seoul food

ANCIENT KOREAN CUISINE FOR TODAY'S VEGETARIANS

By John Feffer
Photography by Renée Comet
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It all started with a handful of mugwort and 20 cloves of garlic. Several thousand years ago, legend has it, a she-bear survived on this "holy food" for 20 days, became transformed into a woman and bore the first Korean child. From the very beginning of Korean history, vegetarianism has been intimately connected to physical and spiritual transformations, and to this day, garlic and wild plants play vital roles in Korean cooking.

Many Western vegetarians don't get close enough to Korean cuisine to discover its holy and wholesome vegetarian secrets. Meat means hospitality in Korea, and foreign guests are usually treated to large platters of barbecued beef at special barbecue restaurants or to grilled short ribs at home. Many visitors often leave Korea with the mistaken impression that it is a country of dedicated carnivores.

"People don't realize that Korean cuisine is mostly vegetarian," says Hi Soo Shin Hepinstall, author of *Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen*, a Korean cookbook that is bringing this least-known of East Asian cuisines to new audiences in the ▶

United States. Formal vegetarianism came to Korea with Zen Buddhism and the traditional cuisine known as *son'shik*. To taste *son'shik*—the imaginative uses of tofu coupled with the beautiful preparations of mountain vegetables—you can visit a handful of restaurants in Seoul or hike up to one of the temples in the Korean mountains that serves this simple fare.

Korean cuisine relies on a great variety of piquant salads, many humble grains and innovative soybean preparations, unusual nuts such as ginkgo and acorn, and fruits such as citron and jujubes, or Chinese dates. Korean cooks also incorporate a colorful array of mountain roots and vegetables that rarely make an appearance on American tables.

These mountain vegetables, or *san'che*, play a central role in one of Hepinstall's most vivid memories of growing up in Korea. During the summer, her family collected *san'che*, putting some aside for the wintertime. On the first full moon of January—*Tae Borum Nal*—her mother would prepare different vegetarian dishes based on these dried vegetables, which, during storage, had become as black as tea leaves and needed soaking to remove their bitterness. With a sprinkle of wild sesame oil and soy sauce, the *san'che*—the aralia root (*todok*), broad bellflower (*toraji*) and fernbracken (*kosari*)—came to life with flavor, eaten with five-grain rice studded with red beans and black soybeans. Served thus, the vegetables are delicious, but they do have another purpose. "In winter, you lose energy," Hepinstall says. "You can revitalize your energy with mountain vegetables."

For most of their history, Koreans were vegetarian by necessity, not by choice. Korean farmers in this mostly agrarian society relied on simple meals of rice and vegetables supplemented very infrequently with meat. To survive between harvests, Koreans preserved vegetables by pickling—hence, the famous Korean kimchi. What most non-Koreans take to be kimchi—fermented napa cabbage—is in fact only one of over a hundred different varieties of kimchi.

