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Feeding Gastronomic Seedlings in South Korea

What do the following people have in common: a fermentation school director, a film festival coordinator, a professor of tourism, a language-studies graduate, a culinary instructor, a business-to-business IT interface designer, and a food entrepreneur? They, along with ten other people with equally diverse and intriguing backgrounds, recently participated in the University of Gastronomic Sciences' Short-Term Course at the Slow Food Asia Pacific Festival in Seoul.

Organized by Slow Food Korea's Boram Kim (an UNISG master program alumna), this three-day program included lectures by UNISG professors, inspiring talks by Slow Food leaders Carlo Petrini and JongDuk Kim, a mini study trip, and of course much conviviality and commensality in the presence of some exceptional food. In parallel to the student experience in Pollenzo, the participants moved from classroom to farmer's field to education center to table, also spending time on the floor of KINTEX, talking with food producers, activists, and international delegates at the SF Asia Pacific Festival.



During Andrea Pieroni's contemplative lesson on the entanglements of food, culture, and region, the group learned how plants and practice, topography and migration all form part of a holistic, integrated system. In this way, ethnobiology, professor Pieroni's field of expertise, can be used as a "platform" for interpreting and understanding the multiple interactions that take place within human-and-food ecologies. Similarly, sensory scientist Luisa Torri showed how "taste" can be understood as a complex assemblage of tongues and chemicals, histories and perceptions, brain functions and food technology. Her talk also included a tasting exercise with various kinds of soy sauce, both mass-produced and slow-aged. Unpacked in this way, professor Torri showed how sensory analysis—like ethnobotany—can be understood as a meeting place of many factors, while serving to produce value for industry, artisans, scholarship, and individual eaters. During my own talk on eco-gastronomy, I discussed the challenges of dealing with the complexity of food in both academic and non-academic settings. Given that the frameworks we have created for studying and

representing food systems are both supportive and limiting in our efforts to make and share knowledge, I asked the students to think about their own ways of viewing food. What would it mean for their future food work? (Hopefully, all this helped inspire the students to keep posing questions in their own lives, rather than confusing or frustrating them!)



As at UNISG, eating together and venturing into food production and communication contexts helped bring all the threads together. Following several remarkable meals in and among the SFAPF stands (spaghetti alle vongole, rice salad and artisan pork sandwiches, wormwood-scented glutinous-rice waffles with sweetened cream cheese), the last day of the program saw the group packed onto a bus and driven outside of Goyang city. At the first stop, the students met activist farmer GeunYi Lee of WooBo Farm (“WooBo” translates roughly to mean “foolish walk” or “cattle step”). A self-described nut for seed-saving, Lee sowed 22 different varieties of rice this year, as well as numerous types of beans, cabbage, and ginger. His illuminating presentation on rice, small-scale farming, and biodiversity whet our palates for the subsequent rice tasting—five varieties, all distinctly different in terms of flavor, texture, and moisture. (The “female bird tail” variety was the popular favorite.) That then prepared us for the full meal that came afterwards, including a wholly unprecedented mixture of 16 rice varieties, all cooked together, with cabbage soup, barley tea, and an array of more than a dozen banchan (side dishes). Cooked, raw, and fermented cabbage sat next to pickled and fried radishes, doraji (bellflower) root tempura, and of course fermented soybean paste.

With our bellies full (and after a quick visit to the WooBo composting toilets, where our host encouraged us to “give back” to the farm), we piled on to the bus and headed to the Heyri Art Village in Paju, just a few kilometers from the border with North Korea. The former artists’ colony, established a couple of decades ago, has now become a major tourism destination, with 800,000 visitors annually. It includes an extensive series of galleries, shops, and studios, as well as the food education center, Farm is Art and the food shop From Farmers.

These final two locations served as the setting for a richly detailed discussion with Korean food journalist, MeeHyang Park, and a final completion ceremony with more excellent food—gimbap (rice rolls), salads, turnip soup, tteokbokki (sauced soft rice cake), and artisanal makgeolli (an unfiltered, alcoholic, fermented rice beverage). Park’s talk illustrated the rapid evolution of gastronomic trends in contemporary Korea: from just a few newspaper references to food in the early 1900s to an explosion of food media today; from a historic belief that food is medicine to the rapid incursion of transnational franchises introducing tastes

like sweet-and-spicy; from food being a common good to a polarized sense of “high” and “low” cuisine. At the same time, Park also explained that many responses to these shifts, like those now common in many European and American countries, are also taking place in Korea: healthful eating campaigns, activist journalism, and local communities promoting historic foodways and traditional products.



As the day came to a close, I had the very real honor to distribute a completion certificate to each of the student-participants. Although my pronunciation of their names was appalling, it was a genuine pleasure to congratulate each of the new ur-gastronomes on their achievement. As I handed to the group a jar of Piemontese crema di gianduja (from Bra’s newest food outlet, Local), along with a small tasting spoon for each person, I hoped that the taste of chocolate-and-hazelnut would infect them with a taste for continued gastronomic exploration, either in Italy, Korea, or wherever their wanderings would take them. To all the participants in the UNISG Short-Term Course, I say a big kamsahamnidad and chuka haeyo!

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