add on to throughout the years, if I'm not drowning in school work.

I felt mostly frustrated throughout the experience of writing this piece. I couldn't translate certain words from Korean to English and vice versa. I struggled to define food culture and choose recipes that represented Korean culture without feeling guilt or confusion. I had to reflect on my positionality as a Korean womxn born and raised in Seoul but self identified as Korean-American before inserting myself in the context of recent trends in Korean immigration and societal shifts. It pissed me off how much influence the United States has in and on South Korea and I felt conflicted by how Korea has mimicked almost all aspects of American economic and political models in expense of Korean traditions and culture. I thought about my parents and their stubborn but admirable resistance to assimilation and how ridiculously brave they were for deciding to immigrate to the US before 2008 when there'd be an influx of Korean immigration and large Korean communities would form.

This book was emotionally draining to write and it hits heavy topics. Because of this, some readers will be upset and hurt by what I say—which is fine and they have every right to feel and react in whatever way they want.

But before anyone makes judgments, I'd like to be transparent with what my intentions are and what they aren't for this book:

1. *I am first and foremost a member of the Korean-American community but I am also an immigrant. That word has years of history and context that I can't condense into this book. Please don't assume things about my experience and generalize the immigrant experience and make it into a homogenous cliché.*
2. *This is a personal account of what food represents in my life and in no way am I attempting to speak on behalf of the Korean community. I am speaking for myself and on occasion, with permission, for my family.*
3. *I am an honest person, so this is an honest book. I don't sugarcoat my thoughts and opinions, and if you're offended when I assert that capitalism and white supremacy exploit and erase cultures, stop reading.*
4. *Yes, I wrote this for class but I'm not letting anything or anyone restrict me from fully exploring and explaining my own culture. Expect profanity.*

Aside from these main points, I hope what I created and curated expands your perception and understanding of Korean food culture and probs you to question your own. There's too much context that we forget to acknowledge before forming our opinions, so please let this information absorb and simmer. Enjoy.



Debunking Misconceptions of Korean Food Culture



The author's mother featured in the center in Seoul, South Korea in 1966.



The author's grandfather, an affluent Korean businessman, provided generously for his family, often importing luxury goods from the United States.

The “Korean” BBQ Lie

I don't know what I hate more: people who say they love “Korean” food when they're consuming poor quality cuts of meat from the local \$10 All You Can Eat KBBQ or Korean barbecue business owners for co-opting an entire country's food culture and diluting authenticity to cater to an American palette.

Don't get me wrong. I have nothing against Korean barbecues. In fact, they've been an integral part of my upbringing and I long for the days when my family and I'd bicker about their preparation— Who should we invite? What meats should we buy? Who's watching the fire? Who's helping mom clean and slice vegetables? Why is dad still watching TV?

The first time I experienced an earthquake in America was during a family barbecue. The first time I'd ever had to evacuate my house was during a family barbecue when a newspaper caught on fire and went unnoticed until our dog's blankets were ablaze. I think it's safe to say our family barbecues were lit.

My family is Korean— very Korean. We were all born in Korea and proudly boast our heritage in one way or the other, though in our respective fashion due to obvious generational and cultural differences. We're Korean, so it's only natural for our family barbecues to be Korean too.

Not to say we don't throw in some “American” foods like sausage or steaks, but nothing compares to eating homemade Korean food the entire family— ok fine, just my mom— labored days to prepare and make.

In addition to her many talents like painting, gardening, fad dieting, and finding sales and coupons, my mother marinates meat better than any Michelin-star chef. She brings a village of folks together through our backyard barbecues and manages to host a



The author is dressed in a red hanbok, traditional Korean dress, along side her twin brother during their doljanchi, one year celebration. The event was hosted at Sam-cheonggak, a venue created and frequented by South Korean President Park Chung-Hee and high ranking government officials.

crowd of ten to fifteen people effortlessly.