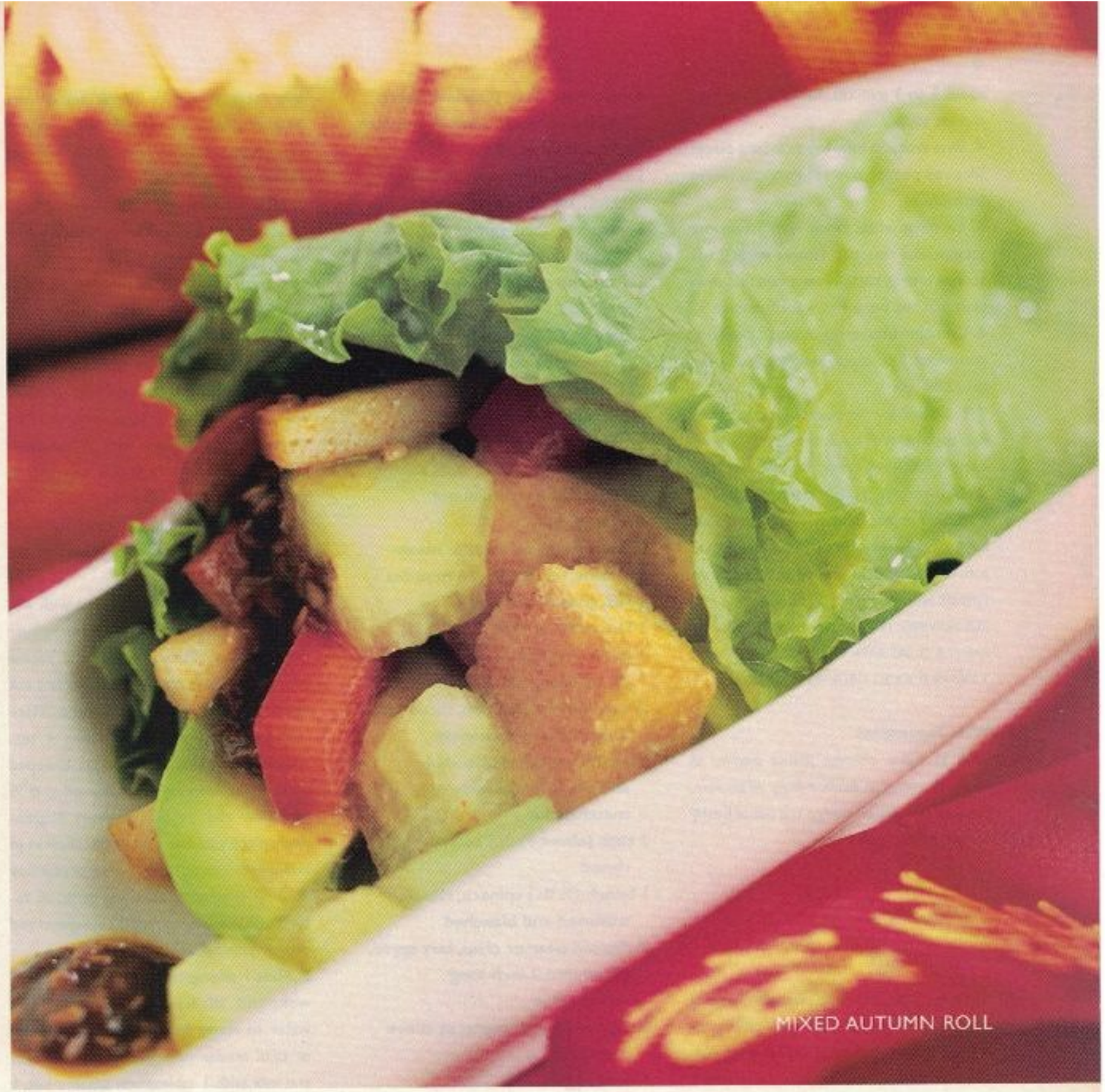
Kimchi is not an easy dish to make. Koreans usually give over a portion of November to *kimjang*, the collective enterprise of kimchi-making that often brings together several generations who work many hours preparing the kimchi, which then requires several days of fermentation before eating. But some summer kimchi—such as Stuffed Cucumber Kimchi (see recipe, p. 65), which are often eaten before they start the fermentation process—are relatively simple to prepare.

Koreans are quick to tout the health benefits of kimchi. Something so packed with garlic and vitamin C-rich cabbage can't help but fortify the immune system, and the lactic acid is said to aid digestion. But Koreans feel that nearly every ingredient and every dish from their traditional kitchen has a particular effect on the body. Ginkgo nuts are supposed to purify the blood. Ginseng provides an energy boost and, as an antioxidant, helps prevent cancer. Seaweed soup is popular with pregnant mothers.

Korean food is not, however, all function without form or beauty. Many Korean dishes are strikingly beautiful, alive with vibrant colors. Take the popular rice dish *bibimbap*. It displays the green of the spinach, the red of the chili paste, the black of the dried seaweed, and the white and yellow of the egg. And Korean vegetarian food is anything but bland. Many dishes are redolent with garlic. Spicy red pepper pastes and fermented bean preparations wake up the tongue and lift the spirit. At the center of many Korean meals is a hearty stew (*tchigae*) made from fermented soybean paste (*toenjang*) with tofu cubes, squash, cabbage and Korean white radish. *Toenjang chijae* is a potent version of Japanese miso, with a punch, a depth of flavor and a pungency that may require some getting used to. Once people acquire the taste for *toenjang* and other strong Korean ingredients, however, they are addicted.

