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brunches

**where to find them
& how to make them**

Foreword by Bill Granger



*** Japchae ***

SOUTH KOREA

Holiday feasts and social outings in South Korea simply aren't complete without *japchae*, a slippery tangle of veggies, beef and glass noodles that will test your chopstick mettle.

What is it?

Japchae is a side dish of noodles made from sweet potato starch, beef, shiitake mushrooms, carrots, spinach and bell pepper. It's served at room temperature and usually eaten in restaurants. Because of the prep time (50 minutes start to finish), homemade *japchae* is normally reserved for family events and holidays.

Tasting

Unlike Korea's famously fiery fare, *japchae* embraces subtlety. Vermicelli tossed in a sesame-oil sauce gives the chewy noodles an understated butter-sweet flavour and a slippery exterior. Handling *japchae* with chopsticks can be a daunting task. So grab a fork, avoid the embarrassment of dropping noodles on the floor and dig into a bounty of layered tastes and textures. *Japchae* is best enjoyed in a *hanjeongsik* restaurant, a delightfully chaotic banquet place offering the full panoply of Korean cuisine. Dishes shift back and forth while outstretched arms pluck food with aplomb. Hand gestures signifying the appropriate level of respect welcome every pour of beer or shot of *soju*. The din of shouts for refills is constant, as is the sound of slurped noodles, an unabashed signal of gastronomic delight.

Origin

Japchae first appeared in 1608 on a prince's dining table. It was, back then, a noodle-free vegetarian dish and remained that way for three centuries. The noodle version emerged in the 1920s when Korea was under the boot of Japanese rulers who, among other dastardly deeds, exported the country's rice. The ensuing grain shortage stimulated interest in alternate food sources, including *japchae* fused with sweet potato noodles. By the 1960s, cookbooks featured *japchae* with meat, fish and noodles.



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Finding it

Sanchon, a restaurant in Insadong, Seoul, serves temple food so you'll get the vegan version. Lunch costs KRW 33,000 (\$30).

*** TIP *** Making *japchae* is a labour of love, so don't skip the details and be sure to buy sesame seeds. Give them a quick roasting before using them to garnish the final noodle mixture. They add a crunchy layer of texture, a pleasant nutty aroma and a dash of sophistication to the presentation.

* By Rob Whyte *

Recipe Japchae

INGREDIENTS

170g (6oz) Korean sweet potato starch noodles
110g (4oz) lean beef, such as sirloin
4–5 shiitake mushrooms
170g (6oz) fresh spinach
salt and ground black pepper, to taste
1 small carrot
1 small onion
1 small green bell pepper
2 eggs, beaten
vegetable oil, for stir-frying
2 tsp sesame seeds

For the sauce

3 tbs soy sauce
2½ tbs sugar
2 tbs sesame oil
2 tsp minced garlic



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METHOD

1. Combine all the ingredients for the sauce in a bowl and stir until the sugar is dissolved.
2. Cook the noodles in boiling water according to the packet directions. Drain, rinse, and drain again. Cut them into 15cm (6in) lengths using scissors and place in a large bowl. Add 2 tbs of the sauce and combine.
3. Cut the beef into thin 5cm (2in) strips. Place into a bowl and stir in 1 tbs of the sauce.
4. Slice the mushrooms into 5mm-wide (¼in-wide) strips. Place the mushroom strips in a bowl and stir in 1 tbs of the sauce.
5. Wilt the spinach in boiling water, then drain and rinse in cold water. Squeeze out excess water, cut into 5cm (2in) lengths and season.
6. Cut the carrot, onion and green bell pepper into julienne strips and place each ingredient in a separate dish.
7. Pour the beaten eggs into a lightly oiled frying pan and cook over a medium heat until just set. Flip over and cook until just solid, then remove to a plate and leave to cool. Cut it into matchstick strips.
8. In a large non-stick frying pan, stir-fry the noodles over a medium heat for 3–4 minutes, until they are translucent and a bit sticky. Transfer back to the large bowl.
9. Stir-fry the prepared carrots with 1 tsp oil in the frying pan over a medium heat for 1–2 minutes, then season. Repeat with the onion and green bell pepper, cooking them separately. After cooking, transfer each to the large bowl of noodles.
10. Stir-fry the beef for 1–2 minutes until just cooked, and add to the noodles along with the spinach and the remaining sauce.
11. Toss the mixture by hand to combine everything thoroughly. Adjust the seasoning by adding soy sauce and/or sugar.
12. Dry-fry the sesame seeds over a medium heat until toasted.
13. Transfer the noodle mixture to a serving dish, top with the sesame seeds and egg strips and serve at room temperature.

SERVES 4