

*Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen* by Hi Soo Shin Hepinstall. Ten Speed Press, 2001. 254 p., \$29.95.

#### Review Summary

Pros: Highly personal, well-written cookbook of traditional Korean family recipes. Recipes are refined but generally not difficult, even for a person unfamiliar with Korean cuisine.

Cons: No photos of dishes or unfamiliar ingredients; dishes indexed by main ingredient or English names only, Korean names generally not indexed. No list of suggested menus.

Anyone who begins a cookbook with a recipe for a year's supply of soy sauce is a home cook to be taken seriously.

Hi Soo Shin Hepinstall, an award-winning novelist in her native Korea, does not expect many people will attempt home fermentation. However, almost as an anthropological exercise to preserve her remarkable personal heritage of a traditional Korea now almost completely extinct, she offers her family's recipe: Stir together 10 gallons of water and  $\frac{3}{4}$  bushel sea salt and let it settle for a few days. Place live hardwood charcoal in a large clay vat, pour in grain syrup, then add *meju* soybean paste, the strained brine, jujubes and dried hot peppers. Test the saltiness by the bounce of an egg or a bean. Keep it outside for 2 months, covering it when it rains. Strain out the fermented bean paste (which becomes another important staple, *toenjang*), then reduce the liquid by boiling. Let it age to dark mellowness in a ceramic jar.

Fortunately, the vast majority of the recipes in this meticulously written cookbook can be made with significantly less time and trouble. Almost all of them take less than an hour of preparation, many as little as 20 minutes, including the best Korean barbecue I have ever experienced. Every one works beautifully with commercial soy sauce.

But even in the simplest dishes, the ingredients are handled with the utmost refinement, reflecting Ms. Hepinstall's upbringing in an upper-class household and her respect for the culinary process. Busy home cooks lacking a staff might look for shortcuts, but the extra trouble does pay good dividends. The numerous components for *chapch'ae* and *pibimbap* are individually seasoned and cooked separately, then arranged on top of noodles or rice with painterly attention to the play of colors before being tossed together at the last minute. To ensure crystalline stock without off flavors, meats are soaked in ice water for an hour before simmering. Her milky chicken stock is much quicker than its long-simmered Escoffier cousin, but using a whole chicken gives it unsurpassed body and flavor. With this rich stock in hand, *sigumch'iguk* (spinach and clam soup) was a snap to make. Sophistication does not get any simpler, especially since the soup can be made with the water from washing rice instead of chicken stock.

The chapter on *kimchi* and *changatchi* or pickles is particularly noteworthy. I chose the *t'ong paech'u kimchi*, the intricate pickled cabbage considered worthy of the author's father, grandmother, and "precious house guests." The halved cabbage heads are left intact and stuffed with a fiery paste of radishes, chilies, nuts, and green onions. They are then left to ferment at room temperature for three days. I admit that I was too afraid to use the full cup of hot red pepper powder and the raw oysters called for in the recipe, but in spite of my timidity, the results were far superior to any commercial brand I have tried. The recipe yielded about 6 quarts, 3 of which we consumed within 3 days. (A technical

note: Be careful when opening a sealed jar of *kimchi*. The sudden release of gases pent up from the fermentation process can lead to a small chili-laced eruption, not at all pleasant in the eyes.)

My week of cooking Ms. Hepinstall's memories culminated in *sins)onlo* (celestial hot pot), a dish for very precious house guests that is really a leftover *tour de force*. Into it went the barbecued beef and chicken, pan-fried fish fillets and beef liver, bean curd *chorim*, and meatballs I had prepared earlier. Placed in alternating layers in a chafing dish with vegetables and submerged at the last moment in simmering beef stock, these various dishes came together into a complex and intriguing whole, covered with a floating tapestry of yellow and white egg ribbons shot through with bright threads of dried red pepper.

