

Kimchi: Vegetarian Journal, March-April, 2004 by Nancy Berkoff

KOREAN FOOD IS HEARTIER AND MORE HOTLY flavored than other Asian cuisines. Korean soy sauce is darker than Japanese soy sauce, and hot chilies are used more liberally than in Thai cuisine. The traditional Korean flavor profile is a combination of soy sauce, garlic, brown sugar, sesame seeds, sesame oil, and hot chilies, served with salted vegetables. Also, Korea has harsh, cold winters. Methods were developed over the years to insure a variety of vegetables in winter menus. These methods included salting and fermenting vegetables so they could last through the entire winter. Kimchi is probably the most renowned of these preserved vegetables.

You may have heard of kimchi. It is a flavorful food that is rich in minerals, including calcium and iron, vitamins A and C, and niacin. In fact, it was originally used as a source of nutrients when fresh produce was not available. The most prevalent type is made with green cabbage that is salted, fermented in earthenware jars, and heavily seasoned with hot chilies.

Kimchi is usually divided into two categories, seasonal or stored. Seasonal kimchi is made with spring and summer vegetables, such as zucchini, summer squash, cucumbers, sprouts, and pea vines. It is designed for short-term use and does not have a long shelf life. Young cabbage kimchi, cucumber kimchi, and baby radish kimchi are some examples of seasonal kimchi. The stored variety, which is meant to last over the long winter months, is usually made with cabbage, onions, and chili. Whole cabbage kimchi, diced radish kimchi, and ponytail cabbage kimchi are common examples. Both types are made almost year-round nowadays, as the availability of most vegetables has increased.

The use of kimchi has been historically documented for at least 2,000 years. Vegetables preserved with salt had been a Chinese tradition. Around the 16th century, preserving cabbage with chili became popular in Korea. The preparation of kimchi, kimjang, soon became a great tradition. It was a family or neighborhood affair, with everyone pitching in throughout all the seasons of the year. In the early spring, chilies, onions, and green onions were planted. They were harvested in the summer. Cabbage and radishes were

purchased in early autumn. For traditional families, it is estimated that 20-30 heads of cabbage may be needed to prepare enough kimchi to last through the winter.

The flavor of kimchi varies from family to family, region to region. As different vegetables were grown, different kimchi varieties were invented. In the northern regions of Korea, where the weather is cooler, kimchi is less salty and more plainly seasoned, with the vegetable flavor coming through. In the southern regions, where the weather can be hotter, kimchi is salty and hotly seasoned with ginger, chili, and extra juice. Most kimchi authorities will tell you there are at least 200 varieties.

A kimchi's flavor is influenced by the type of cabbage and radish used; by the amount of chili, garlic, ginger, and onion used; and by the type of seasonal vegetables, such as cucumbers or sprouts, used. Aromatic seasonings, such as sesame leaves and Indian mustard leaves, are added when available. Fermentation adds to the flavor of kimchi; the longer it is allowed to ferment, the richer the flavor.

Ginger, garlic, and red chili pepper are the predominant seasonings for most kimchis, while cabbage, radishes, and onions are the vegetables used to form their bulk. Two varieties of cabbage are used. Korean cabbage, with long thin stalks, is not usually available in the United States. However, Napa cabbage, also called celery cabbage, is often used as well. There are three kinds of radishes used for kimchi. Korean radish and ponytail radish are not usually found in the United States, but daikon radish can be found in most markets and many farmers' markets. Check Asian markets in your area for Korean varieties of cabbage and radish. Green onions are the onions of choice for kimchi.

In addition, you can use fresh watercress in kimchi recipes. Korean watercress resembles a cross between North American watercress and Japanese wasabi. If you want a little more "zing," you can add a small amount of freshly grated horseradish along with the fresh watercress. Fresh ginger and fresh red and green chili peppers are almost always used to flavor kimchi. Save some of the ginger to make a soothing tea. Steep slices of fresh ginger in boiling water for several minutes. Ginger tea can be served hot or cold. Be careful when seeding fresh chilies. Wash your hands very, very well before touching your skin or eyes.

Kimchi was originally stored underground in earthenware crocks. The crocks were covered with straw mats and then dirt. This storage method helped to prevent temperature fluctuations and to ensure the food remained safe to eat. The kimchi was usually stored in several small crocks, rather than one big one. This way, only a small amount was uncovered and recovered at a time. If you don't have the time to do formal preserving, which includes sterilizing containers, you can prepare kimchi to be stored for short periods of time in the refrigerator.