

## EATING

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# EATING

Eating out every night is a common habit for Seoulites. With thousands of restaurants and street stalls scattered throughout every neighbourhood, there is no problem finding somewhere to eat. Small, unpretentious restaurants serve up local food at very reasonable prices, and restaurants serving Italian and Japanese food are numerous. Western-style fast-food outlets are on every street, as are premium ice-cream parlours, convenience stores and bakeries.

Restaurants in Seoul often specialise in one or two dishes, so Seoulites usually decide what they want to eat and then choose which restaurant to visit. Most Korean-style restaurants offer a table and chairs option, but in some traditional places customers sit on floor cushions at low tables. Few restaurant staff speak English, but most restaurants have some English on the menu or else pictures or plastic replicas of the meals. The Language chapter can help, too.

Sampling the quirky delights of Korean food and drink is one of the joys of visiting Seoul. *The Wonderful World of Korean Food*, published by the Korea Tourism Organisation (KTO), is a free booklet that provides a superbly illustrated introduction to the country's food, snacks and drinks. Download it from [www.visitkorea.or.kr](http://www.visitkorea.or.kr). Explore more quirky delights at [www.seouleats.com](http://www.seouleats.com), an extensive expat blog with 'interesting food tidbits, restaurant reviews and random tomfoolery'.

Italian food is super popular in Seoul – not just pizza chains but numerous small pasta restaurants that serve reasonably authentic meals, although often with a touch of fusion somewhere. These days pasta and pizza are more common than iconic Korean *bulgogi* (barbecued beef slices with lettuce wrap).

Lotteria is the local version of Western-style fast food, and offers *bulgogi* and kimchi burgers. Many Japanese-style restaurants serve sashimi or inexpensive cutlet, salad and soup sets. Budget Chinese restaurants cook up fried rice and *jajangmyeon* (noodles in a black bean sauce), a Chinese dish never seen outside Korea. Luxury hotels have upmarket and more genuine Chinese food.

Thai, Indian, Vietnamese, Middle Eastern and other ethnic restaurants are clustered in Itaewon, although more and more are opening up elsewhere – for example, French restaurants in Garosu-gil (see [Map p68](#)). Fusion restaurants usually provide an American/Italian menu with an Asian twist, such as spaghetti with red-chilli sauce and octopus. The possibilities are endless – anyone for *beondegi* (silkworm larvae) pizza or kimchi Caesar salad?

Drop into any department store or high-rise shopping mall to find a floor of inexpensive restaurants as well as a reasonably priced food court. For dessert, pop into one of the countless ice-cream or yoghurt parlours – Red Mango, Cold Stone Creamery, Baskin Robbins – or a gelati chain. Try the local dessert *patbingsu*, a red-bean, fruit and shaved-ice mixture. Seasonal fruit is for sale from the back of parked vans.

In Seoul, eating out (like everything else) is a group activity, and you don't see many people dining alone. A number of Korean meals, such as *bulgogi*, *jjimdak* (spicy chicken pieces with noodles) or *hanjeongsik* (a banquet of dishes) are not usually available for just one person.

Fill children up with *jajangmyeon*, *donkkaseu* (pork cutlet with rice and salad), *juk* (rice porridge), barbecued chicken, convenience-store sandwiches, bakery items, *hotteok* (a kind of pita bread with cinnamon and honey filling) and ice creams.

Some food fads fade fast. A few years ago bubble tea was all the rage, but now it's almost extinct, and the 'wellbeing' wave has swept in, with restaurants proclaiming the health benefits of real fruit juice, low-fat yoghurt and slow-cooked ginseng rice porridge. Seoul has also been struck by waffle and wine manias, but how long they will last is anyone's guess.

On the drinks front a full range of alcoholic and soft drinks is sold by convenience stores, while some cafés offer organic, premium, fair-trade coffee. Teahouses in Insadong still make traditional fruit teas, served hot or cold.

## HISTORY

Every spring the Joseon kings headed to Seon-nongdan ([p76](#)), an altar where they prayed for

a good harvest. After the ritual, a special beef and vegetable soup (*seolleongtang*) was served to the assembled peasants. *Seolleongtang* is still popular today.