She never procrastinates and I wish I'd inherited or at least learned this from her. Three to four days in advance, my mother buys her meats and spends days soaking them—pork belly, chicken breast, eel, intestines—in their own pools of spices and dressings. The day of, my mother steams eggs, fries noodles and vegetables, cuts kimchi, peels fresh fruits for dessert, and plates all the banchan, the assortment of (usually more than six) side dishes that complement the main course, before even taking out the meats from the fridge.

While Korean barbecues at home were bi-monthly affairs, my mother made it a point to remind us that eating too much meat would lead to higher cholesterol, heart problems, and death—like Elvis Presley she'd say, my father's favorite American singer. And of course she was right; my mom was always right.

High meat consumption isn't normal for Koreans and it's a fairly recent dietary shift. The Korean Peninsula is a mountainous region where plants thrive, but access to meat, especially beef, is and has always been rare and difficult.¹ Unlike the United States, Korea lacks an abundance of grazing land so there isn't much livestock to begin with, nevertheless consume. But what Korea lacks in land meats, they make up with seafood. Like many East Asian countries, Korea thrives on its rich array of fish, shellfish, and sea vegetables. The Korean diet pre-Korean war consisted of rice, banchan, and small to medium size fish roasted, fried, steamed, pickled, or boiled. Red meats and poultry were eaten on celebratory occasions like Chuseok, the national three-day holiday celebrating the harvest on the eighth month of the Lunar New Year, and weddings. Meat was eaten also to flaunt wealth, so it was more common to see red meats on the plates of rich Korean folks. The typical Korean meal, prior to the Korean War and the ensuing Korean diaspora and immigration to the United States, was well balanced and no research data shows an absurd percentage of the Korean population being overweight, obese, or susceptible to illness during this time.²

Then came the war. In a violence and poverty stricken country, many South Koreans struggled to survive and were vulnerable. Americans, taller and larger than the average Korean man and woman, came to the rescue and kickstarted an unfortunate form of white supremacy, still apparent in current Korean and American political, economic, and social relations. Koreans became dependent on Americans for their survival and perpetuated the white savior complex with the occasional nationalist opposing help from the Yankees. But for the most part, Koreans of this generation were enamored by white Americans and idolized American practices as the routes to success.

"After the war, the places that offered the best hope for survival were American military bases. There, one could find charitable gifts of food and clothing, along with work opportunities. The wealth of US bases was stunning compared to the poverty of the typical post-war Korean household. And so my mother grew up with a longing for America that had been carefully cultivated by the social and historical context in which she had been raised. She was dazzled by the images of the u.s. that she saw in the movies and came to associate all things American

1 (Lee and Pemberton, 57-58)

2 (Zaraska, "The unhealthy history of meat and mankind")

with luxury.”³

Many Korean womxn married American soldiers and initiated the chain migration of Koreans into the United States, sponsoring family members and establishing small Korean communities.⁴ The Korean immigrant population grew first in the 1970s-1980s then flourished in 2000 with 29.5% of the current 38 million total Korean immigrants entering the United States during this time.⁵ Small Korean communities formed predominantly in Los Angeles and New York City, but Koreans did not capitalize on their food as Americans could not palate the extremes of the cuisine.

*“If a dish is supposed to be served hot, it’s scalding. If it’s meant to be served fresh, it’s still moving. Stews are served in heavy stone pots that hold the heat; crack an egg on top, and it will poach before your eyes. Cold noodle soups are served in bowls made of actual ice.”*⁶

Instead Koreans turned to operating small businesses like laundromats and convenience stores and those who owned restaurants served meat to appeal to Americans. Thankfully, generations turnover and more people are willing to try new and authentic Korean dishes but still there’s a misconception held by the general population that Korean BBQ is authentic to Korea.

