

The Beginner's Guide to

# Korean Food & Restaurants

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How to comfortably order and eat tasty food in Korea



**REBECCA THERING**

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## *In simple terms from me to you...*

I used to sell this e-book for \$15, but decided to share it freely in the hopes that it will help more people enjoy Korean cuisine in South Korea.

If you find this resource helpful, see its value, or benefit from the energy shared, I invite you to make it a feel-good exchange between you and me. This guide took months of time and energy to create—not to mention the year I spent living in South Korea. [Here's where you can pay what feels right.](#)

Thank you for honoring the value of this creation, as you're able—you rock!

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# 1. Introduction

Hello, and welcome to the beginning of a delicious exploration into Korean food! With this guide, you'll have all of the language and knowledge necessary to enjoy Korea's finest while you're there—from street food to traditional restaurants.

What prompted me to create this in the first place? I taught English in South Korea from 2013-14, the job that many English speakers hold in Korea. My lunch every weekday was a delicious Korean lunch served at school, so I was eating the food (and loving it), but often without knowing the names of what I was consuming.



Usually I cooked at home in the evenings, but when I would go out to eat, it was always with others—either my Korean friend in town, or other teacher friends who had a much higher level of Korean than I did. I had taken pictures of menus in a few local kimbap places (and then translated them at home), so I'd also occasionally get takeout from two places in my town,

When my then-boyfriend came to visit nine months after I'd first arrived, it was the first time that navigating new menus and ordering fell entirely on me. One particular night, during which my lack of sleep and end-of-week exhaustion definitely came into play, we were in a new town and I couldn't find anywhere I was comfortable entering and ordering. I felt overwhelmed and discouraged.

Two days later I had an idea: Rather than beat myself up about how "little" I thought I had to show for my time, I decided to use that night as motivation. I would create a

complete guide to Korean food and restaurants—something I would have liked to carry with me from the start.

From that day forward, every dining experience was an opportunity to research for the guide. I began taking pictures of my meals, street food, and restaurants, thinking about what details I'd need pictures of in the book. Even after having left Korea, I continued working on the project on and off—with the desire to share this incredible Korean food with other visitors by making it more accessible.

So I'm proud to say that this is that guide. I hope it helps you more comfortably experience the wonderful world of Korean food, so that you can dive in from day one with confidence.

Enjoy!

Rebecca Thering



## 2. Helpful Words to Start

**Note about Korean pronunciation:** Throughout this guide you will learn some Korean words. Korean has sounds that don't exist in English, so that's why the pronunciation is rough. I often didn't use the standard romanization. Rather, I wrote what it sounds like to me, as an American native English speaker, to help you get as close as possible. For the purposes of eating good food, it'll get you there!

If any of you would like to hear what some of these sound like, though, here's a neat trick: Just copy and paste the Korean (Hangul — the script) into [Forvo's](http://forvo.com/languages/ko/) "search for a word" field (<http://forvo.com/languages/ko/>) and you can hear a native speaker saying the word.

### *Helpful Words for Ordering Food*

Before we get to the food, let's start with a few helpful words to know when ordering food in Korea.

Phrase	Korean	Pronunciation (Rough)	Notes
Hello	안녕하세요	an-yeong-ha-say-o	A polite bow with ann-yeong-ha-say-o is sure to please whomever you're ordering from.
Please	주세요	ju-say-o  (sounds like a mesh between juice-ay-o and chew-say-o)	The word literally is the polite form of "give it to me," but for our purposes it's like saying "please." If you want water, say "mul jusayo." (Water, please)
Thank you	감사합니다	kam-sa-ham-ni-da	
Take out	포장	po-jang	For takeout coffee, just say "takeout" (Sounds like taek-ow-tuh in Korean)
It's delicious!	맛있어요	mah-shi-sah-yo	

Yes	예 / 네	yeh / neh	“Yeh” is seen as a bit more formal. “Neh” can often sound like “deh.”
No	아니요	an-i-yo	It’s sometimes heard shortened to “an-i” (아니).
Goodbye	안녕히계세요	an-yeong-he gye-say-o	There are actually two different words for goodbye, depending on if you’re leaving or staying. To keep it simple, I’ve included what you’ll use when leaving food stands or restaurants.

You’ll learn some more words throughout this guide, but that’s the starter course.

## Korean Currency

The Korean currency is called won (원). The four bills are 1,000 (blue), 5,000 (red), 10,000 (green), and 50,000 (gold).



By The Bank of Korea (한국은행) [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Currency\\_South\\_Korea.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Currency_South_Korea.jpg)

Here's a close-up of the Korean *won* coins:



By: 한국은행 (Bank of Korea), Don Norris [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/Won\\_surcoreano.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/Won_surcoreano.jpg)

**Exchange rate:** The exchange rate as of February 18, 2021 is 1 KRW = .00090 USD.  
Here's a chart for comparisons:

KRW (₩)	₩ 1,000	₩ 10,000	₩ 20,000	₩ 50,000	₩ 100,000
USD (\$)	\$0.90	\$9.05	\$18.10	\$45.25	\$90.49

When I lived in Korea the *won* was worth around 95 U.S. cents, so I would often use the rough comparison that 1,000 KRW is like \$1; 5,000 KRW is \$5, etc.

[Here's a currency converter](#) you can use to check the current exchange rate.

## How Much Is It?

The first type of food we'll be looking at is street food, and you might not see prices listed at every food stand. If you want to know how much something is before you order it, the key phrase is:

**How much is it? 얼마예요 ol-ma-yae-yo**

When said fast, I think it sounds like *ol-mah-a-yo*, but maybe it's just me.

