

# FROM THE TEMPLE, FOR THE TEMPLE

**MARIANA ZAPATA** takes you inside a one-of-a-kind restaurant, where the food is spiritual nourishment.

**VISITORS IN SEARCH OF** an acclaimed monastic meal in Seoul might be surprised to find that the directions to the Balwoo Gongyang restaurant lead them not to the beautiful Jogyesa Temple but to the concrete building in front of it.

Once inside, however, it all starts to set in. The decoration is tastefully austere. Rooms for private dining are separated by doors of wood and paper. In the open dining room, a slow murmur of conversation hums, barely audible. The words for a premeal chant hang on the walls of each room.

Balwoo Gongyang is unlike any other restaurant—in a temple or otherwise. The establishment, run by the Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, is wholly unconcerned with profit. Its purpose is to share temple food and spiritual principles with the world.

Other temples also share temple food with guests, but Balwoo Gongyang is set apart because it specializes in food that is usually served on special occasions and that laypeople normally wouldn't experience. It has earned a Michelin star for three consecutive years.

Temple food is a specific gastronomy connected to the 1,700-year-old tradition of Korean Buddhism. No animal products can be used, and every meal must be completely organic and

Head Chef Kim Ji Young



Five pungent vegetables are forbidden in Korean temple food because of their perceived role in hindering spiritual practice and meditation: garlic, onion, green onion, leeks, and chives.

Top: View of Jogyesa Temple from Balwoo Gongyang. Above: Rice, soup, and side dishes.



local, with ingredients grown by monks from nearby temples, flavored only by natural ingredients. These restrictions encourage a path to enlightenment and ensure nourishment and health for the physical body.

In temples, each meal is an opportunity for monks to practice balance and steer away from greed. They must perform a prayer before eating, then proceed to take only what their body needs—not too little, not too much. Eating itself is an exercise in mindfulness, equilibrium, and meditation. Not even a single grain of rice is wasted, as water is poured into the bowls and drunk along with any residual food.

“Buddhist ideas say we must show appreciation to the many hands that touched the rice and to nature because it created the rice. We should show appreciation to the rice itself because it is technically sacrificing itself for our survival,” says head chef Kim Ji Young. “Rather than focusing on your desires and your hunger, and thinking [the food] is so delicious, you focus on appreciating these values.”

Of course, in a restaurant setting maintaining these values and the principle of zero waste is a bit more difficult, and one of the dilemmas Kim acknowledges Balwoo



Gongyang faces. To battle this, the staff encourages people to ask to taste ingredients they are unsure about and to “eat slowly and taste the food.” Doing so helps people appreciate the meal not only for its exquisite flavors but for the nourishment it brings to the body. The shift in mentality from overindulgence to spiritual contemplation allows for less food to be wasted and for a richer experience for diners.

The restaurant offers five seasonal menus, each of which consists of six or seven courses. Prices range from the equivalent of about \$30 dollars to several times that. Free from preservatives and artificial flavors, grown with time and love, and kept fresh by proximity to their source, the ingredients used in each menu seek to stimulate the senses and foster awareness. Roots play a strong role, boiled or fried to achieve different textures, as do pickled vegetables.

Temple food’s austere rules can be challenging, Kim admits, especially in the winter when the variety of food the monks are able to grow dwindles. But this challenge is also what brings her joy, allowing her to be mindful and grateful to (not just for) the ingredients she does have available. These strict restrictions seem to help creativity flourish, as familiar ingredients attain new tastes. Shiitake mushrooms, for example, gain a firm texture, almost mimicking meat, with bursts of flavor within their wrinkles.

Before finding her life’s purpose in temple food, Kim claims her cooking was a bit more fed by ego, fired by the desire to make food people liked. Of course, she still wishes to make delicious dishes, but her approach is quite different. “It’s kind of a maternal instinct,” she says. “You make the food [thinking] ‘Would it be digestive? Would it taste good? Would it comfort [the people who eat it]?’”

Her intentions are not in vain. After a meal in Balwoo Gongyang, one feels full and satisfied, but mostly clean, as if the food and the ritual it entails have purified the body and spirit. **S&H**



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