

by **Jean Oh**
The Korea Herald/ ANN

In the hush of the morning, the family gathers at the table to dip into steaming bowls of rice cake soup.

The children are shiny-eyed - dreaming of ways to spend the money they will receive from their elders after they have performed the traditional bow and greeting known as sebae. Aunts, uncles, parents and grandparents are seated, and everyone begins the first day of the Lunar New Year.

Oval slices of snow white rice cake - called tteok in Korean - float in a rich beef broth. Shredded and seasoned beef and bright green onions add spice and flavour. Spoons clink against bowls as everyone enjoys each warm and chewy spoonful of their rice cake soup, called tteokguk.

The meal marks the propitious start of one of Korea's biggest holidays: Seollal.

Throughout the nation, households will be going through these motions, partaking in an age-old tradition that is embedded in one simple dish: tteokguk.

It is the main dish placed on the ancestral table for rites that are traditionally performed in the morning. And it is this soup that adorns the breakfast table after everyone has finished performing the ancestral rites.

But when did Koreans first begin eating tteokguk on Seollal? And what is the cultural significance of this dish?

According to a 19th century handbook on traditions, the practice of eating rice cake soup dates back to the late 18th century. The handbook also explains the fortuitous nature of the dish. According to the text, the long white garae rice cake from which tteokguk is made symbolises good health and longevity. Its white hue signifies purity and cleanliness. And the teok that goes into the broth was originally sliced in the shape of round Korean brass coins, serving as a prayer for wealth.

Finishing one's bowl of rice cake soup also holds great significance. As the saying goes, "In order to get one year older, you must eat your tteokguk."

In Korea, age is not measured by the actual date of birth, but by the year that one is born. Traditionally, on the first day

of the Lunar New Year, you grow one year older. But in order to gain that privilege you need to eat rice cake soup.

Children eager to become full fledged adults try to cheat time by having several bowls of tteokguk. They believe that each empty bowl counts for an additional year. This belief may stem from the custom of asking one's age with the indirect question: "How many bowls of tteokguk have you had?"

In reality, rice cake soup is more of a southern custom. In the northern provinces of South Korea, dumpling soup is often served in place of tteokguk on Seollal. One theory behind this is that in the past rice farms in northern parts of Korea were scarce, leading to the need for a substitute.

With meat, rice and flour now abundant across South Korea, families are free to take their pick, serving either or both dishes or combining the two to create rice

cake dumpling soup. 'Choraengi tteokguk'

If records hold true, then the orthodox tteokguk of the past was made of pheasant or beef broth and round coin-shaped slices of rice cake. If pheasants were unavailable, chicken served as an acceptable alternative.

Tteokguk in practice is a far more versatile dish. It is refreshing as an oyster or seafood broth-based dish, healthy when slivers of tofu are added and novel when served in a soup made from shredded chicken that has been marinated in soy sauce.

Among the diverse array of tteokguk, choraengi tteokguk - a soup that originates from Gaeseong in North Korea - stands out.

Made from small rice cakes shaped like bottle gourds, Gaeseong's choraengi tteokguk is stunning visually, in contrast to its simple and delicate flavours.

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'Tteokguk'

was the neck of Yi that they were slicing. Other theories on the unique shape of choraengi rice cakes focus more on their talisman-like qualities. The small ivory teok is often compared to a cocoon or to a small wooden charm that was shaped like a bottle gourd.

The cocoon, which provides a seemingly endless supply of silk thread, is seen as a symbol of abundance and good fortune.

By eating choraengi tteokguk then, one was praying for prosperity and good luck or warding off evil and misfortune. Those who want to taste this propitious dish can drop by Shin Boo-won's Koong.

"We use tteok that is made from nonglutinous rice," said Shin, 43. "At first customers may not like the taste of the tteok because it is made purely out of rice. After trying it several times, it grows on them. People say it tastes like tteok from the old days."

