

A bit about Onggi

I love fermentation.

I love the way fermented foods taste and the smells that they produce—in kitchens, workshops, and bodies. I love how fermentation both stabilizes and dynamizes food, and that it is both historically and contemporarily relevant. I love that in theorizing about fermentation, we can bring together bacteria with politics, life with death, material agency with food poetics, macro-environments with microbiomes, and non-humanness with humanity.

Because I love fermentation, I was not surprised to love Korea and all the food she so lovingly offered up during the week that I spent in and around Seoul. (I was there to present my first public talk on Eco-Gastronomy, informally kicking off this new project for UNISG.) But because of the ways that living among so many ferments caused me to look inwards—at my artistic and professional pasts, at my sense of self, and at the way my own body feels and smells and changes during travel away from home—I came to love fermentation even more.

As just one example of my renewed sensibility towards fermentation, I offer this little snapshot of a central feature of its practice in Korea: the onggi. Onggi are the ceramic jars—ranging from a couple of liters in volume to a hundred or so—in which food is traditionally fermented in Korea. The word literally means “breathing clay”, and because of the way these containers allow air to move through them, they are ideal for making kimchi, banchan, jang (soy pastes and sauces), and the myriad other marvels of Korean condimentia.



During the SF Asia Pacific Festival, I was introduced to SungKwang Ko, an organizer of the 2010 Onggi Expo in Ulsan, Korea. His descriptions of the array of jars he had installed at the SFAPF resonated with my own experience as a potter—firing temperatures, styles of glazing, decorative and technical elements—and beckoned to me as an amateur fermenter. (I did end up buying a small onggi to bring home to Montreal with me....) Onggi jars for the royal court are made with a smoother, more vitrified interior, more resistant to the salts and acids that characterize ferments. They also have more labor-intensive lids—thrown, trimmed, and finished with a knob or handle, rather than the more simple one-step lids for the commoners' onggi.

Throughout South Korea, some 1000 locations serve as commercial fermenting sites, the larger ones home to as many as 3000 individual onggi (the smallest site has “just” 100 jars). This I learned from MiKyung Yoo, the head of the Doenjang School, a new initiative to promote Korean jang internationally. On her phone are dozens of images of onggi, stretching in curved lines across fields and hillsides. Fermentation takes place outside—traditionally during late fall and winter—and so these sites present themselves as elegant landscapes of shiny brown pots, blossoming fermentation groves, breathing stoneware orchards.

During my all-too-brief time in Seoul, I ate about 10 different types of kimchi, a small fraction of the 250 types that are prepared in the many regions of Korea. And kimchi is just one of the varieties of fermented foods that the country has to offer. I am infected with this taste now, and as the subtle and pervasive smells of ferment dissipate from my sense memories, I realized that I must return. More fermentation strains await. Meanwhile, my own onggi sits ready as the Montreal winter approaches. Its first layering-in of salted cabbage, ginger and garlic, chile powder and chopped anchovies will occur quite soon. And then, perhaps, a small hint of the wonderful aura of Seoul will waft back to me.

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For more about onggi, see:

<http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Culture/view?articleId=119487>

<http://www.koreaaward.com/kor/6196>

http://koreanonggi.com/_Korean_Onggi.html

<http://www.slowfood.com/saving-jeju-jang/>

<http://www.adamfieldpottery.com/onggi/>



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