# Korean Numbers

Here are some possible monetary values that you might hear as a response:

## (Sino-Korean Numbers)

Value	Korean	Pronunciation	Unit
100	백	baek	won
200	이백	ee-baek	won
300	삼백	sahm-baek	won
400	사백	sah-baek	won
500	오백	oh-baek	won
600	육백	yuk-baek	won
700	칠백	chill-baek	won
800	팔백	pal-baek	won
900	구백	gu-baek	won

Value	Korean	Pronunciation	Unit
1,000	천	cheon (chun)	won
2,000	이천	ee-cheon	won
3,000	삼천	sahm-cheon	won
4,000	사천	sah-cheon	won
5,000	오천	oh-cheon	won
6,000	육천	yuk-cheon	won
7,000	칠천	chill-cheon	won
8,000	팔천	pal-cheon	won
9,000	구천	gu-cheon	won
10,000	만	man (mun)	won

Once you have these parts, it's fairly simple to combine them. The only tricky part is remembering that 10,000 is its own unit, *man*. So 20,000 is "two 10,000," or "*ee-man*" won; 30,000 is "three 10,000," or "*sam-man*"; etc.

Here are a few examples:

How to Say It	The Breakdown			
2,500 won	=	2,000	+	500
ee-cheon oh-baek won	=	ee-cheon (이천)	+	oh-baek
15,000 won	=	10,000	+	5,000
man oh-cheon won	=	man (만)	+	oh-cheon

There are actually two different sets of numbers used in Korean. One set, the **sino-Korean** numbers above, are used for money, units of time (but not hours), phone numbers, and a few other uses.

I only bring this up because when you want to specify *how many* of a certain food item you want, it'll be with the **Korean numbers**. Korean numbers are used for the hour, age, and counting physical objects.

When I'm ordering street food I usually just point to an item and say "*Hana jusayo*" (one, please).

You certainly don't need to learn all of these numbers—pointing and holding up fingers can get you a long way in a foreign country—but I'll on the next page I'm including 1-10 as a resource for those interested:

## Korean Numbers

*Used for counting the number of items*

Value	Korean	Pronunciation
1	하나	hana
2	둘	dul
3	셋	set
4	넷	net
5	다섯	daseot
6	여섯	yoseot
7	일곱	ilgop
8	여덟	yeodeol
9	아홉	ahop
10	열	yeol

If you need to go higher than ten for whatever reason, it's not too difficult. Eleven is simply "ten one," or "yeoul hana"; twelve is "ten two," which is "yeol dul"; etc.

Now you're ready for some yummy Korean street food!

## 3. Korean Street Food

Korean street food is great tasting and cheap. It's probably the easiest to order because you can see what you're getting right in front of you. You don't even have to know what it's called! You can point and use those numbers, or point and signal with your fingers all you want.

Here are some common foods you might see while walking around:

### *Dalggocchi* (닭꼬치)

These are grilled skewers of chicken and vegetables, and usually cost 2,000 won each.



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/traveloriented/10585858164>

### *Ddeokbokki* (떡볶이)



By Popo le Chien - Own work, CC0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=43914433>

*Ddeokbokki* (also written as tteokbokki) is made of soft rice cakes and fish cakes in a hot, spicy red sauce.

## "Egg Bread" (계란빵)

These are absolutely delicious, and are another popular item during the winter.

You'll see an egg on top of some type of bread, in an oval shape, and let me say once more—freakin' delicious.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gyeranppang#/media/File:Gyeranppang\\_by\\_travel\\_oriented.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gyeranppang#/media/File:Gyeranppang_by_travel_oriented.jpg)

## Hoddeok (호떡)



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hotteok#/media/File:Hotteok.jpg>

Popular during the winter, *hoddeok* is a Korean pancake filled with something sweet, such as brown sugar, honey, cinnamon, and/or peanuts.

These are usually super hot, so don't eat it right away! I've burned my tongue twice before!

## Jeon (전)

*Jeon* are Korean "pancakes," made with a variety of ingredients depending on type.

Fillings could be meats, vegetables, or seafood, with a flour or egg batter and pan-fried.



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeon\\_\(food\)#/media/File:Korean.pancake-Pajeon-02.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeon_(food)#/media/File:Korean.pancake-Pajeon-02.jpg)

## Mayakimbap (마약김밥)



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean.Snacks-01.jpg>

We'll have a whole section coming up on kimbap, a Korean “fast food” that looks like sushi—without the raw fish.

This is the mini version, which is easier to eat on the street. The outer layer is seaweed, filled with rice and veggies, tuna, kimchi, or other fillings.

## Odeng (오뎅)

Usually 500 won per stick, these fish cakes are served on a stick in a cup of hot broth. Perfect snack for a chilly day!



By "travel oriented"

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/traveloriented/10585854544>

## Tornado Potato



A more recent invention, hailing from the mid-2000s, an entire potato is cut into a swirl along a long skewer, and is then deep fried.

Afterwards they'll dip it in a powder, or let you choose which powder to sprinkle on top, such as cheese or onion flavored.

## Twigim (튀김)

*Twigim* is a general term for deep fried foods.

You'll see all sorts of deep fried vegetables, eggs, dumplings, or shrimp, for example.



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korea-Sokcho-Daepo\\_Port-Twigim\\_and\\_Ojingeo\\_sundae-01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korea-Sokcho-Daepo_Port-Twigim_and_Ojingeo_sundae-01.jpg)

## Bongeobbang (붕어빵)



*Bongeobbang* are fish-shaped bread filled with a red bean paste.

There was a permanent stand just outside of our small school which sold these during the winter time.

## Bundegi (번데기)

I was never brave enough to try this one, but you will see it often on the streets.

*Bundegi* are boiled or steamed silkworm larvae. Yup. Are you braver than me?



By istoletv <https://www.flickr.com/photos/istoletv/8747465354>

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it's a fantastic base to the most common street foods you'll find in Korea. Street food is easy and fun to explore, since a) it's cheap, and b) you can see all of your options and choose with your eyes. So have fun tasting all of the goodness that Korea's street food has to offer!

