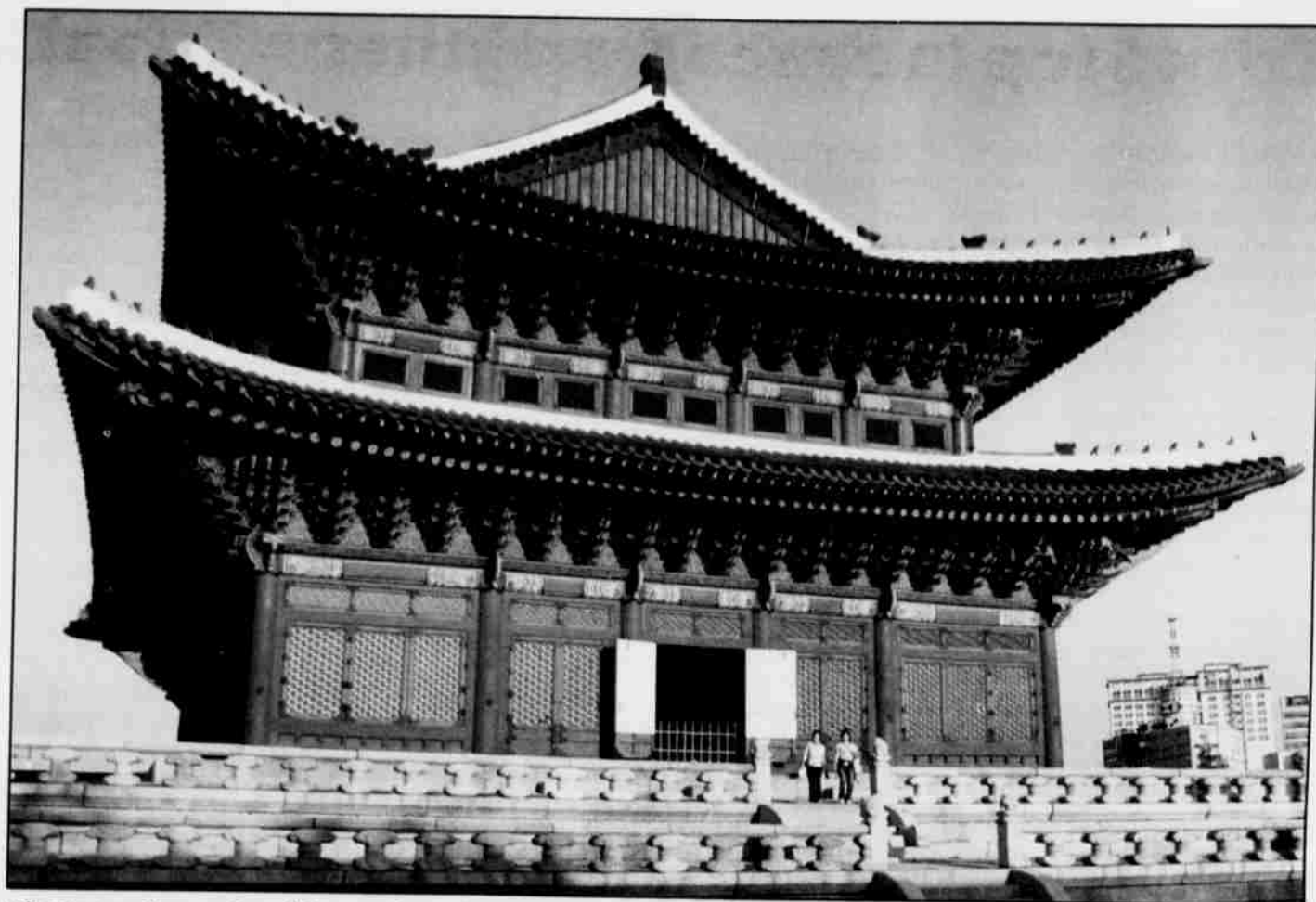


ful of small stoves onto which are placed pans that are in turn filled with broth, beef, onions, and these delicious clear noodles, evidently made of potato starch. There are also tiny sardine-like spicy fish, whole baby crabs with shells so soft you can eat them. Plus different vegetables, two or three variations of kimchee and pork. I love hot food, so this is heaven. The baby crabs are a bit much, but over all, anybody who appreciates food would savor this.

