

largely to imported Korean TV drama series, that often have scenes showing men and women enjoying a casual drink at pojangmacha (the sidewalk food stalls).

When one walks down the bustling alleys of Seoul at night, it feels like the whole city's exhausted labour forces has poured into the cafes and pubs to loosen up and ease their tensions.

My tour guide says pojangmacha offering inexpensive beers and rice wines are also very common in residential neighbourhoods and well-received by ordinary people. When their husbands work late, Korean housewives sometimes meet at these food stands for a drink and to vent their grievances. The most expensive and best-selling drugs in Korea, says my guide, are those meant to cure hangovers and to protect the liver.

According to one news report, there are three things Koreans can't escape from in life: death, taxation and Samsung products. The author has clearly forgotten kimchi (Korean pickles), the spirit and pride of the nation with a 1000-year-old tradition.

A meal without kimchi is unthinkable for Koreans. They see it not only as a spicy-sweet side dish that can also be added to all types of food, such as soup, fried rice and pancake, but also admire kimchi as a gift from nature, which, they believe, has numerous health benefits.

English-speakers yell "cheese" and Chinese say "qie zi (eggplant)" to squeeze out a smile when taking photographs. In South Korea, the word is 'kimchi'. There is even a kimchi museum and a kimchi expo is held every October in Seoul. One can buy kimchi chocolates in souvenir shops. Some weeks ago, the country's first astronaut, 29-year-old woman scientist Yi So-Yeon, took kimchi to the International Space Station (ISS) for the first time.

There are more than 200 types of kimchi. One can taste cabbage, radish and stuffed cucumber kimchi in any traditional restaurant in Seoul. But when in the country, the must-do thing is to make kimchi oneself.

Kimchi workshops run by institutes and kimchi factories are accessible to everyone. I took my first kimchi-making class at the Korean Food Institute of Sookmyung Women's University, which also offers short-term courses for housewives and brides-to-be.

The cabbage kimchi is the most common and usually made during winter. I have a brief note on the sophisticated procedure which runs as follows:

Split a nice big cabbage into half. Sprinkle salt evenly on the leaves, dip the cabbage in salt water for 8 to 10 hours and turn over it from time to time. Mix meat stock and chilli pepper powder with radish pieces, salted sand eel, shrimps, garlic, ginger and sugar, in this order, and then add green onion, dropwort and leaf mustard. Spread this sauce paste evenly on the cabbage layers and wrap it up with the outer leaves.

Many people may find it difficult to remember all these ingredients. I can sympathise. A friend, whose husband is South Korean, says her mother-in-law visits their home in Beijing's suburb every winter and helps her make several jars of kimchi, which are then stored in the cellar. Some Korean families still follow the traditional procedure, while many living in apartment buildings buy ready-to-eat packets off supermarket shelves.

If one visits South Korea in summer, the samgyetang, or chicken soup boiled with ginseng, is a must-have. People wait in long queues outside restaurants during the hottest months of the year just for a hot pot of samgyetang. Locals believe the soup energises people in the blistering heat.

The Tosokchon, or traditional village, is one of the most famous samgyetang restaurants in Seoul. Diners have the soup, the essence of Korean cuisine, in the old way - sitting on the floor in a Korean style courtyard, decorated with pots of white, purple and pink mugunghwa (rose of sharon), Korea's national flower. In waft the intoxicating smells of chicken soup, ginseng and unknown seasonings. A 49-day-old chicken is cooked with six-year-old ginsengs, chestnut, jujubes, glutinous rice and 10 other mixtures till the soup turns milky white. One can have it with a small cup of ginseng wine. And if the drink makes one feel weak, one can always pour some into the soup!

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