## 4. Korean Restaurants

### *Finding a Restaurant*



Since Korea is so mountainous yet highly populated, most buildings are built *up*.

This means you'll have restaurants up on the second, third, fourth, and even higher floors.

So don't forget to look up when you're hunting for somewhere to eat! That tip alone will usually double if not triple your food options.

### *Inside the Restaurant*

#### Taking off shoes

In Korean culture, many activities happen on the floor—including eating. It's common to sit on the floor at many Korean restaurants. This means you'll need to take off your shoes either before you enter the restaurant (there will be an entryway with shoe slots), or just outside of the floor seating area inside (you'll see other shoes).

Some of these restaurants offer both table seating and floor seating, so you can leave your shoes on if you're at a table. At most restaurants, you should just walk in and take a seat at an open table—there won't be a hostess to seat you.

#### Wipe hands, take out chopsticks

Most restaurants will give you a wet cloth with which to wipe your hands when you first sit down. If you don't see silverware right away, look for a small rectangular box like the one pictured below.



Sometimes it's in a drawer hidden underneath the table. Take out two chopsticks and a spoon, and set them on a small white napkin for each person. (The head of the spoon and the tips of the chopsticks resting on the napkin—the parts that'll go in your mouth.)

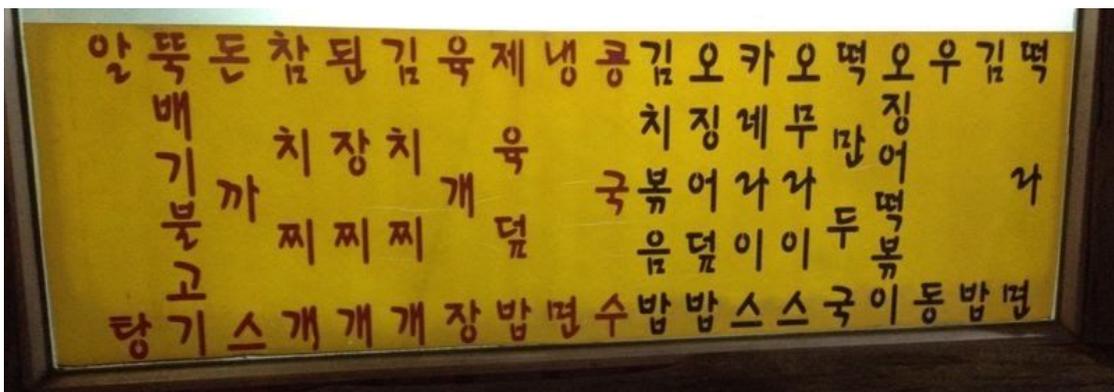
Fun fact: When Koreans eat together, the youngest person at the table should pass out this silverware to everyone else. (So if you're eating with a group of Koreans and happen to be the youngest one, this will really impress them if you start handing out the silverware!)

And since we're talking about chopsticks, [this simple video \(no audio\)](#) clearly shows you how to hold and eat with metal Korean chopsticks. It takes a little practice, but it's a learnable skill. The most helpful hint is that the bottom chopstick needs to remain still, and only the top chopstick is moved up and down.

(I hadn't even thought about chopsticks before arriving in Korea, by the way, so at lunch on my first day of school—and the following days—was a bit embarrassing as I struggled to use them. With time, and from watching videos like these online, I got the hang of it. So if you're totally new to using chopsticks, start using them now to get in some practice! The more often you do it, the more natural it will feel.)

## Menus on the wall

Many Korean restaurants don't have menus for each table. Instead, the menu is posted on the wall in big print.



## Call button

At many restaurants, there will be a call button somewhere on your table. Press this button when you are ready to order, or if you need something from your waiter throughout the course of your meal. If you don't have a call button and need to get your server's attention, say "yogi-yo" loudly.

## Self-serve water

At some places the water is self-serve. If you see something like the photo below (pardon the reflection!), that's where the clean metal cups are stored. You can open it and grab however many you need.



## Side Dishes

Side dishes will be served with whatever you order, and are often brought out before your meal arrives. This can be anywhere from 3-12 smaller dishes, which are shared family style by everyone eating directly from them—so just dig in with your chopsticks!



Go ahead and ask for free refills at any time, and conversely, don't feel like you have to finish every side dish. It's okay not to.

## Kimchi (김치)



One of those side dishes will most likely be *kimchi*, which, if you've never heard of it, is Korea's traditional and beloved spicy fermented cabbage. Eaten every day by Koreans, there are tons of variations of this healthy dish—the most common main ingredient being either cabbage, radish, scallion, or cucumber. It also varies by location, the spicier stuff being found in the southern half of the country.

## Scissors

Don't be surprised to have kitchen scissors sitting at your table, depending on the type of restaurant and what you've ordered. Feel free to pick them up to cut *kimchi* (if it's not already cut), to cube radish *kimchi*, or to cut any other food that needs it during the meal.

These kitchen scissors will be accompanied by tongs for easy maneuvering.

## Using the Bathroom

If you need to use the restroom and don't see one right away, you can ask:

Hwa-jang-shil-ee oh-de-yeh-yo? (화장실이 어디예요?)  
(Where is the bathroom?)

There will be sandals in the bathroom that you should step into when you enter (if you removed your shoes when you came into the restaurant). Remove the sandals when you exit, leaving them in the bathroom by the door.

In some restrooms, there is one toilet paper roll outside of the stalls. You rip off what you need before you enter a stall, so make sure to check what type of stall it is beforehand.

It's important to note that in most bathrooms in Korea, **toilet paper is not to be thrown in the toilets**. Rather, dispose of the toilet paper in the bin inside your stall.