We are treated to a similar meal that night, after the opening ceremonies for the ginseng festival, which feature a whole lot of drums, and drumming. Our ever-present guides and translators walk us through parts of the expo that might interest us, including one area that is museum-like in nature, and explains, through words, dioramas, animation, art, and preserved specimens just about all I will ever need to know on ginseng, nicknamed "the root of life". Geumsan is world-renowned for theirs, especially the red variety, and before this trip is over, I will have ingested the root in more forms than I can count. If the plant really lives up to the reputation of promoting longevity, then by this trip alone I'll have added 10 years to my life.

By the end of our second day, the entire delegation will be present, including Youngman, Bob Donaldson, a local attorney with his wife Julie, and Dana Miller, the president of George Fox University. I see the same tiredness on their faces that I myself just endured. More importantly, I get to see the look on their faces as they sit down the next day to an epic Korean meal. Not only is there plenty of raw fish, but quail eggs, a different sort of crab, some very unusual looking mushrooms, and some food that we just can't ever figure out, and pretty spectacular fish. By the end of this five, six, or seven course meal, I am glutted to the point of dizziness. Youngman chuckles, Koreans, he tells me, take their hospitality very seriously.

The Friday and Saturday of our trips end up being the most eventful by far. Our hosts haul us off to a local University, and also to a shampoo factory, where they make ginseng shampoo. My own personal highlight is when we drive out into the Korean countryside, where on all sides of us black plastic awnings blanket the landscape. Those awnings conceal Geumsan's version of Texas tea, ginseng plants. Many visitors are here clamoring around for their opportunity to yank from the Earth their own root of life. I do the same. Ginseng farmers squat nearby, taking a rest from the surprisingly hot weather, calmly smoking cigarettes and smiling, amused at the keen interest these visitors take in what for them is incredibly routine. I pull out a couple of four-year old plants, not quite old enough to develop the vermilion berries above the leaves. The roots look enigmatic and plain at the same time. The fascination lies in that this root could possibly be one of the most valuable, and healthy plants on the planet. I remember at the expo one of the guides informed us that a mature wild ginseng plant can command nearly \$10,000 from willing buyers. There is that much



After two or three gates, visitors arrive at the main hall of Gyeongbukgong, a lavish and colorfully painted throne room.

faith and reverence in this plant's nutritional powers.

That night we are treated to the public opening ceremonies of the ginseng expo. Drummers prance around in set patterns, and beat their drums at such an up-tempo rate that I can only surmise they are in great physical shape.

The following day we dine again with Chung and his associates. During lunch Yamhill country presents them with gifts, portraits of the Willamette Valley, wine, and of course hazelnuts. Following lunch we drive over to a spiritual meditation center that is stunning and peaceful. We are informed that this is a very popular retreat center. At dinner I present our hosts with gifts on behalf of the Tribe, which are beaded necklaces, a Pendleton blanket and beaded pins. Chung apparently loves the West Valley Veteran's Memorial pin I give him. During the gift exchange there is some slight miscalculation in numbers, and as Chung's wife stands before me, I am empty-handed and somewhat bewildered. Chung nods and points to the necklace around my own neck. I take it off and gently place the necklace over her head. She gasps, and bows. I learned early on that many of these people have a deep respect for Indian culture.

Chung later asks me my age, and when he realizes that I am younger than his sons, informs me that I am now one of his own. Off and on for the rest of the trip, he calls me "son." He also asks me about Mark Mercier, whom he remembered fondly from 1996.

We are given one last chance to run through the expo and purchase the myriad ginseng products that vendors have made available. That of course is on top of the numerous ginseng gifts the province had already supplied us with. When I arrive back in Grand Ronde, I place the ginseng out on the table in council chambers, including some honey-soaked red roots. To date, only Wink Soderberg has tried any,

and our Secretary Colleen Branson puts the rest in a ziplock. So if you're interested...

