

Popularizing Korean food

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In response to the recent series called “Globalization of Korean Food” that ran in the JoongAng Ilbo and JoongAng Daily, four culinary experts got together to chew over the current state of Korean cuisine.

Suh Dae-won said he entertained hundreds of guests over the years during his 30 years as a career diplomat, but during that time he noticed that not much changed in terms of the dishes offered.



Lobster tteokbokki, or spicy broiled rice cakes with lobster, developed at the restaurant Gaon in Beijing. [JoongAng Ilbo]

“I still worry about the menu and what to serve my guests,” he said. “We need to find practical and reasonably priced food that appeals to the rest of the world.”

Choi Jung-wha, an image consultant specializing in overseas perceptions of Korea, agrees. “Westerners serve a three-course meal, for example, but we tend to serve a lot of food on the table at once. Targeting a wider audience through Western-styled course menus is a good way forward.”

The key is versatility. “I think it’s good to deviate from your usual kimchi and bulgogi to fit the demands of the customers,” Choi added.

The experts also pointed out that a crucial part of tourism involves culture.

“One way to introduce ourselves to the rest of the world is to present our food to foreigners with confidence,” said Cho Tae-kwan, who runs the Korean restaurant Gaon in Beijing.

“We cannot merely think about it, we must put it into action.”

It’s not just versatility that’s required. Variety is also called for, according to Samuel Koo, who heads the Seoul Tourism Organization. “We need restaurants that can wow millionaires and fast food joints that can efficiently serve the populace,” said Cho, emphasizing the need for better training for chefs.

This point was picked up by Choi, who argued that instead of asking budding chefs to fulfill their mandatory military duty, they should be dispatched overseas.

“The experience can improve their second language skills and give them valuable experience abroad,” Choi said.

In the past, chefs working for Korean diplomats abroad lacked proper training, said Suh.

“However, nowadays, I heard many young chefs go overseas to fill such positions. It’s a positive change,” he said.

As for food culture, not many Koreans consider food part of culture.

Instead, people often ask for a dish that can be served in the least amount of time.

“While there are people who are in a rush, the behavior stems from the overriding idea that food is being consumed merely to fill the stomach,” Choi



One of the signature dishes at the restaurant Poom in Seoul.
[JoongAng Ilbo]

continued.

To shift public attitudes, it's important to make people proud of Korean cuisine. "First, restaurant owners must avoid recycling side dishes and provide a respectable level of customer service," said Koo.

Consequently, all four speakers insisted there is an urgent need to improve the quality of Korean food.

"A recent survey asked foreigners why they don't enjoy Korean cuisine. The first reason was they were not accustomed to the flavor," Choi said.

"Second, the smell was too strong, and third was the unsanitary interior and practices at the restaurants they visited."

He felt that it was too early to sit back and think Korean cuisine will continue to attract interest from foreigners just because the food enjoys a higher profile than before.

"The Japanese have been working on globalizing their food for the past 150 years," said Cho.

"In the effort to globalize Korean cuisine, it is necessary to focus on two points: dishes which please the foreign palate which also contain elements that are uniquely Korean."

The Japanese have taken Western foods and conformed it to their liking, Jo added, explaining that tonkatsu, a fried pork cutlet, originated from an English pork cutlet and German schnitzel but is now widely consumed with rice and chopsticks in many parts of the world.

“Part of the problem lies in the presentation,” said Koo.

“Dishes are often served in cheap plastic dishes and fruit desserts are served even before the main course is finished. We need to raise the bar to meet global standards.”

By Chun Su-jin JoongAng
Ilbo
[jason@joongang.co.kr]



Samuel Koo

Koo started his career as an English media journalist in Korea, then moved onto Unicef and other global organizations. He served as the head of Arirang TV prior to his current position as the head of Seoul Tourism Organization. Koo has a strong interest in culinary cultures.



Suh Dae-won

Seo served for over 30 years as a diplomat. He has shown a strong interest in introducing Korean culture and cuisine abroad. He is currently an adviser at Hyundai Rotem and an endowed chair professor at Kangwon University.



Cho Tae-kwon

The chairman of ceramics manufacturer KwanJuYo has taken steps to market Korean food with a restaurant called Gaon in Beijing, China.



Choi received her Ph.D. in



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