

Forget kimchi and bibimbap, Seoul's best export is a probiotic liquor – but don't expect it to taste the same outside South Korea

Despite the increasing international availability of Korean food and drink, there is one traditional product best sampled when visiting **South Korea** – makgeolli. With significant amounts of lactobacilli, or lactic acid bacteria, the milky opaque liquor is probiotic, which means it's good for digestion and bolstering the immune system. But the same fermentation process that makes makgeolli rich in amino acids and vitamins also means the traditional drink doesn't travel well without pasteurisation. It's at its best when consumed fresh, a week or two after being brewed.

“Fresh makgeolli is full of probiotics, so in a lot of ways it can be compared to yoghurt in health effects,” said Shin Kim, chef and founder of New York City-based Banchan Story, which leads traditional Korean cooking classes and demos. “But it's definitely more fun to drink. It is a living food that continues its fermentation throughout its short shelf life.”



“There are different kinds of nuruk,” said Kim Kwang Moo, makgeolli brewer and owner of Seoul's Jeonju Jeontong Makgeolli Bar. “Rice nuruk, flour nuruk and mung bean nuruk. Nuruk determines makgeolli's taste and smell.”

For centuries makgeolli was brewed at home but it fell out of favour in the 1970s when South Koreans began to prefer imported wine and other liquors. Recently, the vitamin-rich brew has enjoyed a revival, partly because of the health benefits, partly because of the low alcohol content and partly due to a renewed appreciation of South Korea's culinary cultural traditions.

“Korean alcohol has faced a lot of challenges over the past century and is still often considered a low-quality beverage,” said Mellor. “However, we are seeing year by year more small batch artisan producers who are using better quality ingredients, longer fermentation times, and refusing to use artificial sweeteners.”



Seoul's best fresh brew bars

Neurin Maeul

Seoul, Jung-gu, Myeongdong, Eulji-ro 5-gil, 26

Baesangmyeon Brewery's makgeolli bar, Neurin Maeul, serves the traditional drink in a modern interior with high ceilings, exposed cement walls and tall stainless steel brewing pots that are installed in the middle of the bar. The bar's award-winning makgeolli is made from rice, water and yeast in small batches to preserve the taste and smell. Based on its maturity, the makgeolli is categorised by seasons.