Finally, don't be alarmed if there isn't a toilet bowl either. "Squatters" are quite common in Korea, though I saw them more often in the metro and other public buildings and less often in restaurants.

## Paying

Your bill is usually placed on the table while you're eating. When finished, carry it up to the register to pay. Credit cards are widely used and accepted in Korea, and you must sign electronically for most purchases.

Culturally, the most polite way to hand over your card is by holding it with both hands. For the signatures, most Koreans just do a really quick scribble, which I got into the habit of doing as well.

**You do not tip in Korea.** The total on your bill is the total that you pay.

## Helpful Phrases While Eating

Phrase	Korean	Pronunciation (Rough)	Notes
Excuse me / Here	여기요	yo-gee-yo	This is what you should say to get your waiter's attention.
This, please	이거 주세요.	ee-go ju-say-o	You could use this phrase to order, while pointing to a menu item or photo.
I'm a vegetarian	전 채식주의자예요.	jeon chae-sik ju-ui-jae-yo	
Do you have something without meat?	고기 안 들어간 거 있어요?	gogi an du-reo gan geo ee-say-yo?	"Meat" is go-gi (고기)
What's the most delicious?	뭐가 제일 맛있어요?	mwo-ga je-il ma-see-say-yo?	
Some water, please	물 좀 주세요.	mul chom ju-say-o	
Make it spicy, please	맵게해 주세요	maep-gae hae ju-say-o	

Don't make it spicy, please	안맵게 해주세요	ahn maep-gae hae-ju-say-o	Ahn (안) is used to negate, so you'll notice this phrase is the same as the previous, but with 안 at the start.
The check, please	계산서 좀 주세요	gye-san-seo jome ju-say-yo	

## 5. Traditional Korean Dishes

Here are some dishes you might find in traditional Korean restaurants. Note: If you want to see pictures of each, I've shared some great resources at the end of this guide where you can see professional pictures of these—and many other—dishes.

### Soups—*guk* (국) / *tang* (탕)



Pork and rice soup

By Tmmanya: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%EB%8F%BC%EC%A7%80%EA%B5%AD%EB%B0%A51.jpg>

Soups are really common in Korea, eaten both as a side or main dish. Anything on the menu that ends in 국 (*guk*) or 탕 (*tang*) is going to be a delicious soup.

Any of the "spine," "rib," or "bone" soups will often have the full bone (with meat) right in your soup. So using the chopsticks (and/or kitchen scissors), you can pull the meat straight from the bone to eat. (Often it's so tender it falls off easily.)

Here are some examples of common soups you might see on a menu:

- Tteok guk (떡국) — Sliced rice cake soup
- Mandu guk (만두국) — Dumpling soup
- Doenjang guk (된장국) — Soybean paste soup
- Miyeok guk (미역국) — Seaweed soup
- Yachae guk (야채죽) — Vegetable soup
- Dwae-ji guk-bap (돼지국밥) — Pork and rice soup
- Galbi tang (갈비탕) — Short rib soup

- Seolleong tang (설렁탕) — Ox bone soup
- Samgyetang (삼계탕) — Ginseng chicken soup
- Yukgaejang (육개장) — Spicy beef soup
- Gamjatang (감자탕) — Pork spine soup (Spicy, often contains potato)

## Stews — jjigae (찌개)



Kimchi stew

By [mivagowa](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean_stew-Kimchi_jjigae-01.jpg) — [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean\\_stew-Kimchi\\_jjigae-01.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean_stew-Kimchi_jjigae-01.jpg)

These are thicker than the soups above and always served super hot. In fact, sometimes stews are cooked right at the table, so they can be served at a nice hot temperature.

Stews may contain meat, vegetables, or seafood, and lots are great for mixing with rice. Just take your side serving of rice and add it directly to the soup, or the other way around.

- Kimchi jjigae (김치찌개) — Kimchi stew (One of my favorites—spicy and yummy)
- Doenjang jjigae (된장찌개) — Soybean paste stew
- Budae jjigae (부대찌개) — Spicy sausage stew, aka "army base stew" (Ham, spam, sausage, kimchi, pork, tofu, and often even ramen are combined in this Korean-American fusion stew. Another favorite!)

## Porridge — juk (죽)



Rice porridge with abalone

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean\\_abalone\\_porridge-Jeonbokjuk-01A.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean_abalone_porridge-Jeonbokjuk-01A.jpg)

These thick porridges are made of rice or other grains.

- Jeonbok juk (전복죽) — Rice porridge with abalone
- Pat juk (팥죽) — Red bean porridge
- Hobak juk (호박죽) — Pumpkin porridge

## Noodles — myeon (면), guk-su (국수)



Mul naeng-myeon

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean.cuisine-Mul.naengmyeon-01.jpg>

There are many more dishes and soups with noodles, but again, here are some common ones:

- Naeng-myeon (냉면) — Chilled buckwheat noodle soup  
Perfect for summer, the two main types of this cold-noodle dish are:
  - Mul naeng-myeon (물 냉면) — With broth made from beef, chicken, or dongchimi
  - Bibim naeng-myeon (비빔 냉면) — Spicy sauce, no broth
- Bibim guksu (비빔국수) — Spicy mixed noodles (Chilled)
- Kal guksu (칼국수) — Warm noodle soup (literally "knife noodles," often includes zucchini, potatoes, and scallions)

## Stir-fried — bokkeum (볶음)



Kimchi fried rice

[L.W. Yang https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean\\_cuisine-Kimchi\\_bokkeumbap-02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean_cuisine-Kimchi_bokkeumbap-02.jpg)

The term *bokkeum* can be used to describe meat, seafood, or vegetables that have been seasoned and stir fried.

