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SEOUL VEGAN SCENE

YOUR QUICK GUIDE TO EATING VEGAN IN SEOUL

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SEOUL'S HOTTEST SUMMER PARTY RETURNS

EATING KOREA

AN INTERVIEW WITH GRAHAM HOLLIDAY



Kimchi A CELEBRATION OF THE SURREAL AND WICKED

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Two of society's most defective breeds, journalist Zev Blumenfeld and his boorish advisor Mr. Binx, find themselves bumbling about in the middle of a kimchi madhouse, searching for the heart of true Korea.



“Jesus, look out! They’re closing in on us!” And suddenly, we were surrounded by seven-foot-tall vegetables swaying from side-to-side in some kind of hedonistic ritual. The cabbage twins gyrated viciously and a radish rolled by like a boulder that had come alive.

My advisor Binx and I found ourselves inside Seoul Plaza for the third annual Seoul Kimchi Festival. The organizers had promised a transformative experience for visitors, placing interactive and performance-based programs across the 6,000 square meter venue. They were determined to create a “mega kimchi-making place,” or so the website claimed.

“Foreigner-friendly” sections and activities had been assembled for the unassuming tourist. Best of all, the venue was easily accessible by metro, taking place just steps from Exit 6 at the City Hall stop. Any visitor in the plaza that weekend would have found information tents with guides providing assistance in both Korean and English. Opposite these, stood the “Big Tent”—a giant inflatable building labeled “Seoul Kimjangan.” Live musical and taekwondo performances took place throughout the day on the mainstage. And in the middle of the plaza sat what could only be described as a dormant volcano made of cabbage. But who would expect anything less from a three-

day fiesta dedicated to the hallowed tradition of pickling vegetables?

But were these mutant vegetables what the organizers had intended?

I reasoned that I must have fallen into some sort of psychotropic-induced trance. For all I knew, in a moment’s time, I’d awake, safely barricaded in the comforts of my Los Angeles apartment, the evening light of a California sunset radiating through the window, and it would be then that I’d realize this whole time I had been staring at what amounted to a pile of ash.

No, this was real (or as real as it got anyway). A red pepper snuck up behind us with

outstretched arms. "Run for the hills!" yelled Binx. But the crowd didn't budge. Had they seen this all before? Maybe it had been genetically woven into some part of the collective consciousness, passed down through the everyday Korean from generation to generation. I didn't know for certain.

"You're on your own then," I shouted to the crowd.

If they weren't going to save themselves, what was the point? Besides, we had come on assignment to live like true Koreans. Yes! This expedition was one to explore sacred customs. The frolicking vegetables were merely a sideshow—a distraction from the purpose of it all. This was about getting to the root of what it meant to be Korean—to dig deep, feel the pulse, sink our teeth into the unspoken creed that kept the complexities of this cultural machine spinning, and touch the undercurrent skimmed by many, but truly understood by few. In fact, kimchi was one of the few customs that hadn't been debased by department stores or the blinding light of smartphone ads.

Binx and I stumbled past the volcano and ran smack-dab into a line of people. If they were any indication, the massive inflatable tent that lay before us held the archaic secrets of preservation and fermentation.

"This is the heart, man. The crux of it all!" I said to my advisor. "Inside that bubble lie the secrets we've been searching for."

He nodded in agreement. "They'll have our badges at the front."

"Excellent! They ought to know the importance of our attendance. We're f**king journalists, man—reporters bridging cultural understanding. Shining light into the dark crevasses of society."

"Well, not reporters exactly," he said.

I opened my mouth to reply, but was stopped when two "princesses" moved in our direction. They were clad in floral hanbok dresses, looking as if they had stepped out of the Joseon Dynasty.

For the first two days of the festival, visitors had the opportunity to rent these hanboks and participate in a guerilla-style flash mob. We passed on dressing up, but somehow the hanboks had found us.

"Let's make memories," the girls exclaimed.

