



From left: Chef Woo Joong Kwon demonstrates his modern take on traditional Korean fare during a luncheon in downtown Los Angeles; Minhong Min welcomes the attendees Photo by Jay Diaz, photo courtesy of NTO



# YOU'VE DISCOVERED KOREATOWN, NOW DISCOVER SOUTH KOREA

*L.A. knows the basics, but there's so much more to explore on a Korean trip*

In Southern California, South Korean culture is thriving. Los Angeles is home to the largest diaspora of South Korean immigrants, and many of them live in L.A.'s centrally located Koreatown, where expressions of the nation's food, art and culture abound — and radiate out to the rest of the Southland.

But Minhong Min, executive vice president for international tourism at the Korea Tourism Organization, wants you to know that there's nothing quite like the real thing.

So was the message underscored at last week's Korea Festival in Downtown L.A. The cultural showcase was hosted by KTO to encourage tourism to South Korea. Because the stomach-to-heart path is universal in any culture, the event was food-focused, highlighting traditional Korean cuisine with modern flair.

It's easy for Angelenos to say, "I know Korean food" — we're blessed with an embarrassment of culinary riches, from ubiquitous Korean BBQ to late-night tofu houses. But we've just scratched the surface. To truly experience the depth of the cuisine, Min says a visit is in order.

"There are over 200 kinds of kimchi," said Min, through an interpreter. "Most [Angelenos] stick with five [or] six different kinds."

The wild variety of foods doesn't stop there. Other items not often found at local all-you-can-eat joints include *mandu*, the Korean take on an Asian steamed dumpling. Unlike the tightly stuffed meat roll you might be used to, *mandu* often contains a flavorful mix of veggies and a light sauce — perfect for "healthy eaters" and those watching their figure, said Min.

Speaking of specialty diets, if you're within the distribution area of this newspaper, you're likely on one. Vegans, vegetarians and anyone else monitoring their caloric intake won't have to worry about their needs being lost in translation: Just head to your nearest "temple food" restaurant, said Min.

"We're very vegetarian-friendly," he said. Korean temple cuisine was developed to address the strict diets of Buddhist monks but is now considered "everyone's favorite," assured Min. If you don't eat meat, you don't have to stick to just one restaurant. "Our *banchan* — all of those a la carte menu side dishes — those are all vegetarian ... and so we're almost like a 'meat on the side' culture," said Min. Simply put, you're leaving with a full stomach and a smile no matter where you choose to dine.

To showcase the special culinary treats that await visitors, the Korea Tourism Organization brought in a ringer for their luncheon: Woo Joong Kwon, who happens to be the chef at two Michelin Star-rated Kwon Sook Soo in Seoul's posh Gangnam District. He delighted diners with a 30-year-old soy sauce he brought straight from his mother's kitchen. Like a fine Irish whisky, soy sauce, when aged, loses its salty bite and gains an uncommon depth of flavor you just can't find stateside. Each family's recipe is slightly different, lending a homestyle nuance to every dish. When added to Kwon's steamed abalone appetizer, just three drops of the special soy sauce were enough to impart an entirely new flavor profile.

Next came a course of radish, tofu and beef dumplings in cold pine nut soup. It sounds straightforward — until you realize the dish was devised 200 years before L.A. became a city.

"The recipe's 400 years old," Min said, noting that South Korea's ultra-modern cityscape and technological prowess make up just one facet of a country with nearly 5,000 years of history.



Short rib with tofu-jang and black garlic sauce rounded out the *Hansik* showcase of traditional foods Photo courtesy of NTO

"Seoul itself is [a city] of an almost 600-year history," he said. While gleaming skyscrapers might catch your eye on arrival, Min recommended heading to Bukchon Hanok Village, in the shadow of Gyeongbok Palace, the opulent and excellently preserved crown jewel of Seoul's five grand palaces. Near it is a neighborhood of 600-year-old homes where people still live. Unlike SoCal's widely lackadaisical approach to architecture, traditional *hanok* homes are built to exacting standards and based on landscape and seasonal considerations.

If you're already looking up flights — there are five daily direct departures from LAX to Seoul — you might be thinking that 13 hours over the Pacific will leave you a little travel-weary. Min, clearly privy to SoCal's wellness fixation, recommended some self-care upon arrival.

"As soon as you land, if you have one hour and want to have a one great hour, I recommend a Korean spa," he said. Known as *jjimjilbang*, the spa/sauna experience is the perfect way to unwind after a cross-planet airplane ride. Don't forget to partake in the famed Korean exfoliating treatment. You'll leave feeling soft-skinned, refreshed and completely ready to explore.

Regardless of whether you find yourself in Seoul as a landing point or as a business destination, Min recommends making the time to get out of the city and explore the natural delights that make up the South Korean landscape.

An unlikely spot to commune with nature? "The DMZ tour is very popular," Min said. That's right — he's suggesting a trip to the Korean Demilitarized Zone. The fenced-off 38th parallel separating North and South Korea has been back in the news due to recent summits between the two countries

and the U.S., but it yields unexpected natural delights. "The DMZ is full of nature that you can just feel — even though you feel a little tense," Min joked.

Families traveling for a few days? Head south. In Yongin, there's a mix of historical tradition and theme-park-style fun.

Minsok Village is a living history museum, highlighting the traditions of the Joseon Dynasty that ruled for five centuries and shaped modern Korea's culture. While there are always demonstrations, food, and fun to be had, Min said that a lucky few will see popular South Korean dramas being filmed. The village is often used as backdrop for period pieces in a manner much less annoying than the average filming-related L.A. street shutdown — needless to say, there are no high-speed car chases through the village's quaint roads.

If you're planning a snowy adventure, you'll likely remember that PyeongChang hosted the winter games earlier this year. The county, southeast of Seoul, is a mix of snow-capped peaks, a national park, and gorgeous resorts that'll make any fan of winter happy. Mass transportation options and reasonable prices beat a slog to Mammoth, and abundant snow welcomes thrill-seekers.

For those not interested in the white stuff, Min says the region has year-round appeal. Pyeongchang County is part of Gangwon Province, which has miles and miles of coastline. "It's a very unique place. [The natural areas] are very close to each other," Min said.

The mountains and the beach all in the same day? South Korea and L.A. might not be so different after all.

—ALAN LAGUARDIA  
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Radish dumpling in cold pine nut soup and steamed abalone, caviar and 30-year-old soy sauce Photo courtesy of NTO

