**Food in South Korea**

****The one thing we hear most from our alumni after they leave Korea is how much they miss Korean food and the one thing we hear most of our new teachers say is how much they think Korean food stinks.

Korean food is cheap, healthy and for most teachers, delicious. There is a great variety as well for those willing to try different things.

A typical meal in a Korean restaurant will cost about $5.00 USD. Not too shabby.

**Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner in Korea**

My breakfast is eaten at home, though I always get a vending machine instant coffee with the bits of change in my pocket.   
  
For those more in tune with breakfast, there are loads of breakfast cereals and toast and spread and fruit selections available. Traditional Korean breakfast is seaweed soup with turnip and often fish, served with rice and kimchi.

Lunch for me is something from a "pojangmacha" (side street cart selling food stuffs) or a quick "ajima" (Korean mother) cafe or "shik dang" (hole in the wall restaurant) where I have a soup or noodles or kimbab (kimpop) or virtually any plate of food for anywhere from 2000 Won to 5000 Won ($2-5USD).

You can do noodles or deep fried squid even cheaper or one of my favorites, oudaeng. Ask. Try. Enjoy.

Dinner is often a Korean BBQ house for me or a Chicken Hof (pub). I love the Korean chicken. The sauces are AMAZING. Do try. The bbq houses are also something to behold. Dinner there can be as cheap as 5000Won for one. Best to dine with a partner and get a couple orders. It will be served together, you cook together, you use scissors to cut the meat, you lay it on a lettuce leaf or catnip leaf and put on your special favorites to dress it, that could be kimchi or garlic or garlic cooked in seasame oil or bean sprouts or any number of combinations from the "pancheon" that is set on your table and constantly refilled each time a side dish plate empties. YUM YUM YUM.

Korean food is quite distinct from Japanese or Chinese cuisine. Short grain sticky rice is the staple food of the Korean diet, and virtually every meal is served with kimchi, a fermented cabbage, garlic and pepper dish (think sauerkraut with hot sauce). Some people develop quite an affinity for it and other people can’t stand it, but face it, if you choose to live in Korea you will be eating it a lot. Kimchi, the national dish, is served with breakfast, lunch and dinner and if you don't like it when you first get there, you may find yourself craving it only months after and upon your return home you might even drive 30 minutes out of your way just to get "good" kimchi.   
   
Korean food tends to be spicy and includes liberal amounts of garlic. If you can’t eat spicy food I suppose you can ask for non spicy food, but that is similar to walking into KFC and saying you don’t eat chicken. Cheap nutritious food can be bought everywhere in Korea. Popular dishes include kimbap- which is the Korean version of the California roll - vegetables and egg rolled in a seaweed wrap, mandu, which are meat dumplings which are steamed, deep fried or served in soup, kalbi, or Korean short ribs, pulgogi, which is grilled marinated beef, and bebimbap which is fresh vegetables and an egg mixed with rice. Korea also has a fantastic array of soups and stews, including naengmyon - cold buckwheat noodles - perfect on a hot summer day, kalbi tang, or beef soup, tubu chigae, tofu soup, samgyetang, ginseng chicken soup and kong kuk su, a noodle dish made in a soy milk broth. There is also a vast array of seafood dishes in Korea, including raw fish, or sashimi.Generally before a meal in Korea you will be given a hot, wet towel to wash your face and hands with.

Koreans eat their rice with a spoon and everything else with chopsticks - if you don’t know how to use chopsticks you will learn. The degree of difficulty is ratcheted up in Korea because they use slick metal chopsticks rather than bamboo or wooden ones. Personally I love this concept because they are recycled. This is one of the few environmentally friendly practises you will see in [Korea](http://www.footprintsrecruiting.com/teaching-jobs-in-asia/teaching-jobs-in-korea) - a country where cookies are INDIVIDUALLY wrapped inside a box of cookies... a genuine source of frustration for any person concerned about our environment.

[**Street Food in Korea**](http://www.footprintsrecruiting.com/food-in-korea-south-korea/338-street-food-in-korea)

There are big and small street vendors in Korea.  
  