Simply, the rise of Korean BBQ is a result of white hegemony— the West convincing developing countries that industrializing, implementing neoliberalism, and prioritizing monetary gains are of utmost important to relevance and “self-sufficiency” in a global economy. What Americans deemed a well-balanced and healthy diet, Koreans slowly adopted. If Americans were eating 80 kg of meat per capita per year, Koreans aspired to do so.⁷

What became popularized in the United States became popularized in Korea. Plastic surgery in Korea stemmed from western beauty standards imposed by US mass media. Korea ranks fifth in sending the most number of evangelists and sponsoring missionaries, this rise occurring only after missionaries provided free food and aid to poor and sick Koreans during the war, turning Christianity into a “saving grace.”

Only recently have Americans reciprocated interest in Korea, appreciating Korean pop music,— ironically inspired by American pop stars— copying Korean skin care routines, and craving watered down Korean foods.

Korean food culture becomes co-opted when a mediocre, unauthentic idea like Korean BBQ becomes its logo and mainstream representation. What’s demanded by the majority, a non-Korean consumer base, defines modern Korean food culture— one devoid of cultural roots but motivated by capitalism.

So when people say they love Korean food and follow their statement with some dumb shit about Korean BBQ, I’m livid. When people equate Korean barbeque to Korean cuisine, I’m reminded of the history that popularized it and the normalization of assimilation for Korean folks. The integration of meat in the Korean diet through the Korean BBQ market erases traditional Korean diets and constructs an identity molded by non-Koreans as to what Korean food culture is and should be— not what it actually is. And to accommodate popular demand and support their families, Koreans cater to white tongues while they bite their own.

3 (Cho, “Kimchi Blues”).

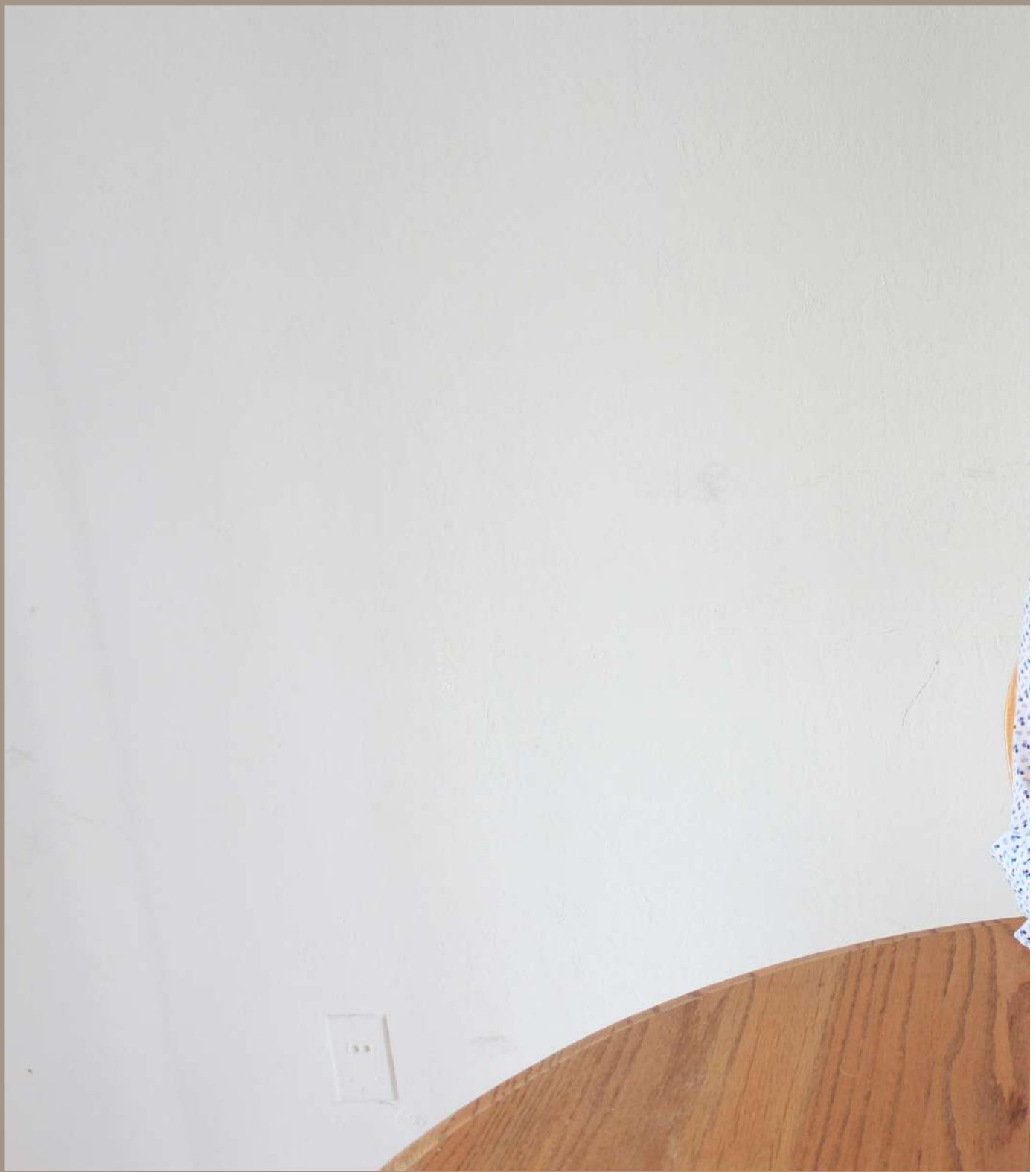
4 (Cho, “Kimchi Blues”).

