

# SOUTH KOREA

Is food a metaphor for a nation's character? It is in South Korea, where the words 'spicy and robust' could be used to characterise both the cuisine and the people.

**T**emperament parallels seasoning in this finger of land inhabited by 49 million people, where the local cuisine is known as *Hansik*. Comparatively mild flavours are common in northern cities like Seoul, where genteel folk speak the standard language and comport themselves in a way that reflects Confucian ideals of restrained public decorum. Further south, you'll find zesty fare, salty language and ebullient discourse.

Though sandwiched between two Asian culinary superpowers, *Hansik* draws little from China's stir-fry tradition and shows minimal interest in Japan's refined presentation. More introspective than worldly, *Hansik* is a melange of ancient customs and values fused with contemporary priorities: a pinch of ancient oriental medicine, a sprinkle of Buddhist vegetarianism and a healthy dose of modern Korea's pugnacious hurry-hurry approach to everything. The result on the dinner table is earthy soup, wholesome grains, fresh vegetables, two or three *kimchis*, pungent seasonings and protein from the sea or farm, all served at once in a banquet-like setting. And to finish the meal, there's usually a light dessert, fruit, coffee or tea.

South Korea's regional cuisine is shaped by mountain contours and inspired by jagged coastlines. Roots and leaves hand-picked from steep slopes transform everyday standards into local delicacies like *sanchae bibimbap* (spicy rice and mountain vegetables) or crunchy *deodeok kimchi* (spicy bellflower root). Baked, stewed, raw or processed, the catch from three seas permeates coastal cooking. Anchovies and mackerel are kitchen staples, while squid, eel, hairtail and octopus are commonly found in oceanfront restaurants and bars.

## BIBIMBAP

### SPEED, SPICE AND HEALTH

***Bibimbap* is essential** *Hansik* in a single bowl. Rice and fresh vegetables mixed vigorously with a splotch of [\*gochujang\*](#) (red chilli sauce) create a meal in minutes. Restaurants tend to fiddle with the presentation, of course. Most start with a six-pack of vegan-friendly ingredients: carrots, cucumber, spinach, bean sprouts, shiitake mushrooms and bracken fern.

The holy grail of *bibimbap* comes from Jeonju. This cornucopia of taste and texture served in a brass bowl stacks 30 ingredients – like sesame oil, ginkgo nuts and mungbean jelly – on a rice bed cooked in beef broth, topped with *gochujang*, steak tartar and egg. More titillating than complex, *sanchae bibimbap* (spicy rice with mountain vegetables) is Korea's version of a chef's surprise. You never really know what to expect because it's made with seasonal roots and leaves from nearby mountains. *Dolsot bibimbap* is rice, spice and vegetables in a sizzling stone pot. Resist the urge to dive in and start mixing. Let the pot work its magic and you'll add a bottom layer of crispy rice to a near-perfect dish.

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### WHERE TO EAT GOGUNG DEOKJIN-DONG, DEOKJIN-GU, JEONJU

This restaurant put *bibimbap* on the world map. Once the food of kings, the full-course option is an opulent spread of side dishes and *moju* (fermented rice wine and medicinal herbs).

## BIBIMBAP

### INGREDIENTS

450g/16oz rice  
300g/10.5oz young pumpkin  
200g/7oz bellflower roots  
120g/4oz beef (top side)  
200g/7oz soaked bracken (optional)  
2 eggs  
2 tbsp of oil

### FOR THE SAUCE

1 tbsp soy sauce

½ tbsp sugar  
2 tsp minced green onion  
1 tsp minced garlic  
1 tsp sesame salt  
pinch ground black pepper  
1 tsp sesame oil

### **FOR THE RED PEPPER PASTE**

5 tbsp red pepper paste  
20g minced beef  
2 tsp minced green onion  
1 tsp minced garlic  
6 tbsp water  
1½ tbsp sugar  
1½ tbsp sesame oil

### **PREPARATION**

Julienne the pumpkin and bellflower roots into 5cm/2in slices. Add a pinch of salt, tumble with hands, wash, then dry. Julienne the beef into 5cm/2in slices. Wash the bracken and slice into 5cm/2in strips. Blend the sauce ingredients in bowl and marinade the beef and bracken. Fry the egg for garnish. Bring the rice in water to the boil then continue to boil for another five minutes then simmer for ten. Stir-fry pumpkin in a preheated pan on high briefly and cool. Stir-fry bellflower roots on medium heat then stir-fry the beef and bracken on for three minutes. Stir-fry the minced beef, green onion, garlic and half of the sesame oil for a couple of minutes. Add red pepper paste, sugar and sesame oil, stir-fry for five minutes. Add water, stir-fry again to make fried red pepper paste. Serve with steamed rice and the fried egg and red pepper paste on top.

## BARBECUED MEAT

### SEARED SIRLOIN

**Tantalisingly aromatic when** grilled over charcoal, *bulgogi* (marinated sirloin) and *so-galbi* (beef ribs) are South Korea's celebrated beef dishes. *Samgyupsal* (fatty bacon) is the country's popular pork cut, while black pig from Jeju-do is a renowned regional favourite. Long ago penned under outhouses, these black-haired beasts gained notoriety for feeding on human waste, a practice discontinued in the 1960s to the detriment of its taste, some claim.

Mongols and Buddhists helped shape South Korea's beefy traditions. Thirteenth-century Buddhism, the principle social philosophy of the time, accentuated vegetables and discouraged beef consumption. Some historians believe cattle slaughter was banned outright. Later that century, Mongols hacked their way down the peninsula, pillaged the villages and brought a dynasty to its knees.

On the bright side, the Mongols re-established cattle farming and introduced foods now considered standards, like *mandu* (dumplings), noodles and grilled beef. Interestingly, renewed beef consumption at the time didn't supplant the vegetable- and fish-rich diet; it merely augmented the array of choices, a tradition that continues to this day.

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### WHERE TO EAT DONSADON JEJU CITY, JEJU ISLAND

Here's a dining tip. The quality of meat in a restaurant often varies inversely with the quality of the decor. Like this place. Well known for tender black-pig pork and the occasional celebrity diner (the entertainer Rain ate here), it's a Jeju institution.