True vegetarianism is somewhat rare in Korea today since many vegetable dishes rely on meat and seafood for flavoring. But younger Koreans are attracted to vegetarianism, an increasingly popular movement in Korea since the inception of such groups as the Korea Vegetarian Union and the Korea Veggie Society for Earth in the late 1980s. Besides its appeal for health, environmental and philosophical reasons, Korean vegetarian food holds the allure of fine taste and texture.

HAIRSTYLING BY WALT THE BARBER. FASHION STYLING BY KATE AND BARBARA



MIXED AUTUMN ROLL

PROPS COURTESY OF VEGA, BACKGROUNDS FROM EMILY AND ANDY FARMER

Mixed Autumn Rolls

SERVES 4

These refreshing appetizers are perfect for a warm day. Look for Korean red pepper powder at Korean markets.

Bean Paste Sauce

1 Tbs. brown sugar
2 Tbs. Korean *toenjang* bean paste or Japanese miso
1 tsp. sesame seeds

Wrapping

8 pieces leaf lettuce leaves
8 pieces sesame leaves or fresh herb such as basil leaves

Salad

1 Tbs. vegetable oil
3 oz. firm tofu, cubed
½ avocado, peeled
¼ red bell pepper, seeded
2½ oz. Korean white radish or daikon, julienned
2 oz. bean sprouts, raw
2 tsp. sesame oil
2 tsp. sesame seeds
2 tsp. brown sugar
1½ tsp. salt
1 tsp. Korean red pepper powder or paprika
2 small cucumbers, preferably Kirby variety, peeled and diced

1. To make Bean Paste Sauce: Place brown sugar in heavy saucepan, and melt over medium-low heat, taking care not to burn. Remove from heat, and stir bean paste and sesame seeds into melted sugar.

2. To make Wrapping: Trim edges of lettuce leaves to make them uniformly circular. Stack sesame or basil leaves alongside.

3. To make Salad: Heat oil in skillet or wok over medium-high heat, and stir-fry tofu ▶

about 2 to 3 minutes. Remove from heat, and set aside.

4. Slice avocado into 1½-inch-long pieces. Slice red pepper into 1½-inch-long pieces. Set aside.

5. Combine white radish with 1 teaspoon sesame oil, 1 teaspoon sesame seeds, 2 teaspoons brown sugar, ½ teaspoon salt and 1 teaspoon red pepper powder. Set aside.

6. Combine bean sprouts with 1 teaspoon sesame oil, 1 teaspoon sesame seeds and 1 teaspoon salt.

7. To assemble rolls, place 1 lettuce leaf on flat surface, and layer remaining ingredients in following order: sesame leaf, bean sprout mixture, radish mixture, tofu, cucumber, avocado and red pepper. Spoon about ½ teaspoon Bean Paste Sauce over top. Wrap by tucking ends in, and roll up. Repeat with remaining ingredients.

PER SERVING: 190 CAL; 7G PROT; 16G TOTAL FAT (1.5 G SAT. FAT); 13G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 1,250MG SOD; 2G FIBER; 5G SUGARS

Wine Suggestions

With so many different flavors involved in these rolls, you can select a fruity white wine, a robust red wine or indulge in a pot of freshly brewed Korean green tea.

Rice with Mountain Vegetables and Spicy Sauce

SERVES 10 TO 12

Koreans often top this rice dish with a fried egg, sunny-side up, and mix it in quickly to spread the hot yolk throughout. With or without the egg, use a big spoon to mix the rice and vegetables together, adding additional red pepper paste to taste. Mountain vegetables such as bellflower and fernbracken—touted in Korea for their health benefits—are available at Korean supermarkets, but they require lengthy cooking to remove bitterness. If mountain vegetables are not available, select such versatile ingredients as yellow summer squash and oyster mushrooms instead. Red pepper paste, or *kochujang*, is a staple of Korean food, and its characteristic hot and sweet flavor can be detected in many dishes. Look for this pepper paste at most pan-Asian and Korean markets.

