

To truly experience the wonder and weirdness of South Korean cuisine you have to go there

SEOUL FOOD

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→ **IT'S AN ODD FEELING** chewing a live, wriggling creature – especially one that doesn't want to be eaten.

I'm sampling sannakji, a South Korean delicacy that involves amputating a tentacle of a live baby octopus, dipping it in sesame oil – so not only is it writhing, it's now also slippery – and trying to swallow it before it blocks my airway.

"You have to chew the tentacles thoroughly because the suction cups can choke you," says my guide, Jenny. "Lots of people die this way each year."

I'm still gagging, but manage to force down a few pieces. After all that effort, and the threat of impending death, it tastes remarkably bland.

But you have to admire Koreans' ability to turn unusual foodstuffs into delicacies. There's silkworm pupae, cow kneecap soup and, of course, the infamous mong-mong tang (dog stew), which is believed to increase stamina. To be fair, we spend a week in Seoul, a city of 25 million that's fast becoming one of Asia's most glittering metropolises, and not once does Fido show up on the menu.

Oddities aside, Korean food is probably best known for kimchi, the 200 or so varieties of salted, fermented

cabbage, radish and cucumber that appear at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and for snacks. It's hard to underestimate the importance of this national dish: Koreans have special fridges to store it, the first Korean astronaut took some into space and there's even a kimchi museum, oddly located in the basement of one of Asia's largest shopping malls, which charts the foodstuff's history from the 7th century to the present day. And in case you haven't already eaten enough pickled veges, there's also a tasting room.

At Kimchi World, we put on gloves and oversized aprons to massage a watery mix of hot pepper powder, ginger, garlic and fish paste into cabbage leaves marinated in so much salt I wonder if Seoul has a sodium mountain it needs to shift by Christmas. It's sacrilege to say, but the fresh kimchi we make tastes so much better than the stuff that's been sitting around for a while, especially when helped down with a glass or two of soju, the distilled rice wine that is Korea's answer to vodka. There's a whole ritual around soju consumption (see over the page) but after a few shots it all gets a bit hazy. Thankfully, no one seems to mind.

South Korea

Koreans are the kings of communal eating and one of the most social affairs is bulgogi, a dish of beef or pork ribs grilled on charcoal at your table. Locals adore the lacerating properties of the pepper sauce and my carnivorous dining companion assures me each mouthful is a little like biting the sun.

I stick to the seafood which, though delicious, is strictly for those who don't want to feel their tongue for the rest of the day.

"Korean food is more about taste than presentation," says Jenny, a fact borne out by bibimbap and tteokbokki, two dishes that are as nice to eat as they are to say.

Translated as 'mixed meal', the former is pretty much a tangle of sliced meat, veges and rice arranged in neat stacks and crowned with an egg yolk. It arrives in a blistering-hot stone bowl that cooks the food as you eat it, giving the rice a crisp, crunchy coating. It soon becomes my new best friend.

It does, however, have stiff competition from tteokbokki, glutinous tubular rice cakes submerged in a spicy orange-coloured sauce. They taste so much better than they sound and are, in fact, the hot chips of Seoul, sold at stalls all over the capital. There's even a neighbourhood dedicated to them, Tteokbokki Town in Sindang, featuring row upon row of tiny restaurants serving their own take on this comfort food. Some come with beef or sausage, others with dumplings or noodles. The one constant is the toe-curlingly hot sauce.

We get to grips – kind of – with what goes into all this amazing food, at Suwon's Jidong market, where lotus flower and burdock roots nudge rows of green and white cabbages, radishes as big as my handbag and items I'm unable to identify. It gets even more interesting at the fish market next door where stingrays, abalone (sea snail) and bizarre sea creatures that look like the work of the devil, and smell almost as bad, are scooped up by locals and restaurateurs with equal enthusiasm.



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The right way to drink soju

→ NEVER FILL YOUR OWN GLASS.

Tradition dictates someone else at the table should fill it for you (but only when your glass is completely empty). → **USE TWO HANDS TO OFFER AND ACCEPT SOJU**, to demonstrate respect. When receiving a drink, rest the glass in your left palm and hold it with your right hand, perhaps bowing your head a little to indicate additional respect to the server. → **TO POUR A DRINK FOR OTHERS**, hold the bottle in your right hand, with your left hand touching your right forearm. → **"GUN BAE" MEANS 'ONE SHOT'** – if someone says this, you have to down your soju in a single gulp.

In this 24-hour city that runs on kimchi and K-pop, the best place for a time-out is a traditional tea house. We sit cross-legged at Suyeon Sanbang, on the slopes of Mt Namsan, and sip apricot, quince and treacly thick jujube (date) tea which is supposed to help everything from diabetes to tooth decay. It is, much like Seoul itself, an unexpected delight. ●