

*Carlos E. Rodriguez*

ENGL 21002 - Professor *Jennifer Buño*

05/16/23

**Cover Letter**

*Mini-ethnography*

After researching the homemade Korean food community, the next step is to create a mini-ethnography. In this essay, I will present my observations and describe my interactions with insiders of the homemade Korean food culture, shedding light on perspectives and information that may not be readily apparent to the public. My intended audience for this essay is college students and faculty members. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the home-made Korean food practice and its cultural context, I planned to visit my Korean friends in their homes. This approach would provide me with a complete picture of the subject matter.

As I prepared my interview questions, I made several changes. Initially, my questions were overly direct and imprudent, so I decided to alter my approach. Instead of relying solely on questions, I focused on keywords that I believed would elicit relevant information and foster natural conversations where valuable insights could freely emerge.

Following interviews with four insiders of the subculture, I realized that I possess decent social skills. I engaged in meaningful conversations with different individuals in various settings. Additionally, I discovered my courage, as stepping out of my comfort zone was necessary to complete this essay. Therefore, I consider this assignment to be beneficial, as it involves observation, description, perception, and communication—skills that will undoubtedly aid me in the future. I must admit that I was initially skeptical about visiting my friends' houses for interviews, as it seemed daunting and imprudent. However, as the process unfolded, I thoroughly enjoyed every aspect of the interviews, particularly the food-tasting experience.

One area I would like to improve upon is the effectiveness with which I utilize the gathered information. Although I collected ample data, I struggled with incorporating it into the essay seamlessly. Fortunately, I received feedback from my professor and peers, which proved invaluable. One comment that particularly helped me was from Professor Buno, who suggested that Ji-hye's interview should be included in this essay instead of the previous one on subculture research. Overall, the experience of crafting this mini-ethnography was a profound learning opportunity that allowed me to achieve some of the course goals, such as engaging in social and collaborative aspects of writing through the interviews, as well as gaining an appreciation for linguistic differences when interacting with a culture different from my own.

### **Mini-ethnography : Korean families and home-made Korean food**

Korean food has become increasingly popular worldwide, and according to Nina Jobst, a research expert covering South Korea (2022) Korean food has experienced a surge in interest since the early 2010s and worldwide growth like no other cuisine. With many people seeking out Korean restaurants and trying traditional Korean dishes. However, the cultural significance and sentiments associated with homemade Korean food are often overlooked by outsiders. As such, this mini ethnography aims to uncover hidden information about the cultural meaning of homemade Korean food. Specifically, this research delves into the details of specific dishes and their meanings in certain contexts, as well as the not-so-obvious perspectives of Korean homemade food insiders towards homemade Korean food.

To gather data for this mini-ethnography, I conducted in-depth interviews with several Korean individuals who are intimately familiar with the subculture of homemade Korean food. I also observed and participated in several gatherings where homemade Korean food was served,

including family dinners and a restaurant. In addition, I conducted online research to supplement my primary data.

### **Cultural Meaning of Homemade Korean Food**

Homemade Korean food is deeply intertwined with family and community values. Korean culture places a strong emphasis on the importance of sharing meals with loved ones, and homemade Korean food is often a means of expressing love and care for family and friends. Korean families frequently gather around the table to share homemade dishes, strengthening family bonds and creating memories that last a lifetime.

To gather some insiders' perspective, I visited Joon, a Korean friend. And as I arrived at Joon's home, I was immediately struck by the fragrant aroma of Korean spices and cooking aromas wafting from the kitchen. The interior of the house was decorated with beautiful traditional Korean artwork, including calligraphy and paintings of landscapes. I noticed that the furniture and décor reflected the family's cultural heritage, with rich colors and intricate designs.

As we sat down to begin the interview, Joon and his family members played traditional Korean music in the background, creating a peaceful and welcoming atmosphere. Joon began to prepare the ingredients for the first dish, while his mother and grandmother shared stories about their experiences cooking homemade Korean food.

As I observed the cooking process, I took note of the types of ingredients being used and the preparation techniques, including the use of a stone bowl to cook rice and the layering of ingredients to create a flavorful and complex soup. Joon explained that each dish had a specific cultural significance, with some dishes representing good luck and prosperity while others were associated with family unity and harmony.

Throughout the interview, I asked open-ended questions that allowed Joon and his family members to share their perspectives and beliefs about homemade Korean food. They spoke about the importance of passing down traditional recipes from generation to generation, and how cooking together as a family was a way to connect with one's cultural heritage.

