

hotpots and bibimbap tots

Karen Goa savours kimchi and feasts on fish, Korean-style

Sitting cross-legged on the warm dining room floor, a gaggle of preschoolers in chick-yellow suits 'helps' their grandmothers make rice-and-veggie *bibimbap* for lunch. It's exuberant chaos. The tots squeeze eggs til they spurt yolk, chanting, "Grandma I love you, have good health."

Wielding a machete of my own I nearly de-finger myself peeling a courgette. I'm at least one vegetable behind the grandmothers, who slice raw beef and chop Chinese bellflowers, mushrooms, green bean jelly and carrots with swift and scary precision.

The grandmothers' *bibimbap* lunches are lovingly symmetrical works of art. Mine looks like a dog wagged its tail through it.

Bibimbap-making is one of the activities, along with etiquette classes, learning to play a classical instrument and folk singing, on offer at Saehwagwan, the 'traditional life experience park' in Jeonju, the southwestern city where my travelling companion Liz and I start our food and culture tour of Korea's Jeollabuk and Jeollanam provinces.

Passed down from grandmother to grandchild, mother to daughter, the culture of 'simple is beautiful, fresh is best' underpins Korean cooking traditions. From elegant palace banquets to spartan Buddhist temple fare the basic tenet is the same: food is for health.

Soybean paste, red pepper paste, soy sauce and sesame oil are used to lightly flavour vegetables just pulled from the earth and seafood so lively it's sometimes still wiggling on the plate.

At a nearby market, row upon row of cheerful lady stall-owners compete for 'Most Artistic Market Stall' with their arrangements of carefully tied greens so newly picked I can almost see the chlorophyll still surging through the leaves. The tomatoes are the size of cannonballs. Most fascinating, though, are the buckets of tiny silver fish a-leaping, snails slow-dancing and, especially, small octopi wrestling matches.

This scene springs to mind later at a dinner of silkworm buds, raw tuna and octopus so recently dispatched it's forgotten to lie still. Liz cravenly cries vegetarianism, so it's up to me to save face. The crunchy silkworms – a protein-rich staple during the Korean war – taste vaguely of mud, and the sensation of octopus suckers stuck to my tongue lingers for a long, long time.

The next day we venture out to Mt Maisan 'Horse Ears' Provincial Park past glimmering fields of rice and red peppers bright as flames. At the foot of one of the mountain's two eponymous peaks stands the century-old Tapsa Temple, a collection of 80 or so stone pagodas as pointy as wizard's hats.

The hermit who single-handedly cobbled together the pagodas, so the story goes, subsisted entirely on pine needles. Snacking on a bagful of crisp roast chestnuts hot off the vendor's stall, I can't help thinking the humble pagoda-builder made a monumental sacrifice.

Over the border, Jeollanam province is shaped like a crab: its peninsular 'claws' grapple morsels of islands out of the Yellow Sea. Our local guide Nancy promises us a very special lunch of this seagoing province's fishy bounty - but we have to earn it.

It's worth a plod up the hundred-odd steps and a suck-in-your-stomach squeeze between two house-sized rocks to get to the Hwangilam Hermitage, set high on a cliff overlooking mussel farms and fishing boats, and garlanded with slow-burning camellia trees to protect

it from fire. The hermitage is so peaceful and perfectly positioned it's easy to see why it's one of four Buddhist prayer sanctuaries in Korea.

Along the path down from the hermitage to the village of Impo there are dozens of kimchi stalls offering tastes of this most Korean of foods. Lest we think it's too early in the day to nibble cabbage fermented with salted fish, Nancy reminds us that Koreans eat kimchi with every meal: with fried rice, pancakes, noodles; in soups, porridge and stews. It's not just a flavour sensation (although the zing of red pepper and soy paste on the tongue is, I find, quite addictive) but also a digestive aid. Chinese cabbage kimchi is the star at many of the stalls, but there's also kimchi made from radish, cucumber, turnip and Jeollanam's favourite, leaf mustard greens.

The promised 'special lunch' is a *hanjeongsik*, a many-plated feast of small, exquisitely presented dishes traditionally served in brass bowls to aristocracy and now available to unwary visitors. The busy waitstaff hustle out bowl after bowl of sun-dried, salted or raw fishes, tender conch, squid stuffed with roe or twirled on a skewer, shredded sea cucumber, five kinds of kimchi – the leaf mustard kimchi is zappy and firm to the tooth – and more kinds of steamed greens than I've ever seen on a single table.

After thirty dishes I give up counting. As we're thanking our hosts for such a sumptuous feast, out comes a bubbling hotpot fragrant with prawns, crab and fat shittake mushrooms. The rest was only an appetizer.

Fernbrake, fischer, aralia shoots and other highly prized greens are gathered from the cool slopes of nearby mountains. On a lazy autumn day we drive to Mt Jogye National Park, under Japanese maples glowing gold and crimson. The two temples in this park, Seonam and Songgwang, are painted in meditative greens and blues; monks swathed in burgundy move silently through the courtyards. Above them, persimmons hang like small orange suns from trees bare of leaves.

The monks' credo is 'take only what you can eat', which is good advice when it comes time for our final Korean feast – a *bulgogi* barbeque lunch. In Seoul at the start of the trip we'd eaten this dish, choosing marinated pork and octopus to grill on the hotplate set into our table.

The Jeollanam version features eel. This slippery beast has never been my favourite fish, but folded into a lettuce leaf and garnished with kimchi, garlic slices and wild mountain plants, the eel is as delicate and toothsome as any sea creature I've eaten.

As we stroll back to the car, a group of pre-teens have the last word on Korean food.

When I ask them to say 'cheese' for a photo, they grin and shout, "Kimchi!"

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