5 (Batog and Terrazas, “Korean Immigrants in the US”).

6 (Zauner, “Real Life: Love, Loss, and Kimchi”).

7 (Zaraska, “The unhealthy history of meat and mankind”).

Interview



The author called her mother over Facetime for recipes to put in this book. Not surprisingly, she convinced her mother, p
gested meals together. Here are her thoughts on food. Sidenote: Can you believe that she's over half a century years old



pictured in the photo above, to drive from Los Angeles to Berkeley to make the sug-
?

"Why are you talking to me about food? Go study."

An in-person interview with the author's mother about food



The author pictured with her mother and twin brother in 1998.

My mother told me not to reveal her age in this book so the closest thing I can give is historical context. Jung Sun Ahn or Ahn Jung Sun in Korea grew up in the political and economic chaos of a newly separated country. Her parents survived brutal colonization in Japanese-occupied Korea where they were forced to learn and use Japanese and replace their Korean names with Japanese ones. My grandparents also lived through the Korean War and started a family immediately when it ended.

My mother is the third eldest of six— actually seven— but infant and child mortality was common during her time. Born to a wealthy family in Seoul, she lived in a newly constructed two story home with household appliances imported from the United States and Japan. She grew up with chauffeurs and nannies and lived a very privileged life due to her father's business career. During this time, Korea was in the midst of its reconstruction and income inequality was prevalent, but wealth blinded my mother and she lived a struggle-free life in a post-war country. She attended private schools all her life and eventually enrolled in college to study art. Despite living in a very conservative and patriarchal society, my grandparents sent their five daughters and son to college. My mother still doesn't know whether they did this because they were genuinely invested in their children or they wanted to flaunt their wealth.

According to my aunts, my mother was a rebellious child. She wore heavy makeup and dressed in edgy American clothing. So not surprisingly, my mother was the first and only member of her family to immigrate to a foreign country with her American college-educated husband— my dad— in her late 20s.

Fast forward a few decades moving back and forth from Seoul to Los Angeles and I'm born alongside my twin brother in Seoul before we immigrated to the US in 2004.

