



Beyond Korean Barbecue

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Posted on June 10, 2005, Printed on June 23, 2005

<http://www.alternet.org/story/22151/>

North Korea has 1) boasted of having nuclear weapons; 2) threatened to turn its neighbors into a "sea of fire"; 3) traded in illegal drugs and counterfeit currency; or 4) been enjoying a gourmet revival.

If you snorted at the last choice, think again.

Recent visitors to the "hermit kingdom" report that good food is no longer limited to government functions or the occasional hotel eatery. A new raft of restaurants -- from Korean barbecue to fast-food hamburgers -- cater to foreigners and locals alike.

"Everybody is now interested in making money, and restaurants are one way of doing so," says Kathi Zellweger of the Catholic aid organization, Caritas. "On my last trip I was told that in Pyongyang alone there are now over 350 new restaurants and I did note far more restaurant signs on buildings and also some 'beer drinking bars' packed with men in evenings."

While North Korea's thriving restaurant scene might seem like minor news -- a feature perhaps for the *Wall Street Journal's* offbeat middle column -- this new trend is in fact a key economic and social indicator of change. The U.S. media provides a steady diet of unappetizing images -- the shadowy nuclear complex, the military parades, the dour aging leadership. This is what "evil" is supposed to look like. But as the burgeoning restaurant trade suggests, the North Korean reality has departed significantly from the fixed menu we've come to expect.

From Famine to Feast?

In the late 1990s when I visited North Korea on an agricultural delegation, the country was still in the throes of a famine. Starving people were not visible on the street but aid workers were still encountering severely malnourished children in daycare centers and hospitals. The North Korean government was appealing to the world for more food aid. Yet our North Korean hosts insisted on bringing the delegation to extravagant meals at hotel restaurants. Knowing full well the economic hardships the population was enduring, we tried to beg off from these meals of grilled meat and spicy stews. Something simple would be fine, we said. But our hosts were eager to show us the best food on offer in Pyongyang and, no doubt, to get a proper meal for themselves in the bargain.

privately and distributed to friends and colleagues, the guide rates 50 restaurants in Pyongyang according to price and quality.

It is the first such attempt to introduce foreigners to the secrets of eating out in a city where visitors rarely wander around unescorted. The guide provides much useful advice. Foreigners are not common, for instance, at the city's one bowling alley, but you might be able to hang out with the locals if you praise the restaurant's stews. American-style pancakes are available at the Pyongyang Information Center's second-floor restaurant. The Chongchun 1 restaurant attracts families and children and, according to the guide, is "a definite 'dine with the proletariat' experience!" Co-author Roberto Christen relates that he often mixed with North Koreans at these restaurants, communicating across language barriers about such matters as food and weather.

A Market for Food

Restaurant choices have proliferated over the last two years. The *Choson Sinbo*, a pro-North Korean newspaper from Japan, estimates that there are now 500 restaurants in Pyongyang -- a far cry from the estimated 30,000 restaurants of New York but a respectable number nonetheless. It is not clear who owns these new restaurants, but ethnic Koreans from Japan and China are responsible for the start-up capital behind at least some of them.

This revival of North Korean cuisine has also caught the attention of South Koreans. Film companies from the two countries recently announced that they will co-produce a documentary on the 100 best North Korean dishes. The profusion of choices has fanned the first sparks of competition.

In the past, Pyongyang restaurant managers would rarely interact with foreigners. Today, manager-owners are competing for customers. On her last trip earlier this year, Kathi Zellweger of Caritas received a free dish at one place, a coupon to use at another, and an offer at a third for future discounts if she brought delegations to eat there.

Since foreigners are not exactly thick on the ground in Pyongyang, the new restaurants depend on local patronage. On his most recent trip this year to Pyongyang, Randall Ireson lunched at a microbrewery alongside average Pyongyangites in working attire. "The beer was excellent, a dark ale," says the DPRK Assistance Coordinator for the American Friends Service Committee. "You could make a meal of it. And they served the best cold noodles I've had."

The price -- 15 euros for five people including beer -- was cheap for foreigners. Without coupons, once given out at North Korean workplaces, this inexpensive restaurant is within reach of only a small minority. Still, several visitors report that they couldn't get into the more popular eateries because of the crowds.

The most unusual food in Pyongyang these days is not the ostrich barbecue at the Arirang restaurant or the sashimi at the Galaxy. It is a dish that most people would

consider the most banal: hamburger. Foreign food is certainly not unknown to the North Korean elite (consider, for instance, the tales of Kim Jong Il's sushi chef or the memoir of the Italian pizza expert flown in to impart the secrets of the trade. But Pyongyang's new hamburger restaurant is perhaps the first example of a Western menu for the masses.

Richard Ragan, the Pyongyang-based country director for the World Food Program (WFP), knows hamburgers. Back in the United States, his family has opened up 150 branches of its BackYard Burgers.