Anxiety rushed through me. They had caught us off-guard. "That's what we're here to do!" Memories!" I screeched.

But before I fully understood the intricacies

of her proposal, she had ripped out her smartphone, applied the filters, and struck a pose, V-sign and all. Her reflex was fluid—a snapshot from inside the crease. I felt stuck in the mud, lost in the tidal wave of technology and youth that had suddenly swept upon us. The sound of Lil Jon's "Let's Get F*cked Up" blared from the plaza speakers.

Was this the true face of Korea? Fifty years of sacrifice and rejection of "the old way" distilled into this moment? Gone were the days of families gathering to make kimjang, relinquished to the grip of industrialism and modernization, all in the name of a supposed "progress." Had the hanbok become a simple costume? She sighed dramatically.

"You're right, stop being so dramatic—never did anything for anyone anyway."

She nodded, but I could tell distance had grown between us. Had the connection not been genuine? Were we merely models in her flash photo op? I hadn't come to terms with this sort of "disposable world," the transience of the cyber realm leeching

into us. Brevity had replaced depth, breaths grew shallow, heartbeats quickened not from passion but paranoia. "Hyper-stimulation," the academics had called it. The legs of technology outpaced by the torso of human biology and conscious thought. And on this day, at this time, paranoia in the concrete jungle had reared its wicked head.

I snapped out of the knot of Brainworms in an anxious sweat, face on fire,

"I can smell it...the kimchi...we're close!"

My advisor cocked his head to the side, "Where the hell have you been the last twenty minutes?" He rolled his eyes.

We had made it into the tent. Its sides looked as though we were sitting in the Michelin Man's crotch. Everywhere I looked, people stood dressed in orange aprons with bandanas wrapped over their heads. On the tables lay pounds of cabbage, garlic, and gochugaru—chili pepper.

The Big Tent included four daily kimchi-making events, three of which were presented in Korean. A notable area was the "Hope-Sharing" kimchi section. Here, large groups made

and donated their spicy creations to various social organizations. We passed through and arrived at the booth for the English-led event, appropriately titled, "Foreigners Making Kimchi."

For a nominal fee, guests could stop feeling like lost tourists and register for the kimchi-making event, kimjangan. Every foreigner partaking in this event received the cabbage, sauce, and a storage container for the nominal fee of KRW3,000—a steal compared to the Korean-led events.

Lost tourists gathered in the "Foreigners Making Kimchi" booth. Some smeared the pre-made red pepper paste on the wilted leaves. One fellow prepped the kimchi while arguing mid-call, phone tucked between his ear and shoulder.

"I told you we needed the 400-piece corn tortillas... Do you have any idea how far this is going to set sales back?" Judging by the agitation, I would have guessed "very far."

His voice competed with the demonstration leader standing at the front near a projection screen, but she didn't seem bothered. Already having fallen victim to an unfortunate tent setup, she had been forced to battle the incessant drone of the tent's generator. The woman had lost all drive to entertain. She shifted into autopilot. "Kimchi fermentation is very complex. The kimchi refrigerator was invented in the 1980's in Seoul, which... is where we are now," she muttered.

I wasn't sure what to make of this statement, watching as she took a long knife and slashed through the head of cabbage. The look on her face indicated that the next time the blade dropped it wouldn't be through cabbage, but through the neck of the Kimchi-Making-Tortilla-Phone-Man. She'd use his blood for next year's fermentation paste. Why not?—no sense in leaving it. Koreans were a resourceful bunch.

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"Phase 1 lift the leaf, Phase 2 spread the sauce, Phase 3 put the coated cabbage in the plastic bag." It was as simple as that, she did it meticulously, but I could tell in her dulled eyes that she was somewhere else. Perhaps, next year they'd say, "F**k it," and bring store bought kimchi to dump in front of these unassuming tourists. I figured it'd be for the best.

