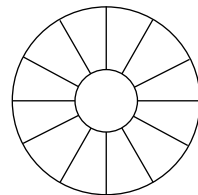
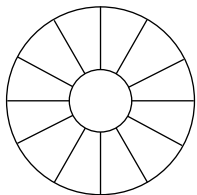


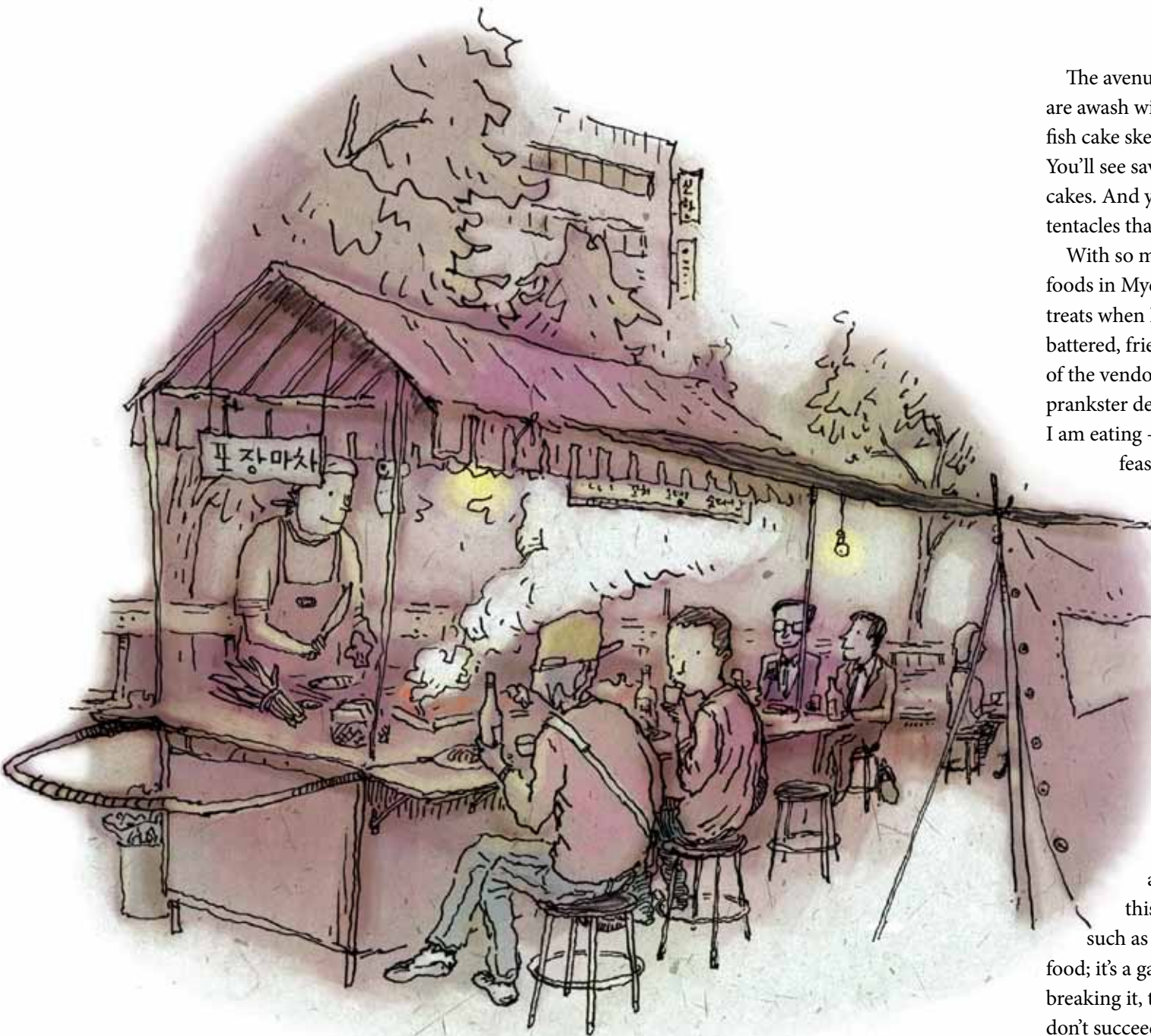
# KINETIC STREET CUISINE



Korean street food is a wonderful fusion of creativity, culture and mobility. Some of the foods, like braised silkworm larvae, are simply bizarre, while others are playful, such as the tornado potato: A whole potato cut and fried to look like a spiral staircase. Others seem to have come straight out of the TV show *MacGyver*. The ColPop, for instance, is a soda cup with a bowl on top for a lid. Pieces of crispy fried chicken sit on top, so you can sip your soda and eat your chicken on the run. The Korean streets are a wonderland of interesting treats and you can eat three full meals (and between-meal snacks) on the go.

On every corner, on every street in Korea, you'll find food stalls selling the new, the bizarre and the playful. All the food is designed to travel and you'll often see high-heeled women walking with a hot dog on a stick or suited men waiting next to a food stall to grab a quick bite. In Korea, this is the original fast food.