I believe the actual name for them is pojangmacha but there could be several different words for them depending on what they serve, how big they are, where they are at and a host of other sub-culture taxonomy conventions.  
  
The long and the short of it is there are loads of people on the street who sell anything from deep friend chicken feet, to steamed fish sticks, to sashimi, to flash fried rice or silk worm larvae.  That short little list doesn't even graze the surface of the choices available to you and some of these choices are seasonal, all of which makes eating on the street loads of fun!

The big pojangmachas (street stalls) ones often run out of a truck or some sort of trailer.  They have plastic stools and sometimes seats and table, and they have power.  The more traditional street vendors are those with a bit of a wagon or a one burner stove and they are boiling "bundegee" - silk worm larvae.  You can get some great treats at these street vendors.

Some of my favorites are: (\*these sound phonetically right to me - whether it's the actual romanization of the word or a very butchered attempt, forgive me)

1. ojinga twegum - deep fried squid tentacles (calamari)
2. duk bogi - rice noodles in a red pepper paste sauce, to go is served in a plastic bag
3. mandu - deep fried wontons
4. ssaeng nakgi - live octopus
5. odaeng - fish gruel on a stick (sounds bad, tastes great)

Give it a try, and when you do, add to this article and share your story or your description

**Foreign Food in Korea**

Chinese and Japanese are the foreign cuisines most common in Korea.  
  
Most Chinese restaurants in Korea are modest affairs that serve jajangmyung (noodles with black sauce) and tang su yuk (sweet and sour pork). Japanese restaurants are generally more expensive and dishes usually include twigim (tempura) and sashimi (raw fish).

Western food is becoming more and more prevalent in [Korea](http://www.footprintsrecruiting.com/teaching-jobs-in-asia/teaching-jobs-in-korea). Fast food joints such as KFC, McDonalds, Subway, Popeye’s and Baskin Robbins are becoming more and more common in Korea, and not surprising, waistlines are expanding as well. Fast food isn’t cheap in Korea compared to local fare.   
  
In larger cities such as Seoul and Busan more ‘upscale’ Western dining establishments such as Bennigan’s and TGI Friday’s are available, but will burn a hole in your wallet. In Seoul, particularly in the Itaewon district, there are a number of western style restaurants and other ‘Ethnic’ restaurants as well, including Italian, Indian and Hong Kong style Chinese food.

**Cooking Korean Style**

**What better way to immerse yourself in Korean culture than learning how to cook Korean food?**  
  
[Korea](http://www.footprintsrecruiting.com/teaching-jobs-in-asia/teaching-jobs-in-korea) has a culinary tradition distinct from Japanese and Chinese cuisine - traditional Korean cuisine is heavily influenced by Mongol culture. Koreans are the only Asian culture that eats rice with a spoon. Interestingly, the pepper, a mainstay of all Asian cuisine, was introduced to Asia by the Dutch in the 17th century - the pepper plant comes from the Americas. It is hard to imagine any Asian cuisine without this mainstay.

**Dining Out on a Shoestring’s string of a budget!**

Sure, we’ve all been down to our last 5,000 Won - and with a hankering for a bite to eat.  
  
Take heart - there are places where you can grab a hearty meal to tide you over for that amount. Short of splitting the cost with friends, ordering a satisfying meal alone can often be costly.

Sometimes, there are days when 2,000 KRW is a small fortune at hand. Don’t fear starvation - you can ‘fine dine’ even on a sliver of money. Have you got an Outback near you? If you want something to tide you for an hour or two until you get home--then head on over there. For 2,000 Won, you can grab two Bushman bread and ask for butter to go with it! For me, it's sheer love for these lightly sweet baked morsels back in the States. At the Bundang Outback on Migeum station, exit 6, I’d bought 2 loaves at 1,000 Won each, asked for two pats of butter, and Kelly, the manager on duty, threw in 4 extra pats on the house!

