Korean foods making inroads in America via pantry staples

By Edward Lee
The Associated Press

HOT TREND. *Everywhere you look, Korean food is screaming off the trend charts. Kimchi has become a household condiment. Korean barbecue is universally loved.* Gochujang *— a thick, Korean chili paste — is about to have its heyday. Pictured is Korean gochujang corn on the cob. (AP Photo/Matthew Mead)*

Everywhere you look, Korean food is screaming off the trend charts. Kimchi has become a household condiment. Korean barbecue is universally loved. *Gochujang* is about to have its heyday.

And we've seen this sort of thing before. Japanese cuisine was all the rage once, then Thai and Vietnamese, and regional Chinese is making a comeback, too. Except in the case of Korean food, it is playing out a bit differently. In the decade that Korean food has been inching its way into the spotlight, we haven't seen a proliferation of Korean restaurants as we did with other Asian cuisines. I'd even argue that the mystery of Korean cuisine hasn't even begun to be unpacked for mainstream America.

Rather, the rise of Korean food in America is driven by its pantry ingredients, not traditional restaurants. This is a different path from the other Asian cuisines that have been popularized in the west. One of the main reasons for this is because even though the cuisine of the homeland is complex and ritualistic, the ingredients are not. They made the leap pretty quickly into the American taste vernacular. In fact, the assimilation of Korean food happened so fast, we found our way to kimchi tacos faster than we did kimchi *ji-gae* (a traditional Korean stew).

It's that same versatility that will define the future of Korean food in the U.S. The ingredients are already adapting to everything from burgers to poutine. And it's not just here. In Seoul, where I have travelled frequently in recent years, the cuisine is rapidly morphing, too. The line between western influences and traditional flavors is becoming less and less rigid. We don't need to wait a generation anymore to discover the next incarnation of Korean food.

And that's good — and delicious — for us. What is popular in Korea now is instantly translatable to the American table. The expanding Korean pantry is already here to entice an audience hungry for more *umami* and spice.

Now, I'll grant you that sea squirt sashimi may never gain traction here. But *jeotgal* is something that can easily become an American staple. It is a category that denotes any fermented seafood. It can be anything from 40-day-old fish guts to a lighter, almost ceviche-like cold dish of oysters with chili and fish sauce. It is delicious as a condiment, added to a rice dish, or served with fatty pork. And there are as many varieties as there are fish in the sea. My recipe is an introduction to the category: oysters in a lettuce wrap tempered by the richness of fatty pork sausage.

When we think of Korean ingredients, we think of fermented products. But there are also many fresh herbs and vegetables that are becoming more widely available. Teardrop or hachiya persimmons, chrysanthemum leaves, and Asian pears are staples I see all the time now. One that is still rare but growing in popularity is *perilla* (sometimes called *shiso*). They are leaves from the sesame tree, and they are pungent, slightly minty, and bitter all at the same time. Traditionally used as a wrap or fermented into kimchi, the leaves also make a delicious addition to salads.

Meanwhile, gochujang is the Korean ingredient Americans are most likely to encounter first. It is a fermented chili paste that is essential to many Korean dishes. It has yet to penetrate the typical household, but chefs have been using it for years to add depth to stews, glazes, and marinades. *Ssamjang* is its more complex (and less spicy) brother. It is a seasoned dipping sauce made from gochujang, garlic, sesame oil, and soybean paste. Typically it is used only as a condiment to barbecue, but it has so much more potential. I use it in gravy, in hummus, or just eat it with raw vegetables. And that is exactly why this sauce will gain in popularity here. Without the limiting blinders of tradition, American chefs will see it as a limitless pantry item.

And that's the exciting part — watching these ingredients take on new roles. That's when American cuisine is at its best. The misinterpretation of tradition can be a good thing, even essential. Because it often leads to new ones, those we can claim as our own.

Edward Lee is the chef/owner of multiple Louisville, Kentucky restaurants, including 610 Magnolia and MilkWood. His first cookbook is Smoke and Pickles.

10 fresh, fast ideas for using Korean *gochujang* chili paste

By J.M. Hirsch
AP Food Editor

If you haven't already seen *gochujang* — a thick, Korean chili paste — you very likely will. And very soon.

Korean food has been enjoying an upswing in the U.S. in recent years, and one of the most popular ingredients to catch on has been gochujang. Think of it as a blend of miso (Japanese fermented soy bean paste) and Sriracha (that increasingly ubiquitous hot sauce), except gochujang is way more complex and (usually) not nearly as spicy as straight up hot sauce.

