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Subculture Research: Homemade Korean Food

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Cover Letter

Korean food is a rich gastronomic culture, but in this essay, I will focus specifically on Homemade Korean food and its significance within the subculture. This essay aims to shed light on important aspects such as historical context, insiders' perspective, and the role of homemade Korean food in Korean families. My target audience is college students, particularly those interested in exploring different cultures. With this in mind, I have structured the essay in an organized and clear manner, allowing readers to follow it without a designated order.

Regarding the process of working on this essay, I planned to interact face-to-face with Korean families who have preserved the tradition of homemade Korean cooking. As intended, I visited and interviewed Korean individuals. Initially, I was unsure about which information to include since everything seemed relevant to my research topic: Homemade Korean food in Korean households. However, after receiving feedback and revisiting the purpose of this essay, I narrowed down the information included. I shifted my focus from analyzing and researching the food itself to gathering insights from both food-related research and people who actively practice culinary traditions within a cultural context.

While exploring various avenues to gather relevant information for this essay, I discovered that I, too, can obtain valuable insights as a field worker. I used to believe that only well-educated scholars who had spent years as fieldworkers could contribute significant knowledge about cultures around the world. However, I now realize that valuable information is abundant and waiting to be noticed and documented. Crafting this essay has been an enlightening experience, making me appreciate the richness of societies in terms of cultural diversity and the people within them. During my reflection on the essay, I identified areas for improvement, one of

which is planning a more detailed approach to obtaining information for specific sections of research.

While I collected plenty of information from various sources, I learned that quantity does not always equate to quality. I now understand the importance of better planning, specifically determining where and for what purpose I require the information I gather. This realization was reinforced through feedback from my professor and peer reviews. Overall, this essay has been a learning experience that has helped me achieve some of the class outcomes.

Throughout this essay, I adopt the perspective of an outsider seeking to acquire as much information as possible about an insider's culture and perspective. Additionally, I have engaged in collaborative and social aspects of the writing process by conducting in-person interviews with Korean families, which has contributed to achieving this goal.

As an enthusiastic researcher, my interest lies in investigating the vibrant subculture of homemade Korean food and the passionate individuals who contribute to its preservation and evolution. In this essay, I aim to shed light on the cultural significance, historical influences, and contemporary growth of Korean cuisine. By exploring the traditional techniques, regional variations, fusion with Chinese and Japanese culinary influences, and the dedicated individuals behind homemade Korean food, I hope to deepen our understanding of this rich and diverse gastronomic landscape.

The subculture of homemade Korean food is not solely about the dishes themselves; it is equally about the people who practice and celebrate this culinary tradition. Enthusiasts of homemade Korean food are individuals who embrace the art of preparing authentic Korean dishes within their homes. They are passionate cooks, dedicated to preserving the culinary heritage passed down through generations. Through their commitment to traditional techniques

and the use of authentic ingredients, these individuals play a pivotal role in maintaining the cultural identity embedded in Korean cuisine.

In my exploration of homemade Korean food, the central research question that will inform my observations is: "What are the history, cultural context, and insider perspectives and practices of homemade Korean food?"

Context: History and evolution of Korean cuisine

Traditional Korean cuisine

Before delving into the specific dishes and techniques from the Korean food culture, we must define the essential ingredients. Starting with grains, rice is a staple in this cuisine. Rice, also called *Bap* (cooked rice) is used in most Korean dishes, and it's consumed daily. Other important ingredients are beans, potatoes, vegetables, mushrooms, fish and clams, seaweed, meat, eggs, and fruits. Having mentioned the ingredients, now we can move to the traditional techniques.

In pre-modern Korean cuisine, the main cooking methods were fermenting, boiling, pickling, blanching, and seasoning. It wasn't until the last century that frying and baking became more common, and new variations of food emerged.

One of the most important characteristics of traditional Korean food and its preparation is fermentation. This practice dates back to the Three Kingdoms¹ period, and it was used to preserve and store food. And according to KOCIS (2018),



¹ **Three Kingdoms period**, in Korean history, the period (from c.57 BC to AD 668) when the country was divided into the kingdoms of Silla, Koguryŏ, and Paekche. (Britannica, 1998)

fermentation is a metabolic process that transforms the food by changing flavor, improving taste and maintaining its nutritional values for longer periods of time. There is a wide variety of fermented foods that are a must-have for most Korean households.

