

FORK IN THE ROAD

Beyond barbecue, kimchi

Korean cuisine offers much more than the standard fare known to Americans

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When I was young, I went through a phase where I hated Korean food. My mother would make fresh, home-cooked meals. And instead of realizing what a treat that was, I would ask why we couldn't just eat TV dinners like all my friends. But these days, there's no cuisine I enjoy more than Korean. And if someone else is willing to cook it for me, all the better!

So when my family and I traveled to South Korea in the fall, eating well was a top priority.

Americans are familiar with Korean barbecue beef and kimchi (the spicy, fermented cabbage dish now touted as a good source of probiotics). And while those dishes certainly are components of the Korean diet, there's so much more.

Let me take a moment to give a shout out to Daegu. The fourth-largest city in Korea — after Seoul, Busan



The fourth-largest city in Korea — after Seoul, Busan and Incheon — Daegu has a bit of a maligned reputation. When I talked to people about what we might do there, the most common answer was, “Nothing. There’s nothing to see, no place worth eating at. The best restaurant there is McDonald’s.”

Au contraire.

My little family enjoyed some of our best days in Daegu, visiting the local temples, taking our son to the child-friendly Eco Park at Herb Hillz and enjoying the city’s cuisine.

After visiting the Tongil-daebul Buddha on Mount Palgongsan, we had lunch at a little restaurant that served a set meal that included pork belly, soup and vegetables. But my favorite dish was Gondeure Dolsot Bap, which is lightly seasoned cirsium setidens served over rice in a piping-hot stone bowl. The vegetables have a slightly bitter taste, which you can neutralize with a few spoonfuls of soybean paste soup or some pickled vegetables. I enjoyed it simply mixed together with the rice. It was hearty, refreshing, healthy and delicious.

Beef is relatively expensive in Korea, but I found the seafood to be reasonably priced, especially in the coastal city of Busan. If you like sashimi, you’ll love the thinly sliced pieces of fish, served with a spicy red pepper-based dipping sauce. Also try the dongnae pajeon, a Busan delicacy. The crispy, savory pancake is filled with green onions, seafood and beef.

My 6-year-old son is an adventurous eater, but he still gets homesick for his comfort foods, such as a bowl of white rice, some crisped and seasoned seaweed and mandu (Korean fried dumplings). At many



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Gondeure Dolsot Bap is a dish of lightly seasoned cirsium setidens served in a hot stone bowl. Pickled vegetables can help balance its slight bitterness.



Korean dumplings, known as mandu, are served steamed or fried.

mother made when I was a child, we headed to the tourist-friendly neighborhood of Insadong in Seoul. Outside the tiny Bukchon Son Mandu restaurant, where the line to get inside wrapped around the corner, we could see the workers stuffing the fresh, plump dumplings with mung beans, pork, tofu and assorted vegetables. Served right out of the sizzling

ber of restaurants that didn’t serve rice at the beginning of the meal but rather at the end, almost like a palate cleanser.

“Traditionally you eat the meat first,” said author Taekyung Chung, who co-wrote “The Korean Table” (Tuttle Publishing, \$27.95) with Debra Samuels. “Then side dishes and rice at



Vegetable are used generously in Korean food.

Then there are the extremes

As with all cuisines, there are local specialties — loved by natives — that may be a bit much for foreign palates to stomach. In an American bar, you might have some peanuts or popcorn with your beer. In Korea, you’re just as likely to be served a small bowl of dried cuttlefish and anchovies.

densed milk, various fruits, syrup, cereal, nuts, etc. Personally, I find it disgusting. But I’m also not a fan of bubble tea (boba milk tea) or milk-based smoothies.

While Koreans have a rightly deserved reputation for enjoying red-hot spicy meals, they like to add a bit of sweetness to some dishes

toes are served with a tiny bit of sugar sprinkled on top. Many people think this is weird. But if you haven’t eaten chilled, sweetened slices of tomatoes, you’re missing out on a tasty treat.

But then there are other items ruined by too much sweetness. For instance, K-pop star Hyuna won a makeshift cooking contest

of the nicer restaurants we dined at, we couldn't get any of this. And at the more basic restaurants, the mandu was frozen and reheated rather than made fresh.

For mandu like my

fryer, they were greasy, but also ridiculously delicious. We bought extra to eat later in our hotel, and they held up well without reheating.

One of the things that surprised me was the num-

the end. Many important elements of the Korean diet are vegetable-based, with standard items like kimchi and namul (vegetables) being prominent nonmeat dishes."

and anchovies.

A popular dessert in Korea is patbingsu. Originally, the treat consisted of shaved ice, sweet rice cakes and red bean paste. These days the shaved-ice base is covered with con-

of sweetness to some dishes that we consider to be savory. My son was surprised when his plate of waffles was served with a side of tomatoes. I explained to him that in many Korean households, toma-

makeshift cooking contest by serving a perfectly sectioned grapefruit slathered with condensed milk. And if you see garlic bread sold in stores, be warned that there's a good chance it will have sugar sprinkled on.