- Bokkeum bap (볶음밥) — Fried rice ("Bap" means cooked rice)
- Kimchi bokkeum bap (김치볶음밥) — Kimchi fried rice (My favorite, which I regularly make myself since having left Korea)
- Jeyuk bokkeum (제육볶음) — Stir-fried pork
- Ojingeo bokkeum (오징어볶음) — Stir-fried squid
- Gochujang bokkeum (고추장볶음) — Stir-fried meat with chili paste

## Grilled — gui (구이)



Grilled short rib patties

By Minseong Kim [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Songjeong\\_Tteokgalbi.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Songjeong_Tteokgalbi.jpg)

Like most of these cooking methods, gui dishes can be grilled meat, fish, or vegetables.

- Sogogi pyeonchae (소고기편채) — Pan-fried beef with vegetables
- Tteok galbi (떡갈비) — Grilled short rib patties
- Ori gui (오리구이) — Grilled duck
- Chuncheon dak galbi (춘천닭갈비) — Spicy grilled chicken

## Beverages (음료수)



Soju

By Clément Bucco-Lechat [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soju\\_in\\_korean\\_restaurant.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Soju_in_korean_restaurant.JPG)

Here are some beverages to get you started:

- Mul (물) — Water
- Cha (차) — Tea
- Keopi (커피) — Coffee
- Sujeonggwa (수정과) — A sweet punch with persimmon, cinnamon, and ginger.
- Omija hwachae (오미자화채) — Omija punch (Sweet yet tangy, served with small slices of Asian pear)
- Maekju (맥주) — Beer
- Soju (소주) — Distilled rice liquor ("Korea's most popular alcohol," 20% alcohol, very inexpensive, often drunk from shot glasses—though it's completely normal to sip at the shot glass during a meal.)
- Somaek (소맥) — Mix of soju + beer (You can dump a shot of soju into your beer to make this mix of soju and maekju. Apparently the best ratio is three parts soju to seven parts beer.)
- Makgeolli (막걸리) — Rice wine (Milky color, 6-8% alcohol)
- Podoju (포도주) — Wine

To say "cheers" in Korean, say "*gun bae*" (건배). (The "g" is harder, almost like a "k." Likewise, the "b" in "bae" is closer to a "p.")

## 6. Kimbap Restaurants

Kimbap restaurants can almost be thought of as a healthy version of Korean "fast food." The food comes quickly, it's cheap, it's delicious, and it's much healthier than actual fast food.

When I lived in Korea, on Saturdays a group of friends and I would usually grab lunch at a kimbap place before our Korean language class, getting tons of dishes to share. We'd stuff ourselves full of freshly prepared Korean food, often unable to finish everything—and pay only 3,000-4,000 KRW per person (under \$3-4 USD). Yum! (Below is one of those very meals.)



There are many local, one-off kimbap restaurants, and there are also chains. Two popular kimbap chains are:

- Kimbap Nara — 김밥나라 (Meaning: Kimbap Country)
- Kimbap Cheonguk — 김밥천국 (Meaning: Kimbap Heaven)

These types of restaurants have huge menus (70-80 items)—partially because they'll offer many variations of the same types of dish, which we'll see below.

But because of this lengthy menu, many sit-down places will have a pad of paper sitting at each table, where you'll put quantities next to the items you want. (The pad will probably be near that box on the table which holds the chopsticks and spoons, remember that box?) When the waiter comes around, you'll just rip off the piece of paper and hand over your order. Simple!

I won't go through *every* possible dish below, but I'll let you know the main categories, and some of the variations you'll see. This way, you'll at least know which type of food each item is when you look at a menu. At the end, I'll share with you an awesome online resource: A fully translated menu from Kimbap Nara. It's gold, I tell you!

## Kimbap (김밥)

Let's begin with the dish that gives these restaurants their name: kimbap!

*Bap* is cooked rice and *kim* is seaweed, so it makes sense that *kimbap* is rice (plus veggies and other goodies) rolled up in seaweed.



The roll is then cut into bite-sized slices, making *kimbap* perfect for picnics, snacks, or a light meal. The rolls can look somewhat similar to sushi, and thus have been called "Korean sushi"—but there's no raw fish in *kimbap*!

김밥류	
원 조 김 밥	1,500원
야채(피망)김밥	2,000원
치즈 김 밥	2,000원
김치 김 밥	2,500원
참치 김 밥	2,500원
김치, 참치김밥	3,000원
소고기 김밥	3,000원
돈까스 김밥	3,000원
모듬 김 밥	3,000원
날치알 김밥	3,000원

When I said above that there are lots of variations of dishes, one of my local kimbap places had 10 different kinds of *kimbap* on the menu, for example (as seen on the left).

Here are a few types of *kimbap*:

- Chijeu kimbap (치즈김밥) — With cheese
- Yachae kimbap (야채김밥) — All veggies, no meat
- Soegogi kimbap (쇠고기김밥) — With beef

## Bibimbap (비빔밥)



Korea.net

*Bibimbap* (bee-beem-bap) is a bowl of warm, white rice, topped with lots of different colorful veggies and a spicy red sauce. Common variations include meat and/or an egg as well.

You should stir everything together before eating. (If you want to break down the word again, *bibim* means "mix," and, as you know, *bap* is cooked rice!)

- Dolsot bibimbap (돌솥 비빔밥) — Served in a very hot stone pot, often with an egg cracked on top (which you should then mix around to cook as it hits the hot, hot sides of the bowl).

## Bokkeumbap (볶음밥)

We've already seen this one before, up in the traditional foods section, so I'll keep it brief. This is stir-fried rice with vegetables—and it's a favorite of mine.

- Saewoo bokkeum bap (새우 볶음밥) — Shrimp fried rice

## Dapbap (덮밥)

Here are some more dishes that will come with rice!

