

New Foods on the Block: Duck and Tuna as New Protein Sources in South Korea in the 1980s*

Tae-Ho KIM[†]

Introduction

Dietary preferences are deeply rooted in culture and resistant to change. Attempts to modify public tastes from the supply side, especially when motivated by political, economic, or ideological factors, have largely proven unsuccessful. While pre-modern societies relied on cultural rationales such as religion to justify these efforts, modern societies have turned to scientific justifications. The modern state has both encouraged and discouraged the consumption of certain foods by mobilizing nutritional science, economics, or demography. Yet these interventions have yielded limited results in most cases.

Nevertheless, historical evidence suggests that the public may embrace new foods when specific conditions are met. The rise of new protein sources in the 1980s in South Korea is one example of this shift. As a result of the economic growth in previous decades, the middle class emerged and began to drive consumer culture, and the trend toward Westernized diets became apparent. In the late 1970s, the success of the Green Revolution paradoxically loosened the South Koreans' obsession with rice, leading to a growing interest in Western-style food. The hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympic Games in Seoul also served as a catalyst to accelerate this change. Consumption of meat and dairy products increased, and American fast-food restaurants introduced Koreans to the flavors of new foods like hamburgers, pizza, and pasta.

As the Western-style food gained popularity in South Korea, demand for meat and dairy products also substantially increased over the 1980s and the 1990s. While consumption of traditional sources of meat and fish has increased significantly,

Received July 15, 2024; Reviewed August 5, 2024; Accepted August 9, 2024.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.36092/KJHS.2024.46.2.297>

[†] Jeonbuk National University, taehokim@jbnu.ac.kr

* This research was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Education of Korea in 2021 (NRF-2021S1A5C2A02086985).

novel protein sources have also been introduced. Among them, duck meat and canned tuna are specifically notable, as they have become new commonplace sources of protein for South Koreans. Canned tuna first entered the retail market in 1982 (Dongwon Tuna) and duck meat processed for modern home cooking debuted in 1985 (Juwon “Mountain Duck”), and both successfully found a niche in the Korean diet by the end of the century.

This article examines the cases of duck and tuna in the South Korean food market during the 1980s. These two “new meats” were unfamiliar to South Koreans prior to the 1980s but managed to establish new markets and eventually became significant sources of animal protein. This shift is particularly intriguing as supply did not arise in response to demand; rather, increased supply catalyzed demand. Duck production increased substantially with the introduction of new breeds more amenable to farming, and new recipes were developed accordingly to create new demand. The supply of tuna also expanded as South Korean fishing companies, originally focused on exporting tuna to foreign canneries, diverted a portion of their catches to the domestic market. The supplier promoted recipes for this unfamiliar fish meat while selling the cans, thereby creating a domestic market. Through this process, both meats rapidly gained a foothold in the everyday diet of South Koreans.

The case studies of these “new foods on the block,” namely duck and tuna, reveal several commonalities that can help us understand the changes in Korean society in the 1980s. First, both were not native Korean ingredients, but were incorporated into Korean recipes, while adding new flavors to traditional Korean dishes. More interestingly, this process was not driven by demand, but by supply: the agri-food industry’s needs created the supply first, and Korean consumers expanded their culinary repertoire as they learned how to cook and enjoy these new ingredients. Another commonality is that the introduction of new meats to Korea was driven by mature industries abroad. In the case of duck, a new breed was introduced from Europe; in the case of tuna, a new market was created by Korean fishing companies translating their technical capabilities from exports to domestic demand.

Food history is not a well-established field in Korea yet, but there have recently been several interesting studies that extend our understanding of agriculture, animal husbandry, and fisheries that produce the ingredients. Eun Hi Lee has done pioneering work on sugar and Coca-Cola,¹ while Eun Jeong Chong has vividly traced the rise of fried chicken to become South Korea’s favorite food.² Tae-Ho Kim reconstructed the history of the Green Revolution and addressed Korean consumers’

¹ Eun Hi Lee, “The Changes of the Sugar Industry and Consumer Culture in Modern Korea” 근현대 한국의 제당업과 설탕 소비 문화의 변화 (Ph.D. dissertation, Yonsei University, 2012); Eun Hi Lee, “Cola Wars in Park Junghee Era 박정희 시대 콜라 전쟁,” *Critical Studies on Modern Korean History* 역사문제연구 19:2 (2015), 87-132. East Asian names are written in the Western order, in which the family name follows the given name, unless otherwise noted.

² Eun Jeong Chong, *Biography of Chicken in Korea* 대한민국 치킨전 (Ttabi, 2014).

perceptions of different varieties of rice.³ The recent issues of the journal *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 showcased the latest research on food in a special issue titled “Agriculture, Fisheries, and Social and Ecological Material Metabolism in East Asia in the 20th Century,” with contributions on a wide range of topics including agriculture and forestry, animal husbandry, fisheries, food culture, and veterinary medicine.⁴

In light of these previous studies, this study aims to conduct a historical analysis of the changes in dietary habits among ordinary South Koreans. In particular, it will investigate how international contexts, such as export-led industrialization within the international division of labor, have intertwined with socioeconomic factors, such as the growth of the middle class, and cultural factors, such as the increasing emphasis on protein in dietary discourse.

How to Feed the “Asian Tiger”?

Dietary changes are caused by a combination of socioeconomic factors. In non-Western societies, the Westernization of diets, especially the increased consumption of meat and dairies, is a universal phenomenon that goes along with industrialization

³Tae-Ho Kim, “President’s Rice vs. King’s Rice: How the Memory of the Green Revolution in the 1970s Influenced the Consumer’s Choice in South Korea’s Rice Market 통일벼의 기억과 ‘임금님 쌀’의 역사 만들기,” *The Historical Journal* 사림 57 (2016), 35-70.