Made from chili peppers, rice, fermented soy beans, and salt, gochujang has a savory spicy-sweet flavor that's particularly agreeable with meats and grilled or roasted vegetables. Though often used as a condiment in its own right, gochujang also frequently is used as a base of marinades, sauces, and soups. Thinned with a bit of rice vinegar, for example, it makes a great sauce for cooked vegetables.

Because specific recipes for gochujang can vary widely, it's good to try several brands to find one you prefer. Once you have, of course you can delve into classic Korean cooking. But it's also fun to take gochujang outside its cultural context and put it to use in all sorts of cooking. Here are 10 of my favorites:

10 fresh ways to use Korean gochujang

Bloody Mary

Whisk a teaspoon or so of gochujang into tomato juice, then use in your favorite bloody mary cocktail.

TASTY PASTE. *A Bloody Mary with Korean* gochujang *— which is made from chili peppers, rice, fermented soy beans, and salt — is seen in Concord, New Hampshire. (AP Photo/Matthew Mead)*

Corn on the cob

Smear a liberal amount of gochujang over corn fresh off the grill. Or even better, mix together equal amounts of gochujang and softened butter, then use that.

Rub

Smear a generous amount of gochujang over flank steak and let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes before grilling. Serve thinly sliced against the grain with additional gochujang thinned with rice vinegar.

Vinaigrette

Whisk together equal parts gochujang, cider or rice vinegar, and apricot jam. Use on robust salads or grilled vegetables, such as broccoli and zucchini.

Grilled cheese

Smear gochujang thickly on a slice of bread. Top with slices of blue cheese, then top with a second slice of bread. Butter the outsides of the bread, then toast in a skillet until the cheese is melted.

Hot dogs

Mix together equal amounts of ketchup and gochujang, then use to top hot dogs. For the full experience, lay down a heap of kimchi in the bun first.

Burgers

Mix several tablespoons of gochujang into whatever ground meat (or blend of meats) you use for burgers, meatballs, and meatloaf.

Falafel

Stir gochujang and diced cucumber into plain Greek yogurt, then use as a condiment for falafel or lamb burgers.

Pulled pork

Thin gochujang with water, cider vinegar, and a bit of honey, then toss with shredded or pulled pork and serve on slider buns.

Sloppy Joes

Brown one pound ground beef and one diced onion in a splash of olive oil. Mix in a 15-ounce can tomato sauce blended with two tablespoons gochujang. Simmer. If desired, sprinkle in a bit of brown sugar.

Appeals court upholds California's shark-fin ban

By Sudhin Thanawala
The Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A federal appeals court has dismissed a legal challenge to a California law banning the sale, distribution, and possession of shark fins.

The legislation does not conflict with a 19th-century law that gives federal officials authority to manage shark fishing off the California coast or significantly interfere with interstate commerce, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said.

The 2-1 ruling upheld a lower court decision tossing the lawsuit brought by the Chinatown Neighborhood Association and Asian Americans for Political Advancement, a political action committee.

The groups had argued that the ban — passed in 2011 — unfairly targeted the Chinese community, which considers shark-fin soup a delicacy. Shark finning is the practice of removing the fins from a living shark, leaving the animal to die.

Joseph Breall, an attorney for the groups, said they were reviewing their options and had not yet decided whether to appeal. He said he was heartened by the dissenting opinion by judge Stephen Reinhardt, who said the plaintiffs should have been allowed to amend their lawsuit.

The plaintiffs had argued on appeal that the shark-fin law conflicted with the federal law intended to manage shark fishing off the California coast.

The majority in the 9th Circuit ruling, however, said the federal law has no requirement that a certain number of sharks be harvested, and even if it did, the California law still allowed sharks to be taken for purposes other than obtaining their fins.

The federal law, additionally, envisions a broad role for states in crafting fishery management plans, and, like California's ban, makes conservation paramount, the court said.

The 9th Circuit also rejected the plaintiffs' claims that the ban illegally interfered with trade in shark fins between California and other states and the flow of shark fins between states through California.

"The Shark Fin Law does not interfere with activity that is inherently national or that requires a uniform system of regulation," judge Andrew Hurwitz wrote. "The purpose of the Shark Fin Law is to conserve state resources, prevent animal cruelty, and protect wildlife and public health. These are legitimate matters of local concern."