

NO PARTY LIKE AN ANJU PARTY

Here's how to host a night
of drinking and eating, Korean-style

BY IRENE YOO
RECIPES BY IRENE YOO AND HANA ASBRINK

I've been drinking Korean-style ever since my soju-loving uncle slid that first glass across the table. From that point I've shared countless green bottles of soju, copper kettles of makgeolli, and bottles of beer with family, friends, their parents, and even the occasional business person (the true expert) in Korea and Koreatowns across the US. Drinking is an important part of Korean culture, a practice with a beautiful rhythm that is dictated by a complex web of rules and traditions. To start, you can't drink without eating—which is exactly what makes K-drinking the perfect inspiration for hosting a party at home.

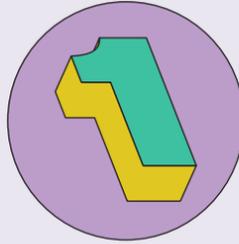
Here I've distilled what I've learned from all those tipsy nights into a simple guide, with recommendations for what to buy and drink, classic and satisfying recipes to pair, and more. These rules will quickly break down social barriers and invite everyone to let loose. So get ready to clink glasses and pass around platters of sizzling jeon—we're splashing into the world of Korean drinking.

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Irene Yoo (center) is opening Orion Bar with her husband in Brooklyn later this month, and her debut cookbook, *Soju Party*, is coming out fall 2025.



NEVER DRINK WITHOUT EATING...

In Korean culture you would never think to offer someone alcohol without food to accompany it. We even have our own food category for it: anju. Anju can range from smaller banchan-style dishes to larger shareable sides and entrées. They can be salty (e.g., dried shredded fish), soupy or spicy (as in rich budae jjigae), or meaty and satisfying, like Kong-Bul (page 61). However, anything can be anju in my opinion, as long as it can stand up to the bracing clarity of soju or the creamy sweetness of makgeolli.

You can find these snacks (and more!) at Korean grocery stores like H Mart.



KONG-BUL (SOYBEAN SPROUTS AND BULGOGI)
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JOLLY PONG
Sweet, cereal-like puffs

OJINGEO DDANG KONG
Squid-flavored balls filled with peanuts

SHRIMP CHIPS
Twists made with actual shrimp

HOMERUN BALL
Chocolate-filled pastries

CUTTLEFISH CHIPS
Crispy shellfish-flavored snacks



...BUT YOU DON'T HAVE TO COOK

Anju doesn't always have to be fancy or homemade. In a *Squid Game* scene, the broke character Seong Gi-hun offers to share a bottle of soju with an elder, Oh Il-nam, then apologizes for not having any anju. Oh immediately whips out a package of instant ramyun, and they eat the dry noodles in crunchy bites sprinkled with the seasoning powder. This is a common anju in Korea, and the scene shows that anju can be a cheap and easy snack. I usually have shrimp chips, potato chips, and honey-butter almonds on hand to serve as anju. If you go the instant-noodle route, be sure that it's Samyang, the OG Korean instant ramyun.



STOCK YOUR BAR WITH SOJU AND MORE

Now for the most important part: the booze! When drinking K-style, I reach first for a few bottles of soju, Korea's most iconic and consumed alcohol.

(Apparently, the average Korean downs 53 bottles of soju a year—the equivalent to about 23 bottles of wine!)

Soju was traditionally a liquor distilled from a mash of rice, water, and nuruk (a Korean fermentation starter). Nowadays most commercial soju, which you'll usually find in green bottles, tends to be a neutral spirit mixed with sweeteners and diluted, so it usually clocks in between 12–20% ABV. It has a very crisp but clean flavor, like an easier-to-sip vodka—perhaps that's one reason why it's a constant presence in every popular K-drama.



CHUM CHURUM
This green-bottle soju, whose name translates as "like the first time," tastes slightly sweet.



TOKKI SOJU
Repping the new wave of contemporary artisanal soju in America (see also West 32 and Yobo), this soju is distilled from only rice, nuruk, and water. Tokki's 23% ABV White Soju can be sipped straight, while its 40% ABV Black Soju is made for mixing into cocktails.