Kimchi

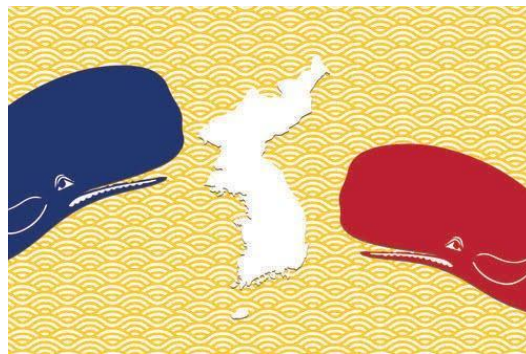
The way of preparing Kimchi can vary depending on the region, but the most common method of preparing it is by mixing a paste made of chili, onion, garlic, Korean radish, ginger, and fish sauce, with salted white cabbage. Followed by the mix is the process of fermentation that happens when the Kimchi is stored on an Onggi²- the traditional way- or a sealed container.

Doenjang and Ganjang

Korean doenjang and Ganjang are important fermented foods made by soaking, boiling, pounding, and fermenting soybeans. They are left to ferment for two to three months, then divided into solids and liquid. Both parts are further brewed for at least three to five months to enhance their flavor, like the brewing process for wine.

Influence of Chinese and Japanese cuisine on Korean gastronomic culture

Korea's location between China and Japan has led to centuries of intercultural exchange and interaction. Over the years, this exchange has facilitated the sharing of technology, ideals, customs, and perhaps most notably, food. Both Chinese and Japanese culinary traditions have had a significant impact on Korean cuisine, resulting in a unique fusion of flavors and cooking techniques that is distinctively Korean. In this context, it is



² **Korean earthenware crocks** that can be used for making and preserving many things: soybean paste, soy sauce, hot pepper paste, fermented salty fish, makgeolli, and of course kimchi. (Maangchi, 2009)

fascinating to explore how Chinese and Japanese gastronomy have influenced and contributed to the rich tapestry of Korean cuisine.

Chinese Influence

Chinese culinary influences on Korean cuisine can be traced back to the early centuries AD when China and Korea engaged in significant cultural exchange. Chinese cuisine is known for its complex flavors, use of spices, and cooking techniques such as stir-frying, deep-frying, and braising. Some of the Chinese culinary influences that can be seen in Korean cuisine include the use of soy sauce, fermented soybean pastes (doenjang), and chili paste (gochujang), as well as the cooking techniques mentioned above. Popular Korean dishes that have Chinese roots include Jjajangmyeon (black bean sauce noodles), Jajangbap (rice with black bean sauce), and Tongsuyuk (sweet and sour pork).

Japanese influence

According to Britannica (1998) Japan has had a significant culinary influence on Korea since the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. During this time, Japanese cuisine became popular among the Korean upper classes, and many Japanese ingredients and cooking techniques were adopted into Korean cuisine. Japanese cuisine is known for its emphasis on freshness, simplicity, and natural flavors. Some of the Japanese culinary influences on Korean cuisine include the use of seafood, raw fish (sashimi), and sushi, as well as the cooking technique of grilling over charcoal (yakimiku). Popular Korean dishes that have Japanese roots include kimbap (rice rolls with vegetables and meat), Ramyeon (instant noodles), and Gimbap (seaweed rolls with rice and fillings).

Context: Korean Food and culture

Korean cuisine is renowned for its delicious flavors, vibrant colors, and diverse range of dishes. However, Korean food is not only a culinary marvel, but it also holds deep cultural and historical significance for Koreans. Rooted in the country's geography, climate, and agricultural practices, Korean cuisine reflects the country's traditions and beliefs, and many dishes have been passed down through generations. The Korean diet has traditionally emphasized balance, harmony, and nutrition, with a focus on rice, vegetables, and small amounts of meat. Moreover, Korean food has been used as a tool for diplomacy and cultural exchange, with the Korean government actively promoting Korean cuisine to the world. In this context, Korean food represents much more than just a meal; it reflects Korea's rich history, culture, and values.

Role of homemade Korean food

Within the realm of Korean cuisine, the subculture of homemade Korean food thrives, driven by passionate individuals who play a central role in preserving and promoting the culinary heritage of their ancestors. These individuals, known as Korean food enthusiasts or home cooks, form a vibrant community dedicated to exploring, mastering, and sharing the art of homemade Korean cuisine.

For these enthusiasts, preparing homemade Korean food is a labor of love that goes beyond mere sustenance. It is a way of honoring their cultural roots, connecting with their heritage, and expressing their identity. The process of cooking becomes a deeply personal and meaningful experience, representing a profound connection to the past and a commitment to preserving tradition.

These passionate individuals find joy in delving into the intricacies of traditional Korean recipes, unearthing the secrets passed down through generations. They diligently study the

techniques, ingredients, and cultural nuances behind each dish, recognizing that the essence of Korean cuisine lies not only in the flavors but also in the stories and traditions woven into every bite.