⁴Jiho Moon, “The Formation of ‘Scientific’ Environmental Correctionism in the Early Mao Era: The Agricultural Meteorological Solution to the Cold-Weather Damage to Rubber Trees in the 1950s 마오쩌둥 시대 초기 ‘과학적’ 환경 개조관의 부상: 1950년대 고무나무 냉해의 농업기상학적 해결,” *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 144 (2023), 174-213; Chuyoung Won, “Development for the Environment? The Inland Fish Farming Development and Nature Conservation Movement in Korea during the 1970s 환경을 위한 개발?: 1970년대 내수면 개발과 한국자연보존협회의 자연보존 운동,” *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 145 (2023), 154-180; Seung a Lee, “The Institutional Origins of the Great Famine: State Food Planning and the Implementation of ‘Rational’ Distribution 대기근의 제도적 기원: 국가의 식량 기획과 ‘합리적’ 유통의 실현,” *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 145 (2023), 181-208; Jongsik Christian Yi, “Peanut Hulls, Swine Feces, and Silver Carps: Eating, Excreting, and Communal Metabolism in 1950s Guangxi,” *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 145 (2023), 209-236; Gene Kim, “Mediating Land and Sea: Labor in the Hamgyŏng Province Pollock Fishery and Oceanic Territorialization 육지와 해양의 관계 중재하기: 함경도 명태어업 노동과 해양 영토화,” *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 146 (2024), 184-212; Eunsung Cho, “Okssal and Rabbit: The ‘Eating Problem’ in North Korea in the 1970s and State Intervention in Diets 옥살과 토끼: 1970년대 북한의 ‘먹는 문제’와 국가의 식생활 개입,” *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 146 (2024), 213-243; Tae-Ho Kim, “‘Little Cattle with Wings’ on Korean’s Table: Industrialization of Duck Meat in Modern Korea ‘날개 달린 작은 소’, 한국인의 밥상에 오르다: 현대 한국의 오리고기 산업화,” *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 146 (2024), 244-286; Sookyong Hong, “Learning about Life and Nature through Food: The Summer School of Health in Japan, 1939~1941 ‘바른 먹거리(正食)’ 교육과 ‘자연’ 이데올로기: 전시기 일본의 어린이 여름 건강학교(1939-1941),” *Critical Review of History* 역사비평 147 (2024), 250-270.

and urbanization. In East Asia, Japan, China, Taiwan, and South Korea have all experienced an increase in meat consumption as they went through modernization. Some believed that the consumption of meat and dairy products was a prerequisite for modernization and that governments should promote their consumption, as they believed that having the same big body size as Westerners would allow them to catch up with Western modernity faster. This was the case in early 20th century Japan, where the emperor himself ate meat dishes to set an example for the meat-averse public, and where milk and bread were recommended—and sometimes even mandated—for school lunches for children.⁵ Even when it was discovered that the majority of the Japanese people were lactose-intolerant, Japanese modernists made an additional effort to address the issue by fermenting milk into yogurt, which was originally an alien product from Eurasian nomadic cultures, to enable the Japanese people to consume more animal protein.⁶

The demand for protein in South Korea took off in the 1980s. South Korea experienced rapid economic growth in the 1960s and 70s, which made it internationally recognized as a member of the “Four Asian Tigers.” It also resulted in the formation of a sizeable middle class with surplus income for more consumption, as well as more exposure to Western culture compared with the previous generation. As the government-led Green Revolution in the 1970s, spearheaded by “*Tongil* Rice 통일벼,” led to self-sufficiency in rice production, rice consumption paradoxically peaked in the early 1980s and began to decline.⁷ By the mid-1970s, when domestic rice production did not meet the demand, the South government sought to substitute the demand for rice by promoting alternative grains such as wheat and barley. However, as economic growth and the success of the Green Revolution resolved chronic rice shortages, the middle class, with their increased purchasing power, began to diversify their diet not by shifting between grains, but by increasing their consumption of meat, dairy products, and fruits. Furthermore, as various Western cuisines came to be known to the Korean public through exposure to U.S. military in Korea and returning overseas students, the demand for Western-style meat dishes steadily expanded, particularly among the urban middle class.

In addition, Seoul’s hosting of the 1988 Summer Olympic Games also catalyzed the popularization of meat-based Western style diet. Although the South Korean government had previously regulated multinational franchise restaurants to prevent

⁵ Tetsu Okada, trans. by Sunbun Jeong, *Birth of Donkatsu* 돈까스의 탄생 (Ppuri wa Ipari, 2006), 25-28.

⁶ Shiori Nosaka, “Industrialized Health: Dairy Products of Meiji and Taishō Japan,” in Catherine Jami, Christopher Cullen, and Sica Acapo eds., *14th International Conference on the History of Science in East Asia* (Paris, 6-10 July 2015): Book of Abstracts (2015), 133.

⁷ Tae-Ho Kim, *The Social History of Rice in Modern Korea* 근현대 한국 쌀의 사회사 (Dulnyouk, 2017).

foreign currency outflows, it had to allow global food companies such as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) to enter the country in preparation for the Olympics, to meet the demand from international tourists. Upon the launch, these global franchise restaurants were readily crowded by South Korean customers, who had been eager to experience the hamburgers, pizza, and fried chicken as portrayed in foreign media. Lotteria, originally based in Japan, opened its first outlet in Seoul (1979), Burger King and KFC (1984), Wendy's, Pizza Hut, and Pizza Inn (1985), and McDonald's (1988) introduced American taste to South Koreans.⁸ As a result of these factors combined, meat and dairy consumption in South Korea has increased steadily since the 1980s.

However, the growing demand for protein could not be met by traditional meat products. There were apparent limits to increasing domestic meat production on a limited territory. While the government was aggressively—sometimes even violently—pursuing the “Green Revolution” to increase rice production, there was no land or resources available to invest in increasing silage production. Importing meat was also not an ideal option for the South Korean government, although the government occasionally decided to import beef or pork when the domestic price exceptionally soared. Not only was it a time when exporting was praised as a patriotic achievement and importing luxury goods was condemned as a social evil, but importing foreign meat would have been a devastating economic blow to South Korean farmers, among whose products beef was the most profitable. As the demand for meat continued to grow, more farmers took up cattle and pig farming, but the market kept fluctuating rather than growing steadily, largely owing to the underdeveloped meat distribution system. As meat prices rose, farmers competed to enter the industry, resulting in collective overproduction that caused meat prices to plummet, leaving farmers deeply in debt. To stabilize the meat market, the government intermittently declared “No Meat Day” in the 1960s and 1970s, prohibiting restaurants from selling meat once or twice a week.⁹

To meet the growing demand for protein while stemming the outflow of foreign currency, it was necessary to develop and promote a variety of domestic protein sources, other than the beef and pork favored by Koreans. The first possibility was to increase the supply of plant-based protein. This was being actively researched not only in Korea but throughout Asia. The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines, which was established in 1960 to initiate the Green Revolution in

⁸Eun Hi Lee, “Dining Out Culture of Modern Seoul Citizens 근현대 서울 사람들의 음식문화,” *Leisure Activities of Modern Seoul Citizens 근현대 서울 사람들의 여가 생활, Seoul History Lecture Series Vol. 8* (Seoul Historiography Institute, 2019), Ch. 2, 32-53.