If I encountered any problems, it was in the grocery store, not the kitchen. I have studied a year's worth of college-level Korean, enough to make out labels at least, but I was still bewildered by the staggering variety of unfamiliar ingredients in the Korean markets lining El Camino at Lawrence Expressway, some of which were not labeled at all. A few shoppers took pity on me as I wandered the aisles, clutching my cookbook in confusion. Several kindly women helped me find what I was looking for, then tried to persuade me to ignore the printed recipe and make it their way instead, reciting their own recipes in great detail.

Ms. Hepinstall liberally seasons her cookbook with fascinating memories of growing up in her aristocratic grandmother's household near **Ch'o)nju** in the 1940s. Family meals were a social study: Different meals, with different dinnerware and quality of food, were served to each segment of the family. Grandmother was served first in her quarters, then the father and his guests received individual meal trays in his freestanding house in the compound, 2-person trays were then taken to the boys' room, while the mother and girls served and ate together in the women's quarters. Servants ate last and most humbly. Recipe notes describe which dishes were considered appropriate for which groups.

By revealing these highly personal stories and recipes, Ms. Hepinstall breaches family etiquette and risks the displeasure of her very particular ancestors. But given the few volumes of high-quality Korean cookbooks in English, I for one am grateful that she did.

I made this all-time favorite Korean dish with thinly sliced prime rib with spectacular results. Cool leaves swaddle sizzling barbecued beef to make a divine little packet. The seasonings are quite restrained, enhancing rather than masking the meaty flavor, and the grated Asian pear adds unexpected refinement. Take care that the meat does not stick to the grill and rip into ragged bits. The recipe also gives directions to make the beef under a broiler or on the stove.

Fired Beef (Pulgogi)

Serves 4 to 6, 20 minutes to prepare and 15 minutes to cook

2 lbs. lean beef tenderloin roast, eye of round, or sirloin.

Marinade:

3 tablespoons soy sauce

½ cup **chongju** (Korean rice wine) or vermouth  
1 Korean or Asian pear, peeled and grated, or 4 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice  
2 green onions, white and pale green part, finely minced  
3 cloves garlic, crushed and finely chopped  
4 walnut halves, finely chopped  
2 tablespoons corn syrup  
1 tablespoon sugar  
1 tablespoon sesame oil  
1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds  
½ tablespoon freshly ground black pepper  
Pinch of salt

1 to 5 tablespoons vegetable oil [to oil grill]

Cabbage hearts or lettuce leaves

1 tablespoon coarsely chopped pine nuts, for garnish

½ tablespoon sil koch'u (dried hot red pepper threads) or hot red pepper flakes, for garnish

Slice the beef across the grain into large 1/8-inch thick pieces. In a large bowl, combine the marinade ingredients and mix well with a spoon. Add the beef and, with your fingers, massage the marinade into the meat. Wrap the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and marinate in the refrigerator for 1 hour.

To grill the beef, start the coals 30 minutes before cooking; or, preheat a gas grill. Lightly brush the grilling rack with the vegetable oil and set it 4 inches from the heat source. Add the beef, in batches or all at once, and grill 5 to 6 minutes per side, or until caramel brown and crusty and to the desired doneness. [I grilled mine about 2 to 3 minutes per side.]

Repeat if necessary with the remaining beef.

To broil the beef, preheat the broiler. Lightly brush the broiler pan with the vegetable oil and set it 6 inches from the heat source. Add the beef, in batches or all at once, and broil for 2 minutes per side, or to the desired doneness. Repeat if necessary with the remaining beef.

To pan-grill the beef, in a 12-inch cast-iron or 14-inch nonstick skillet, heat 1 tablespoon vegetable oil over medium-high heat until it begins to smoke. Add the beef, in batches or all at once, and cook for 2 minutes per side, or to the desired doneness, flattening with a spatula to prevent curling. Turn only once. Repeat if necessary with the remaining beef. Save the pan juices to spoon over the beef before serving.

On a cutting board, slice the beef into bite-size pieces. Make a bed of cabbage on individual plates and place the beef on top of each. Garnish with the pine nuts and sil koch'u. Serve with hot steamed rice.