While it is far from dining out in the traditional sense of the word - StoryWay, a 7-Eleven-style snack kiosk scattered about at least throughout Seoul and its suburbs, features bargains you can always afford - and wolf down, too - such as waffles, eggs, and a Korean street vendor specialty known as a gaeran-tosteu - scrambled eggs drizzled with Ottogi syrup, surrounded by cinnamon sugar-dusted toasted white bread - for 4,000 KRW.

If that isn’t enough, head over to a Han Sot - a fast food-type sit-down place (you can find one almost ANYWHERE in Seoul), where you can fill yourself up for at least half a day. I went to one with a friend and his daughter near Gangnam station and for 4,500 W I bought something of a Korean penne pasta dish similar to Italian - save that the sauce was spicy! He’d ordered a sandwich, breadsticks, and a soda there at 7,500. Don’t expect top cuisine there, but expect food that goes down well - and agrees with your wallet.  
  
Have you found another way to fill up your stomach and save money for 5,000 Won or less? Send them to us for review-with any helpful tips or recommendations!

**Restaurants in Korea**

Korea has all kinds of eating establishments, ranging from street vendors (pojangmachas) and hole-in-the-wall shikdangs (small restaurants) to high-priced, formal restaurants will full-course meals. In between you can find many types of medium-sized places offering a wide range of food types, including traditional Korean food, fast food, Western and other non-Korean dishes. Happily, tipping is not customary in Korea.

**Water - to Drink or Not to Drink**

Tap water in Korea’s cities, although not necessarily overly tasty, but in general will not make you sick. It may not be the best stuff in the world, but it probably won’t kill you. Many Koreans, particularly in the summer time, get water from local mountain springs. You can get bottled water delivered to your home quite cheaply - with delivery service a five liter bottle of water will cost you around USD $5.

**Bizarre Korean Cuisine**

South Korea has certain epicurean traditions that some foreigners might find quite strange, but you should definitely partake in at least a few of them to truly experience the food culture.

**Street Food**  
  
When you’re hungry in Korea, you don’t have to go very far to find a quick snack. There are numerous stands located along the street and throughout markets at which you can grab various food items on sticks to eat on the go, or sit on plastic chairs to eat inside vinyl food stalls.   
  
You can find such items as:

* Dukbokki, the most popular street food – a spicy dish of rice cakes in hot pepper sauce (sometimes made with cheese inside!).
* marinated meat or sausages on a stick.
* battered squid, which some refer to as “squid fries.”
* pizza in a cup: just a slice of pizza in a paper cup instead of on a plate, which is definitely easier to hold if you’re eating it on the go.
* French fry-encrusted corn dog on a stick – it’s exactly what it sounds like, and it’s delectable.
* roasted corn-on-the-cob on a stick: this isn’t that weird, but it is not something you would see in Canada Europe (we know how Americans love their corn on a stick).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| A typical Korean food stall | Me enjoying some corn on a stick with squid fries | Duk Bok Ki |
| A typical Korean food stall. | The author enjoying some corn on a stick with squid fries. | Duk Bok Ki |

**The Really Weird Stuff**  
  
Now, I don’t intend to turn anyone off of Korean food by sharing the following not-so-stomachable dishes, but there are just a few edible oddities that I dare you to devour during your visit:  
  
Bun dae gi: these are crunchy roasted silk worm larvae sold on the streets. Well, I imagine they would be crunchy – this is one thing that I did not try, because the horrid smell was nearly vomit-inducing, and well, they’re bugs. My students claimed they were delicious and ate them like one would eat a bag of peanuts.

|  |
| --- |
| Yummy... Bun dae gi |
| Yummy...Bun dae gi |

Raw cow intestine: I encountered this once, served as a side dish at a Korean barbecue restaurant. It’s supposed to be good for your digestion. I did try a small piece; it was essentially tasteless, and the texture was like chewing on a piece of rubber.

|  |
| --- |
| Raw cow intestine |
| Raw cow intestine. |

Live squid/octopus: these sea creatures are pulled from the tank, cut up and served while still “alive.” The squid pieces twitch and the octopus tentacles squirm around your plate. The pieces are often tossed with sesame oil and seaweed, or served with hot sauce. I opted for the live squid as it seemed like the safer option, unlike octopus tentacles which have suction cups that cling to your tongue, cheeks, or even to the inside of your throat. The squid wasn’t bad – just bizarre.

