be shared by everyone. One family tradition which has gotten lost in the fast-paced ready-made food era that we live in is the role of children in helping the parent prepare the meals. The most important tradition is when children learn how to cook the family’s ethnic specialities, for this is how foodways get passed on.

Notes

1. This seaweed bundle is called kouna.

2. Growing up in the 1950s early Cold War years, American culture placed a heavy emphasis on a white American “standard” that everyone needed to measure up to. “White flight entitled a renegotiation of racial and spatial identities, implying a cultural process in which an expanding middle class of myriad ethnic backgrounds came to discover itself as white.” Eric Avila, Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2004).

3. Dean S. Toji and Karen Umemoto, “The Paradox of Dispersal: Ethnic Continuity & Community Development among Japanese Americans in Little Tokyo,” napl nexus 11 (Summer/Fall 2003), 35. “Throughout all of the generations, Japanese American sports leagues have brought the ethnic community together. For Japanese American youth, Nikkei sports leagues are often their sole or primary affiliation with a Japanese American organization.”

4. At Ranch 99 Market, or most Chinese grocery supermarkets, you can find “soochuen Preserved Vegetable” in a red and yellow can. The ingredients say “Chinese radish, chili powder, salt and spices. It is the White Rabbit Brand,” a product of Shanghai.


6. Ketu H. Katniss, “Food and Belonging: At Home and in ’Alien-Kitchens,” from Through the Kitchen Window: Women Writers Explore the Intimate Meanings of Food and Cooking, ed. Alinea Avakian (Boston: Beadon Press, 1997), 267. For Ketu’s mother, cooking was far more than a labor of love: “...cooking did not give my mother any authority within the family hierarchy. I recall a deep sense of her powerlessness and invisibility—so much effort and so little acknowledgement. I was stopped short in my sadness for her. I could not enjoy the food, and I could not articulate why I felt distressed. Looking back now, her situation and my response seems to be dictated by the power structure within a joint family’s hierarchy. Since the greatest authority was enjoyed by my father, I identified with him rather than with my mother.”

To me, Korean food is beautiful. Yet, for most non-Koreans, the look of the food is left with much to be desired—the proverbial blind date with the great personality. It is like other Asian cuisine but different, focused on the preparation rather than the presentation. Nevertheless, nothing binds us Koreans more securely than our love for soon doe bu (soft tofu soup in a hot bean paste), bibim naeng myun (thin cold noodles in a spicy sauce topped with vegetables, beef, and egg), and bibim bap (rice mixed with vegetables and beef strips). However, these dishes can be frustrating for a young boy looking to impress his American friends. Much goes into preparing a typical Korean dish but it always seems to arrive at the table betraying those efforts. Nobody understood this better than my mother. I didn’t understand this until it was too late.

The Korean pride that my family expressed at home limited the kinds of food to which my sister and I had access. Even within a city as diverse as Los Angeles, it wasn’t until the third grade that I was able to taste anything that could be found outside of a typical menu at a Korean restaurant. Luckily, at school, starting with the upper grade levels, every year ended with a multicultural potluck—a celebration of our school’s diversity. This was where I had my first taste, my first Indian coconut milk curry (so much better than the powdered kind), and my first falafel. This was the culinary event I looked forward to each year until I was forced into middle school.

The rule for the potluck was simple: if you wanted to partake, all you had to do was bring an ethnic dish (preferably one representing your own culture) that was large enough to serve a classroom full of kids. I had the dilemma of having to decide

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for my mother what her contribution would be. I was sure that the children from Mexico, El Salvador, India, and Israel would all bring attractive-looking cuisine. The one girl from Australia with the funny accent would no doubt bring something exotic like kangaroo fillet cooked over a barbie. However, I realized (even at that age) that most of the food we ate at home may have been mouth-watering but it definitely wasn’t pretty to look at. I wanted to bring a dish that would turn heads too.

Very quickly, I raised my hand and submitted my mother’s kim bop. I could see the angst in the eyes of the Korean girl sitting next to me. Her pout revealed that she had intended to bring her mother’s version of this very same dish. It was too late for her. She would have to bring in bul go gi which is a thinly sliced rib-eyed steak marinated in a special sauce. Yes, this dish was pretty too but extremely expensive when you consider having to feed a classroom full of hungry kids. My mother’s kim bop would be attractive and economical. The Korean girl’s mother must have passed out when she was told of the amount of meat that was needed. I just had to smile at my great fortune.

Kim bop is very close to a California roll. Wrapped in dried seaweed, it typically holds pickled radish, cucumbers, carrots, eggs, steam rice, and a meat of some kind—it can be beef, chicken, pork, crab, or even fish. The exact ingredients and in which proportions are chosen by the person who prepares it. However, I didn’t care about that. All I was concerned about was how it would look. I just hoped the dish would be as gorgeous to them as it was to me on those special occasions when my mother saw fit to make it. I kept smiling.

My mother smiled too upon learning of her obligation. She seemed pleased that I was smart enough to pick such a pretty dish. The afternoon before the potluck was spent with my mother at the local Korean grocer. She made sure that she bought everything she needed before having to quickly race back home to change for work and then heading back out the door. The next time I would see her would be in the morning as she worked on the kim bop. Over the next several years as I continued to raise my hand and volunteer her kim bop for those potlucks, and as my little sister soon did the same, this image of my mother preparing the dish early in the morning became solidified in my mind.