4 cups Korean or Japanese short-grain rice, soaked for 20 minutes
5½ Tbs. sesame oil
1 cup dried bellflower or 2 cups thinly sliced oyster mushrooms
3½ tsp. chopped garlic
2 tsp. plus 1 Tbs. salt
1½ tsp. red pepper powder or paprika
2 cups dried fernbracken or 2 yellow summer squash, sliced into 2-inch-long matchsticks
5½ Tbs. plus 1 tsp. soy sauce
6½ Tbs. vegetable oil
1 Tbs. sesame salt or table salt
1 Tbs. scallion strips, about ½ scallion
6 dried *pyogo* or shiitake mushrooms, soaked for 20 minutes
2 Tbs. granulated sugar
2 Tbs. cooking wine
1 carrot, quartered and sliced into 2-inch-long matchsticks
½ medium-sized onion, sliced into 2-inch-long matchsticks
1 cucumber, peeled, seeded and sliced into 2-inch-long matchsticks
2 cups (about ¼ lb.) bean sprouts, rinsed
1 bunch (½ lb.) spinach, rinsed, trimmed and blanched
½ Korean pear or crisp, tart apple, sliced into 2-inch-long matchsticks
6 tsp. red pepper paste, or more to taste
6 fried eggs
1 sheet laver (seaweed), cut into 1-inch-long x ¼-inch-wide strips

1. Bring 4 to 4¼ cups water to a boil in large saucepan over medium heat, and stir in rice. Cover, reduce heat to low and cook about 20 minutes. When cooked, remove from heat, add 2 tablespoons sesame oil and mix thoroughly. Keep rice covered until ready to serve.

2. Place bellflower in saucepan with water to cover, and cook for 10 minutes over medium heat. Discard water, and repeat process. Place bellflower in saucepan with lightly salted water to cover, and cook over medium heat for 20 minutes, or until bitterness is gone and bellflower is easy to slice. Remove from heat, drain and cut each root into strips.

3. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in skillet or large wok, and stir-fry bellflower with ½ teaspoon chopped garlic, ½ teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon red pepper powder. Add 3 to 4 tablespoons water, and cover. Cook about 10 minutes, or until tender, remove from heat and stir in ¼ teaspoon sesame oil. Set aside. Alternatively, heat 1 tablespoon oil in skillet or large wok, and stir-fry oyster mushrooms with ½ teaspoon chopped garlic, ½ teaspoon salt and ¼ teaspoon red pepper powder. Cook about 5 minutes, or until tender, remove from heat and stir in ¼ teaspoon sesame oil. Set aside.

4. Place fernbracken in saucepan with water to cover, and cook for 10 minutes over medium heat. Discard water, and repeat process. Remove from heat, drain and cut fernbracken into 2-inch-long pieces. Place pieces in bowl, and season with 4 teaspoons soy sauce, 2 teaspoons chopped garlic, ½ tablespoon vegetable oil and ½ teaspoon red pepper powder. Alternatively, place summer squash matchsticks in bowl, and season with 4 teaspoons soy sauce, 2 teaspoons chopped garlic, ½ tablespoon cooking oil, and ½ teaspoon red pepper powder. Set aside.

5. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in skillet or large wok, and stir-fry fernbracken, adding water to cover and cooking 15 minutes, or until tender. Remove from heat, drain and mix with 1 tablespoon sesame salt, 1 tablespoon scallion strips and 1 tablespoon sesame oil. Set aside. Alternatively, heat 1 tablespoon oil in skillet or large wok, and stir-fry summer squash matchsticks 2 to 3 minutes, or until translucent. Remove from heat, drain and mix with 1 tablespoon sesame salt, 1 tablespoon scallion strips and 1 tablespoon sesame oil. Set aside.

6. Stem mushrooms, and slice thinly. Place in saucepan with mushroom soaking water. Add 2 tablespoons soy sauce, 2 tablespoons sugar, 2 tablespoons cooking wine, and cook over medium heat 10 minutes, or until tender. Set aside.

PROPS COURTESY OF VEGA

7. Heat 1 tablespoon vegetable oil in skillet or large wok, and stir-fry carrots, adding ½ teaspoon salt and a few teaspoons water to prevent burning. Cook 3 to 4 minutes, remove from heat and set aside.