Across the aisle, I noticed a display had been set up. Here, on a raised platform, mincing garlic, sat none other than a famous kimchi master herself. Her permed, short hair signaled ajumma—old Korean woman. Centuries of tradition rushed from the scene (it felt like a reenactment from a History Channel documentary). On her face ran the scars of time, canals of transformation.

From outside the building, a roar drew my attention. A swarm of audience-goers watched as a slender woman waded through a sea of confetti falling from the sky. Around her waist was a kitchen table on wheels. She was the centerpiece.

"Maybe she's a sacrificial offering to whatever vegetable beasts stewed inside the cabbage volcano," I said to my advisor. There was no telling.

She trudged through the confetti to the live music coming from the main stage. "F**ker," Binx said under his breath. He looked worried. "Look at all this filth. We'll never get out."

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Haven't you ever seen an ocean of confetti before? Where do you think it all goes? They dump that shit down Flipper's blowhole after the landfills are at capacity."

He shook his head viciously, making a piggish grunt. "That's ugly, man. Ugly!"

"Righty-o, man, righty-o—ugly indeed, but an absolute necessity in the eyes of a throw-away, capitalist society." He wasn't having it, and wandered away.

As the tides turned, yanking the table-lady out into the horizon beyond, the audience shifted. A shadow had drifted over the plaza. Acrobats from the group, "Project Fly," hung in the air. I couldn't tell you what happened next. It could have been the barrage of dust swirling into a gigantic storm or maybe the plastic sheet being dragged across the plaza, trapping everyone in its path.

The dust storm grew thick in color—blue, green, yellow, red. A boy stumbled past, blood dripping from his nose. "Duck and cover! It's spreading." I could hardly speak over the bass drum thumping from the speakers.

People darted about. Pure chaos had en-

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sued. Suddenly, a voice rose from the plume.

"Everybody, don't panic it's just cornstarch. It's not toxic."

"Maybe so," I thought. "But how do we know for sure?"

People began choosing sides, splintering into clans. A competition was brewing. The plaza divided into four lines stretching from the center—territory had been split. Everybody

knew where he or she belonged, except for one group: the dancing line-train of foreigners that pranced about oblivious to all form and order outside of themselves.

The four lines began removing cabbage from the "mound-volcano" and passing the heads in all directions. It was a race—move the cabbage to your team's designated corner and pile it into a "cabbage tower." The team with the highest tower wins.

"Don't stand around. It's precious food so... be careful," the announcer trailed off dully. She too had drifted into a fatigued autopilot of sorts.

The speed of the cabbage passing caused a storm of leaves to fly around. Meanwhile, the colored dust storm mushroomed. Heads of cabbage moved from hand-to-hand. I remember a boy picking up a cabbage twice the size of his head and deciding to bypass the entire line to set it on the mound.

"This symbolizes the annual harvest," belated the announcer.

At the sides of the plaza, daily homeless visitors stood in shock. Some looked as if they were standing at the footsteps of the pearly gates only to find out Heaven had been overrun by a Moonlight Party of Millennials.

When all had finally quieted and the fermentation dust settled, we stood, and in her worn voice the announcer girl called the winner.

But who remembers exactly? Who cared? There was something bigger going on. The crowd was united again as one community. Even the foreigner-train embraced the moment, jumping and giving high-fives like a high school cheerleader squad.

Maybe this was "true Korea." Through the dust, smells, and brow-dripping labor, a unified country had prevailed. Maybe even we, the visitors attending the festival on that strange autumn day, were in fact a part of what "true Korea" had become. But underneath the smiling faces and flashy entertainment lay something more ominous—an unmistakable pain. A hushed wickedness most would only see had they stopped and looked past all the distraction. It lay in the faces of those who pushed forth with bent backs, grinding against the force of time, all in order to put on the extra layer of disguise—that extra coat of sheen.

"This is Korea, baby!" shouted Binx as he ran up to take pictures of the cheering crowd, covered in confetti and remnants of dust and cabbage.

"No way," I thought immediately. "Not even close. More investigation would be needed—months, if not years, most likely." 🍷