JINRO IS BACK
Produced by the same company as Chamisul, this soju is clean and smooth (and comes in clear blue bottles).

CHAMISUL
Korea's most popular green-bottle soju. Meaning "dew" in Korean, the lighter and more commonly sold Chamisul Fresh tastes sweet but with a bit of an alcohol burn (it's 17% ABV), while Chamisul Original (denoted by its red cap) is more potent at 20% ABV.



MORE TO SIP ON



BEER

Most Korean beers are light and crisp, all the better for glugging with food or mixing into somaek (see below). Look for cans of the classic Hite, OB, or Cass, or bottles of the more modern Terra.



MAKGEOLLI

Korea's oldest alcohol, not as popular as soju but experiencing an artisanal resurgence. This lightly filtered fermented rice wine looks milky but tastes tangy and a little sweet. It naturally separates, so shake the bottle gently before opening to mix in any sediment. Grab some bottles from Korean brand Kooksoondang and Korean American brewers Mäkkü and Hana Makgeolli.



SOMAEK

Sometimes a straight shot of soju tastes too alcoholic, but a glass of Hite beer is too light. That's how Koreans came up with their national cocktail, the somaek: a portmanteau combining soju and maekju (beer). You can pour 2 oz. of soju into 5 oz. of beer, or up the ante with a soju bomb: Place a shot of soju over chopsticks set on top of a glass of beer, then slam your hands on the table to mix together.





PLAY SOME GAMES!

Whether you're 19 (the legal drinking age if you're in Korea) or 90, drinking games are a must. Here are three games to get the party (and buzz) started.



TWIST CAP

Unfurl the metal ring hanging on the soju bottle cap and twist it so it's a coiled strand attached to the cap. Take turns holding the cap and trying to flick the strand off. Whoever flings it off first is the winner, and the people on either side of them must take a shot or finish their drink.



3-6-9

An easy but deadly game of speed. Go around the table and start counting from one, but for every three, six, or nine, you must clap instead of saying the number and clap twice if a number shows up twice, like 36. If you mess up, drink!



TITANIC

In the middle of the table, fill a tall glass partway with beer and carefully float an empty soju glass in the liquid. One by one, pour soju into the empty soju glass. The person who sinks the glass is the loser and has to drink the whole thing!



BRUSH UP ON YOUR DRINKING ETIQUETTE

There are some rules—and a little social math—when it comes to pouring and consuming alcohol with friends.

That's because Korean drinking is all about showing respect and taking care of each other, even when you're just hanging out. So before you pick up that green bottle, do a little prep. Make sure you have the right glassware: Soju is always poured into glasses, usually 2-oz. soju shot glasses. In a pinch, though, any small vessel will do. Then read the room. If I'm with an intergenerational group, I'll offer to pour for the highest-status or eldest person first, then go down the line in order of hierarchy.

If I'm drinking with peers, I might directly ask for someone's age if I'm unsure—it's not impolite to ask in Korean culture, where age is a prominent factor in the social order. Either way, never pour for yourself; just set the bottle down next to your empty glass or hand it to another person if no one takes the hint.





LEVEL UP YOUR FOOD AND DRINK PAIRINGS

While any food enjoyed with a drink can technically be an anju, there are some classic combos Koreans turn to again and again. Sometimes they are traditional matches dating back to the royal courts of the Joseon dynasty, like Haemul Pajeon (page 61) and makgeolli. The flavors work well together: The seafood and pungent scallion in the pajeon are balanced by the creaminess of the makgeolli.

This pairing is so popular that Koreans today love it for an even more romantic reason: The soft pitter-patter of raindrops conjures cravings because the sound mimics the sizzle of the pancakes frying in oil. But tasting is believing: Try this pairing and the ones below and it'll all start to make sense.

