

Lesson 4 Flavors Without Borders

An Underwater Delicacy

This is a NASA satellite image of the area near Wando, taken from space. NASA initially wondered what the black lines were and later discovered they are farms that grow gim. From this picture, you can guess that Korea is currently producing a lot of gim. It is relatively cheap and is frequently used in various Korean dishes, such as gimbap (a type of seaweed rice roll), gimjaban (roasted seaweed), and gimbugak (a type of crispy seaweed and rice chip). However, it used to be very expensive in the past, so not everyone could enjoy it as much as people can today.

Gim in the Past

Gim seems to have been harvested in the past by women who walked into the sea during low tide to collect it from rocks. It was so precious and scarce that only royalty, like kings and queens, and the very wealthy had the privilege to afford it. During the Joseon period, ten sheets of gim were said to cost twenty cotton rolls, which cost a lot at the time. So you can imagine how expensive gim was. You might be wondering how gim became more affordable and readily available in recent years. Two figures are behind the striking popularity of gim today.

It is widely believed that during the reign of King Injo, a man named Yeoik Gim succeeded in farming gim for the first time in history. He was taking a walk along the beach near the Seomjin River one day. He came across floating tree branches with some seaweed attached to them. He tasted the seaweed out of curiosity and found it to be delicious. The following year, he planted some poles along the sea where he had discovered the seaweed. Floating seaweed became entangled in the poles and grew there. This method allowed more people to enjoy gim, but it was not productive enough to cultivate as much gim as we consume today.

To our surprise, a British scientist named Kathleen Drew-Baker, who had never been to Korea, contributed to making gim more widely available. While researching the annual life cycle of seaweed, she discovered how seaweed reproduces through spores, which function like seeds. Since her research, people have been able to produce gim in large quantities by artificially collecting spores and attaching them to cultivating frames. That is how gim became more affordable and widely available these days.

Gim in the Present

Did you know that gim is also eaten in South Africa?

In the first half of 2017, Korean gim accounted for approximately 43% of the South African market. Not surprisingly, Korea is the world's largest gim producer and exporter, dominating roughly 70% of the global gim market. According to Graph 1, gim exports overseas were only \$100 million in 2010, but have steadily increased year after year, and reached \$600 million in 2020. To where is gim exported? In 2019, the top three export destinations for Korean gim were the United States, Japan, and China. Furthermore, the number of export destinations is continuously increasing. According to Graph 2, gim was only exported to 64 countries in 2010, but by September 2021, gim exports had expanded to 112 countries worldwide.

As more countries begin to eat gim, it is being consumed in new ways depending on the country. For example, in the United States, as Americans are paying more attention to gim as a healthy food, they enjoy roasted gim snacks with almonds and coconut added. Also, Thailand is producing its own gim snacks by importing gim from Korea and processing it with popular Thai flavors, such as tom yam kung (a sweet and sour flavor) and grilled squid. What is more, gim can be easily added to a variety of dishes. For example, the Culinary Institute of America, an internationally famous culinary university, published a recipe book titled Fabulous and Flavorful Gim. It includes gim recipes, such as gim flavored popcorn, gim fried chicken, and even gim ice cream. It is quite clear that gim is being used to create new and delicious types of food and to give new flavors to old favorites.

Gim in the Future

The future of the gim industry appears bright, as global demand for gim is expected to rise in the coming years for a couple of reasons. First of all, gim is a highly valued product on the global market as a healthy food due to its nutritional properties. One hundred grams of gim contain sixteen times more dietary fiber than the same amount of cabbage, two times more protein than beans, and four times more calcium than milk. Gim's high nutrient content will make it a popular choice among consumers who are keenly interested in a healthy diet. Second, gim is environmentally friendly. A French magazine once published an article titled "Koreans who cook seaweed for Earth," which listed seaweed, including gim, as one of the most valuable foods for future generations, along with Spanish tomatoes, Latin American beans, and Canadian salmon. In fact, research shows that seaweed has been shown to capture and store CO₂ as it grows. For example, one ton of seaweed absorbs three times as much CO₂ as a maple tree. As demonstrated here, gim has many benefits. Who knows? There may come a day when gim is found on every dinner table around the world.

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From “Black Gold” to Everyday Seasoning

Black pepper is recognized for its contribution to countless styles of world cuisine in general and is one of the most commonly used spices in the world. However, in the past, it was a rare and expensive luxury item that peasants could not afford. In some parts of the world, people paid rents and taxes with black pepper. So desired was pepper that it earned fancy nicknames like “black gold” and “king of spices.” There are several reasons black pepper was highly regarded in the past. First, before toothbrushes and toothpaste were invented, people used spices to reduce bad breath. Another reason was medical. It was believed that pepper was a healing remedy that helped people sleep well, digest food, and relieve skin irritation from sunburn and aches. The third reason is that it elaborated one’s social status and wealth. Having pepper on one’s desk was a symbol of wealth and dignity. Thus, not only did black pepper make food more delicious, but it also meant better-smelling breath, better health, and greater wealth and elite position in society.

Considering all these, it is clear why black pepper was such a highly valued commodity. While some might feel that black pepper is just like any other spice, it is pretty obvious that black pepper, both in and outside the kitchen, has a lot more to offer than meets the eye.