8. Heat 1 tablespoon vegetable oil in skillet or large wok, and stir-fry onion, adding ½ teaspoon salt and a few teaspoons water to prevent burning. Cook 3 to 4 minutes, remove from heat and set aside.

9. Sprinkle cucumber with ½ tablespoon salt, and let stand. When limp, squeeze hard. Heat 1 tablespoon vegetable oil in skillet or large wok, and stir-fry cucumber about 1 minute. Remove from heat, and set aside.

10. Heat 1 tablespoon vegetable oil in skillet or large wok, and stir-fry bean sprouts with ½ teaspoon garlic. Add salt and sprinkle of water, cover and cook until bean sprouts are softened, about 3 minutes. Season with 1 tablespoon sesame oil and 1 teaspoon red pepper powder.

11. Squeeze out water from spinach, and mix with ½ tablespoon sesame oil and ½ tablespoon soy sauce.

12. To serve, fill bottom of individual shallow bowl with rice. Alternate vegetables and pear side by side on rice like rays of sun, placing 1 teaspoon red pepper paste in center. Place egg near red pepper paste. Sprinkle slivers of laver on top, and serve. Repeat process with remaining ingredients until all used up.

PER SERVING: 440 CAL; 12G PROT; 21G TOTAL FAT (3.5 G SAT. FAT); 50G CARB; 210MG CHOL; 1,860MG SOD; 4G FIBER; 6G SUGARS

Wine Suggestions

This rice dish is really a workingperson's dish. Cool down with a bowl of bibimbap *and a frosty mug full of Olde Heurich's German-Style Maerzen beer called Foggy Bottom Lager.*

Hi Soo Shin Hepinstall's Tofu and Vegetable Stew

SERVES 4 TO 6

Korean *tchigaes* are rich, satisfying stews. A staple of many Korean recipes, *toenjang*, or fermented soybean paste, is similar to Japanese miso—but with a much earthier taste. Look for it at pan-Asian or Korean markets. If Korean radish, or *mu*, is not available, use Japanese daikon. Korean sweet green onions are larger than Western scallions, but if the Korean variety is not available, use scallions. Serve this stew with rice and a fresh salad.

3 cups water
6 Tbs. *toenjang*, or to taste
1 kelp strip, about 1 inch by 6 inches long, optional
¼ lb. *pyogo* or shiitake mushrooms, thinly sliced
5 cloves garlic, crushed and finely chopped
1 lb. medium-firm bean curd, sliced into 1x1½x¼-inch pieces
1 lb. napa cabbage, cut into 1x1½-inch-long pieces
1 lb. sweet Korean radish or Japanese daikon, peeled and sliced into 1x1½x¼-inch pieces
½ lb. summer squash, or *hobak*, sliced into 1x1½x¼-inch pieces
2 large Korean green onions or 4 scallions, white and pale green parts only, cut diagonally into ¼-inch-long pieces
1 hot green Korean pepper or jalapeño, seeded, deribbed and cut diagonally into ¼-inch-long pieces
1 hot red Korean pepper or ½ red bell pepper, seeded, deribbed and cut diagonally into ¼-inch-long pieces
1 Tbs. sesame oil

1. Pour water in large deep skillet with domed cover. Add *toenjang*, and stir to dissolve. Add kelp, if using, mushrooms and garlic. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Place bean curd, cabbage, radish and squash in skillet in pinwheel pattern. Cover, bring to a boil and cook about 10 minutes.

2. Place green onions and peppers evenly between other ingredients, and cover again. Cook for several seconds, or until green onions and peppers become fragrant and colors turn bright. Cook stew no longer than 15 minutes total. Drizzle sesame oil over ingredients just before removing from heat. Serve immediately.

PER SERVING: 160 CAL; 10G PROT; 6G TOTAL FAT (1G SAT. FAT); 17G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 690MG SOD; 5G FIBER; 5G SUGARS

Wine Suggestions

This earthy Korean stew is full of wine-loving foods. While there are many red wines that match, go for a white wine such as Estancia Pinnacles Chardonnay for a summer refresher.

