

## This is a big *kimjang* weekend in Korea - making kimchi to last through the winter

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This is a big "kimjang" weekend in Korea. Of course, kimchi is a staple of the Korean diet. Koreans make kimchi throughout the year but "*kimjang*" is making kimchi to last through the winter. In November, they harvest the last of the Chinese cabbage and it hits the markets. Most Korean households then turn their minds to kimjang. It's an all-day affair and requires the help of many hands.

Housewives first check out prices in the markets and then make a plan to assemble the ingredients, gather sisters, sister-in-laws, aunts and even grandmas. It is generally women's work but menfolk, if they don't have the foresight to make themselves scarce, are recruited for heavy lifting.

There are many varieties of kimchi made with various vegetables including Korean radish, cucumbers and cabbage. *Bae chu*, known as Chinese cabbage in the West, is the most common. Other ingredients include salt, garlic, scallions, leeks, shrimp and other fermented seafood such as (trust me you don't want to know.) The most important ingredient is red hot pepper powder. This gives the final product its dark red color and its fire-in-the-mouth flavor. In addition, large plastic tubs, strainers, knives and storage containers are needed.

Once a day is chosen and everything has been assembled, everyone gets together early in the morning and the process begins. Under the strict direction of the oldest female relative, grandma, mom, or the oldest aunt, jobs are assigned and washing, chopping and rubbing is carried out on mountains of cabbage heads. Each head is individually washed, rubbed with salt and red pepper powder. The thoroughness of salting and peppering determines the flavor and quality of the final product. It is well known that plenty of marital strife stems from husbands who can't help but compare mom's kimchi with his bride's. For the sake of family harmony, a daughter-in-law, whenever possible, should serve a long apprenticeship under her mother-in-law.

Each family has its preferred recipe. Some kimchi is saltier, some has a stronger garlic taste. Opinions run

strong as to which is the correct flavor. It seems to be a common Korean belief that there is only one correct way to do anything. Once they establish the correct way, everyone accepts it and tries to do it that way. Since in many fields the absolute standard is not yet set, people still fiercely debate fields such as politics, religion and kimchi making. Therefore "our" kimchi is the best and all others are almost inedible.



After adding the other ingredients, the concoction has to be placed into containers for storage. Koreans believe that it is a scientific fact that Korean kimchi is one of the healthiest foods you can eat. Every once in a while a new report comes out with a team of scientists detailing the health benefits of kimchi. Of course, the scientists are always Korean. The health benefits cited are usually based on fermentation. Fermentation takes time, so the best kimchi is aged. The storage method is important. In days gone by, kimchi was stored in large earthenware jars. A loose lid is placed on top which apparently promotes air circulation and aids the fermentation process. The jars were then buried in the ground, natural refrigeration. Today plastic containers are most often used and almost everyone has a kimchi refrigerator thanks to Samsung, LG and the rest. I wonder how this affects the taste. Koreans are proud of their kimchi and consider it the height of hospitality to give some of their kimchi to foreigners. Now days my fridge is full.

