

THE TASTE OF HANGUK

The office lights had dimmed long before they left, the cityscape outside glittering with the after-hours buzz of Seoul. After a gruelling week of meetings, we finally arrived at a Korean barbecue bar nestled in a bustling district. The moment we stepped through the door, the atmosphere transformed into something warm and inviting, a sanctuary from the chaos of the workweek.

The bar was alive with the sounds of sizzling meat and lively chatter. Low wooden tables, each equipped with a built-in grill, created an intimate and communal setting. As we settled around one of these tables, the scent of grilling pork belly and garlic filled the air, mingling with the aromatic tang of freshly brewed soju.

Our Korean colleague, Jihoon, greeted us with a broad smile and a friendly wave. “Welcome to Korean barbecue,” he said, his voice brimming with enthusiasm. “You’ll love this!”

Jihoon and his wife, Hana, guided us through the process. They expertly placed strips of marinated pork belly onto the grill, their deft movements showcasing years of practice. Hana filled our glasses with soju, the clear, smooth liquor that seemed to be an integral part of every corner of Korea. As the evening progressed, the table was laden with banchan—small dishes of kimchi, pickled radishes, and tangy fermented beansprouts. The centrepiece, though, was the bubbling pot of ramen, its steam rising like a welcoming embrace.

I watched, mesmerized, as the conversation flowed in rapid Korean, punctuated by laughter and occasional English phrases to include us in their camaraderie. Jihoon and Hana spoke animatedly about their favourite spots in Seoul, their voices overlapping in a symphony of familiar accents. The warmth of their hospitality was palpable, their joy in sharing their culture evident.

The first time I picked up Korean chopsticks was a revelation. The metal utensils felt unfamiliar in my hands, their sleek, flat design a stark contrast to the clunky wooden ones I was used to. Each movement required a delicate precision, and I struggled initially, but the satisfaction of finally mastering them was a small victory in itself. I could almost taste the effort of blending in with this new, vibrant culture.

At that moment, Jihoon nudged a plate towards me. “Try this,” he urged, placing a steaming piece of grilled pork belly on a lettuce leaf and adding a dollop of ssamjang.

I hesitated. I had never been fond of grilled pork wrapped in lettuce, and the idea of eating it was less than appealing. Still, my colleagues' eager eyes and insistence were difficult to ignore. With a reluctant sigh, I took a bite, the Flavors hitting my mouth in a surprising burst.

The richness of the pork combined with the freshness of the lettuce and the spiciness of the ssamjang was an intense experience. The initial taste was more than I'd expected—it was bold and vibrant, an explosion of flavour that was hard to ignore. Despite this, the combination still didn't sit well with me. The texture and Flavors, while exciting, clashed with my own preferences.

As I chewed through the wrap, I forced a smile and tried to appreciate the experience, but the reality was, I still hated it. The Flavors were too intense, the texture not to my liking, and the dish remained far from enjoyable.

But in that moment, surrounded by laughter and camaraderie, it wasn't just about the food. It was about embracing the experience, pushing past my culinary boundaries, and sharing in the cultural ritual that made the evening memorable. The discomfort of the dish was overshadowed by the joy of being fully immersed in this new world—a world I had dreamt of exploring for so long.

My heart raced with excitement as I glanced around the restaurant, my mind wandering to the reason for my visit. This was the moment I had dreamed of for so long—a chance to experience Korea firsthand, to soak in its rich culture, and to finally see the vibrant cityscape I had longed to explore. But more than that, I was waiting for a fleeting chance to catch a glimpse of BTS, the idols whose music had been the soundtrack to my dreams.

As the evening continued, surrounded by laughter, food, and the spirit of togetherness, it all felt surreal. Here I was, in the heart of Seoul, living out a dream that had once seemed distant and elusive. Despite my dislike for the grilled pork wrapped in lettuce, I cherished this moment of cultural connection and adventure. The simple joy of Korean barbecue was not just a meal but a culmination of years of anticipation and hope. And as I looked around at the smiling faces, I knew this was a moment I would cherish forever, a true testament to the beauty of experiencing a dream come to life.

I came here for my research work, and it's been 8 months since I arrived. I will not say staying in Korea is as easy as watching k dramas or fantasizing over idols, it was hell of a ride - full of ups and downs but incredibly rewarding, point to mention * it's rewarding only when we are fully determined.

My aversion to Korean food particularly pork, red meat, and dishes with live ingredients, I found it challenging to adjust in Korea. My diet typically consists of white meats like chicken, so the pervasive aroma of grilled pork and beef was difficult for me accept. The constant scent of these aromatic meats, so integral to the Korean dining experience, was a tough adjustment, making each meal a test of my comfort zone.

But apart from some dishes which I dislike there are some dishes that are simply the best of the best. Kimchi stew, bibimbap, chimaek, gimbap, tteokbokki, samgyetang, korean dumplings, ramen. "Oh my god those are my absolute favourite dishes, who would resist chimaek? It's a perfect weekend go-to after a long, stressful week at work."

"Haha, I'm literally craving chimaek right now, I think I'll order some right away".