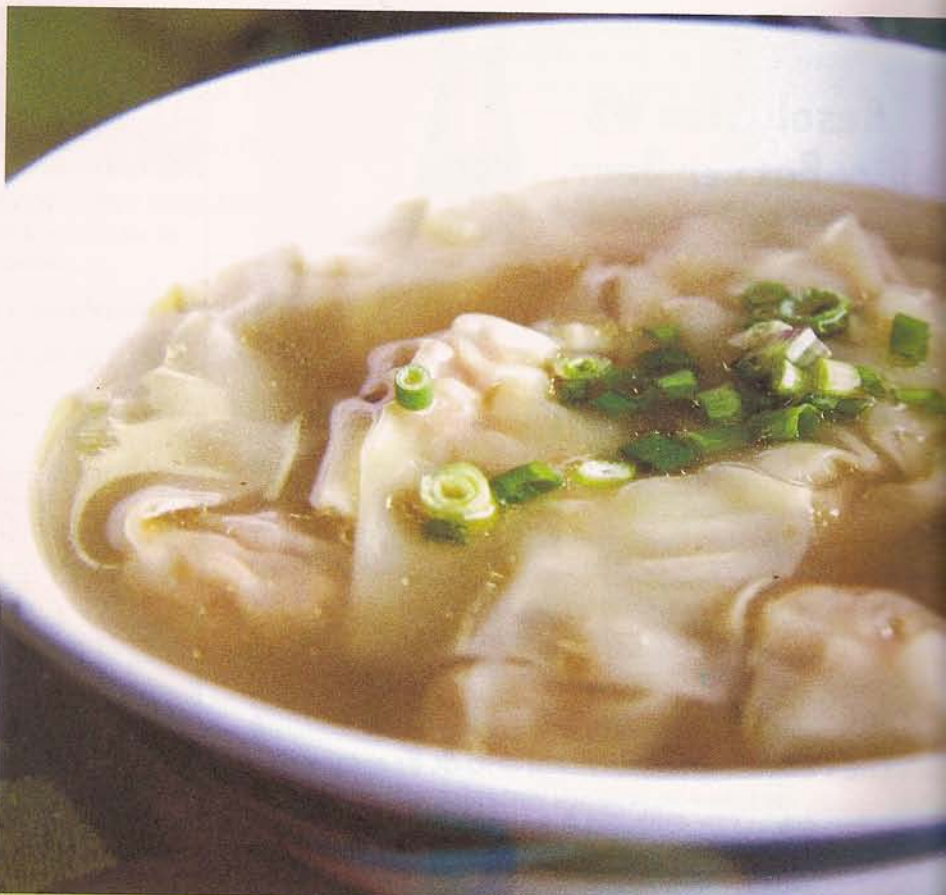


EXTREMELY SLOW FOOD

A BOWL OF SEOUL

BY GRACE MENG

Growing up in Seoul, Korea, I never associated the New Year with glitter and champagne toasts. New Year's Day meant a big bowl of dumpling and rice cake soup, and given that both January 1 and Lunar New Year are official holidays in South Korea, my family brought out that big bowl at least twice each year. There are other foods Koreans like to eat to celebrate the New Year (short ribs braised in soy sauce with chestnuts and dried red dates were a favorite in our house), but the



MANDU

Korean dumplings

This recipe makes 50-60 dumplings, though my feeling is, if you're going to make 50, you might as well make a hundred, and eat dumplings all winter. The quickest way to make a lot is to throw a dumpling party and put your guests to work. Asking people to poke raw meat with their fingers is the best ice-breaker in the world.

- 1 16-ounce package of firm tofu
- 1 cup ground beef
- 1 cup ground pork
- 5 cups bean sprouts, blanched for 5 minutes, then roughly chopped
- 2 teaspoons garlic, minced
- 2 teaspoons ginger, minced
- 6 scallions, green and white parts, sliced into thin rounds
- 2 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons sesame oil
- 2 teaspoons salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 50-60 premade dumpling skins, preferably round
- ½ cup water

Wrap the tofu in cheesecloth and squeeze out as much water as possible so that you end up with little crumbled tofu curds. Combine the tofu, beef and pork, and mix thoroughly, using your hands to knead the ingredients together. Add the bean sprouts, garlic, ginger, scallions, soy sauce, sesame oil, salt and pepper.