As the meal was served, I tasted each dish with newfound appreciation, having gained a deeper understanding of the cultural meaning and sentiments associated with each dish.

As I continued my interview with Joon and his family, I began to explore the not-so-obvious perspectives of homemade Korean food from the insiders' point of view. While I had learned about the cultural significance and sentiments associated with each dish, I was interested in understanding how homemade Korean food impacted their everyday lives.

Joon explained that for him and his family, homemade Korean food was more than just a meal; it was a way of maintaining their cultural identity and preserving their heritage. In a country where fast food and prepared meals were at hand, homemade Korean food was a way to stay connected to their roots and pass down traditions to future generations.

His mother and grandmother echoed these sentiments, sharing stories about how their mothers and grandmothers had taught them how to cook traditional Korean dishes, and how they had passed on this knowledge to their children and grandchildren. They spoke about the sense of pride and accomplishment they felt when they successfully prepared a difficult dish, and how cooking together as a family strengthened their bonds and reinforced their shared cultural identity.

Joon also talked about how homemade Korean food helped him to connect with his Korean identity, even while living in a different country. He shared how he would often cook Korean food for his non-Korean friends, introducing them to new flavors and cultural traditions.

He felt that sharing his culture with others was a way of breaking down cultural barriers and promoting understanding and acceptance.

As the interview came to a close, I reflected on the not-so-obvious perspectives of homemade Korean food that Joon and his family had shared with me. Homemade Korean food was not just about the flavors and ingredients; it was a way of preserving cultural heritage, maintaining family bonds, and promoting cultural understanding. I felt grateful for the opportunity to have gained a deeper appreciation for homemade Korean food and the cultural significance it held for those who knew it best.

In addition to the cultural significance and sentimental value of homemade Korean food, Joon and his family also shed light on the health benefits associated with this cuisine: As one of the authors of the section of “Understanding Korean food from Korean food paintings.” in the *Journal of Ethnic foods*, Chung (2016) denoted, since ancient times, people are taught the importance of food with the expression “medicine and food come from the same source”. They spoke about how homemade Korean food was made with fresh and natural ingredients, free from additives and preservatives commonly found in processed foods. Traditional Korean dishes are often rich in vegetables, fruits, and spices, which are all key components of a healthy diet.

Joon also explained that Korean cuisine incorporates fermentation, which is a natural preservation process that results in the growth of beneficial bacteria, and as the Korean foundation webpage, KOCIS (2018) defined it, fermentation is a metabolic process that helps food to ‘mature’ so that it has improved taste and nutritional properties and can be stored for a longer period. These bacteria help to improve gut health, boost the immune system, and aid in digestion. Fermented foods such as kimchi, a staple in Korean cuisine, have gained popularity in recent years due to their numerous health benefits.

Moreover, Joon and his family emphasized the social aspect of homemade Korean food. They described how cooking together as a family was a way to bond and share experiences. They shared how they would often invite friends and extended family over for meals, creating a sense of community and togetherness. This highlights the importance of food as a social connector and the role it plays in bringing people together.

Finally, Joon's family also addressed the issue of cultural appropriation and the importance of respecting cultural traditions. They spoke about how the increasing popularity of Korean cuisine in Western countries has led to the commercialization and commodification of traditional dishes. They expressed concern that the true cultural significance and sentiments associated with these dishes were being lost in the process.

The not-so-obvious perspectives of Joon and his family towards homemade Korean food highlight the cultural, social, and health benefits associated with this cuisine. They emphasized the importance of preserving cultural traditions, maintaining family bonds, and promoting cultural understanding. Moreover, they highlighted the need to respect cultural traditions and to acknowledge the true cultural significance of these dishes. Overall, this mini-ethnography sheds light on the cultural and social dimensions of food and its impact on identity, health, and community.

Insiders also view homemade Korean food as a way of expressing their love and care for others. Cooking and sharing food are seen as a way of building and strengthening relationships with family and friends. Many Korean families have a deep emotional connection to their homemade dishes, which have been passed down from generation to generation.

In addition, homemade Korean food is often seen as a way of maintaining health and well-being. Korean cuisine is known for its use of fresh, whole ingredients and its emphasis on balance and

harmony. Insiders often believe that homemade Korean food is not only delicious but also nutritious, and they take pride in preparing and serving healthy meals for their loved ones.