Seaweed Rolls

SERVES 4 TO 6

A Korean snack food, eaten at all times of day, the rolls, or *kimbap*, make a colorful appetizer. Also popular picnic foods, they are taken along as energy snacks on hikes. Once you get the basic recipe down, you can try substituting your favorite cooked vegetables or tofu. Look for laver, a type of dried seaweed sold in Korean markets, or substitute Japanese nori, also sold in sheets, available in most Asian markets.

2 cups short-grain Korean or Japanese rice, soaked for 20 minutes
¼ cup white vinegar plus ½ cup for soaking
5 Tbs. granulated sugar plus ½ cup for soaking
3 tsp. salt
1 cucumber, peeled
2 long carrots, scraped and trimmed
1 pickled yellow Korean radish or Japanese daikon
4 large eggs
1 Tbs. vegetable oil
1 bunch (about ½ lb.) spinach, rinsed, trimmed and blanched
8 dried Korean *pyogo* or shiitake mushrooms, soaked in warm water for 20 minutes
2 Tbs. soy sauce
2 Tbs. cooking wine
10 sheets laver or Japanese nori, about 7 inches square
Sesame oil for brushing
Sesame seeds for sprinkling
Pickled ginger slices for garnish

PROPS COURTESY OF VEGA

1. Bring 2 cups water to a boil in large saucepan over medium heat, and stir in rice. Cover, reduce heat to low and cook about 20 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, heat ¼ cup vinegar, 3 tablespoons sugar and 1 teaspoon salt in small saucepan, about 2 minutes, and stir into cooked rice. Let rice cool 10 minutes.

3. Cut cucumber, carrots and pickled radish same length as laver sheets. Cut same vegetables into strips ¼-inch thick and ¼-inch wide. Soak cucumber and carrot strips in ½ cup vinegar, ½ cup sugar and 1 teaspoon salt until ready to roll.

4. Beat eggs with ½ teaspoon salt until foamy. Heat oil in large skillet over medium-low heat, and cook eggs in sheet dimension of laver. Using spatula, remove from heat, and cut into strips same size as pickled radish.

5. Preheat oven to 350F.

6. Squeeze water from spinach, and mix with ½ teaspoon salt. Remove stems from mushrooms, and slice thinly. Add 2 tablespoons soy sauce, 2 tablespoons sugar and 2 tablespoons cooking wine to mushroom soaking water, and cook over low heat 10 minutes, or until tender.

7. Place laver on cookie sheet, and toast lightly in oven, about 5 minutes. Remove from oven, and place on bamboo sushi-rolling mat or flat surface. Spread thin layer of cooled rice on sheet, leaving about one-third of far side of sheet uncovered. Lay one strip each egg, mushroom and vegetables at center of rice, about one-third way up sheet. Place pieces side by side for those width of laver and egg, and end to end for smaller pieces. Roll tight, adding some water to seal edge.

8. Brush outside of roll with sesame oil. Cut rolls into ½-inch-thick slices. Sprinkle slices with sesame seeds, and garnish with pickled ginger.

PER SERVING: 370 CAL; 10G PROT; 6G TOTAL FAT (1.5G SAT. FAT); 67G CARB; 140MG CHOL; 1,420MG SOD; 3G FIBER; 13G SUGARS

Sautéed Oyster Mushrooms with Scallions and Onions

SERVES 4

Hangawi Restaurant's vegetarian version of the barbecued beef, or *bulgogi*, dish so popular in Korean restaurants should be served with rice, making a pleasing and flavorful main-course dish.

½ lb. oyster mushrooms
2 orange segments, peeled
⅛ large Korean pear or crisp, tart apple
3 oz. fresh ginger
4 Tbs. brown sugar
¼ cup sake
¾ cup low-sodium soy sauce
¾ cup water
3 Tbs. sesame oil
7 oz. onions, peeled and thinly sliced
5 oz. scallions, sliced into 3-inch-long pieces
2 cups mixed salad greens, such as mesclun or other greens as preferred
1 tsp. sesame seeds

1. Rinse oyster mushrooms thoroughly, and pat dry with paper towels. Shred mushrooms by hand into long, thin pieces.

2. Bring water to a boil in saucepan over medium-high heat, and dip in shredded oyster mushrooms for several seconds. Remove from heat.

3. Combine orange, pear, ginger, brown sugar, sake, soy sauce, water and sesame oil in mixing bowl. Stir in mushrooms, onions and scallions.