"Thus, I'm a burger snob," Ragan admits. "That said, the North Korean version is a fair attempt at the original. The bread, which is a key element of any good burger, is toasted with sesame seeds and very tasty. The meat is a pork patty, but quite acceptable while the dressing is a little lettuce, onions, mayo and an egg. Sure the egg sounds strange, but it helps make the burger. All in all I give it a thumbs up!"

Communist No More

Whatever you might think of North Korea, it barely qualifies as "communist" any longer. The North Korean government passed a joint venture law in 1984, established its first free trade zone in 1991, and deleted references to Marxism-Leninism from its constitution in 1992. The 2002 economic "adjustment" officially put profit at the center of economic activity. In 2003, the state began to shift to a "family-run farm system" that follows roughly the Chinese reforms of the late 1970s. On many farms, families are now responsible for what to plant and where to sell. The transfer of rights to land and property is reportedly just around the corner. Centralized planning still exists, but the center no longer has the money, the knowledge, or the absolute authority to control what happens on the ground.

Private markets -- once outlawed -- are now encouraged. The Tongil Market in the middle of Pyongyang is a large space where vendors sell everything from Chinese electronics to hothouse tomatoes. Until recently off-limits to foreigners, Tongil now attracts non-Korean visitors such as Marcela Sandoval. A chef who has worked at the Courtyard Restaurant in Beijing and Kinhead's in Washington, DC, Sandoval has been in Pyongyang for a year with husband Richard Ragan of WFP. For the Friday night tapas she prepares for the foreign community, Sandoval relies on the Tongil Market for cilantro, quail, turkey, and other provisions. Her experiences at the market vary.

"I've been turned away and I've been able to purchase things," she reports. "There are some people who are afraid to deal with you or don't know if they're allowed to deal with you."

Private enterprise is taking place outside these markets as well, often involving middlemen known as "doekori." These middlemen are now selling bicycles, cars, and any number of goods from the back of trucks. It's not just profit-making at the street level. Outside firms have taken advantage of the skilled workforce of the North, even to the point of outsourcing computer graphics: parts of the animated

movie *The Lion King* were made in Pyongyang. According to the *Korea Herald*, 150 international companies now operate in North Korea. To handle all the business going back and forth, the DHL office in Pyongyang has grown to 21 staff.

The most dramatic changes are occurring in Kaesong, an ancient city located just north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Until recently, the DMZ was an inviolable line dividing the peninsula. Now that South Korean businesses have set up shop in a Kaesong industrial zone, a daily bus runs from the South Korean capital of Seoul across the DMZ and right through what was once considered a prime tank invasion route. At Kaesong, workers from both halves of the divided peninsula labor side by side.

South Korea, which has been supplying energy to the Kaesong complex since March, has laid an optical cable for a direct phone link. The first products from the Living Arts facility at Kaesong -- a set of kitchen pots -- sold out quickly in department stores in Seoul. Scheduled to open in the near future in the new zone is the epitome of fast food: the South Korean convenience store Family Mart.

Politics of Rich and Poor

North Korea was never one of the more egalitarian of the communist countries. The rigid hierarchies of Confucianism, reflected in the numerous levels of address in the Korean language, persisted after 1945. Only in North Korea did "comrade" come in two variants: the comrade above you and the comrade at your level.

The new North Korea, full of swank restaurants and bustling private markets, is an even more stratified society. The economic reforms have widened the gap between rich and poor by privileging all those who can get hard currency. A new "red capitalist" elite is emerging, just as it did in the former Soviet bloc: those with connections and power under the old system are trying to carve out privileged positions under the new dispensation. Some of these red capitalists, according to North Korea analysts, have decided to make money by opening restaurants.

Gaps are emerging outside Pyongyang as well. The new agricultural system is increasing the wealth of certain farmers. The poor live in the cities, have less access to land to grow food or raise livestock, and have seen their paychecks shrink from inflation. The World Food Program estimates that much of the country receives a ration of only 250 grams of food a day, about two bowls of rice.

"I certainly don't think your average wage earner can afford eating out," says the WTP's Richard Ragan. But, he adds, this can be said for average wage earners in many parts of the world.

Although the economic adjustment has only widened disparities of wealth in the country, the importance of North Korea's restaurant revival is not restricted to a handful of lucky diners. The restaurant kitchens are keeping the market sellers and middlemen in business. And the markets are keeping farmers and families afloat in the countryside.

It's a harsh "trickle-down" process that, in providing opportunity to the few and neglecting the many, owes more to Reaganomics than Marxist economics. But after 10 years of food crisis and a barely functioning economy, the crowded restaurants of Pyongyang suggest that North Koreans have greater appetite for change.

John Feffer is working on a book about the global politics of food.

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