Another important interview for this essay was Ji-hye's interview; As I walked up to Ji-hye's house, the enticing aroma of Korean food wafted through the air. I couldn't wait to get inside and experience the traditional dishes firsthand. Ji-hye greeted me with a warm smile and ushered me into her cozy kitchen, where she had been busy preparing a feast of bulgogi, bibimbap, and kimchi.

As we sat down to eat, Ji-hye shared with me her insider perspective on the history and cultural significance of each dish. She explained how bulgogi, made with marinated beef, represented the harmony between land and livestock, while bibimbap, a mixed rice bowl, symbolized the importance of balance and variety in Korean cuisine. And of course, no Korean meal would be complete without kimchi, a spicy fermented cabbage dish that is believed to promote good health and longevity.

As I savored each delicious bite, I couldn't help but appreciate the depth of history and culture that was infused into every dish. Observing my fascination, Ji-hye's parents joined the conversation and gave me more details about the importance of homemade Korean food. During my conversation with Ji-hye's parents, I learned more about the role that homemade Korean food plays in family life. They explained that preparing food for loved ones is a way to express care and affection and that sharing meals is a cornerstone of Korean family culture.

Ji-hye's mother emphasized the importance of passing down family recipes and cooking techniques from one generation to the next. She told me about how her mother had taught her how to make kimchi, and how she in turn had taught Ji-hye. For her, cooking and sharing

traditional dishes is a way to maintain a connection with her roots and to pass on cultural knowledge and values to her children.

Ji-hye's father echoed these sentiments, adding that cooking and eating together as a family creates a sense of unity and strengthens familial bonds. He spoke of how their family gathers around the table to share stories, discuss their day, and simply enjoy each other's company. In this way, homemade Korean food is not just about sustenance, but also about fostering relationships and building a sense of community. After a pleasing conversation, Ji-hye's parents proceeded to explain the significance of some popular homemade dishes in Korean food culture.

### ***Bibimbap***

This dish is considered a symbol of balance and harmony in Korean culture. The various ingredients, each with their own unique flavors and textures, are meant to be mixed to create a harmonious and well-rounded dish.

### ***Japchae***

This dish is often served at special occasions such as weddings and birthdays and is considered a symbol of long life and good fortune. The noodles, which are made from sweet potato starch, are thought to represent longevity, while the various vegetables and meats symbolize wealth and prosperity.

### ***Galbi***

This dish is a popular choice for family gatherings and celebrations and is often served during holidays such as Lunar New Year. The act of grilling the meat at the table and sharing it with loved ones is seen to strengthen family bonds and promote togetherness.

### ***Samgyetang***

This dish is traditionally consumed during the hot summer months to promote health and energy. The chicken, which is stuffed with glutinous rice and ginseng, is believed to have healing properties, and is said to boost the immune system and fight off illness.

### ***Kimchi***

This spicy fermented vegetable dish is considered the national dish of Korea and has a deep cultural significance. It is a symbol of Korean identity and is often seen as a reflection of the country's history and cultural heritage.

The practice of making homemade Korean food is a way for Koreans to preserve their cultural heritage and pass it down to future generations. The ingredients and cooking techniques used in Korean cuisine are deeply rooted in history and tradition, and it is important to recognize and appreciate this aspect of the culture.

However, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges that come with researching this subculture, as many Korean families tend to be conservative and private. It is essential to approach the topic with sensitivity and respect, recognizing that asking specific questions about their perceptions, beliefs, and culture may make some individuals uncomfortable.

In the end, the goal of this mini-ethnography was to gain a greater appreciation for homemade Korean food and share the newfound knowledge with others. By understanding the hidden information and not-so-obvious perspectives of Koreans towards their cuisine, we can promote awareness and understanding of this unique and vibrant subculture.

## Bibliography

Chung, C. K. ((2016)). Korean food culture from Korean paintings. *Journal of Ethnic Foods*, 3(1), 42–50. . DOI: 10.1016/j.jef.2016.01.002-CCNY LIBRARY

Jobst, N. (2022, August 26). *Statista*. Retrieved from Statista:

<https://www.statista.com/topics/9836/korean-food-worldwide/#topicOverview>

KOCIS. (2018). *Gateway Korea*. Retrieved from Gateway Korea:

<https://www.gateway-korea.org/korean-food>