- Ojingeo dapbap (오징어덮밥) — Spicy stir-fried squid with rice
- Jaeyuk dapbap (제육덮밥) — Stir fried pork and some veggies served with rice

## Jjigae (찌개) / Guk (국) / Tang (탕)

You've seen all three of these before in the Korean restaurants section, but I wanted to point out that you can get stews and soups at kimbap places too.

## Ddeokbokki (떡볶이)



A common street food, *ddeokbokki* (soft rice cakes and fish cakes in spicy red sauce) is also often found in kimbap restaurants as well.

## Mandu (만두)



*Mandu* are dumplings! Here are a few possible types:

- Kimchi mandu (김치 만두) — Kimchi dumplings
- Gogi mandu (고기만두) — Meat dumplings
- Ddeok mandu guk (떡만두 국) — Soup with sliced rice cakes and meat dumplings

## Ramyeon (라면)

Yes, ramen soup is something you can order at a restaurant in Korea! This Korean noodle soup is often spicy.

- Mandu ramyeon (만두라면) — Ramen soup with dumplings
- Kimchi ramyeon (김치라면) — Ramen and kimchi soup

## Udon (우동)

*Udon* are thicker, wheat-based noodles, usually found in milder soups.

- Jjam-ppeong-udon (짬뽕우동) — Spicy seafood noodle soup
- Bokkeum udon (볶음우동) — Stir-fried noodles and vegetables

## Donkas (돈가스)



*Donkas* are deep-fried pork cutlets. Fun fact: They're the Korean version of Japanese tonkatsu, which the Japanese adapted from the Austrian schnitzel!

With that start, here's a fully translated Kimbap Nara menu from the blog *Mary Eats*:

<http://maryeats.com/2006/11/16/kimbap-nara-menu/>

## 7. Korean Barbecue

Going out for Korean barbecue is a delicious, fun experience, as you get to cook the meat yourself right at the table!

These types of restaurants are easy to spot just by looking in the window because the tables have wide, tubular vents coming down over every table.

It looks like this:



### *Cuts of Meat*

First, you need to decide which type of meat to order. Normally in a group you'll get several servings of different types of meats for everyone to share (rather than ordering individually).

The most popular cut in Korea is *ssamgyepsal*, which is pork with three layers of fat. (Did you catch the number *sahm* (three) in the name?)

Here are more cuts of meat that you might see:

## Pork Cuts

- Samgyeopsal (삼겹살) — Three-layered pork belly
- Ogyeopsal (오겹살) — Five-layered pork belly
- Saenggui (생구이) — Fresh grilled pork belly
- Moksalsal (목살) — Neck meat or pork chop
- Dwaengi galbi (돼지갈비) — Pork rib meat (Usually marinated before grilling)
- Dwaengi bulgogi (돼지불고기) — Very thin strips of grilled or stir-fried marinated pork

I found the *ssamgyeopsal* too fatty for my liking—and so did my sensitive stomach—so you could try the flavorful but less fatty *galmaegisalsal* (갈매기살), which are thin strips of skirtmeat.

## Beef Cuts

- Deungsim (등심) — Sirloin
- Ansim (안심) — Tenderloin
- Kkot deungsim (꽃등심) — Rib eye
- Galbialsal (갈비살) — Thin strips of rib meat
- Bulgogi (불고기) — Thin slices of marinated beef (This is popular, and most often when you hear "bulgogi" it'll be referring to marinated *beef*)

There are tons of different meat cuts—especially looking at both pork and beef. I've kept it simple above, but here are the best guides I've found online on Korean meat cuts, which are much more detailed in case you're interested:

- ["Know Your Beef Cut" from Kimchimari](http://kimchimari.com/2012/01/28/know-your-beef-cut/)  
<http://kimchimari.com/2012/01/28/know-your-beef-cut/>
- ["Know Your Pork Cut" from Kimchimari](http://kimchimari.com/know-your-pork-cut/)  
<http://kimchimari.com/know-your-pork-cut/>
- ["Korean BBQ Guide" from My Destination Seoul](http://www.mydestination.com/seoul/usefulinfo/6181370/korean-bbq-guide)  
<http://www.mydestination.com/seoul/usefulinfo/6181370/korean-bbq-guide>

# Ordering Your Meat

Here's a template you can use to order:

[Meat cut] + [# of servings (in sino-Korean number)] **inbun** + **jusayo**

For example, for four servings of bulgogi, we'd say:

*bulgogi sah inbun jusayo* (불고기 사인분 주세요)

Which from left to right, is like saying "bulgogi four servings please," but means "Four servings of bulgogi, please!"

## Here are the sino-Korean numbers to order servings:

- **Il** inbun (일인분) — 1 serving (That's I-L for "one," said almost like a mix between "ill" and "eel"—hear it pronounced [here](#))
- **Ee** inbun (이인분) — 2 servings
- **Sahm** inbun (삼인분) — 3 servings
- **Sah** inbun (사인분) — 4 servings
- **Oh** inbun (오인분) — 5 servings

You should be served side dishes (*banchan*) and a bowl of leafy greens for making *ssam*, which I'll explain below. Sometimes the meat will come with a soup (*guk*) or stew (*jjigae*).

# How to Cook the Meat

There should be a pair of scissors and tongs at your table. Use them to put the raw meat on the grill, cook it, and cut it into smaller pieces for eating.



Often there's raw garlic in the bowl of leafy greens (or served somewhere on the table). If this is the case, throw the garlic on the grill with the meat, as it's meant to be grilled.

## Changing grills

The staff will come around and change your grill for a fresh one at least once during the meal, when it's notably charred black. They'll have special tongs to pick up the grill off the fire, and to put on a new one.

If someone's heading over to do this, you could help out by taking off any remaining meat/veggies from the grill. Don't freak out about it, though—they're really good at doing this too, and won't mind helping out.