|  |
| --- |
| Live octopus |
| Living, twitching, raw octopus. |

Dog meat: yes, the rumours are true. Some Korean people eat dog meat. This is a controversial practice both inside and outside of the country, due to health concerns and animal rights. They do not simply eat any dog off the street or a family pet, though – the Nureongi dog is bred and raised on farms as livestock. Dog meat is traditionally consumed during the summer and it is either roasted or put into soups or stews. It is believed to improve one’s stamina. I did not try it, for reasons that I’m sure many of you share.

|  |
| --- |
| bosintang |
| Your food says woof. |

Well, there’s a look into the stranger side of Korean cuisine. When you go to Korea, I hope that you will try some of the interesting dishes I’ve just described. If you are brave enough to try any of the more out-of-the-ordinary ones, I applaud you. Good luck!

MASHISOYO!

by [Tamara Povarchook](http://www.footprintsrecruiting.com/about-footprints/footprints-staff/1213-tamara-povarchook),   
  
Food culture is one of the most exciting and enjoyable aspects of traveling. Eating as the locals eat is essential to truly experiencing another way of life.  
  
I’d like to share some of my favourite dishes and dining experiences from my time in South Korea.  
  
Donkas: this is the first meal I ate when I arrived in Korea. It is a pork cutlet (essentially a schnitzel) topped with sweet barbecue sauce and typically served with rice and pickled radish, and/or various other side dishes.

|  |
| --- |
| Donkas |

Mandu: this is what I lived off of my first few weeks in Korea. It is inexpensive and can be purchased in large quantities at E-Mart (Korea’s version of Wal-mart). Mandu is the Korean equivalent to Chinese Dim Sum or Japanese Gyoza, or what we Westerners refer to as a “pot sticker.” There are many variations of Mandu, but the dumplings are usually filled with meat or tofu, and vegetables.

|  |
| --- |
| Mandu |

Doenjang chige: (“dwen jong chee gay”) is a delicious stew made with a soy-bean base, complete with zucchini, tofu, green onions, hot peppers and clams (or other seafood/meat). “Chige” means stew, and there are many different types of chiges in Korea. Kimchi chige is another very popular one. Chiges are served with a side of rice, and many people order one to share at Korean barbecue.

|  |
| --- |
| Doenjang Chige |

Bi bim bap: this is my absolute favourite dish! It consists of rice, topped with marinated beef, seaweed, mixed veggies cooked in sesame oil (usually zucchini, carrots, oyster mushrooms, and bean sprouts), topped with a fried egg and sesame seeds. Most people also mix in hot chili sauce to taste. That all probably sounds like an odd combination to you, but it is very yummy! Or in Korean: mashisoyo (delicious).

|  |
| --- |
| Bi Bim Bap |

Korean barbecue: this is the dining experience that Korea is most famous for in the Western world. It involves cooking a variety of different marinated meats (beef, pork, chicken, duck, prawns, etc) right at your table, dipping the meat into various sauces and wrapping it in lettuce or sesame leaves with rice, mushrooms, onions, radish, garlic, and whatever else you so desire. Along with the barbecued goodness, you get endless banchan (side dishes) including salads, fish cakes, quail eggs, marinated potatoes, and various types of kimchi.

Kimchi: (“kim chee”) is a traditional fermented Korean side dish made of vegetables and a variety of seasonings. The most common type of kimchi is made with cabbage, but many other vegetables like radish, scallions, or cucumbers are used. (My personal favourite is the cucumber kimchi.)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Korean BBQ | Cucumber Kimchi |

There you have it: a brief look into the delectable world of food in South Korea. I encourage you to try all of the dishes I have described and more – if you are open-minded when it comes to food, you will not be disappointed. One more thing to note: the traditional way to eat Korean food, even at a restaurant, is with your shoes off, sitting around the table on cushions on the floor! Mat it gye deu se yo!  
  
(Stay tuned for Part 2: Bizarre Korean Food…)