MORE ICONIC DUOS

Some food and drink pairings become so part of Korean culture that they result in abbreviations. Get a little lesson in Korean with these examples:

● **CHI-MAEK**
CHICKEN + MAEKJU (BEER)

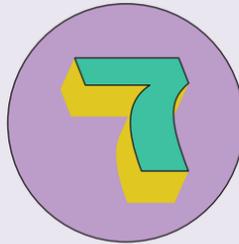
● **PI-MAEK**
PIZZA + MAEKJU (BEER)

● **SAMSO**
SAMGYUPSAL (BARBECUED PORK BELLY) + SOJU



HAEMUL
PAJEON
(SEAFOOD
PANCAKES)
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PREP FOR YOUR HANGOVER

Even when you've been drinking responsibly, hangovers are often an inevitable outcome of a good night. Luckily, anju can work both as a preventative measure and a curative. Eating plenty of food while you're drinking helps to soak up all the alcohol, and bubbling hot stews like Sulguk (page 61) are perfect for that. It also works as hangover stew, known as haejangguk, since it includes soybean sprouts and mushrooms, which contain allegedly hangover-helping vitamins. Bonus: It all comes together faster than it takes for your headache to set in.



SULGUK
(ALCOHOL STEW)

●●● A Few More Korean Hangover Cures ●●●

Hangover Sticks

These Korean pouches are full of vitamins purported to prevent the next day's head spin. Easy Tomorrow is on Amazon; slurp from the pouch (the more you take, the better it seems to work).

Hangover Drinks

Herbal ingredients power bottled Korean potions like Dawn 808 and Condition. Buy them online at Weee and at Korean grocery stores. Down before drinking or at bedtime for best results.

Hydration Powders

You can achieve similar effects to the other two options with electrolyte-rich powders such as Liquid I.V. It's stocked at most convenience stores as well as online. Just dissolve in water.

KONG-BUL (SOYBEAN SPROUTS AND BULGOGI)

4 SERVINGS

This dish is a portmanteau of kongnamul (bean sprouts) and bulgogi (in reference to the well-known thinly sliced beef barbecue of the same name), capturing the Korean propensity for shortening phrases into abbreviated names. The meat and soybean sprouts are layered into a pot and cooked until tender, then topped with perilla leaves. You can find preshaved boneless rib eye at most Asian grocery stores (along with the perilla and soybean sprouts). Or ask a butcher to slice it for you.

- ¼ pear or apple
- 8 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 ½" piece ginger, peeled
- ¼ cup soy sauce
- 2 Tbsp. sugar
- 1 Tbsp. oyster sauce
- 1 Tbsp. toasted sesame oil
- ½ tsp. freshly ground pepper
- ½ medium onion, thinly sliced
- 4 scallions, cut into 1½" pieces
- 1 carrot, peeled, cut into 1½"-long matchsticks
- 8 oz. thinly sliced boneless rib eye
- 12 oz. soybean or mung bean sprouts, rinsed
- 2 Tbsp. gochujang (Korean hot pepper paste; optional)
- 20 perilla (sesame leaves), stems trimmed, leaves rolled, thinly sliced
- Toasted sesame seeds (for serving)
- Steamed rice (optional)

Purée pear, garlic, ginger, soy sauce, sugar, oyster sauce, sesame oil, and pepper in a food processor until mostly smooth. Transfer sauce to a large bowl and add onion, scallions, carrot, and meat and toss with tongs to combine.

Arrange mixture in a large high-sided skillet, braising pan, or wide, shallow pot. Scatter sprouts on top, then spoon gochujang (if using) over. Cover skillet, set over high heat, and cook until meat is cooked through and sprouts are tender, 7–9 minutes.

Uncover skillet and reduce heat to low. Toss meat mixture and sprouts together. Scatter perilla on top and cook, uncovered, 2 minutes. Top with sesame seeds and serve with rice if desired.

HAEMUL PAJEON (SEAFOOD PANCAKES)

4 SERVINGS

Boasting crisp golden edges and served with a kicky soy-sauce-based dipping sauce, this anju is a true classic. Haemul

pajeon are filled with bright scallions (pa) and a variety of seafood (haemul) that adds brininess and texture. Koreans usually tear off hunks of pancake with their chopsticks, but feel free to cut them into squares or wedges for ease. Using plenty of oil while frying is the key to the crunchiest edges.

