

5695 occasions to have a memory

After 17 years spent in South Korea, how many meals did I have here ?

17 x 365 years x 2 meals a day = 12 410 meals. I take out on purpose breakfast, still “continental” for me most of the time (but I *do* love to have someone prepare for me a full Korean breakfast!). If I take into account the vacations out of Korea, let’s say 30 days x 17 years x 2 = 1020 meals to subtract - it still makes a total of 11 390 meals in Korea. On which total I can assume that half of them were non-Korean food or a kind of fusion... So let’s say, at least, 5 695 occasions to eat Korean food in Korea... 5695 occasions to have a memory, whether good or bad... Suddenly, a mist of oblivion seems to fall on my mind, and these thousands of Korean *banchan*, *jjigae*, *guksu*, *jjim*, *tuigim*, *gu-i* come and dance in front of my eyes... I feel like I have so many memories that it is as if I had *none*... What could emerge from that, if I try to put my thoughts into order?

I remember very well my first meal, but it is for personal and quite obvious reasons. In itself, it was good, but not an outstanding gastronomic experience. It was more important for me because I was just taken from the airport, and it was my first real contact with Korea. It was summer, the atmosphere was sticky hot and humid, and the director of the French school where I was sent to teach for two years brought me to a small restaurant in Bangbae-dong specialized in *jejuk bokkeum*. That very spicy pork sautéed in a red and oily paste on top of steaming rice was just what I didn’t want to eat on such a day! But it was a strong, striking experience, it tasted as a tough “Welcome to Korea!” shouted very loud to my whole body, and for a while it symbolized the country for me, and the complex charm I was discovering in it.

I also remember some snacks I had in very common places like *pojangmacha*, and I don’t know why I remember them. It is the mystery of the memory process, that some seemingly trivial memories just come to haunt you back and back without apparent reason. But there is always a reason in the logic of the mind, and it is just because we are not fluent in that special language our mind speaks that we cannot understand that logic. There must be a reason why I remember a special *tteokbokki* I had in the wee hours of a street of Hongdae, or that *sundae bokkeum* in front of the ex-Dongdaemun stadium, one cold night... I don’t know why I still remember them *especially*. Is it because it reminds me of these busy nights when I was going out in my Hongdae area before all the clubs and bars that we can see now opened, a time when electronic music was just entering Korea through that very area? Is it because of that atmosphere of never-ending activity in the markets which made you suddenly hungry at 3 in the morning? Or is it the taste of freedom that only a *pojangmacha* could give you at a time when an official “curfew” was still closing the city at midnight?

We all know that some special times in life are linked to the strong physical perceptions we had then, and that taste can be one of them. That is certainly why I cherish the taste of *galbijjim* of the Jingogae restaurant in Chungmuro, because it reminds me of my lover of that time who was working in the area, of our first date in a movie theater now demolished, and of that first dinner in the area. It may not have been a dinner at Jingogae actually that night, but that restaurant became a symbol of that love, and even more, of the whole area which symbolizes it: when I think of the very fragrant broth of the *galbijjim*, its rich cinammon aroma topped with the crisp freshness of garland chrysanthemum (*ssukgat*), a lot of images come back to my mind – the repetitive sound of the printing companies’ rotatives, the smell of fresh ink and dust in the street, the machines cutting white piles of paper like butter, the old shops specialised in photo and cameras, the sweat of the hard-working workers in the dark small alleys...

I remember... I remember the evenings spent with my friends in Imojip in Insadong, when they were grilling the *tteokgalbi* on the charcoal in the small courtyard – and among these friends, few are left now... and Imojip has moved... Without them, my friends, will the taste of the juicy meat and of the *modeum jeon* be the same? It seems that my memory has fixed these dinners at Imojip and that special smell of barbecued beef just to remember those who were there, like my dear friend Frederic who passed away few years ago... Just like this dinner in Jongno 6-ga, in one of the *dalk hanmari* restaurants of the market, full with the smell of grilled fish in the narrow back alley, and the steaming hot pots with the boiling chicken in the lively and super noisy dining hall full of customers with faces red of *soju*, heat

and joy... It would be nothing though in my memory if my mother, who was visiting me in Korea for the first time, and loved so much that restaurant, was not sitting somewhere in that dining hall... I think that she has forgotten the very expensive *banjeongsbik* places I brought her to in Insadong, but she still remembers that popular, dirty and noisy joint in Jongno – as I do actually...

I am quite a picky person when it comes to food – because I also cook at home and do my own *doenjang*, *ganjang*, *gimchi* and *jangajji* with vegetables from my garden. So I tend to be less and less lenient when it comes to Korean food. But why is it that in my memories, none of the “royal court food” or fancy “new Korean cuisine” restaurants that I visited many times in Samcheon-dong or Gangnam left a meaningful trace? I guess that these places, sometimes very good, sometimes just pretentious and disappointing, don’t have for me the special “resonance” that other places have in my heart. Is it because of the service, of the setting, of the food? There seems to be a missing dimension. I don’t want to say that Korean food is necessarily popular food and cannot be refined and luxurious. But kings died a long time ago here, and the spirit of their lifestyle with them. And it is hard to impress a Frenchman with “fancy” restaurants... Actually, most of the time, I couldn’t find in such places that bold authenticity which charmed me all over the country (Korea) in so many restaurants, or even in people’s houses where I had the chance to be invited to. It may be the only limitation that I put on the Korean food globalization phenomenon: Korean food never tastes as good as when it is enjoyed with the people who give its special flavour to it... Therefore, how to put in a processed frozen bibimpap box all these Korean nights, these beautiful people, these strong feelings, these intoxicating smells, these *physical landscapes of my memory*...? How to put in a tin can of *gimchi* all these 5695 occasions which made me a lover of Korean food – and of Korea ?

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