Home cooks in the subculture of homemade Korean food are driven by a genuine desire to ensure the continuity of their culinary traditions. They view themselves as custodians of a rich heritage and feel a profound responsibility to pass down their knowledge to future generations. They invest countless hours in honing their skills, attending cooking classes, conducting research, and engaging in exchanges with other enthusiasts, all to deepen their understanding of traditional Korean cooking.

Through their commitment and dedication, these enthusiasts have become ambassadors of Korean culture. They take pride in sharing their creations with others, inviting friends and family to experience the flavors, aromas, and textures that have shaped their lives. The act of cooking homemade Korean food becomes an expression of love, hospitality, and cultural exchange, fostering a sense of belonging and strengthening bonds within their communities. Beyond the personal fulfillment they derive from practicing homemade Korean food, these individuals also contribute to the broader cultural landscape. They participate in food festivals, cooking competitions, and community events, showcasing their culinary skills and educating others about the richness of Korean cuisine. By sharing their passion and knowledge, they inspire curiosity and appreciation for Korean food among people of diverse backgrounds, fostering cross-cultural understanding and promoting cultural exchange.

The subculture of homemade Korean food thrives because of the enthusiasm, dedication, and creativity of these individuals. Their contributions extend beyond the realm of the kitchen, as

they actively engage in conversations, research, and collaborations that drive innovation while respecting the traditions that form the foundation of Korean cuisine.

The subculture of homemade Korean food is a testament to the passionate individuals who embody the spirit of preserving, exploring, and sharing the culinary heritage of Korea. Their unwavering commitment and love for Korean cuisine not only ensure the continuity of tradition but also serve as a bridge connecting generations and cultures. Through their efforts, they not only celebrate the flavors and techniques of homemade Korean food but also celebrate the people and the stories behind each dish, further enriching the cultural fabric of Korea and inspiring others to embrace the beauty of homemade Korean cuisine.

According to Hae Kyung, Kyung Rhan, and Hung Ju (2016), the significance of food in Korean culture extends beyond merely fulfilling a physical need. It is also viewed as representing concepts such as harmony, patience, consideration, beauty, and health.

Food as a symbol of social harmony and togetherness In Korean culture, food is often seen as a way of bringing people together and fostering social harmony. Meals are typically communal affairs, with family members, friends, or colleagues gathering around a table to share dishes and conversation. Moreover, Korean cuisine is characterized by an emphasis on balance and harmony, with meals typically featuring a variety of dishes that are meant to complement each other in terms of taste, texture, and color. This focus on communal eating and harmonious balance reflects the value that Korean culture places on social cohesion and interpersonal relationships.

Food as a source of cultural identity in addition to its social significance, food also plays an important role in defining and expressing Korean cultural identity. Many traditional Korean

dishes have been passed down through generations and are closely tied to specific regions, seasons, or occasions. For example, kimchi is a staple of Korean cuisine and is widely recognized as a symbol of Korean identity. Similarly, dishes like bibimbap, bulgogi, and japchae are closely associated with Korean culture and are popular both domestically and internationally. Through its cuisine, Korean culture can express and showcase its unique traditions, customs, and values.

Context: Growth of the Korean food Industry

According to Britannica (1998) and Hae Kyung, Kyung Rhan, & Hung Ju (2016) over the past decade, the Korean food industry has experienced significant growth and has become increasingly popular both domestically and internationally. This growth can be attributed to a variety of factors, including increased interest in Korean culture and cuisine, government initiatives to promote Korean food exports, and the rise of Korean pop culture (K-Pop) and Korean dramas. One of the key drivers of the growth in the Korean food industry has been the Korean Wave, also known as Hallyu, which refers to the global popularity of Korean pop culture. This has helped to raise the profile of Korean cuisine and has led to increased demand for Korean food products and restaurants around the world.

Another factor contributing to the growth of the Korean food industry is the Korean government's efforts to promote Korean food exports. The government has established several programs and initiatives to support Korean food businesses, including providing financial incentives for export-oriented companies, organizing trade shows and exhibitions, and offering training and education for exporters.

In addition to these external factors, the Korean food industry has also been bolstered by a growing domestic market. With the rise of the Korean middle class, there has been an increased

demand for high-quality and healthy food products, leading to the development of a vibrant food scene in major Korean cities such as Seoul.

As a result of these various factors, the Korean food industry has seen remarkable growth over the past decade, with exports of Korean food products increasing steadily year-on-year. This growth is expected to continue in the coming years, as more people around the world discover the unique and delicious flavors of Korean cuisine.

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