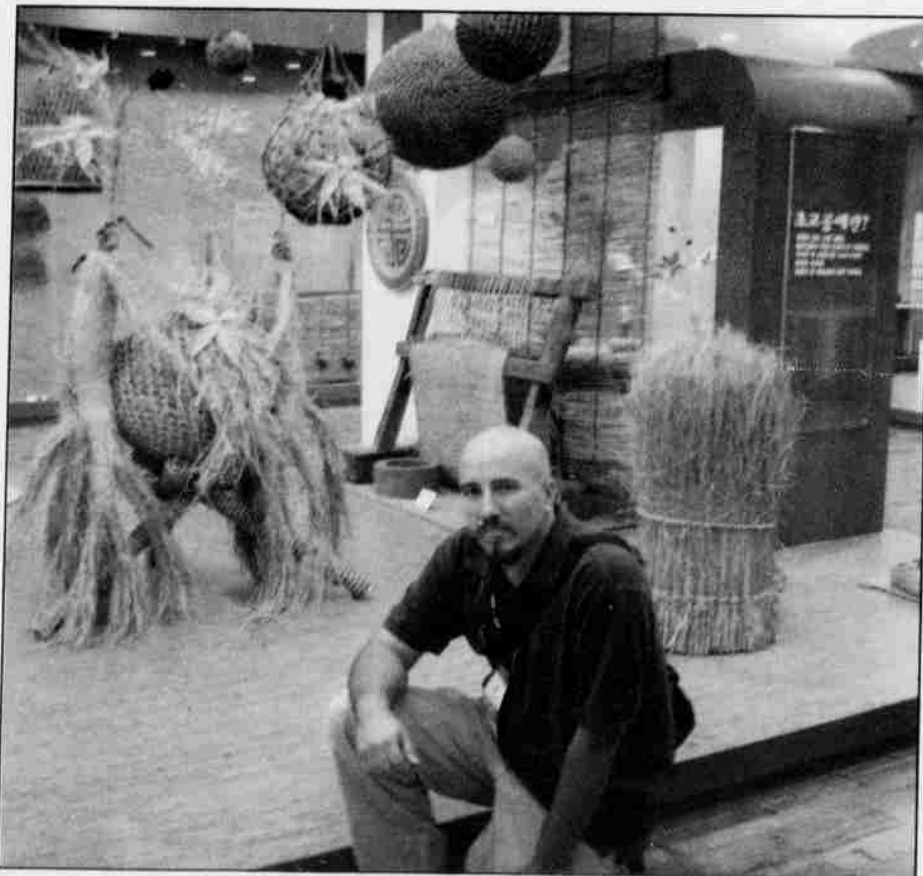
The rest of our trip goes nicely, and peacefully. Chairman Chung greets us that last day, inquiring as to when we will come back. Honestly, I don't know, nor does anybody else in the delegation. We all agree though that once every ten years doesn't quite cut it. The sister county relationship has been very helpful as a cultural exchange, maybe to a degree business as well. It is something that hopefully the county will look at developing, with the Tribe's ongoing support.

My last day and a half is spent in Seoul, where before I leave I meet with Jin Won Kim, the State of Oregon representative in Korea. Kim has been through it all with us, often stepping up to the challenge to serve as interpreter, and at times, guide. He asks me if I have any calendars left, or "Smoke Signals." I

inform him those went long ago, but promise to mail some later. What I do have left, though, are golden and silver logo pins, which he seems to genuinely like. His office is dotted with photos of Oregon, and a dream-catcher is nailed to the wall beside his door. Kim tells me that only two months ago Governor Kulongoski also paid him a visit.

My time in Seoul is spent checking out the nearby palace, and visiting Insadong, the city's art community where vendors have their works all over the sidewalks and in shops. For lunch I dine on chicken and ginseng rice porridge, so astoundingly good I return to the same spot for dinner. Seoul is a city in love with light, specifically neon. The view from my hotel room on the 32nd floor is stunning. Like New York, Seoul is a beautiful city at night. For such an enormous metropolis, some 10 million I'm told, the people here are very friendly.

Must be the ginseng. ■



Who says agriculture can't be artistic? Tribal Chair Chris Mercier kneels before an exhibition at the World Ginseng Expo during his trip to Korea.