My mother lived an unconventional lifestyle but growing up, I suffocated under her patriarchal values. She would emphasize unrealistic beauty standards of thinness and paleness. She would scold me if I didn't wear sunscreen or insult me if I gained a pound or two. "Lauren, you can't be fat if you want a handsome and rich husband." "Why are you so loud? You're going to scare the boys away." "Stop eating, you're already fat." Fun fact: I was 120 pounds at 5'7" and my mother still considered me fat."

We would fight and fight and fight and fight until one of us would run off into a room, slamming the door and breaking into tears. But after every fight, my mother would offer a warm meal as an apology and we'd bond over our mutual love for food.

I still don't know how to confront my mother about certain topics and frankly, I'd rather not waste my time with a person as stubborn as I am— the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree! But if there's one thing we share, it's a love for food no one else can relate to.



Jung posing next to her friend's new car in the 1980s.



The author's mother in Hawaii rocking high-waisted shorts.



Jung pictured in her childhood neighborhood of Chungmuro, Seoul— taken five months ago.



Original watercolor portrait painted by the author's mother

What does food mean to you?

"Why is food important to me? Good food guards health and it lets us work to the best of our ability."

What is good food?

"Food that nourishes."

Mom that's too vague. Can you give me some examples?

"Okay ok kimchi, steamed vegetables like spinach, and fish."

Why did you eat kimchi when you were younger?

"Because your grandma always said it was good for me."

Is that why you tell me that?

"Yeah I guess. Kimchi always tasted good to me though."

When you first came to America, how did you make kimchi?

"It was 1984 or 1985? There was kimchi ev-

erywhere at markets. Korean markets were everywhere in LA like Market World."

This was in LA right?

"Yeah Olympic Blvd. There was a Hannam-chaein [chain Korean market]."

Was it expensive?

"It was a lot cheaper than now. The markets would even give out pounds of rice if you purchased \$50 or more."

rubs nose

"WHY ARE YOU RUBBING YOUR NOSE DOWN. YOU HAVE TO PULL YOUR NOSE TO MAKE IT SHARP."

Ok ok calm down mom. Let's just get this over with. Did a lot of Americans eat Korean food?

"I met white people who ate Korean food but KBBQ was always a thing with white people. I've never seen them eat anything else that passes for authentic."

Did you miss anything while you were in the US?

"I missed spicy fish stew and there just wasn't as much fresh food in America which is surprising."

What's different from now and the 1980s?

"Food is a lot less salty and spicy."

Why do you think so?

"I think people started caring more about health so restaurant owners focused on lowering sodium and sugar."

What were your favorite memories of food as a kid?

"I never ate flour or vegetables especially onions till I went to school. I ate rice and roasted seaweed and egg. I was definitely malnourished or something because I was very small. Everyone would bully me when I was younger so I always had to stick with my teachers, literally right next to them, so my nickname was Kangaroo. I hit a growth spurt in fourth or fifth grade once I started eating vegetables but I stopped growing in the seventh grade. Grandma would make this bread I loved. She'd mix rice malt and flour into a yeast then bake it. I remember

when butter was introduced and we'd eat butter with rice and gochujang, Korean chili paste. Grandma would make a spicy raw crab slaw with this one specific furry round shelled crab and I remember walking down the street and seeing vendors with long sticks with live crabs hanging from them. There'd be a row of ten or so on a stick. I don't remember how much it was exactly but I knew it was expensive because a lot of people couldn't afford it at the time. My mom would steam it and marinate the crabs with soy sauce and make gangjang gaejang [marinated raw crab] and we'd eat this over a hot bowl of rice."

When did you learn to cook?

"I started watching grandma cook in high school so I could make the foods I wanted when I was younger.

The maids weren't there to cook for us but they did the dishes and cleaned, so if I wanted food, I'd have to make it myself, but I mostly learned to cook when I got married."

Then why'd you try to teach me how to cook when I was younger? You never taught Matthew!

"I tried to teach Matthew too but he didn't want to learn and neither did you! Matthew knows how to grill meat though. Have you seen how much bulgogi and samgyeopsal [pork belly] the boy eats?."