⁹“Government Considers Weekly ‘No Meat Day,’ to Address the Fluctuation of Beef Price 정부 쇠고기 파동 해소책 일환 주 1회 ‘무육일’ 제정 검토,” *Maeil Business*, 1976. 3. 19; “(Editorial) No Meat Day rather than Importing Beef 쇠고기 수입보다 무육일을,” *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 1977. 8. 19; “Ministry of Agriculture and Fishery Considers Designation of No Meat Day 농수산부 무육일 지정 검토,” *Maeil Business*, 1979. 3. 31.

rice, launched a series of breeding programs to meet the demand of billions of rice-eating population in Asia, including development of high-protein rice varieties.¹⁰ In the densely populated areas of Asia, it was considered unrealistic to meet all protein needs from meat, so the IRRI's scheme was to improve nutritional balance by increasing the protein content of rice, the staple food of the region's population. Even *Tongil* rice, the high-yielding variety that spearheaded South Korea's Green Revolution, was initially introduced to the South Korean peer researchers as a "high-protein rice" in the early stages of development.¹¹ From the government's perspective, promoting high-protein grains also had the additional benefit of encouraging people to consume other grains instead of rice, which was chronically in short supply. Since wheat and soybeans were higher in protein than rice, promoting a "high-protein diet" also justified the Korean government's "mixed diet 혼식" and "flour diet 분식" policies at the time.

The second possibility was to encourage production and consumption of new sources of meat other than the traditionally favored beef and pork. In addition to the major livestock such as cattle, pig, and chicken, the government encouraged farmers to raise small, self-foraging animals that could be raised without purchasing feed. Specifically, goats, rabbits, and ducks were recommended, as they could roam around the house and search for food for themselves.¹² Although their numbers were substantially lower than those of "big three" livestock, and they were raised largely for household consumption rather than for sales to the market, those small self-foraging animals were expected to occupy a certain portion of the domestic demand for meat.

Consumption of fish was also consistently encouraged. The fishing industry on the Korean peninsula was industrialized during the Japanese occupation, and at one point there were large-scale fisheries along the east coast. Large quantities of pollocks, sardines, and sauries were caught, some of which were used for food, but much of which was processed into nitrogenous fertilizer and used to increase agricultural productivity. After the independence, although Japanese capital withdrew from the Korean Peninsula and the major processing facilities were separated into the North Korean territory, fishery and fish-processing industries in

¹⁰ Henry M. Beachell, Gurdev S. Khush, and Bienvenido O. Juliano, "Breeding for High Protein Content in Rice," *Rice Breeding* (Los Banos, Philippines: International Rice Research Institute, 1972), 419-428.

¹¹ Mun Hue Heu, the developer of *Tongil* rice, published a series of research papers titled "Basic Studies for the Breeding of High Protein Rice 수도 고단백 계통육성을 위한 기초적 연구," with his colleagues in the *Korean Journal of Crop Science* from 1972 to 1975 (in Korean).

¹² Eunsung Cho's study on rabbit in North Korea shows a parallel case. Eunsung Cho, "Okssal and Rabbit" (note 4).

South Korea continued. High-quality fish and shellfish were specifically selected and canned for export to Japan and the United States.¹³

However, these attempts to diversify protein sources were not always successful. The supply of new protein sources was increasing, but how to render them into merchandises that suit Korean consumer tastes was another matter. Partly due to a long tradition of agrarian culture, the types of meat consumed by Koreans were rather limited, compared to other civilizations based on hunting and herding: cattle, pig, chicken, and a few types of fish were the familiar sources of protein for Koreans. The taste, smell, and texture of other meats were unfamiliar, and new recipes had to be developed to make them acceptable to Koreans as ingredients in Korean cuisine. In order for the Korean government to solve the protein supply problem, it had to not only increase the supply, but also popular demand.

New Breeds of the Old Species¹⁴

Despite the absence of noticeable consumer demand for duck meat, the South Korean government encouraged duck farming since the 1960s, as a part of its agricultural policy of promoting animal husbandry. In the aftermath of the Korean War, South Korea's rural economy languished in underdevelopment, owing to the combination of various problems such as small farm sizes, overpopulation, underdeveloped farming techniques, and low productivity. Agricultural authorities believed that transitioning from "agriculture as subsistence" to "agriculture as industry" was the only solution that could fundamentally address rural poverty. Increasing farm incomes by producing commercialized products, beyond self-consumption of rural household, was imperative to this end.¹⁵ Animal husbandry was promoted within this context. While livestock farming generally necessitates substantial investments in facilities and feed procurement, ducks circumvented this requirement, because they could forage for their own food being free-range. It made ducks recognized as an accessible choice for even the smallest farming households. Their inherent homing instinct also minimized management efforts, and free-range ducks were less susceptible to diseases than densely confined chickens, which already entered the stage of industrialized farming.

¹³ Takekuni Tomoyasu, trans. by Geun Yeong O, *Korea-Japan Fish Road: From Hungnam to Kyoto 한일 피시로드: 흥남에서 도쿄까지* (Ttabi, 2014), 259-268.

¹⁴ This section addresses the same subject as the author's previous research; however, only the content pertinent to the theme of this paper has been referenced, in alignment with the current study's focus. Tae-Ho Kim, "'Little Cattle with Wings' on Korean's Table" (note 4).

¹⁵ Tae-Ho Kim, "Under the Banner of 'Scientific Agriculture': What did the Word 'Science' Mean in Rural Communities in the Park Chung Hee Era? 과학 영농의 깃발 아래서: 박정희 시대 농촌에서 과학의 의미", *Critical Review of History 역사비평* 119 (2017), 270-301.

However, the low-maintenance nature of ducks also hindered their adaptation to industrialized livestock production. Traditional Korean ducks are waterfowl, even after domestication, and thus necessitated frequent access to natural water resources, which precluded dense confinement akin to chickens, inevitably reducing yield of meat per unit area. Moreover, while self-sufficiency through foraging could save farmers' investment in animal feed, it turned into an obstacle for commercialized production on a large scale. In addition, ducks fed by self-foraging in the wild or by human food waste exhibited uncontrolled traits, similar to their wild counterparts, imparting undesirable flavors to their meat.

The industrialization of duck production in South Korea did not commence until the early 1980s, due to the aforementioned factors. Accordingly, duck consumption was not integrated into everyday culinary culture; instead, it was primarily reserved for special occasions, valued more for its nutritional benefits than its flavor profile. In short, duck occupied a liminal space between ordinary food and health food, with its perceived nutritional values often overshadowing its gastronomic appeal.