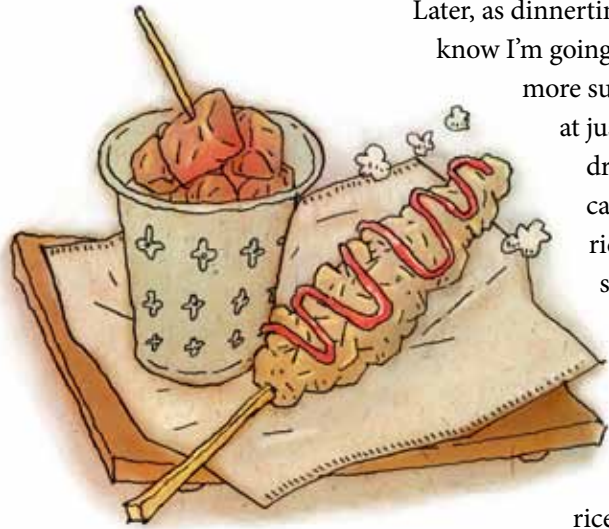


The avenues of Myeong-dong, besides being rammed with shoppers, are awash with fabulous street carts. Here, you'll find thick ribbons of fish cake skewered on long wooden poles and cooked in crab stock. You'll see savory hamburger patties wrapped around chewy white rice cakes. And you'll certainly smell the massive dried and smoked squid tentacles that are sliced and grilled on heated black stones.

With so many of them fighting for the attention of passersby, street foods in Myeong-dong have to make a statement. One of my favorite treats when I visit is the "dokkaebi hot dog," a hot dog on a stick that is battered, fried and then studded with crinkled French fries. I ask one of the vendors what dokkaebi means, and she explains that they are prankster demons who carry spiked clubs — not unlike the hot dog I am eating — which they bang on the ground to bring forth magical feasts or golden coins.

I take my demon club hot dog and continue down the road to find my next treat. These days, seemingly everything is available from street food vendors. As with the city's restaurants, street foods are increasingly picking up foreign influences, with Myeong-dong itself home to vendors selling kebabs, 30cm-tall ice cream cones, hamburgers and much more.

After I finally finish my hot dog, though, I know just what I want next: *bbopgi*. Served on a popsicle stick, *bbopgi* is a lollipop that smells just like *crème brûlée*. You'll see old women squat on the ground as they heat up sugar in a small metal pot until it melts to a rich, caramel brown. Add a pinch of baking soda and the candy bubbles up and thickens. They'll then put this sticky mixture on a board, flatten it and stencil a shape such as a cloud, a star or maybe a bird. Now, *bbopgi* isn't just a food; it's a game, too. If you can eat around the stenciled shape without breaking it, then the vendor will reward you with another *bbopgi*. I don't succeed, but one was enough.



Later, as dinnertime approaches, I know I'm going to need something more substantial. Luckily, at just this moment, I draw near a street cart selling spicy rice cakes and fried snacks. Sauteed along with fish cakes in a spicy and sweet red chili paste sauce, these *tteokbokki* rice cakes are typically

served along with your choice of battered, fried treats including sweet potato slices, dumplings, egg, noodle rolls and vegetable fritters. It's all about the sauce with this streetside delicacy, so what I like to do is order a selection and have the vendor mix it up in the sauce. Yummy and cheap: only 3,000 won (US\$2.73).

In the evenings, tented food bars will open right on the edges of Seoul's streets. One of the best places to experience this is over by Jongno 3-ga near the middle of town. Here, on most nights, the main drag will be lit up by a procession of orange tents and yellow lights.

There is something peculiarly enticing about sitting in these tents at night with friends. The conversations are more down to earth and personal. The foods you order there are made to accompany alcohol — typically *soju*, Korea's best-known fire water, but sometimes *makgeolli* (milky rice wine) or beer. Soju is served in small glasses and throughout the evening everyone will propose continuous toasts and, more often than not, down the drink in one. It could be a toast of congratulations but often it is simply a toast of togetherness, of friendship. Koreans drink to build relationships and a sense of comfort — you'll never see a Korean drinking alone.

As I look around the tent, I can see people of all backgrounds united under one plastic roof. Next to me sits a group of elegantly dressed women in business attire, bottles of beer spread around their table. They are wearing clear plastic gloves and eating chili sauce-coated chicken's feet (full of gelatin, which is supposedly good for your skin). Adjacent to them is a middle-aged couple in casual attire sitting across from a Korean man wearing a beret and, though night has fallen, sunglasses. A movie star, perhaps?

They have plates of rolled egg omelette dishes specked with small pieces of carrot and green onion with a drizzling of ketchup on top. The soju has already begun flowing, and three green bottles sit atop their small red plastic tabletop like emeralds on a royal carpet. Then, on the corner of the bench where my friend and I are eating, two older men, looking like they've just finished construction work, pull up a seat. Loud and boisterous, they seem on the verge of fighting each other, before their booming laughs clear the air. They sit and recount stories to one another as they take turns pouring white rice wine into little tin bowls.

Inside this roadside tent, in the middle of the night, I feel like I am seeing the real Korea. When people ask me to tell them stories of life here, I will invariably talk about the street foods and the atmosphere in these tented restaurants. Just like the city that they and I call home, street foods here are fast, piquant and always on the go.

*by Daniel Gray | illustrations by Jo Seung-yeon | photograph by Kim Nam-heon*

#### PROFILE

Daniel Gray, a Korean-American, is the creator of the popular restaurant review blog [www.seouleats.com](http://www.seouleats.com). When he is not writing about food, eating food or taking pictures of food, he sleeps. He works at O'ngo Food Communications where he writes books on Korean food and develops culinary tourism programs and cooking classes for travelers to Korea.