That's not even a hard thing to do—grilling meat. You literally just put meat on fire. Two steps!

"Yeah but your father still doesn't know how to do it!"

deep sigh

"We both know he's 'special'."

Ok back to this mom. How is food different in Korea?

"Everything is just fresher in Korea. Yes there's more supermarkets now but there's still a lot of street vendors and local markets. There's community. We don't have set prices on foods at the shijangs [open-air markets] so we barter and get deals based on how long we've known the vendors. I remember when I was younger, Grandma would make

Grandpa juice every morning. We could have bought a blender but we preferred using gangpan [manual plastic or wooder grinder pictured to the left] because we thought it'd preserve more of the nutrients and retain the fruit fibers. We shopped seasonal-

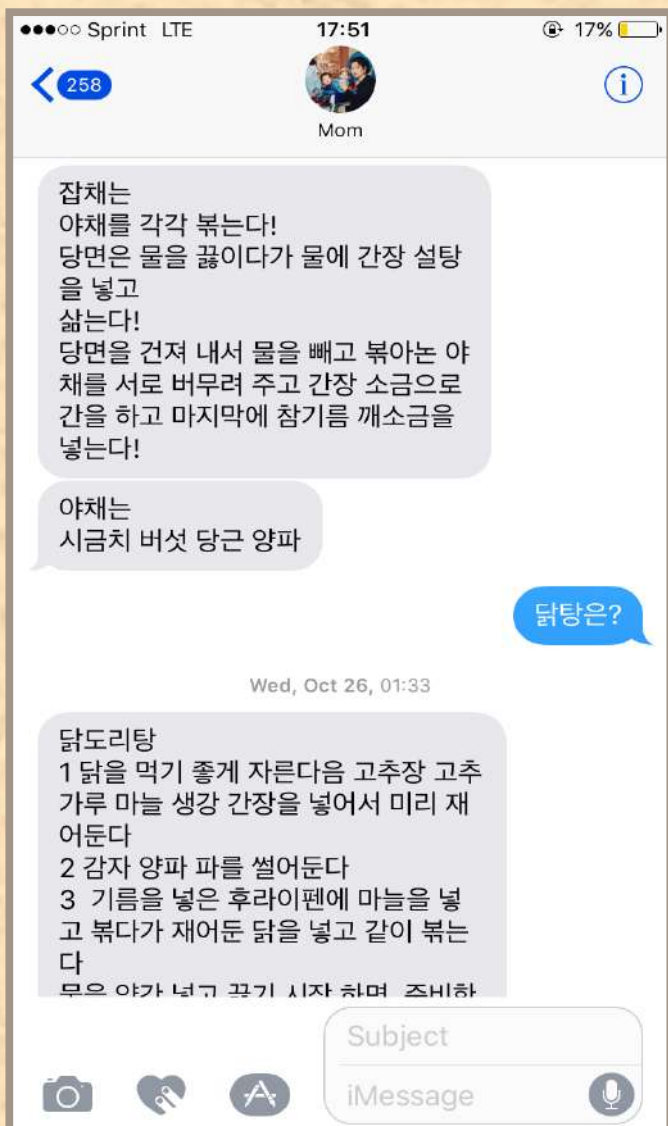


ly so the juices varied every two or three months: grapes in the fall, apples and tangerines in the winter, strawberries in spring, and watermelons and peaches in the summer. I grew up with good fresh foods so it's nostalgic and habit for me to eat them. That's why I spend so much time watering our orange and lemons trees! The foods I liked in my childhood I still love like eel and fresh fruits and vegetables. I noticed that people who don't grow up in food secure places don't experience these luxuries at a younger age so they don't enjoy these foods as much when they're older. It's virtually become habit for me to eat good healthy food. By the way, Julie's mom [childhood friend and neighbor] sick so I made her dumpplings and mulkimchi ["water" kimchi— not as spicy as regular napa kimchi]. I hope she'll feel better after she eats some homemade food."