The Introduction of “Mountain Ducks”

While Korean farmers continued the traditional practice of free-range rearing of indigenous duck breeds, significant changes have occurred in global duck farming. New duck varieties have been developed that can be intensively raised in confined housing like chickens, without the need for access to water. The ancestors of modern domesticated duck breeds were developed in China. As various Chinese duck dishes, such as Peking duck, gained popularity and consumption increased, duck breeds that could be raised without access to water were developed by the late 19th century to meet this growing demand. One of those white duck breeds from the Beijing region was introduced to United Kingdom in 1872 and named the “White Pekin,” which was then exported to the United States and Germany, leading to the development of the “American Pekin” and “German Pekin” varieties. Meanwhile, the wild ducks of Latin America were also domesticated into the “Muscovy” breed, which was then disseminated across Europe, including France. These improved domestic duck breeds, like chickens, could be intensively housed in large numbers, resulting in a substantial increase in duck meat production and a decline in prices.

The introduction of new European breeds catalyzed a transformation in the South Korean duck breeding industry, which had previously struggled with sluggish growth despite the government's encouragement. Juwon Farms, established by real estate developer Taek-shik Jang, spearheaded this trend by actively promoting new breeds of ducks imported from the United Kingdom and France. In 1985, Juwon established a large-scale duck farm spanning 150,000 square meters in Jincheon-gun, Chungcheongbuk-do, boasting a daily hatching capacity of 6,000 ducklings and the

potential to sell 180,000 ducks per month. Monthly sales of ducks were further increased to 600,000 by 1987.¹⁶

Juwon Farms tried to distinguish their ducks from the indigenous breeds by advertising them under the trademark “San-Ori 산오리.” The name implied that the existing breeds of ducks in Korea were “water ducks,” for which the access to water was necessary. To the contrary, the mountain ducks did not need water, and thus could be densely confined in barns for large-scale production, mirroring industrial chicken farming practices. In newspaper advertisements, the company identified itself as “the exclusive Korean distributor of Cherry Valley Farms of the United Kingdom and Barbary of France,” referring to the trademarked White Pekin and Muscovy breeds, respectively.¹⁷ Both breeds had undergone several improvements to enhance meat production efficiency and had not been previously attempted for large-scale breeding in Korea. According to the advertisements, the mountain duck “compensates for the disadvantages of ducks that require water to grow.” The departure from water led to two benefits: new breeds could be raised in higher densities on the same land area, and their feed could be more closely controlled because they were confined in a barn throughout their breeding period. Although farmers had to spend more money for commercial silage, this ultimately benefited producers by allowing them to regulate growth rates and produce meat without undesirable odors. The advertisements repeatedly emphasized that the meat was “tender and not smelly because it is raised on a special feed on the farm.” With the introduction of new breeds and breeding methods, it also claimed “ducks that had been despised for ‘being raised in the dumps in the countryside’ are now treated with respect.”¹⁸

To expand the duck market further, it was imperative to cultivate an appealing image that resonated with consumers. Juwon adopted the phrase “A Little Cattle with Wings.”¹⁹ Although ducks belong to the poultry family like chickens, their meat quality and flavor more closely resemble red meats such as beef and pork. In addition, due to the scale and costs associated with duck breeding, consumer prices of duck meat were higher than those of chicken and pork in the mid-1980s. Under these circumstances, Juwon’s marketing strategy appeared to be twofold: differentiating duck from similar meats like pork and chicken by emphasizing its red meat qualities, and positioning duck as a more affordable and accessible alternative to beef, the

¹⁶ “Duck Farm in Jincheon, North Chungcheong Province 충북 진천군의 오리 사육장,” *Daehan News* 1587, 1986. 4. 5; “Mountain Duck in Jincheon 충청북도 진천, 산오리,” *Daehan News* 1655, 1987. 7. 29, https://www.ehistory.go.kr/koreanews/korea_news (accessed on August 14, 2024).

¹⁷ “Juwon Mountain Duck 주원산오리,” advertisement, *Chosun Ilbo*, 1985. 4. 4.

¹⁸ “Ducks Growing in Mountain, not Water 오리가 물 아닌 산에서 자란다” *Maeil Business* 1986. 3. 29.

¹⁹ “Juwon Mountain Duck” (note 17).

Korean's favorite meat. This approach ultimately aimed to carve a niche for duck between beef and other meats in the market.

Seeking for the New Recipe for Duck Meat

The 1988 Seoul Olympics served as a catalyst for duck's transition from a specialized medicinal food to an everyday dietary item. In preparation for the Games, the South Korean government implemented comprehensive reforms in the food and service industries, including the preparation of a list of "representative Korean foods" recommended to foreign visitors as well as the suppression of "hate foods."²⁰ *Bosintang*, which literally means "invigorating soup" but actually refers to dog meat soup, became the primary target, because it was internationally well known as a quintessential Korean hate food. The government encouraged business owners to transition, leading many to substitute the primary ingredient with alternatives such as eel, goat, or duck.²¹ While "*Ori tang* (duck soup)" itself was not a novel creation, the 1988 Seoul Olympics propelled it to nationwide recognition as a regional delicacy from the Jeolla Provinces. Until the early 1980s, there were only a couple of duck soup restaurants in the Yudong district of Gwangju City. However, after "Gwangju duck soup" was listed as one of the "representative Korean foods" for the Olympics, duck soup became widely recognized as a signature dish of Gwangju, and the number of duck soup restaurants in the Yudong area began to increase. By the late 1980s, over thirty such restaurants had clustered together to form the "*Ori-tang* Street." Even today, *Ori-tang* Street continues to thrive, hosting more than a dozen shops.²²

However, it still remains ambiguous whether duck soup possessed a distinct seasoning profile or recipe compared to other soups categorized as "*bosintang* 보신탕" or "*boyangtang* 보양탕." The fundamental flavors of these invigorating soups, derived from various herbs and spices such as sesame leaves, ginger, garlic, perilla seeds, and soybean paste (*doenjang*, 된장), were largely indistinguishable regardless of the meat source. Nonetheless, largely owing to the government's encouragement, duck dishes gradually gained recognition. Although the public continued to strongly associate duck meat with nutritional value for invigoration, the prevalence of

²⁰ "Changing Appetite for Health Food 기호바뀌는 건강식품," *Donga Ilbo*, 1984. 8. 24.

²¹ "Sixty 'Olympic Food' to be Designated Next Year 올림픽 식품 내년 60종 나와," *Chosun Ilbo*, 1984. 12. 18.