According to Shin, the broth is made from beef brisket and vegetables that have been boiled for 12 hours. Koong also boils their famous Gaeseong dumplings in the soup. The result is a slightly sweet, clear yet rich broth.

Passed down to Shin from her 95-year old grandmother, Lim Myeong-sook - who fled South during the Korean War - Koong retains the flavors of founder Lim's native North Korea.

"We lived in this hanok for 10 years," said Shin of the restaurant. "It has not been reconstructed. It is over 30 years old."

Situated in the heart of Insa-dong, this small and traditional Korean establishment serves up modest bowls of rice cake soup, steamed dumplings and Korean pancakes in a homey atmosphere.

Choraengi rice cake soup and choraengi rice cake and dumpling soup cost 7,000 won. Assorted Korean pancakes cost 10,000 won. Mung bean pancakes cost 10,000 won.

Shin Boo-won's tteokguk tips According to Shin, the ideal tteokguk broth is made from the leg bones of a cow, called sagol in Korean. However that may be time consuming. As a short cut, Shin recommends stir frying slices of beef brisket with garlic and pepper.

All one needs to do after stir frying the beef is add water and boil. Then add rice cakes that have been soaked in cold water.

As a finishing touch, season the soup with soy sauce and salt, then garnish with sliced green onions.



Katie Stam of Indiana Crowned Miss America

Denim-clad beauties stood in marked contrast to the traditional, more formal mood at this year's Miss America pageant, as young women from around the country vied for the crown at the Planet Hollywood Resort and Casino in Las Vegas.

And the winner was? Miss Indiana Katie Stam, 22, a communications major at the University of Indianapolis.

Another innovation at the 88-year-old competition, which aired on TLC, was the selection of four top finalists by votes cast by viewers. The pageant's host was Mario Lopez.

Reigning Miss America Kirsten Haglund of Michigan crowned Stam, who takes home the new title and a \$50,000 scholarship.

Taylor Swift Calls CSI Role 'Life-Changing'

By Brian Orloff

Taylor Swift's role on CBS's hit CSI: Crime Scene Investigation hasn't aired yet - but the singer is already saying it's a part for the ages.

"When I'm really old and can only



remember one story about my life to go back and relive," Swift

writes on her MySpace Celebrity blog, "and tell over and over and over again to the point where my grandchildren roll their eyes and leave the room - that's the story."

Calling the experience "life-changing," she continues, "Ah, I can see it now. You know, when I was a youngster, I got to guest star on CSI! It was marvelous! So marvelous, it was!"

Swift, 19, will play a teenage girl whose family runs a motel in Las Vegas. No air date has been confirmed for her guest appearance.

In her humorous blog post, the singer reveals another life

changing event: Her bathroom is now clean - thanks to her mother's hard work!

"My bathroom has stayed the same terrible mess of piled up beauty products for two years while I traveled the world with the sad, unorganized state of my bathroom perpetually weighing in the back of my conscience," Swift writes. "Then suddenly... EVERYTHING changed."

Continues the post: "I came back from L.A. and discovered a whole new world. My bathroom is now a magical, wondrous place with cabinets for storing makeup and hooks on the door for holding scarves."



BAHAMA BABE Hilary Duff and her boyfriend, hockey player Mike Comrie, take flight from the winter cold with a beach vacation to the Bahamas.



THE BOLD & THE BEAUTIFUL Kim Kardashian shows off her sexy side (in a David Meister gown) with a star turn on the red carpet Thursday for the 8th annual WeHo Awards at the Avalon Hollywood in Los Angeles. The reality TV star co-hosted the event, which honored gays and lesbians in the West Hollywood community.

WALK THIS WAY Jessica Simpson struts her stuff on stage during Radio 99.9 Kiss Country's annual Chili Cookoff Sunday in Pembroke Pines, Fla. The singer performed a mix of pop and country tunes before dashing off to Dallas for a rendezvous with boyfriend Tony Romo.

