

"Bon Appétit, Your Majesty" is Delectable

But why is the fictional king based on a real-life despot?

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폭군의 셰프

☆☆☆ (out of ☆☆☆☆)

Yeon Ji-yeong (played by Im Yoon-ah)

Yi Heon (played by Lee Chae-min)

↑*Note: Korean names denote the surname followed by the given name.*

This show was included in my [Teen Vogue round-up](#) of the best K-dramas of 2025:

Bon Appetit, Your Majesty is a delicious mashup of sageuk (or historical dramas), time travel, and mukbang. The developing love story between 21st century Michelin-star rated chef Ji-yeong (Im Yoon-ah), and Yi Heon (Lee Chae-min) — the petulant king of Joseon — is driven by their shared love of unique, beautifully-prepared food. Ji-yeong can stay in the king's good grace if she cooks him something different at each meal. If she doesn't, or if he doesn't care for what she prepares, she will die.



This K-drama has more mouth-watering scenes than any other show in recent memory, as it introduces current Korean staples like bibimbap, samgyetang (ginseng chicken soup), and pajeon (green onion pancakes) to his majesty. While the plot gets a bit anemic towards the end, the leads share warm chemistry as they fall in love with each other, and with the meals Ji-yeong prepares. (Netflix)

There was a lot that I couldn't get into in the above blurb, so I'll address them here.

This show is a work of fiction, but King Yi Heon is based on Yeonsangun, the real-life tyrannical King of Joseon.

Bon Appetit, Your Majesty is presented as a relatively light rom-com with two incredibly attractive leads. Most viewers outside of South Korea will not realize that Yeonsangun was by all accounts a despised ruler who shut down the royal university **Sungkyunkwan**, displaced more than 20,000 subjects to expand his own hunting grounds, enforced slave labor, and kidnapped thousands of women and girls to be his sex slaves.

Some of these elements are addressed in the series. Like the real king he's based on, Yi Heon has no issues stealing land from the people he rules over. In several scenes in the show, he petulantly and without shame announces that everything in Joseon is his.

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When the king's attendant selects which of the kidnapped women will *belong* to Yi Heon, Ji-yeong is spared because as pretty as she is, she's deemed *too old*. Ji-yeong is both relieved and insulted by how her worthiness has been determined. But then Ji-yeong realizes that being considered too old can also spare her teenage friend, Gil-geum (Yoon Seo-ah). She tells the younger girl to lie about her age. (In that era, girls

were married off in their teens. By their early 20s, they were unmarriageable. I would assume there was no minimum age for girls who were targeted specifically for sex.)

Later, an envoy for the Ming Dynasty demands that the king hand over Joseon women for him to take back home. And then he ups the ante by saying he wants Ji-yeong specifically.

Men wanting ownership over women's bodies has existed since the beginning of time, so that storyline isn't out of place in a sageuk. But I wondered why the showrunners chose such a polarizing king as the basis for the storyline.



I have two theories:

1) Korean shows are first and foremost intended for Koreans living in South Korea (and perhaps also Korean diaspora). So a good chunk of the South Korean viewing audience will know immediately who Yi Heon is based on, which may plant the seed in their heads that this is a horrible man not worthy of getting attached to. And in the early episodes, he is exactly that. He's just good looking, which still makes his actions inexcusable, but we don't mind looking at his face.

As the storyline weaves in more tender vignettes between him and Ji-yeong, the viewers' emotional dissonance shift as the villain-to-hero redemption arc takes over. Yi Heon's change is due to his relationship with Ji-yeong, influencing the viewers' **theory of mind**, perhaps even challenging what bad things we may secretly desire to do if we could. (Me? I'd love to slap a few people. You know who you are.)

2) I honestly don't think the Korean creatives were too concerned with foreigners' reaction to the fictional king sharing traits with the real-life despot. Most non-Koreans wouldn't know who Yeonsangun even was.

With the time slip element, the modern language the cast uses — yeah, no one in Joseon was using the English loan word “want” — and how Yi Heon doesn't even execute the concubines who mouthe off to him, this is clearly not a retelling of historical facts.

Do you think the K-drama would've been better if Yi Heon hadn't been based on the real-life king Yeonsangun? Did it bother you (or not)? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

Airdates: Twelve hour-long episodes aired on tvN from August 23 through September 28, 2025. (I watched this on Netflix.)

Bon Appétit, Your Majesty | Official Trailer | Netflix

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