²² "I am the Founder of the Ori-tang Street 오리탕 골목의 원조는 바로 나," *Digital Encyclopedia of Gwangju Culture (Digital Encyclopedia of Local Culture in Korea 한국 향토 문화 전자 대전, The Academy of Korean Studies)*, <https://www.grandculture.net/gwangju/gwangsangju/toc/GC60005095> (accessed on July 31, 2024).

restaurants routinely serving duck dishes such as soup and marinated *bulgogi* slowly increased throughout the 1980s.²³

Sliced Frozen duck meat, prepared for on-table barbeque, was another way of enjoying duck meat that gradually gained popularity in the late 1980s. Following Juwon's market entry with Mountain Ducks, the company earnestly promoted duck meat as an ingredient for Korean-style tabletop barbecue, colloquially termed "*rosu gui*" or simply "*rosu* 로스," a Japanized English word derived from "roast." The introduction of the portable butane gas burner in 1980 significantly contributed to the popularization of *rosu*, enabling meat grilling experiences at home akin to restaurant dining.²⁴ While *samgyeopsal* (three-layered pork belly, 삼겹살) maintained its position as the most popular *rosu* among Koreans, duck meat was gradually endorsed as a *rosu* ingredient. The preparation of duck meat for this purpose involved deboning while retaining the fat, freezing it in chunks to form a cylindrical shape. When sliced, this resulted in round cross-sectional pieces of meat encircled by a layer of white fat. While chicken, which lacked a developed fatty layer and sufficient meatiness, failed to secure a niche in the roast market and instead created an entirely new market of Korean-style fried chicken, duck managed to occupy a supporting or, in some instances, a starring role in family barbeque dinners by the late 1980s.

Folk Remedy and Western Seasoning, Converged into a New "Korean" Dish

Duck's successful entry into the *rosu* market marked a significant step towards its establishment as an everyday household staple. While various duck products have emerged and waned, "smoked duck slices" have dominated the retail market since the 2000s. The commercialization of smoked duck needs closer examination, as it represents a product that effectively converges (or is perceived to converge) the dual images of "duck as everyday meat" and "duck as health food" into a single product. This convergence is even more interesting today, considering that most of the smoked duck slices sold in the 2020s label themselves as "smoked 'sulfur duck 유흥오리' meat" rather than simply "smoked duck."

Despite the common belief that "sulfur duck" has a historical root in traditional East Asian medicine, it is challenging to find explicit prescriptions in institutionalized East Asian medical literature that specifically advocate for the use of sulfur-fed ducks as a medicinal ingredient. The existing literatures contain only

²³ "Diversified Duck Meat Dishe 다양해진 오리 고기 요리," *Chosun Ilbo*, 1986. 6. 24.

²⁴ Kyou Jin Lee, "Korean Food Culture of Eating Meat during the past 100 years" 근대 이후 100년간 한국 육류구이 문화의 변화, (Ph.D. dissertation, Ewha Woman's University, 2010), 161-163.

scattered references about (a) the use of duck meat in detoxification prescriptions; (b) feeding ducks toxic materials and consuming the meat of surviving ducks, to absorb the power of the toxic materials “harnessed” by the ducks; and (c) feeding ducks sulfur (or sulfur compounds) to accelerate growth. However, these fragments appear in separate contexts, making it difficult to ascertain how the concept of “using the meat of sulfur-fed ducks as medicine” became established as a single prescription.

The “sulfur duck” currently marketed in South Korea has a relatively recent history. Il-hoon Kim, a popular folk medicine practitioner, is credited with inventing the “sulfur duck extract.” He claimed that sulfur contained the spirit of fire, while ducks had the spirit of water, specifically concentrated in their brains. Thus, he proceeded to argue, feeding ducks sulfur would mitigate sulfur’s fieriness and ducks would eventually harness sulfur’s vitality in their body. Kim concluded that his tonic, based on extract from sulfur-fed duck and herbal ingredients, could save South Korean people from modern perils caused by environmental pollution.²⁵ Kim Il-hoon’s prescription required ducks to be grown with sulfurized feed for at least a year, to allow the alleged medicinal properties of sulfur to be absorbed. It is noteworthy that this breeding period and method was significantly different from that of ordinary ducks grown for meat, which are typically around fifty days.

While Kim’s original prescription was not about utilizing duck as cooking meat, the number of restaurants offering “sulfur-fed duck meat” gradually increased in the early 1990s. Newspaper advertisements for these restaurants show that, despite the differences in the details of breeding methods, they endorsed and repeated Kim’s claims, “the duck’s brain water contains an antidote to various poisons” and “eating sulfur-fed duck has excellent effects on lung diseases, diabetes, neuralgia, hypertension, and thyroiditis.” As the distinction between “sulfur duck extract” as a medicinal tonic and “sulfur duck meat dishes” as a delicacy became increasingly blurred, the term “sulfur duck” gradually entered public consciousness. The internationally popular television drama *Jewel in the Palace* 대장금 brought national attention to sulfur duck, even praising it as a “living elixir,” thereby solidifying its image as a food, both healthy and delicious.²⁶

It is noteworthy that smoked duck slices do not necessarily have to be made from sulfur-fed ducks. Furthermore, there is no consensus on the appropriate amount of sulfur, if any, that should be added to feed during the short breeding period for meat ducks. Consequently, there is much room for debate about the relevance of applying the label “sulfur duck” for young ducklings, fed only trace amounts of sulfur for a short period. However, as the term “sulfur duck” is not subject to any form of protection by trademark or patent, many South Korean duck famers prefer branding their products as “sulfur ducks,” considering the positive connotation the term has acquired among South Koreans.

²⁵ Kim Il-hoon, *Devine Medicine and Materia Medica* 신약본초 Part 1 (Insanga, 2006), 164.

²⁶ *Jewel in the Palace* 대장금, episodes 25 (2003. 12. 8) and 26 (2003. 12. 9), MBC.

However, sulfur duck was primarily valued as a specialty ingredient rather than a standalone dish, necessitating the invention and dissemination of recipes suitable for home preparation. The invention of ready-to-eat “smoked duck slices” addressed this challenge. Since the mid-to-late 1980s, the production and consumption of smoked food have increased significantly, primarily due to the Westernization of food habits and the growth of the food processing industry. Western-style draft beer halls, which emerged during this period, became venues for promoting the flavor of ready-to-serve smoked meat such as “smoked pork knuckle” or “German-style sausages.” As the popularity of smoked food grew, other meats, including chicken and duck, were also processed and marketed as ready-to-eat smoked products. Smoked duck slices quickly gained popularity due to their ease of preparation without the need to handle fat or bones at home kitchen. The smoky flavor, specifically with a good companion of honey mustard sauce, impressed consumers with a taste reminiscent of Western ham and sausages. It made duck more palatable, especially to children and adolescents already accustomed to the flavor of processed meats.

