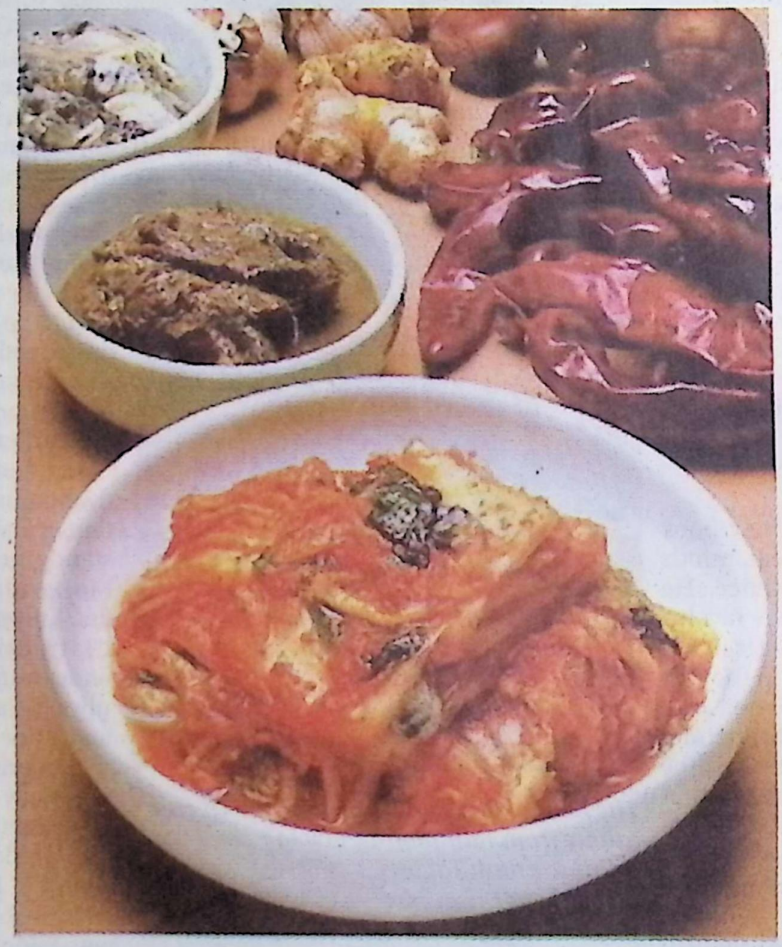
More than Just Kimchi

LIN QI

Most Chinese tourists carry instant noodles and packets of pickles with them while travelling, in case they don't take to the food in the countries they visit. But there is one place where such precautions may not be necessary. And that is South Korea, as Korean restaurants are now quite popular in China.



The capital of a country usually showcases the best food of the land. So it is with Seoul. As one embarks on a tour to touch the soul of Korean cuisine, the first stop, a frequent suggestion made by the locals, is the Myeongdong area, one of the main commercial streets of the country.

The narrow lanes in this area are littered with numerous small clothing stores, cafes and restaurants, and are always overflowing with foreigners and white-collar workers from the nearby offices, for a quick coffee or a short burst of shopping.

If you ask a Chinese to name one Korean dish they are most familiar with, more than half are likely to answer, the steamed rice mixed with vegetables, or the rice hash in hot stone. In the Gogung restaurant, patrons can enjoy the traditional Jeonju (a southwestern city) rice hash, or the bibimbap.

South Koreans pay a lot of attention to table setting, and the presentation of the Jeonju bibimbap is a good example of this. Diners are served with boiled rice, cooked in cow bone juice beforehand, in a brass bowl. On a big plate lie small piles of cooked bean sprouts, cucumbers, ferns, spinach, pickles, mushrooms and beef, and a bowl of sauce combining sesame oil and soy sauce. Diners place the vegetables one by one on the rice and top it with an egg, dribbles of sauce, a tablespoon of the Korean chilli pepper paste and a sprinkling of fish powder. Patrons take pride in, and compare one another against, how well they arrange all of this.

Koreans invented the bibimbap according to the principle of Yin and Yang, and added vegetables, meat and seasonings to represent the Five Elements (wood, fire, earth, metal and water). They see the nutritious dish as the distillation of the wisdom of their ancestors.

But before one rushes in to enjoy a DIY bibimbap, there is the distinctive rice aperitif to down. The drink looks thick and brown and more like a cup of miso soup. It has a refreshing, slightly herbal, taste.

Koreans are seen to have an extraordinary enthusiasm for drinking, by many Chinese. This can be attributed