Prepare to make the dumplings by putting the water in a shallow dish. Line a baking sheet or large platter with wax paper.

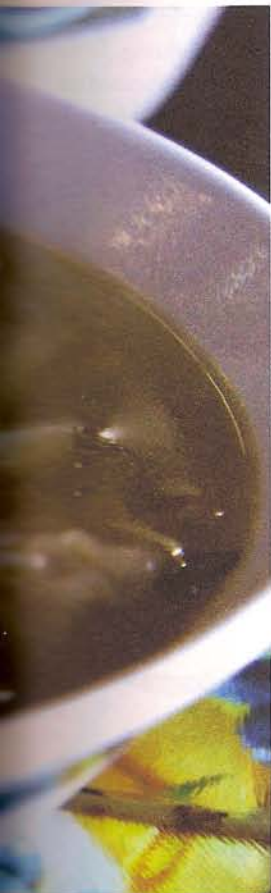
Take one dumpling skin, place it in the palm of your hand and put a rounded teaspoon of filling in the middle. It might be a little more or a little less filling depending on the size of the skin. (Note: this is an approximate amount. After you make a couple of dumplings, you'll get a sense of how much filling the skin will hold and how much it will stretch without breaking.)

Dip a finger in the water and draw it around the perimeter of the skin. Dampening the skin will help the edges stick together. Seal the dumpling skin by folding it over the filling and pressing the edges firmly between your fingers, poking the

filling inside into place as necessary as you work your way around the edge. There should be about a quarter-inch of dumpling skin around the filling. Be sure that the dumpling skin is fully sealed from one end of the half moon to the other. Place the dumplings as you make them on the baking sheet, making sure they don't touch.

There are fancy pleats and things you can do if you like, but I like the simplicity of the half-moon. If you'd like to try the traditional Korean round shape, take the half-moon dumpling, dab a little water on one end of the half moon and bring the other end towards it. Your dumpling will crease in the middle but if it's tightly sealed and not too full, it should stay closed. Overlap the two ends and seal them together, creating a fat, little, round pocket.

To freeze, leave the dumplings on the baking sheet and put them in the freezer for an hour or two before placing them in ziplock bags. They can be dropped, still frozen, in boiling beef broth; they will be done in 10 minutes or so.



quintessential dish found each New Year on every table across the country is *tteok-mandu-guk*, dumpling and rice cake soup.

Tteok-mandu-guk (“dduk mandoo gook”) is such a national staple, I didn’t really understand what made the soup special until I left Korea. Don’t get me wrong, I always thought it was delicious. The dumplings are tender, and the rice cakes have the chewy texture all kids (and almost all adults) love. The broth is rich and light at the same time, sharpened only with a bit of raw garlic and scallions thrown in at the end. But in my family, it wasn’t just a holiday food. While it wasn’t unusual for my mother to make a bowl from scratch, she was more prone to whip up a quick version when she was too tired to cook anything else, and I would think, “*Tteok-mandu-guk* AGAIN?” I didn’t get that the soup I’d grown up with was a modern, convenient take on a dish Koreans have been eating for at least 400 years.

Koreans call their dumplings *mandu*, perhaps related to the Chinese term for steamed bun, *mantou* and the Turkish/Kazakh word for dumplings, *manti*. *Mandu* has its origins in northern Korea, where the influence of the meat-loving, dough-wrapping cultures just across the border easily seeped in. But Koreans adopted the dumplings as their own,

adding tofu to the meat filling, along with plenty of vegetables: everything from spicy, sour kimchi to blanched bean sprouts.

Korean dumpling skins can vary greatly depending on whether the dumpling is fried, steamed, boiled or made into a giant topknot bun. For soup dumplings, the dough is kneaded and rolled out to be thicker than typical Chinese dumplings, and should have an almost elastic chewiness to contain all that filling.

While northerners celebrated the New Year with dumpling soup, southerners celebrated with rice cake soup. The rice cakes or *tteok* were made from rice, pounded into dough and then shaped into chewy cylinders and sliced into thin ovals. The resulting shape of the *tteok* was supposedly suggestive of coins, alluding to a prosperous year to come, but the value of *tteok* wasn’t just hopeful symbolism. White rice was expensive and precious, and it became even more so when compressed into dense *tteok*.