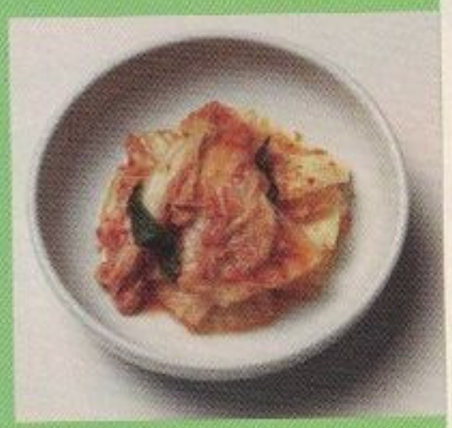
4. Place mushroom mixture into skillet, and sauté 2 to 3 minutes over medium heat. Remove from heat.

Hangawi Restaurant

In the heart of Koreatown in midtown Manhattan, an oasis of Zen quietude known as Hangawi beckons. This small restaurant—with its traditional Korean architecture, calligraphy wall hangings and soothing music—features a menu that bursts with variety and taste. Owners Terri Choi and her husband, William, offer traditional dishes such as the earthy Korean pancakes of mung bean, leek and kimchi; a crunchy salad of aralia, watercress, cabbage and carrots with a lemony dressing; and autumn rolls, which are little deep-fried tofu sandwiches. Diners include two types of kimchi—the fiery version with red pepper paste and a white kimchi like a slaw.

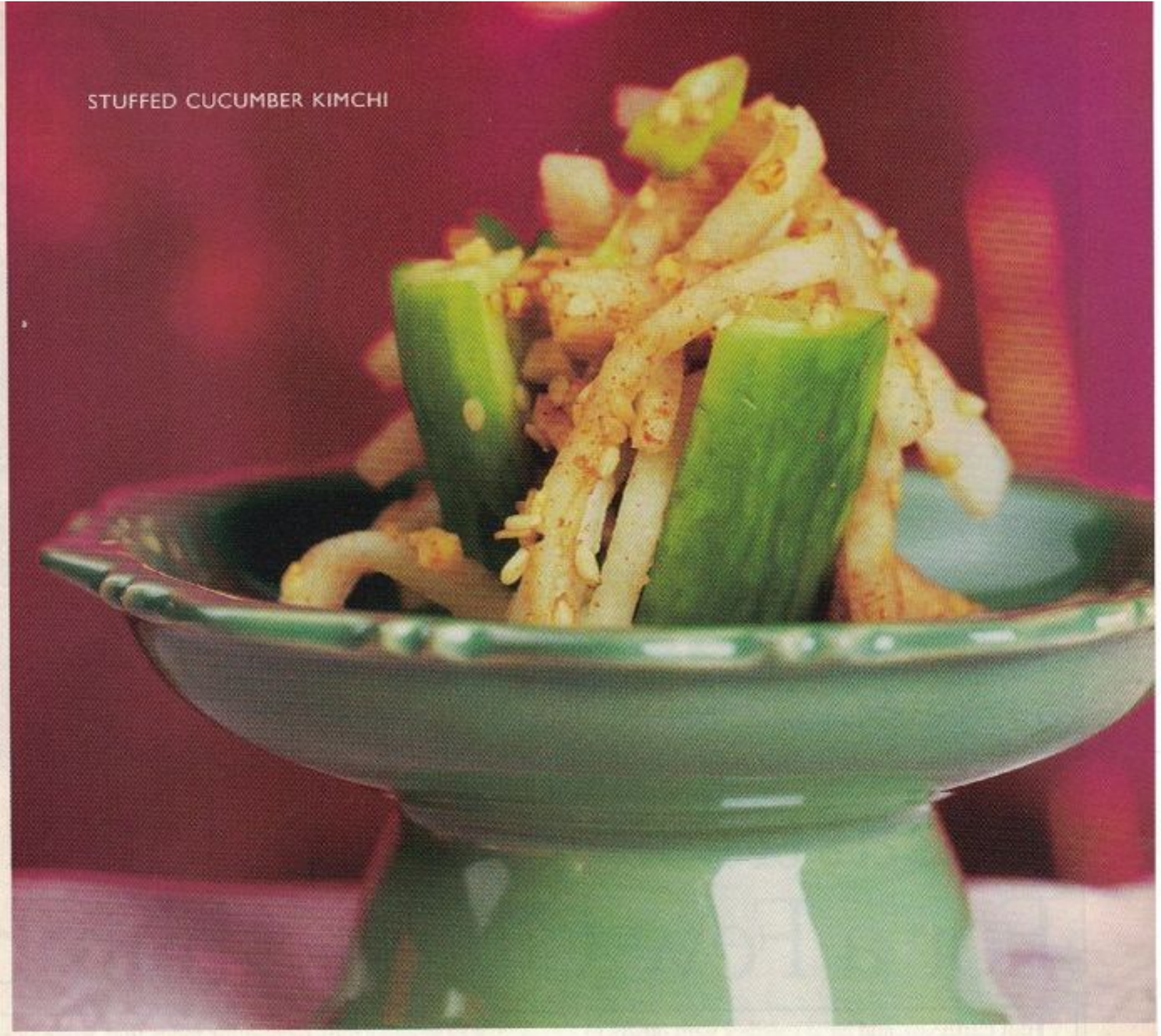
"When we started, we were very influenced by Buddhist temple cooking," explains Terri Choi. "But we realized that *son'shik* wasn't enough. We had to have more variety." So they added other pan-Asian dishes to the menu. These include an example of Korean-Chinese food—the *tang soo yook* with mushrooms instead of meat, plus an acorn noodle salad that combines Korean ingredients in an Italian style. "We're always in the process of creating new dishes," Terry Choi says, "without getting too far away from principles. We will always have that Koreanness in it."