An informal recipe



Cooking isn't an exact science. Most people learn to cook through observation and trial and error rather than following recipes. My mother learned to cook her favorite meals simply watching her mother cook. When I asked my mom if she could text me some recipes for this cookbook, she simply responded with the ingredients and told me to just throw things into a pot. What she meant by this, or what I'm assuming she meant, is that food should cater to the needs of each person. We all have unique palates and it's not fair to limit one to measurements. So for the following recipes, I listed ingredients and helpful suggestions, indicating the necessary and optional, for the convenience of the reader.



On the left: The author's mother enthusiastically texting vague recipes to the author. The author was very frustrated initially with her responses but then she decided it'd be a more enriching experience if she invited her mother over to her apartment to cook together these Korean dishes along with her twin brother who also attends UC Berkeley. The following is a translation: "Japchae Instructions: Stir fry vegetables! Cook the noodles with sugar and soy sauce! Drain the noodles, add salt, and mix with the vegetables! Drizzle a bit of sesame oil at the end! The vegetables are spinach, mushrooms, carrots, and onions."



Clockwise: Japchae, white rice, chicken stew my mother never gives me the recipe for, and ground beef patties.

Japchae (sweet potato noodles with stir fried vegetables)

any cut of meat (optional)
 mushrooms (8-10 thumb sized mushrooms)
 1-3 garlic cloves (optional if you want more flavor)
 brown sugar (as sweet as you'd like)
 soy sauce (try to limit your sodium)
 sesame oil (a drizzle will do)
 sesame seeds (optional)
 egg (optional)

spinach (a hanful works)
 sweet potato starch noodles (a package is enough for a family)
 green onions or onion
 carrot (cut very thinly)
 ground black pepper (optional)
 salt
 frying pan and pot





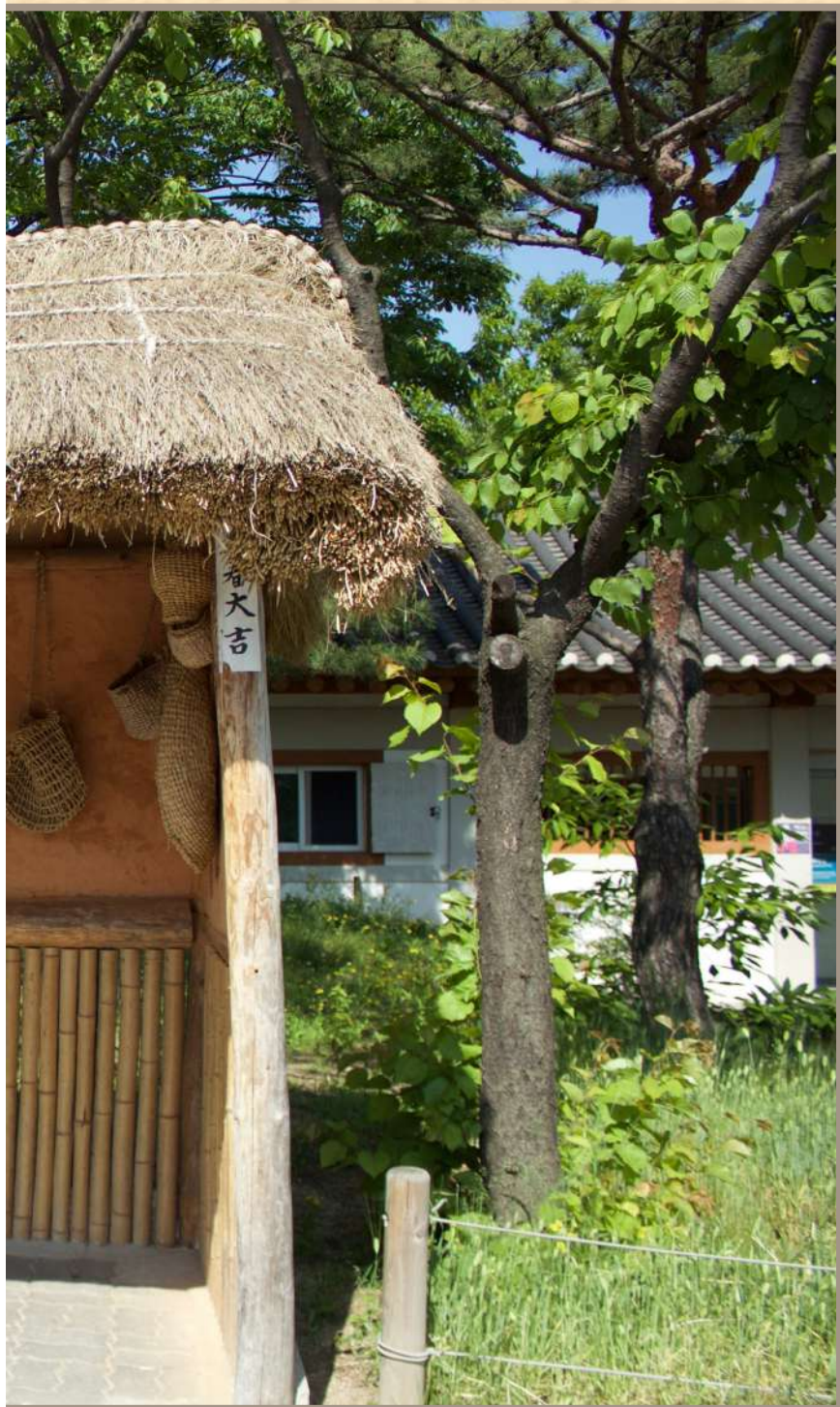
The final product– it doesn't have to look like this!