SAUCE

- 3 Tbsp. soy sauce
- 2 Tbsp. unseasoned rice vinegar or apple cider vinegar
- 1 tsp. sugar
- ¼ small onion, coarsely chopped
- 1 scallion, chopped
- 1 small red chile (such as Fresno), thinly sliced

PANCAKES AND ASSEMBLY

- 1 cup (125 g) all-purpose flour
- 3 Tbsp. potato starch or cornstarch
- ½ tsp. baking powder
- ¼ tsp. freshly ground pepper
- 2 bunches scallions, cut into 2" pieces, white parts halved lengthwise if thick
- 1 cup frozen mixed seafood (such as shrimp, mussels, clams, and/or squid), thawed, drained, patted dry, cut into bite-size pieces
- 6–8 Tbsp. (or more) vegetable oil
- 1 small red chile (such as Fresno), thinly sliced

SAUCE Stir soy sauce, vinegar, and sugar in a small bowl until sugar is dissolved. Add onion, scallion, and chile and mix to combine. Set sauce aside.

PANCAKES AND ASSEMBLY Place a wire rack inside a parchment-lined rimmed baking sheet. Whisk flour, potato starch, baking powder, and pepper in a large bowl. Gradually pour in 1⅓ cups cold water, whisking constantly until just combined. Add scallions and seafood; mix with a rubber spatula or wooden spoon to coat.

Heat 3 Tbsp. oil (you want enough oil to cover the surface generously, so add more if needed) in a large skillet, preferably nonstick (add a bit more oil if using stainless steel), over medium-high until hot but not smoking. Ladle half of batter into pan and carefully but quickly spread into a round (the ladle or spatula will do the job; you just want to make sure the pancake is not too thick). Scatter half of the chiles over and cook pancake, reducing heat if browning too quickly, until golden underneath, 2–3 minutes. Using a metal spatula, carefully flip pancake over and pour in up to 1 Tbsp. more oil around perimeter; cook until other side is golden, 2–3 minutes. If you want your pancake extra crispy, flip again and continue to cook, flipping halfway through and adding a little more oil if needed,

2 minutes longer. Transfer pancake to wire rack. Repeat with remaining batter, chile, and more oil to make another pancake.

Cut pancakes into squares or wedges if desired and arrange on plates. Serve with sauce alongside for dipping.

SULGUK (ALCOHOL STEW)

4 SERVINGS

Sulguk is one of many types of haejangguk, a Korean food class of "hangover stews." Usually a hearty soup brimming with vegetables and meat, it is meant to load your body with ingredients that soothe an upset stomach and help sweat out the alcohol from the night before. This sulguk is a slightly larger, casserole-style version made for eating while drinking, but you can, of course, throw it together the morning after as a cure. Both the fish cake sheets and ramyun can be found at most Asian grocery stores; look for the fish cake sheets in the refrigerated aisles.

- 2 Tbsp. gochujang (Korean hot pepper paste)
- 5 tsp. gochugaru (coarse Korean red pepper powder)
- 1 Tbsp. finely chopped garlic
- 1 Tbsp. soy sauce
- ½ tsp. freshly ground pepper
- 1 soondae (Korean blood sausage), sliced 1" thick, or 4 oz. thick-cut pork belly, cut into ½" pieces
- 2 fish cake sheets (about 7x4"), quartered, halved on a diagonal to make 16 triangles
- 3 cups oyster mushrooms, separated into small pieces
- 1 4-oz. package instant ramyun noodles (such as Ottogi Plain Instant Noodle)
- 4 scallions, sliced into 2" pieces
- 4 cups beef or chicken bone broth or stock
- Steamed rice (for serving; optional)

Mix gochujang, gochugaru, garlic, soy sauce, and pepper in a small bowl. Set in the middle of a large high-sided skillet, braising pan, or wide, shallow pot. Arrange pork belly (if using), fish cake sheets, and mushrooms around bowl. Place ramyun, then scallions, on top.

Pour in broth and set over high heat. Bring to a boil and cook, uncovered, adding up to ½ cup water ¼-cupful at a time if liquid is getting low, until noodles are al dente, about 5 minutes. (If using soondae, reduce heat to medium after cooking 3 minutes. Add sausage; cook until noodles are al dente and sausage is warmed through, about 2 minutes.)

Divide sulguk among bowls and serve with rice if desired.