## Eating Your Barbecue

All right, now you've cooked your meat. How do you eat it? It's totally fine to just grab a small piece directly from the grill with your chopsticks, dip it in a sauce, and pop it in your mouth.

You can also eat the meat in *ssam*, which quickly became one of my favorites in Korea.

## Ssam

*Ssam* is a wrap, which is why you'll be given a basket of various leaves/greens at your table.

Pick up a leaf (holding it in your hand is okay), and put on a piece of meat, sauce, and perhaps a little bit from one of the veggie side dishes.



Wrap it up and put the whole thing in your mouth. Yup, the norm is to eat the whole thing at once—so keep it small! Note that *ssam* are usually simple; don't pack it full like a burrito.

## Rice

I like making my *ssam* with rice, sauce, and the meat. If you want rice but it wasn't included with your meal, just ask for some “*bap*” (say: *bap jusayo*). At my local BBQ, a bowl of rice cost just 1,000 KRW (less than \$1).

The first time eating Korean barbecue can be perhaps the most intimidating type of Korean meal for foreigners, but now that you've read this guide, you're totally ready to enjoy the incredibly satisfying experience of Korean barbecue!

## 8. Shabu Shabu

*Shabu shabu* is a Japanese dish that's common in Korea. Like Korean barbecue, shabu shabu is prepared right at the table—though this time it's a pot of hot broth which you'll have cooking in front of you. This means there are particular restaurants just for shabu shabu, as their tables are designed for it. I absolutely love this hearty, interactive, drawn-out meal—so I had to include it!



In Korea, shabu shabu is a three-course affair:

- 1) Meat and veggies
- 2) Noodle soup
- 3) Rice (porridge)

### *Meat and Veggies*

After you order (often just by picking a type of meat), someone on the waitstaff will normally turn on the flame and pour broth into the pot.

At some places you might have a choice between a few types of broth. (The photo on the next page is from a shabu shabu place I went to which lets you have two different types of broth divided in the same pot.)



Then, they'll bring out plates of raw vegetables and raw, thinly-sliced meat. You'll also have many little side dishes per usual—kimchi will be one, of course!

Often the noodles and rice are also brought out at this time, but you'll want to set them aside for later. At the shabu shabu place in the town where I lived, they had a little shelf underneath the table for the noodles and rice. Later you'd just grab them when you were ready.

Using tongs, grab some veggies and meat, and throw them in the hot pot to cook. The meat will cook rather quickly, since it's so thin. Then, whenever the various food items are cooked to your liking, you can grab in with your chopsticks to put a bit on your plate, or ladle a spoonful into your bowl. Feel free to dip a piece of meat into one of the sauces, and plop it in your mouth.

It's best to do a couple rounds of cooking, meaning that you won't want to throw *all* of the vegetables in at once. We usually put in some veggies first (whatever takes longer to cook), then a few minutes later add a round of meat, and then you'll want to dial down the heat a bit until you're ready for cooking session #2 (and repeat).

## Rice paper



During this first "course," there should also be rice paper at your table. Sometimes they're big circles, or other times, rectangles (as pictured left).

With your chopsticks, you'll want to dip these in hot water for a few seconds to soften them. I've been at shabu shabu restaurants which give

you a separate bowl of hot water for this purpose, and others where you just have to dip it into the broth.

Then, you can lay it on your plate, place a few veggies/meat/sauce in the center, and finally roll it up to eat.

## *Noodle Soup*

When everyone's had their fill of this first round (which takes up at least half of the meal time, I'd say—if not two-thirds), you can add the fresh noodles into the pot to cook.



Whether you eat them with the broth as a soup, or without as plain noodles, they're excellent.

## *Rice*

Although I'd usually be stuffed by this point, I always looked forward to the tasty, final rice/porridge course. At my local shabu shabu restaurant, one of the servers would come over and do this part for you, but I think it's normal to do it on your own (like the noodles).

First they would remove any extra broth (and any remaining veggies/noodles) from the pot, which you'll want to do as well.

This leaves a smaller layer of broth, which should just cover the rice (which was partially cooked) after you add it in. The bowl of rice will have a bit of seasoning. (At my local place, it always had a piece of squash—which was divine.)

So after dumping the bowl of rice and seasonings into the pot, the server would then stir slowly for several minutes, mashing the piece of squash with the back of the ladle as they did so. When the rice is all cooked and little to no broth remains, turn off the heat.

Serve the rice/porridge and enjoy!

## 9. Chains in Korea

We saw two chains—Kimbap Nara and Kimbap Cheonguk—earlier, but here are a few other common chains (there are many more!) in Korea for grabbing a quick bite to eat:

### *Paris Baguette / Tous Les Jours*



Both of these are two different chains with different pastry, sandwich, salad, wrap, etc. items.

You grab a tray, thin paper tray cover, and tongs near the door, and then grab what you want and place it on your tray, finally paying at the front. You can either take it to go or eat inside.

This is a nice option for a quick meal, as you don't need to know the names of anything to order—just grab what you want! Note that you can also usually find loaves of sliced white bread and peanut butter at these stores, which is less common in grocery stores.

### *Isaac Toast (이삭토스트)*



Nice for breakfast or an anytime filler, Isaac Toast serves up a variety of different grilled sandwiches, just as the name suggests. Lots of these have walk-up windows right on the street, so you order right there to go, and then watch as your sandwich is grilled in front of you.

## Jaws Ddeokbokki (쥬스떡볶이)



Jaws Ddeokbokki is a chain that serves cheap street food—often with a window opening onto the street. Just look for the image of the shark fin in the red/white store name, and you'll know you've found Jaws.

## Lotteria



Lotteria.com

This is a fast-food chain (think: Burger King). I actually never ate here myself because I try to avoid fast food, but if you're in the mood, come here to see what fast food is like in Korea!