Even the broth varied from region to region. Those who lived by the ocean made theirs from anchovies and *dashima* (a dried kelp), but beef-based broths indicated wealth and were popular in the capital city of Seoul.

Today, the regional variations are less apparent. After the war, North Korean refugees brought dumplings to the south, making them a beloved staple below the 38th parallel. With South Korea’s rapid industrialization, frozen dumplings became cheap and ubiquitous, and rice cakes became available in plastic bags—pre-sliced—with little envelopes of preservative silicon inside each bag. A dish that used to appear only to mark the New Year could now be an everyday food.

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Now that I live in the U.S, far from my mother's kitchen, I crave *tteok-mandu-guk* all the time. It's my favorite thing to eat when I'm cold or sad or both, and I'm grateful that there are shops that carry everything I need to whip it up quickly, even on a busy weeknight. But when I really want to treat myself, I make the soup from scratch.

There are shortcuts, like store-bought dumpling skins and pre-sliced rice cakes, but I will never skimp on the time I spend making the broth or the filling. I simmer beef, blanch and chop the vegetables, squeeze the liquid out of tofu and then turn up the radio as I plant myself in the kitchen to wrap the dumplings.

Every once in a while, I'll make my own dumpling skins, a skill I have yet to master, but I can't begrudge the time I've spent trying. When I look up from my table and see that I've spent an hour cov-

ered in flour with only a measly 20 or so misshapen circles of dough to show for it, I understand why this soup is worth celebrating. To be able to spend a lazy Sunday afternoon, contently, intently focused on the details of my ultimate comfort food—that makes me feel incredibly rich.

Grace Meng is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn. She is currently at work on a cookbook on Korean home cooking, which has given her a great excuse to travel and eat all over South Korea. Her blog can be found at oneforkonespoon.wordpress.com.

This year, Lunar New Year falls on February 14, ushering in the Year of the Tiger.

TTEOK-MANDU-GUK

Korean dumpling and rice cake soup

Sliced rice cakes (or tteok) for this soup are optional, but they are really fun to eat and worth looking for. The pre-sliced ones in plastic bags are surprisingly good and can be found at Asian grocery stores, but if you ever have a chance to buy tteok fresh, take it. Like dumplings, tteok also freezes well. This recipe is easily doubled and tripled.

Broth:

1 pound beef brisket, trimmed of fat

Water

2-3 cloves garlic

4-5 scallions

1 tablespoon soy sauce

Salt

Soup:

20 dumplings

2 cups sliced rice cakes (optional)

1 tablespoon soy sauce

1 teaspoon sesame oil

½ teaspoon crushed red pepper (Korean *gochukaru* if available, optional)

2 teaspoons minced garlic

3 scallions, green and white parts, sliced into thin rounds

3 eggs

1 sheet *gim* or toasted, dried seaweed (also known as Japanese *nori*, optional), cut into thin two-inch long strips

Freshly ground black pepper

Soak the beef brisket in cold water to cover for one hour. This draws out much of the blood,

which is important, as Koreans value broth that is clear in color.

Drain the brisket and put it with the garlic cloves, whole scallions, and 12 cups of water in a large pot. Bring to a boil. Skim off the foam and fat that appears on the surface of the broth. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer covered for 1 hour. Discard the garlic and scallions and cover the pot partially. Simmer another hour until the meat is tender. The broth will have reduced to 10 cups.

Remove the meat from the broth. When the meat is cool enough to touch, shred it into thin strips and toss them in a bowl with 1 tablespoon of soy sauce, crushed red pepper, minced garlic and sliced scallions. Set aside.

In the meantime, soak the rice cakes in cold water to cover for 30 minutes to remove excess starch. Drain and set aside.

Bring the beef broth back to a boil and season it with 1 tablespoon of soy sauce and 1 teaspoon of salt. If it needs more seasoning, use salt, as soy sauce will darken the broth.

Add the dumplings to the boiling broth. Simmer for 10 minutes, then add the rice cakes and simmer for another 5 minutes. Taste one of the rice cakes. It should be tender but still chewy. If not, simmer the soup for another minute or two. Otherwise, break the eggs into the soup and stir to create ribbons of cooked egg.

To serve, ladle the soup, dumplings and rice cakes into large bowls. Top each bowl with some of the shredded beef, a couple strips of toasted seaweed and a grinding of black pepper.

Serves 4

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