

CUISINE

# Seolleongtang

Serves Up Wellness and a Sense of Sharing



Thinly sliced green onions, red pepper flakes, black pepper, and salt are all the condiments needed for seolleongtang. Crunchy radish kimchi, kkakdugi, is a perfect side dish.

*Seolleongtang*, a traditional dish that has been enjoyed by the people of Korea for several centuries, is prepared by boiling the bones and different parts of a cow for a long time. Flavorful and nutritious, it is little wonder that *seolleongtang* is such a favorite of so many Koreans.

**Yoon Sook-ja** Director, Institute of Traditional Korean Food

**F**or office workers, the lunch hour is a vital time when they can relax and restore their energy for the afternoon work. As such, a bowl of easy-to-eat and highly nutritious *seolleongtang* at lunchtime can be as rewarding as a lavish banquet.

*Seolleongtang* is made by boiling the bones and other parts of a cow, including its hooves, head, ribs, and intestines, in water for a lengthy period of time. This produces a rich source of protein and calcium, such that a bowl of *seolleongtang* provides 540 kcal of energy, with 25 grams of protein, 12 grams of fat, and 28 grams of carbohydrates, as well as vitamin A (57 RE), vitamin C (11 milligrams), and calcium (45 milligrams). Based on the nutritional guidelines for Korean males, which recommend 2,500 kcal of energy and 75 grams of protein, a bowl of *seolleongtang* can provide one-third of the suggested protein level, without an excess of calories.

### Origin of *Seolleongtang*

*Seolleongtang* should be eaten at restaurants that specialize in its preparation rather than at home because long hours of boiling are required for the large quantity of ingredients. Moreover, the protein will take the form of free amino acids and hexane from the lengthy boiling, thereby maximizing the nutritional value and adding to the full-flavoriness of *seolleongtang*. This is why people will say that *seolleongtang* is better-tasting at restaurants, where large amounts can be properly boiled, than at home. Therefore, *seolleongtang* can best be enjoyed at restau-

rants in the company of family and friends. Then, how did *seolleongtang* originate?

During the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), on the occasion of Sangsin (the first day of 辛日) in the second lunar month, the king would visit Seonnongdan (an altar in honor of the legendary Chinese figures who introduced Korea to the advancements of civilization between 2800 and 2600 B.C., including Shennong, a teacher of agriculture and mercantilism, and Houji, a specialist in writing, hunting, trapping, and fishing), which was located in today's Dongdaemun-gu of Seoul, to preside over a prayer ritual to supplicate for a bountiful harvest in the coming year. After having completed the ritual ceremony, which included offerings of uncooked rice, millet, cows, and pigs, the king would tend to various farming tasks at *jeokjeon* (a farmland area reserved for the royal family).

Thereafter, the rice and millet would be cooked in a large pot, the beef used to prepare soup, and the pork boiled to make *pyeonyuk*, boiled sliced meat. The king would then invite the elderly farmers over the age of 60, who had been selected to guide the ox used by the king to plow the fields, to attend a dinner. The rice and beef soup were served in a large bowl, or *ttukbaegi*, after being seasoned with shallots and salt. The use of shallots and salt has remained an integral element of this soup even today. *Seolleongtang* was originally called *seonnongtang* because of its association with the Seonnongdan ritual ceremony. Over time, the name evolved into the easier to pronounce "seolleongtang."

The key to seolleongtang's savory appeal is its thick white broth and the accompaniment of *kkakdugi*, crunchy radish kimchi. *Kkakdugi* serves to offset the meat odor, which is unpleasant to some, in addition to aiding in the digestion of the beef.

### Slow and Steady Boiling

In Western cuisine, stock made by boiling the bones of cow, chicken, or fish with vegetables and spices, is typically considered the most critical ingredient for assuring the desired taste of soups and sauces. Bones must be boiled to produce white stock, but cow bones will result in a brown stock if the bones have been grilled. The lengthy boiling of cow bones will create a beef stock similar to that of seolleongtang. However, Koreans will then consume this beef broth as is, whereas Western-style cooking calls for the stock to be combined with other ingredients to make various soups and sauces. For example, potato soup and onion soup include the addition of potatoes and onions to the beef stock. Moreover, as compared to Western dining, in which soup is often served as one course of a meal, Korean soup (*guk*) or seolleongtang will be a main course, when accompanied by rice.

As compared to *gomtang*, another type of meat-based soup, seolleongtang calls for the use of a larger amount of bones and longer boiling, such that bone marrow becomes part of the soup stock. Salt and seasoning are added to seolleongtang just before being served.

So, what steps are involved in the preparation of seolleongtang? First, water is boiled in a large pot. When the water boils, the washed head and bones of a cow are added. After sufficient boiling, the cow head and bones are removed and placed in fresh water. The water is then boiled and the beef ribs and shanks are added. To minimize the beef odor, shallots, garlic, and ginger are includ-

ed. Fat and dregs are removed from the stock. When thoroughly boiled, remove the meat from the bones and slice into strips. Serve the seolleongtang in a bowl with rice and slices of beef, together with minced shallots, powdered red pepper, black pepper, and salt.

The longer the seolleongtang is boiled, the more savory and richer it will be. Therefore, the best-tasting seolleongtang involves the lengthy boiling of a proper amount of water at a low temperature. On the other hand, boiling too little water at high heat, and then adding water later, will not only result in an inferior taste, but also intensify the beef odor. Indeed, the key to preparing flavorful seolleongtang calls for using an appropriate amount of water and regulating the boiling at low heat. Also, to reduce the beef odor, the shallots, garlic, and ginger should be added after the protein has been extracted from the cow bones.

Another must for the enjoyment of seolleongtang is the accompaniment of well-ripened *kkakdugi* kimchi. *Kkakdugi* is a refreshing radish kimchi, which helps to offset any pungent aroma of seolleongtang, while providing a crunchy contrast. In addition, *kkakdugi* contains various enzymes that aids in the digestion of seolleongtang's large amounts of beef protein and fat. Enjoying seolleongtang and *kkakdugi* in the company of family and friends is always a delightful experience. ❧