

CEREAL

In this volume, we look towards Korea. We explore the architecture of Itami Jun, the photography of Koo Bohnchang, and the Dansaekhwa art movement. We converse with David Chang and Eunjo Park, visit Charlotte Perriand's Méribel chalet with Aēsop, and share our cultural guide to Seoul.

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TTEOK

*Korean
Rice Cakes*

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SEO MYEONG-HWAN

Tteok consultant, and the owner of Yeonhui
Tteok Sarang studio. Seo studies and
develops traditional Korean rice cake recipes.

You won’t find a Korean grocery store without *tteok*, or ‘rice cakes’, an inadequate translation that belies its many sweet and savoury applications. Plain, barely-salted sticks of *tteok* can be sliced and boiled in soups or sautéed with a spicy sauce as a snack. Sweet versions come in an array of flavours and textures, too: sticky, pliant *injeolmi* (made by pounding rice); thick and crumbly cake-like blocks of *siru-tteok* (steamed); plump, chewy *songpyeon* (shaped from rice flour mixed with boiling water, then steamed); and tender, sweet pan-fried *hwajeon*.

My mother and I prefer the chewier, stickier rice cakes made from glutinous rice, studded with black beans and a ribbon of brown sugar or honey weaving through. At the Korean grocery store, we eye the *tteok* cart, debating whether to buy one or two packs, and we almost always end up with two. If the rice cake is warm and freshly made, we don’t even wait until we get home, instead poking holes in the plastic cling wrap like naughty children, pulling out bites to feed each other in the car.

This is what I remember best about grocery store trips from my childhood; my mom told me stories about what a treat *tteok* was when she was growing up, and how much tastes have changed. Even as a child, I knew that my sugar-blasted American palate prevented me from savouring it the way she must have, but I loved that moment of shared excitement and ritual.

As much as I enjoyed the rice cake cart at our K-town market, nothing prepared me for the variety of rice cakes I encountered when I moved to South Korea. And discovering Yeonhui Tteok Sarang was a revelation. A studio tucked into a back alley of the ever-evolving Yeonhui-dong neighbourhood, it’s an understated, modern space with traditional details: Korean ceramics and *soban*, small wooden tray-like tables.

Here, owner Seo Myeong-Hwan teaches classes, offers consulting, and develops menus. His elegant *tteok* come in shapes, sizes and textures I had never seen before: dainty, pale cubes of pine nut *seolgi* topped with a pine needle garnish; fried *Kaesong juak*, round and dimpled and glistening like tiny amber apples. I ask Seo if he created these recipes as modern incarnations of traditional ones, and he smiles. “No, these *are* traditional recipes,” he says. “The issue is that modern Koreans have no idea how vast the world of *tteok* is. We lost so much of our cultural heritage to colonisation, war, and famine.” And now, Seo says, Korean dessert culture has become supplanted by a global market. Even as rice cakes have started to become fashionable again, many youth-oriented cafes and shops still use European and North American ingredients and techniques.

“In Korea, too many foods have become fusion, and it’s actually harder to find traditional Korean food,” Seo observes. “These days, when Korean chefs go to culinary school, they tend to look to the cuisines of other countries instead of their own — there’s a curiosity about things one has not seen.” He adds that he is not opposed to learning about other cultures, but hopes that young Korean chefs will take the time to learn about their own culinary heritage before venturing further afield for inspiration.

Seo himself is on a decades-long journey to reclaim this heritage. He has been cooking for over 24 years and learning the art of *tteok*-making for the last 15, and is largely self-taught. Now, he combs antique book purveyors in search of ancient texts, collecting titles with culinary relevance to learn how his ancestors cooked. “It’s difficult though,” he notes, “because ingredients change and instructions can be vague. Even the varieties of rice we have now are different, which can result in vastly different

A. 상황버섯 SANGHUANG MUSHROOMS

Also known as black hoof mushrooms, the *phellinus linteus* is often used in traditional Korean and Chinese medicine, and can be found growing in the wild on mulberry trees.

B. 약편 YAKPYEON

A type of tteok with a particularly soft texture, made with jujubes - a kind of chewy, gummy sweet.

C. 곤떡 GONTTEOK

A traditional *tteok* from Chungcheong province. The red colour of the *gontteok* comes from frying the cake in an oil made from the *ji cho* plant, also called the red gromwell.

A.



B.



textures — and the types of flowers in a region will drastically change the flavour of that area’s honey.” Seo constantly wrestles with these variables, and his workshop is a hive of experimentation, testing and development.

Tteok has become laced with nostalgia for Korean families. In the last few decades, flour-based baked sweets have grown in popularity. Cream-covered cakes are the birthday treat of choice, and trends like churros and cronuts have taken Seoul by storm. It’s not that rice cakes are gone. It’s more that they’re the old guard who made way for the sugar rush of glamorous youth. *Tteok* has taken on more formal duties: the half-moon-shaped *songpyeon* might grace the table at *Chuseok*, Korean Thanksgiving; you might bring a box as a gift to an older relative; or a traditional wedding feast or ancestors’ ceremony might include trays of elaborately arranged *tteok*.

As I’ve grown older, I’ve come to appreciate the subtleties of *tteok* — the way the starches turn to sugars in your mouth when you chew slowly, and the pleasure of chewiness (one of the most underrated textures in western cuisines). My favourite rice cakes are best described as ‘*jjolgit jjolgit*,’ an onomatopoeic expression that connotes a pleasurable tension and give in your bite. If Seo has anything to say about it, I won’t be alone — *tteok* will make its comeback. “I have this growing feeling that it would be a pity for our ancestors’ history to stop with us,” he says. “We need to keep passing it on to our successors.” •

C.



고려율고 GORYEO YULGO

A variety of tteok made with chestnuts. The recipe dates back to the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392 CE).