1. Gather your ingredients and place them arm's distance apart from where you're cooking. Featured in the top left picture are: brown sugar, sesame seeds, salt, sesame oil, and soysauce.
2. Cut all vegetables and toss on a frying on low heat till soft.
3. While waiting for vegetables to soften, boil noodles in frying pan or pot till soft.
4. Drain and put noodles in pan with veggies
5. Toss on medium heat and season accordingly.
6. Mix well and drizzle sesame oil and seeds throughout if desired.
7. Plate.



A traditional shed featured in a Korean Folk Village in Chungmuro. Traditional tools were woven with straw and dried weeds.

Miscellaneous Photos





A photo taken by the author during a visit to Jeju Island in the summer of 2016. She ate Sannakji, live octopus, that day.

Dad,
Mom nourishes you
Quite literally
Because
You still believe only
Womxn should cook.
I wonder what'll happen
When she's gone,
Will you learn then?



The national dog of Korea, the Jindo, captured by the author during her time in Jeju Island.



Infant mortality was common in Korea so Koreans celebrate baek-il which translates literally to a hundred days. It's a celebration of the baby's first hundred days of survival and parents offer fresh fruits and ricecakes to at least a hundred friends or family members for the baby's luck. Here the author is on her baek-il.

Shijangs, local open air markets, offer locally grown products for affordable prices. Due to the informality of these markets, buyers can bargain with sellers and find deals unavailable in supermarkets. However there aren't many regulations or health guidelines to protect buyers and sellers, so people must be extra cautious with the products they handle and purchase. The image depicted on the right, courtesy of Robert W. Pemberton and Nam Sook Lee, illustrate the bulk bins and crates of native raw Korean foods.





Modern technology allows people to make kimchi whenever they want and store it without spoiling. But in traditional Korean customs, kimchi was a comfort food prepared in the winter with family. Kimchi was buried underground in large, well-insulated terracotta pots during the coldest months and left alone to ferment for two to three weeks.



"Please do not kick or throw rocks at the trees. Violators will be removed from the public park."