Although smoked meat was not a commonly used cooking method in traditional Korean cuisine, and the combination of smoked duck and mustard sauce became popular because it was regarded as a “Western” preparation, it surprisingly gained popularity as Korean “banchan,” a companion to boiled rice. The sliced smoked duck with mustard sauce has smoothly seeped into the Korean meal, much like how Spam, originally a cheap substitute for meat in the United States, became embraced in various Asian countries, including Korea, Japan, Hawaii, and the Philippines, as a side dish that perfectly matches white rice.

Sliced smoked duck has become a popular side dish in lunch boxes and school meals. When reheated with a touch of Korean or Chinese seasoning, the smoked duck slices were incorporated into traditional Korean meal sets without any sense of incongruity. Just as “*budae jjigae* (army base stew, 부대찌개),” made primarily with Western processed meats like Spam and sausage, has become a globally renowned Korean dish, smoked duck has contributed to expanding the Korean culinary repertoire, by successfully establishing itself as familiar Korean banchan.

The “Sea Chicken” that Blazed its own Trail

The next case study to examine is tuna, particularly canned tuna. While ducks, albeit of different breeds, were familiar ingredients to Koreans since the ancient times, tuna was a relatively unfamiliar food item to most of the Korean population. Primarily, tuna was not a species commonly caught in the waters surrounding the Korean peninsula. During the Japanese colonial period, as sashimi culture was introduced through Japanese influence, it became known that tuna was a premium fish species

preferred by the Japanese. However, tuna remained absent from the list of favorite sashimi ingredients for Koreans until very recently.

Not only in Korea but globally, until the early 20th century, there were relatively few countries where tuna was widely consumed. While tuna was usually caught and eaten in Mediterranean coastal nations and Japan, where it was naturally abundant, the ways of consuming tuna were limited before the development of refrigeration technology. This limitation was due to the rapid spoilage of tuna after being caught, owing to its large size. Even in Japan, beyond just coastal regions, the nationwide appreciation of tuna sashimi only became visible after the widespread adoption of refrigeration technology.

Who Catches, and Who eats?

The global prominence of tuna as a significant food source, not just in Korea but also worldwide, can be attributed to its synergy with canning technology. The evolution of canned fish began in the 1830s in Scotland as a method to preserve fish for market distribution. By the 1840s, this technology had spread to North America, with salmon canning operations established in Maine and New Brunswick. The American commercial salmon canning industry initially flourished in California and the northwest United States, particularly along the Columbia River, before shifting its primary operations to Alaska by the 1940s. The first large-scale salmon cannery in North America was established in 1864 by the Hume brothers and their partner Andrew S. Hapgood on the Sacramento River. This operation later relocated to the Columbia River in 1866. The industry rapidly grew along the Columbia River, where by 1883, thirty-nine canneries were processing 15,000 tons of salmon annually.²⁷

Tuna cannery also grew as an important industry in the west coast of the United States. Tuna fishing transitioned from small-scale coastal operations to a significant industry in the early 20th century, facilitated by canning technology. The first canned tuna was produced in 1904 in California, initially as an alternative to the more popular canned sardines during periods of sardine scarcity. Entrepreneur Albert P. Halfhill pioneered this shift, processing albacore tuna into canned form and marketing it across the United States. The product gained popularity due to its affordability, substantial size, and meatiness, with sales rapidly increasing from 700 tins in the first year to 400,000 tins by 1914. Ironically, canned tuna was well received by American consumers because it did not taste like fish. Van Camp Seafood Company, established in 1914, coined the famous brand name “Chicken of the Sea,” to highlight that canned tuna (albacore) tasted like white chicken meat. By

²⁷ Norman D. Jarvis, “Curing and Canning of Fishery Products: A History,” *Marine Fisheries Review* 50:4 (1988), 180-185.

1950, canned tuna production in the United States had reached 8,500,000 pounds, leading the U.S. Department of Agriculture to classify it as a “plentiful food.”²⁸ Its versatility in American cuisine is evident in its use in sandwiches, salads, casseroles, and various other dishes. In addition, its affordability, high protein content, and ease of storage and transportation contributed to its rapid adoption for various purposes, including military rations.²⁹ Asian countries with high population densities also recognized canned tuna as an economical protein source.

In Japan, domestic canned tuna production began in 1929. Higoromo Foods (then Goto Cannery) registered the trademark “Sea Chicken” in 1958, and this term became synonymous with canned tuna in Japan.³⁰ Higoromo Sea Chicken was imported by a Korean company Dong-A in 1983, to be introduced into South Korean retail market under the name, “Dong-A Sea Chicken.”

As the canned tuna market expanded, coastal fishing could no longer meet demand, leading to the development of deep-sea tuna fishing. This industry required significant investment in large, refrigerated vessels capable of extended voyages and storing large quantities of tuna. Despite challenging labor conditions, the potential for substantial profits attracted developing countries seeking to earn foreign currency. This led to the formation of an international division of labor, where developing countries utilized low-wage labor to catch and process tuna into cans for export to developed countries, which provided materials (mainly aluminum and iron), machinery, and technology for canning and purchased the end product. Japan initially caught tuna for export to the United States in the 1950s, but soon shifted its business model to leasing fishing vessels and equipment to other developing countries in the 1960s. South Korea entered the tuna fishing industry within this global context.³¹

The Emergence of South Korea’s Deep-sea Fishing and the Tuna Industry

The debut of “Dongwon Tuna,” the first domestically produced canned tuna, in November 1982 marked a milestone in South Korea’s canned tuna industry. This

²⁸ Andrew F. Smith, *American Tuna: The Rise and Fall of an Improbable Food* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 26–45.

²⁹ On the influence of war to the growth of canned fish industry, also see Ross Coen, “Fish Is a Fighting Food: North American Canned Salmon and the First World War,” *The Northern Review* 44 (2017), 457–464.

³⁰ “History,” Higoromo Foods, <https://corp.higoromofoods.co.jp/ja/information/hagocen.html> (in Japanese; accessed on July 1, 2024).