I would wake up to the smell of sesame oil. Making my way downstairs, I would find my mother, still in her nurse’s uniform (as she worked night shifts), busy at work over the frying pan toasting the seaweed that was brushed with sesame oil and sprinkled with sesame seeds. She would spend about two hours just preparing the ingredients that would ultimately make the kim bop. It was all sliced, all of it. The eggs were fried and sliced into long slivers; the pickled radish (which I could only stand to eat in the kim bop)—sliced; carrots—sliced; cucumbers—sliced.

It was all on the kitchen table in an assembly line arrangement. At the head of the table sat the bowl of steaming white rice (sticky but not wet) ready for the seaweed wrap. Just as important as the rice was the meat she would use. She always chose beef for these potlucks. She would need to compete with the bul go gi. Looking back, it was the only time I tasted kim bop with beef. Usually it was filled with a lesser meat like hot dogs sliced along the length, or crab (with the “K”), or even spam!

Once all the ingredients were ready, the assembly could occur. She would take a single seaweed wrap and with a moistened spoon grab a scoop of rice. The spoon would spread the rice over the seaweed which she would have to occasionally re-moisten to prevent sticking. Then the rest would go in: first—the meat; second—the fried egg; and finally—the rest of the vegetables. The secret to her kim bop was the width of her cuts. All her vegetables were cut so thin and wispy that she would have to be careful when grabbing these tiny clumps of vegetable lengths so as not to tear them. When I look back, I am amazed that a woman who worked an entire night shift could still have the focus to gently slice all those vegetables into such thin pieces.

Once the ingredients were all in, she would roll the kim bop like a cigar. The trick was to compress it thoroughly without crushing the ingredients. To do this, she used a bamboo wrap that would allow her hands to distribute the pressure equally along the length of the roll. She would then cut diagonally across the vegetable cigar and each roll would yield at least a dozen pieces (if not more). The ends were not attractive and relegated to a pile to which I had free access. I would gobble down as much as I could before it was time for me to go to school. She would need a couple more hours to finish and would have to bring the kim bop to school later.

The entire class would be instructed not to eat anything at recess and to come into the classroom for lunch. We didn’t get to play our beloved sock-ball but it was a trivial sacrifice for the meal that would end all meals. What I never thought about then but continually think about today is just how reliable my mother
was. She would get to school and drop off the kim bap while we were usually at recess. I imagine my mother walking into an empty classroom with only my teacher (Ms. Dolce, Ms. Appel, or Ms. Gladstone) there to greet her. They would’ve exchanged “hellos,” I imagine. I picture my mother asking her where I sat.

If you came looking for me on the eighteenth of June in the year 1994, you could have found me at the corner of Western Avenue and Olympic Boulevard. I was now a high school student killing time, waiting for the school bus, reminiscing about my carefree days in elementary school. At that intersection, during the morning rush, a white Cadillac El Dorado ran a red light. The driver was either trying to beat the light to get home or was just too tired to notice the light change. A faded blue Ford pickup truck slammed into the Cadillac and killed the driver instantly. By the time this accident occurred, I was already safely on my way to school.

Entering a living room full of relatives is usually a joyous occasion marking some kind of celebration. That day was different. Almost everyone was there: my two aunts on my mother’s side, my many uncles, and my little sister sat staring at me (and not the TV which was unusual). With a group as big as this, my mother would be racing back and forth from the kitchen serving them quick confections she would inevitably have to create with only her imagination to aid her. She was that kind of woman. People would be eating. No one was eating—or talking for that matter. They all just seemed to be staring at me. Why did they all look so lost?

We buried our mother that Saturday. She had apparently fallen asleep at the wheel. It wasn’t until they lowered her casket into the ground that I realized I would never see her again. Her importance to the family was immediately felt when we got home from the service and realized nobody had even thought to prepare any food for the family and friends who would soon arrive. That was something my mother would have taken care of. My father had to quickly race over to Kentucky Fried Chicken and order something like six family meals. We ate chicken all week.

Even after all these years, I still know where to find my mother. She isn’t in a cemetery where they use in-ground plaques so that the eerie look of tombstones is replaced by something that looks more like a morbid park. She isn’t in the kitchen arduously preparing food after a long night at the hospital, as tired as she must have been. She is at my school asking my teacher where I sit. She is next to me during recess as I’ve decided to forgo soccer ball this afternoon and instead resolved to sit and wait for her so that I can say, “thank you.”

Kim Bop

The following amounts of desired ingredients are for what would constitute one roll of kim bap which would then be cut diagonally across to create kim bap coins of varying depth depending on your preference.

Ingredients needed:

- 1 Dried seaweed
- 1 Jumbo egg
- 2 oz. Fried beef
- 1/2 Fist of steam white rice
- 1/8 Carrot
- 1/8 Cucumber
- 1/8 Pickled radish
- Sesame oil
- A pinch of sesame seeds

Preparation:

The seaweed should be toasted over a frying pan that is lubricated with sesame oil.

Sprinkle a pinch of sesame seeds to flavor.

The 2 oz. of beef should be fried and set aside.

Fry the jumbo egg so that when you cut across the length of it, it should be at least 6 inches.

Take your carrot, cucumber, and pickled radish and cut along the length of the vegetable to create 1/4 inch cylinder lengths.

Lay the dried seaweed down flat on a bamboo wrap.

Spread the 1/2 fist of white steam rice over the seaweed evenly.

Take the beef, egg, carrot, cucumber, and pickled radish and place it along the length in the middle.

Use the bamboo wrap to roll the kim bap into a tight cigar shape.

Use the sesame oil to “glue” the ends together.

Take a knife and cut diagonally across the kim bap roll.

Enjoy!

Obviously use more ingredients to create more kim bap!