Ganjang (soy sauce) and doenjang (soybean paste) are traditional Korean seasonings made from soybeans that undergo a natural fermentation process. Today, fermented and other naturally processed foods are increasingly attracting keen attention the world over for their proven health benefits.

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Although countless fermented food items can be found all over the world, Koreans like to believe that they have created more of these than anybody else. Whereas kimchi is the most representative example of a traditional Korean fermented food, there are other items with even longer histories that have been a part of everyday meals for as long as anyone can remember, such as ganjang and doenjang. The Chinese typically prepare *jiang* (醬) by fermenting fish (*yujiang*, 漁醬) or meat (*roujiang*, 肉醬). Although these are similar in appearance, the ingredients that go into their preparation are different. *Yujiang* is widely popular in Southeast Asia.

**The Essential Ingredient**

Soybeans are one of the most popular natural grains cultivated on the Korean peninsula. Although a variety of grains were introduced into Korea from other countries, it was only natural that soybeans, thanks to their simple cultivation process and extended storage life, would become a staple of Korean food culture. After soybeans have been fermented, they can easily be maintained for several years. In fact, some families have been preparing their own unique form of ganjang for over 200 years, by continually repeating the fermenting process and mixing aged stock with newly produced ganjang.

As recently as 10 years ago, it was not difficult to see *hangari* (crockery pots) when driving around the countryside of Korea. They were invariably located in an area that received ample sunlight and was also well ventilated. If a house had a big enough yard, the hangari were often placed along the rear wall. In such case, the hangari
would sit on an elevated base, made from stones and earth, so that they could receive more direct sunlight. This elevated base was commonly known as jangdokdae, or crockery jar terrace.

Since ganjang is a liquid and doenjang a paste, the two can be easily distinguished. However, they both share a common origin. Tradition calls for Koreans to prepare the mejubap needed to make doenjang in the tenth lunar month, by boiling and grinding soybeans. The ground soybeans are formed into a block (20 x 15 cm) or round shape, and left to dry for a week in a cool place. Then, the meju is bound with rice straw and hung to dry from the eaves of their homes for about 40 days. When the meju is thoroughly dried, it is stored in a warm place so that it can ferment. The rice straw is not removed since it serves to facilitate the fermentation process.

When the fermentation process is complete, the meju is placed in salt water. The water’s salt content is proper when the meju will float toward the surface. The fermented meju and salt water would gradually mix together over an extended period of time. When the salt water takes on a dark brown color, it is ganjang. Once the soaking and mixing process is completed, the meju is removed. The removed meju is doenjang, while the dark brown salt water is ganjang. Ganjang is then boiled and stored in a large hangari on the jangdokdae.

Doenjang, which is also made from the fermented meju, has the consistency of a thick paste. Charcoal and red peppers are placed in a ganjang pot. Charcoal is added because it is effective in absorbing impurities, while red peppers are included for their sterilizing capability. These ancient methods of preparing jang have been scientifically proven to produce fermented foods with impressive health benefits.

**Great Taste, Good Health**

Mention of Korean jang can be found in the *Book of Wei and Dongyi Tribes, Sanguozhi*, a Chinese document
compiled by Chen Shou in A.D. 290. This would seem to confirm that jang-making methods were developed a long time ago, indeed. Doenjang, which is neither hard nor soft, was also called tojang in the past. In the days of old, the Chinese used to refer to doenjang as the smell of Korea; thus indicating their acknowledgement of the fact that doenjang originated on the Korean peninsula. The technique of preparing meju was eventually introduced to Japan, such that the mention of jang, si, and maljang is included in the Japanese Daihoritsuryo, or Daiho Code published in 701. Maljang was introduced to Japan as well. However, according to a Shosoin document published in 739, the Japanese referred to maljang as miso. Touga by Arai Hakuseki in 1717 stated: “Maljang, which originated from Goryeo, made its way to Japan, where it was pronounced as miso, in accordance with the local dialect.”

In the olden days, doenjang was said to possess five virtues. The first of these is dansim, meaning that doenjang will maintain its own taste and aroma even when combined with other tastes. The second is hangsim, that doenjang would never go bad. If stored properly, doenjang actually develops a more intense taste over time. Third is bulsim, that doenjang can eliminate the unpleas-

One of the more noticeable signs of our changing times is that ever more Korean households now purchase their ganjjang and doenjang from stores rather than making them at home. Nevertheless, no matter where they might live, Koreans can never forget the unique taste of these traditional foods.
tant odor of fish and meat. Fourth is seonsim, in which doenjang is said to make spicy food more savory. And fifth is hwasim, meaning that doenjang can be used to complement any type of food.

A recent report revealed that doenjang has the most significant anti-carcinogenic efficacy of all Korean fermented foods, followed by gochujang (red-pepper paste) and ganjang. In the case of doenjang and gochujang, homemade items were found to have greater anti-carcinogenic effectiveness than the commercial products sold in stores. Moreover, traditional doenjang is also known to be effective for restoring liver damage.

Along with doenjang, soy sauce is a basic seasoning integral to Korean cooking (opposite page).

The ground-up soybeans are formed into various shapes, like rectangular blocks (right).

Fermented soybeans are stored in an earthenware crock, to which hot charcoal and red chili peppers are added (bottom).