³¹ On the transnational aspect of the development and migration of mineral resources, also see Jordan Howell, “Capital Prospects: Jamaica and the Environmental History of Postwar Decolonization,” *Environmental History* 28:1 (2023), 133–159.

development was intrinsically linked to the evolution of South Korea's deep-sea fishing. The inception of South Korean deep-sea fishing industry can be traced to June 26, 1957, when the tuna fishing boat Jinam, a 230-ton vessel converted from U.S. aid supplies, departed from Busan Port to operate in the Indian Ocean. The Jinam's inaugural fishing operation commenced on the Liberation Day of Korea, August 15, 1957. During its three-month expedition off Nicobar in the Indian Ocean, the vessel caught 10 tons of tuna, with half the catch sold to Van Camp Seafood Company for 1,000 USD. It was South Korea's first export of tuna to the United States.³² Upon receiving the welcome news of foreign currency acquisition, President Syngman Rhee extended an invitation to the Blue House (then Gyeongmudae) for the relevant parties, including Sang-jun Shim, the president of Jedong Industries and the owner of the Jinam. Shim selected the largest tuna from the Jinam's catch for his presidential visit. President Rhee posed for a commemorative photograph with the 180-centimeter tuna and subsequently distributed the fish to foreign diplomats.³³



Figure 1. President Syngman Rhee welcoming a bluefin tuna caught by Jinam at Gyeongmudae (the president's office) in 1957. *Joongang Daily*, 2017. 6. 29.

³² "Fanfare with Fishery in Indian Ocean 인도양어로의 개가," *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 1957. 10. 16.

³³ "50 Years of Deep-Sea Fishing History: Into the Field 원양어업 오십년사: 그 현장 속으로," *Busan Ilbo*, 2009. 1. 7.

A young sailor named Jae-cheol Kim began his career as an apprentice navigator of Jinam in 1958. Kim was born in Gangjin, South Jeolla Province. Although he was selected as a scholarship student to the College of Agriculture at Seoul National University, he chose to enroll in the Fisheries Department at the National Fisheries University (now Pukyong National University), driven by his belief that a country with limited land and resources must explore the sea. He boarded Jinam as an apprentice navigator, not because he was unqualified, but because his colleagues suspected that his academic credentials were too advanced as a fisherman and thus he might not be serious about the job.

After his first voyage, Kim gained the trust of his peers and soon became a key figure in the South Korean pelagic fishery. In 1960, at the young age of 26, he became the captain of the Jinam 2, when the fleet was expanded to four vessels. Being a young captain, he was dedicated to refining fishing techniques and researching the fishing ground. As a result, he achieved the highest catch volume in the Samoan waters at such a young age, and came to be well known as “Captain J.C. Kim” among the international crews in that area.³⁴

In 1969, after establishing his reputation as the top captain in Samoa, Kim, then a senior manager at Koryo Pelagic Fishery, decided to run his own company. He founded Dongwon Industries with a capital of 10 million won, which he had accumulated over the years. Dongwon launched its first operation with a single 481-ton tuna longliner “Dongwon 31,” borrowed from Japan.³⁵

The 1960s saw active government promotion of deep-sea fishing as a means of earning foreign currency. This policy, coupled with the introduction of foreign loans, led to a substantial increase in the number of South Korean fishermen and fishing vessels. The entire South Korean fleet expanded from fewer than 100 vessels in the early 1960s to a peak of 850 in the late 1970s. Correspondingly, output surged from less than 100,000 tons in the 1960s to 500,000 tons by the late 1970s. From the 1960s through the 1980s, pelagic fishery became the only single industry to exceed 5 percent of South Korea’s total industrial exports, playing a crucial role in foreign currency acquisition.³⁶

Dongwon’s growth in the tuna fishing sector culminated in the early 1980s when it possessed one of the world’s largest tuna fishing fleets, with advanced vessels such as purse seiners equipped with helicopters.³⁷ However, as the South Korean economy developed, competition intensified with other Asian countries offering lower wages.

³⁴ “Boarding the First Domestic Deep-Sea Fishing Vessel Jinam Ho... 26-Year-Old Captain ‘Captain J.C. Kim’ 국내 최초 원양 어선 지남호 선장... 26세 청년 선장 ‘Captain J.C. Kim’,” *Newspim*, 2019. 4. 16, <https://www.newspim.com/news/view/20190416000637> (accessed on August 1, 2024).

³⁵ Dongwon Industries ed., *Twenty-Year History of Dongwon Industries* 동원산업 이십년사 (Seoul: Dongwon Industries, 1989), 69-70; 73-74.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-69; 82.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121-129

Growing international competition over marine resources became a significant blow to South Korean pelagic fishery. The United States and the Soviet Union declared the 200 nautical miles exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in 1977, and the United Nations subsequently ratified the EEZ internationally in 1982, which significantly blocked South Korean fleet's access to profitable waters.³⁸ Moreover, major clients such as the American company StarKist and Japanese firms urged to cut down the purchase price, amidst of the global economic downturn. Recognizing the need for strategic diversification, Dongwon decided to transition from a merely supplier of raw materials to a cannery that produces canned tuna on its own. The company then focused on developing the nascent domestic canned tuna market in Korea.

New Companion for *Gimbap* and *Kimchi Jjigae*: Development and Marketing of New Recipes

The Korean canning industry initially developed primarily around two markets: military procurement and exports. However, until the early 1980s, the domestic market remained relatively stagnant. Following the Korean War, a consistent demand for canned goods for military use was established. During the Vietnam War, canned kimchi was developed to supply Korean troops. This experience was subsequently applied to the development of traditional Korean side dishes such as pickled perilla leaves and pickled garlic in cans. Precious seafood items like abalone and oysters were processed into cans for export to Japan. Additionally, mushroom cultivation, particularly of champignon mushrooms—a species previously unfamiliar to Koreans—was encouraged among farmers for canned export to Japan. Sempio Foods Company, founded in 1946, began developing canned fish products such as saury and sardines, as well as fruit preserves including peaches, tangerines, and grapes for the domestic market in 1977.³⁹ Lotte and CJ (then Cheil Jedang) also produced canned meat, imitating Spam.

While canned fish products were more expensive than purchasing and preparing fresh fish, they gradually gained acceptance among outdoor enthusiasts such as hikers and anglers, due to their convenience and portability as pre-cooked meals. As the South Korean economy grew, so did the population engaging in leisure activities, gradually increasing the demand for canned goods.

Prior to the early 1980s, canned tuna was mainly consumed by the people of developed countries. Most of the consumption took place in nations with per capita

³⁸ “Challenge and Ordeal of Korean Pelagic Fishery toward North Sea 북양을 향한 한국 원양의 도전과 시련,” *Donga Ilbo*, 1977. 3. 5.

³⁹ “History of Sempio,” *Sempio*, <https://en.sempio.com/company/history> (in English, accessed on July 3, 2024).

incomes above 2,000 USD. In 1981, South Korea's per capita income was approximately 1,200 to 1,300 USD. Although some South Koreans encountered canned tuna included in American military rations illicitly leaked out, there was no noticeable demand for canned tuna until the end of the 1970s. However, some entrepreneurs, including Jae-cheol Kim, anticipated potential demand for canned tuna as South Korean per capita income approached 2,000 USD.⁴⁰ In November 1982, Dongwon Industries launched Dongwon Tuna, Korea's first canned tuna product using cottonseed oil, tailored to Korean culinary preferences.