Another influence on Hangawi's food is the court cuisine of ancient



Korea. The Chef Special Emperor's Meal comes with a vegetarian version of *sinsollo*, the royal steamboat soup whose brilliant colors and arrangement look more like a beautiful tapestry than mere food—and in heartiness is much like a stew.

A dinner at Hangawi challenges the popular notion that serving meat is the only way to be hospitable in Korean culture. Hangawi, 12 East 32nd St., New York, NY; 212.213.0077.



5. Arrange mesclun on plates, and top with mushroom mixture. Garnish with sesame seeds, and serve.

PER SERVING: 260 CAL; 7G PROT; 11G TOTAL FAT (1.5G SAT. FAT); 29G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 1,210MG SOD; 5G FIBER; 16G SUGARS

Stuffed Cucumber Kimchi

SERVES 4 TO 6

Kimchi—or pickled vegetables—usually takes a long time to prepare. This particular version is fast, producing a crisp, refreshing Korean pickle. If Korean radish, or mu, is not available, use Japanese daikon, which is available in most markets. You can eat the pickled cucumbers as soon as you like, though they taste better after a day or so. If you haven't eaten all the kimchi at the end of the second day, wrap leftovers tightly in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for up to one week.

5 pickling cucumbers, such as Kirby variety
3 Tbs. iodine-free coarse salt
1 cup Korean radish or Japanese daikon, julienned
½ Tbs. iodine-free table salt
½ Tbs. sugar
½ Tbs. Korean red pepper powder or paprika
2 tsp. chopped garlic
2 tsp. chopped fresh ginger
¼ cup thinly sliced scallion
½ Tbs. toasted sesame seeds

1. Wash cucumbers, rub with coarse salt and let stand 20 to 30 minutes. Wipe dry.

2. Combine radish, table salt, sugar, red pepper powder, garlic, ginger and scallions. Cut cucumbers into two-inch chunks. Slit each piece down middle but not through end. Repeat at right angle to form cross. Fill with radish mixture.

3. Bring ¼ cup water to a boil, and pour into empty radish-mixing bowl. Swirl out, and pour water over cucumbers.

4. Place cucumbers in pan in single layer, sprinkle with sesame seeds, cover with plastic wrap and set aside. Serve when cool, or reserve for later use.

PER SERVING: 30 CAL; 1G PROT; 0.5G TOTAL FAT (0G SAT. FAT); 6G CARB; 0MG CHOL; 1,170MG SOD; 1G FIBER; 2G SUGARS

PROPS COURTESY OF SUR LA TABLE