## Pizza School



This is a pizza chain with pizzas ranging from 5,000-11,000 KRW in price (less than \$5-11 USD). Here's their current menu: <http://pizzaschool.net/menu/>

## Convenience Stores (7-11, GS-25)



[https://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/%ED%8C%8C%EC%9D%BC:Korea\\_GS25\\_convenience\\_store.jpg](https://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/%ED%8C%8C%EC%9D%BC:Korea_GS25_convenience_store.jpg)

Convenience stores are all over in Korea, and you can always find a quick meal/snack there. Most have microwaves available to use for those who buy something that needs to be heated up.

My favorite convenience store buy is *samgak kimbap* 삼각김밥, which is rice in the shape of a triangle, with some type of filling inside, all wrapped in seaweed (think: convenience store kimbap). If you unwrap the plastic packaging correctly on your first try, you'll really have bragging rights! These will be in a refrigerated section; just look for a green triangle wrapped in plastic.

Korea is huge in technology, so I'll mention that it's common for folks to hand over their phone at the front counter of convenience stores—for them to charge it while you shop/eat.

# 10. Additional Resources

## *Helpful Korean Food Apps*

If you have a smartphone, here are two free Korean food apps I recommend downloading to take along with this guide.

### **Korean Menu Guide** by Korean Food Foundation

iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/korean-menu-guide/id538700853?mt=8>

This simple yet handy international Korean food guide divides Korean food into categories, clearly labeled in English (i.e. Cooked Grains, Porridge, Noodles & Dumplings, Soups, etc.) Once inside each category, swipe to see examples of foods. Each item has an image, the name in Korean, the pronunciation, and English translation, plus a brief description in English.

### **Korean Food Guide 800** by The Korea Foundation

iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/korean-food-guide-800/id896936657?mt=8>

Google Play: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.kf.KoreaFoodGuide>

At 800 total, there are a ton more items in this app than the "Korean Menu Guide," so it's much more complete. It could get overwhelming, but there is a bookmark feature to save items of interest.

The nice thing about this app is that each item page has a little speaker button next to the Korean, which when tapped, will say the name of the food aloud in Korean.

Foods are sorted into two main categories, which you'll see on the main menu: "Ingredients" (i.e. Grains, Beans, Vegetables, Root Vegetables, etc.) and "Cooking Methods" (i.e. Cooked Rice, Porridge, Soups, Stews, Hot Pot, etc.).

I wish this app had existed when I was in Korea!

# Korean Food Blogs

## Maangchi

<http://www.maangchi.com/>

*Maangchi* is the site of a Korean woman (now living in New York) who posts videos of herself cooking Korean dishes. They're super helpful, and have accompanying blog posts which list all of the ingredients and steps as well.

So if there's any dish you're curious about, look it up on *Maangchi* to find all of the ingredients and how it's usually prepared.

## Seoulistic

<http://seoulistic.com>

*Seoulistic* is created by Keith Kim, a Korean-American who resides in Seoul. It has tons of great resources for travelers or people moving to Korea.

- "[Complete Guide to Korean Street Food with Pictures](http://seoulistic.com/travel-to-korea/complete-guide-korean-street-food-pictures/)" via *Seoulistic*

## Eat Your Kimchi (EYK)

<http://www.eatyourkimchi.com/>

When eating foreign food in a brand new country where you don't speak the language, it's really helpful to see it done before you go and try ordering yourself. That's where *Eat Your Kimchi* comes in handy, a site featuring videos made by Simon and Martina, Canadian expats who moved to Korea in 2008.

Here are some videos to get you started:

- "What Is Shabu Shabu?"  
<http://www.eatyourkimchi.com/shabu-shabu/>
- "Jaws Dukkbokki"  
<http://www.eatyourkimchi.com/jaws/>
- "How to Survive a Korean Bar"  
<http://www.eatyourkimchi.com/how-to-survive-a-korean-bar/>
- "Korean Street Food Wonderfulness"  
<http://www.eatyourkimchi.com/korean-street-food-wonderfulness/>

## *Korea Travel Hotline - 1330*

Operated by the Korea Tourism Organization, dialing 1330 in Korea will take you to their free travel hotline—which is amazingly open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. You can even call from Skype!

English is one of the four languages their specialists are trained in, so you can ask any questions about attractions, transportation, accommodation, etc.—but also about food and restaurants. Representatives can even translate/interpret for you on the spot! So this is a very useful number to know whether you're traveling in or moving to Korea.

Here's the site for more information:

[http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/GK/GK\\_EN\\_2\\_7\\_1\\_1.jsp](http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/GK/GK_EN_2_7_1_1.jsp)

## *American Food - iHerb.com*

If you're an American expat in Korea and are craving an ingredient from home, see if you can find it on [iherb.com](http://iherb.com). Food ships from California to Korea for only \$4, and it's super fast! (I ordered a box every couple of months while living in Korea.) For \$5 off your first order, feel free to use my referral code QNK798.

If you find yourself in Seoul, head to the **Itaewon** neighborhood for whatever type of foreign food you're craving—American, Mexican, etc.

# Closing Remarks

Well, friends, that brings us to the end of your intro to Korean food, but your journey has only just begun.

I hope you feel better prepared to order food in The Land of the Morning Calm, or even excited to eat at a Korean restaurant in your home country.

I'm certainly excited to know the dishes in these pages will soon have new, rich, full meaning for you.

I wonder...

Will you fall in love with kimchi, as I did?

Will you have a favorite between Korean barbecue, shabu shabu, and kimbap restaurants?

And how did this guide affect your experience?

I welcome you to fill me in:

[www.rebeccarosethering.com](http://www.rebeccarosethering.com)

**Email:** rebeccarosethering [at] gmail [dot] com

May your time in Korea be enjoyable and keep your taste buds buzzing with joy!

Sincerely,

Rebecca