

BELOW: salting the cabbage leaves or other vegetables is the first step of making kimchi



Ae Jin Huys, chef and author of 'Kimchi'

I was born in South Korea, but when I was almost six, I was adopted and came to live in Belgium. I had no connection with Korea at all until I was in my 20s, when I met a Korean family here who cooked for me. It was then that I recognised dishes I'd had as a child – tastes I didn't even realise I remembered. That's how my journey into rediscovering Korean food started.

Sonmat, which translates as 'hand taste' in English, is an important culinary term in Korea. Referring to one's *sonmat* is a way of complimenting a signature way of preparing food and the skill to elevate a dish. Kimchi (a traditional side dish of fermented vegetables) is certainly related to *sonmat* because everybody has their own style and recipe. The word also has motherly associations, because it is connected to a feeling of comfort and nostalgia.

I'm sure I experienced making kimchi in my early life, because it's such a huge part of daily Korean meals – *kimjang* is the annual practice of making kimchi in huge batches with a group of people. When you harvest a lot of vegetables, you need to preserve them quickly, requiring many hands. That's how kimchi-making evolved into a communal way of cooking. And it's more than just cooking together: it's a way of sharing recipes and moments with family and neighbours.

There are hundreds of variations of kimchi, but preparing it is mostly done in three phases.

The first is salting the vegetables. In natural fermentation, salt is important to remove bacteria and micro-organisms that are bad for us and create an environment for the good bacteria to grow. This good bacteria helps us to digest our meal. Step two is to add seasoning to make the kimchi tasty. Commonly used are chilli, garlic, ginger, pear and fish sauce. The third step is to store and ferment. Korean kimchi is fermented slowly, at a cool temperature, which keeps the vegetables crunchy even if it's very old. My own preference and taste in kimchi is evolving continuously. Nowadays, I make it vegan and only use fresh and local ingredients. Along the way I skipped using the fermented fish sauce from Korea and the chilli powder that mostly comes from China to use fresh chilli instead.

Since Korean food has become my profession, I make a lot of kimchi on a regular basis. But this is the type of dish you can never make the same twice. It really depends on your mood and the environment. Kimchi made in summer will be different than winter. And sometimes when I taste my own kimchi, I wonder what mood I was in when I made it. If you have the time to pay a lot of attention to making it, it will certainly taste better than if you're in a rush. Scientifically, there's also the influence of one's own hands and microbes. A crowd science project I initiated (with support from University of Antwerp and World Kimchi Institute) showed variations in the dish according to whether it was made by an individual or a group.

What's also interesting about naturally fermented food is that you taste it a long time after you make it. You never know exactly how it will turn out because it's not in your control. When I give workshops about kimchi, people generally find it hard to trust themselves to make it safely. This way of cooking is all about trusting your intuition. That's what I like about kimchi: it brings people closer to trusting themselves. Fermenting teaches you to become more in touch with your senses and to discover your own *sonmat*. mokja.be

PHOTO: YOLANTA C SIU, FROM 'KIMCHI' BY AE JIN HUYS (PRESTEL 2022)