



Korean Food in the United States

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When most Americans think about Korean food, they usually think of kimchi; and other equally mysterious foods that are difficult to pronounce and spicy. They may have consumed some Korean food when they visited a major metropolis, usually New York or LA in the Korean section of the city. Many of these restaurants are open late, are inexpensive and cater to the late night dining crowd. For the most part this is far from the real essence of Korean cuisine. Once you taste traditional well prepared items your view should change, mine did in a big way.

Unlike the typical American diet the Korean diet is quite varied, flavorful and nutrition balanced. It's just plain good for you. As you all know it is comprised of many fermented foods, vegetables and grains, broths, soups, and of course rice. Kimchi and doenjang paste made of soybeans are the most well known of traditional fermented items, and today many western dieticians are promoting their disease-prevention effects. The Korean meal is almost always accompanied by a bowl of hot soup or stew, and the classic meal contains a variety of vegetables combined into many side dishes. This number can be as little as 3 to as many as 12. Korean foods are rarely deep-fried; they are usually boiled or blanched, broiled, stir-fried, steamed, or pan-seared with vegetable oil, and rarely have salt added. The cooking techniques are basic and simple; however the difficulty comes from understanding the traditional flavor profile combinations and securing the freshest ingredients. Flavoring the food for its delicate balance takes some practice, and there is no substitute for the traditional spices. Once you understand the taste profile balance a new world of flavor opens up. This takes practice and could take a life time to master.

The question thus becomes with all of these positive benefits, why is Korean so difficult to find in the United States and many times when located, it does not resemble what is found in Korea ?

Korean food is rooted in the culture and geography and reflects many aspects of the country and its history. Korea is a peninsula with a climate that similar to central region United States, with cold winters, warm summers and moderate autumns. It has the best of both worlds, considering it has abundant seas sounding it as well as mountainous regions that product distinct micro climates for growing many diverse and favorable vegetables and plants. For the most part Korean cuisine is seafood and especially rice. Aquatic species from Yellow Sea differs from those of the Eastern Sea (Sea of Japan), and that too adds to the food diversity and selection. Another good thing. Of note is seaweed, an item that is used in many ways and has been promoted as a health maintaining element for 100's of years. Dried fish, meats and vegetables are the main element of the Korean diet and the way these items are prepared and flavored make Korean food unique to all other Asian cuisines.

Why is Korean cuisine is not well known in the US ?

The Chosŏn Dynasty 1392 – 1910

Japan–Korea Annexation Treaty
The Korean War of June 25, 1950 to July 27, 1953
Popularity of Italian food
The Fast Food Revolution
The Korean personality

Whis is it now better known today than any other time in the past?

The 1988 Summer Olympics, held in 1988 in Seoul, South Korea
US military presence in the country
The wave of health concouscious eating in the US
Korean Immegration and education at US Institutions

What will The future Hold ?

The more popular Asian foods are Sushi / Sashimi, and various interpretations of Chinese cuisines. Korean cuisine, like many Asian regional cuisines tend to have difficult to pronounce names, very different seasoning, and spice profiles (Indian for example), thus making it a challenge for the American dinner.

As long as Americans are timid about new flavors, textures, odd vegetables, unfamiliar cuts of meat and fish served with bones, Korean food will have a difficult time getting into the main stream in the US. However, all is not lost.

Korean food when well prepared using traditional fresh ingredients taste good and is good for you. Fresh and healthy appears to be the new food philosophy in the United States, the food trend of present and the future. The American dinner just needs to look to Korean cuisine and its 5,000 year history to see what the country has known for oh so long. Food when varied, fresh, without many artificial additives, served with a moderate amount of meat, primarily plant based, will keep one strong and healthy their entire life. Its not a new way of eating, its old, it just needs to be recognized.

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