

Lunar New Year

The Biggest Celebration in Korea

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Lunar New Year (aka –Gu jung in Korean) is the biggest celebration in Korea. I didn't realise just how big the celebration was until I moved to Singapore 10 years ago. I grew up in Sydney where New Year day was the biggest celebration and we grew up adjusting to western culture. When Chinese school friends took days off to celebrate Lunar New Year with their family, we used to wonder how this celebration could be more important than going to school.

Living in Singapore opened my eyes to Asia and the importance of culture, family values and food. During Lunar New Year, everything stops across Asia including Korea. This

is the time when every member of the family gathers at their grandparents house to indulge in good food, catch up with cousins you haven't seen for a while, play games and receive angpao. Yes, we receive angpao but we call it "sebedon" in Korean.

As a child receiving sebedon was the most fun thing to do over Lunar New Year, besides the food. We would dress up in Korean traditional costumes (han bok) and bow to our parents, uncles, grandparents or anyone older than us. In return, we received sebedon. It is almost like Christmas except we receive money in a white envelope.



During the Korean Lunar New Year, it is tradition for the children to bow to their elders, and receive sebedon in return.



The second most exciting thing about Lunar New Year, especially for children, is eating rice cake soup (Ttuk guk in Korean). Soup filled with round rice cakes accompanied with either beef or chicken has a big significance on the day. Lunar New Year is not really Lunar New Year without the soup. It symbolises getting one year older. So as a child, eating as many soups as possible meant growing up faster. On the other hand, as an adult, you don't look forward to having the soup as most of us would prefer to stay young.

There are many varieties of food served on Lunar New Year. Traditionally, all the dishes are first served to our ancestors as a ceremony. Only after that are we allowed to eat.

Besides the rice cake soup, japche is another dish we often have on Lunar New Year. It is prepared with sweet potato noodles with a variety of vegetables and beef. It is also served at other major celebrations such as Korean Thanksgiving and birthdays.

Finally for dessert, we normally have ginger and cinnamon tea. The tea is really easy to make. All you need is cinnamon, brown sugar and ginger. Boil it with water for 20 minutes and you have a wonderful tea which can be served either hot in winter or cold in summer. Dry persimmon and pine nuts is added during winter for extra texture.

Writing all about Korean tradition and thinking about the festive food makes me long for the good days of gathering with my family. Time to call my parents....

Nicky Kim had been teaching Korean cooking in Singapore for four years before relocating to Bangkok at the end of 2012. She still travels to Singapore on a regular basis, teaching Korean cooking at private classes, corporate events and at the Korean Tourism Organisation (KTO) in Singapore every month. Please contact KTO (+65 6533 0441) to register for classes. She blogs at www.nickyskitchen.com.sg

Rice cake soup, or ttuk guk in Korean, is an essential dish for the Korean Lunar New Year.



Japche—a Korean dish of sweet potato noodles with vegetables and beef—is served during major celebratory holidays and birthdays.

Nicky Kim