Dongwon employed a comprehensive marketing strategy based on consumer surveys. Recognizing the importance of initial consumer perception, the company positioned canned tuna as a "high-end food" and "food for developed countries," targeting middle and upper-class consumers and justifying its relatively high price. At its 1982 launch, a can of tuna was priced at 1,000 KRW, relatively expensive for a fish product. The marketing campaign emphasized the product's exclusivity, featuring imagery of helicopters and large tuna purse seiner to reinforce the perception that canned tuna was produced by huge investment and the application of cutting-edge science and technology. The product was initially named "Dongwon Tuna" but was later rebranded as "Dongwon Tuna Lean Meat 살코기 Can" to align with Korean preferences for beef and to enhance its premium image.⁴¹

The 1980s in South Korea witnessed a concurrent increase in meat consumption and growing awareness of obesity and adult-onset diseases. Reflecting these societal trends, the phrase "high-protein, low-calorie" gained prominence in various food advertisements. Dongwon capitalized on this trend by emphasizing its product's high-protein and low-calorie attributes. Their marketing campaigns prominently featured claims positioning canned tuna as a healthy protein source beneficial for weight management and physical exercise, while simultaneously alleviating concerns about adult-onset diseases.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Twenty-Year History of Dongwon Industries*, 141-143.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

⁴² "There are plenty of foods, but not much you can eat without concern 먹을 것은 많아도, 마음 놓고 먹을 수 있는 것은 많지 않습니다," advertisement, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, 1983. 12. 19.

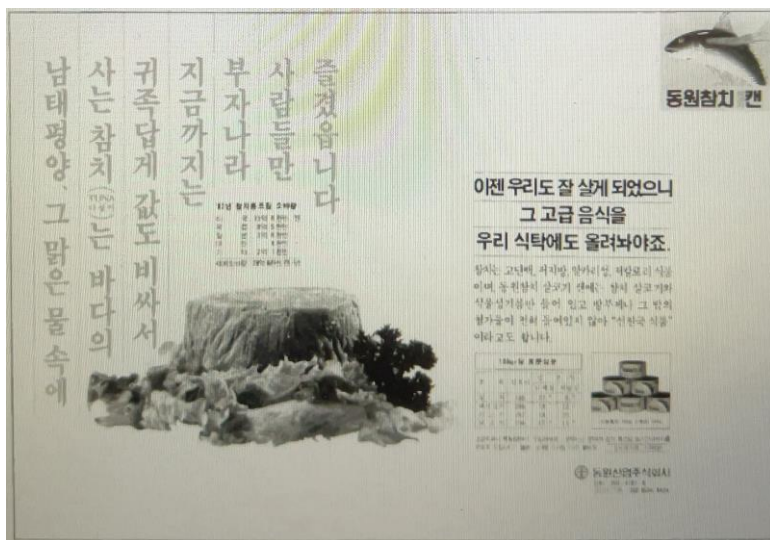


Figure 2. Magazine advertisement of Dongwon Tuna (1983), which reads, “Tuna, the nobility of the sea, lives in the crystal-clear waters of the South Pacific, and only the people in wealthy countries could afford it. Now that we are well off, it’s time to bring that luxury to our tables.”

Dongwon mobilized its entire workforce for marketing efforts. Employees conducted nationwide store displays and sales on weekdays, while organizing tasting events at various public locations on weekends and holidays to increase product awareness among various generations of South Korean population. On weekends, tasting events were held at trailheads to attract family customers.⁴³ The company introduced both Western-style dishes (salads and sandwiches) and localized recipes (kimchi stew and pan-fried meatballs) during tasting events. Tuna kimchi stew quickly gained popularity, building on the existing familiarity with canned saury in similar dishes. In the 1990s, canned tuna with mayonnaise became a popular ingredient in *gimbap* (seaweed rice rolls, 김밥), appreciated for its affordability and convenience.

The rapid and seamless integration of canned tuna as a part of the Korean cuisine can be attributed, ironically, to the lack of distinct character in canned tuna. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons for the success of canned tuna in the United States was that “it did not taste like fish.” Canned tuna, having had the fat removed and consisting solely of lean meat, was in effect a large chunk of protein tissue devoid of strong flavor, allowing it to blend and fuse with various sauces and

⁴³ *Twenty-Year History of Dongwon Industries*, 148.

seasonings without clashing. It occupied a position akin to chicken breast, the relatively flavorless part of the poultry meat.

This lack of distinct flavor also contributed to the success of canned tuna in Korea. Although tuna was not the first fish to be canned in Korea, other canned fish such as saury or sardine had strong and distinctive flavors that limited their culinary applications. Apart from kimchi stew, which could overpower the rich taste of oily fish, there were not many banchan (side dish, 반찬) recipes developed for these strongly flavored canned seafood products. In contrast, tuna's lack of pronounced aroma allowed it to pair well with a wide range of accompanying ingredients. It could be easily incorporated into gimbap, with mayonnaise and perilla leaves, or used to create kimchi stew with an enhanced umami flavor, without the overwhelming fishy scent. Unlike in the United States, in Korea, where chicken breast was unpopular, canned tuna could substitute various meat ingredients in existing Korean cuisine recipes, without being limited only as a replacement for chicken breast.



Figure 3. Tasting event (left) and cooking class (right) for Dongwon Tuna. *Twenty-year History of Dongwon Industries*, 148.

Another strategic initiative was the development of “gift sets.” In Korea, there is a traditional custom of gathering with family and relatives during Lunar New Year 설날 and Chuseok (mid-autumn festival, 추석) to perform ancestral rites and

exchange gifts. During these holidays, large groups of people congregate for multiple meals, making food items particularly practical as gifts, as they help alleviate the burden of meal preparation. Canned tuna, with its versatility in preparation, was especially useful in this context. Recognizing this opportunity, Dongwon launched a Chuseok gift set in 1984, comprising multiple cans of tuna attractively packaged in a paper box. This product was well-received by both givers and recipients. Recipients appreciated the long shelf life and culinary versatility of the canned tuna, while givers found the gift sets to be a cost-effective option relative to their size and weight. Although there were several other earlier attempts of rendering canned products into holiday gift sets (mainly fruit preserves, sardine, or saury), Dongwon's canned tuna gift sets gained unprecedented popularity upon their market introduction. Dongwon could sell over 300,000 sets during that year's Chuseok alone.⁴⁴ From then on, canned tuna became a staple item in holiday gift sets, alongside Spam, another popular canned food in South Korea, in major retail outlets. This gift set strategy effectively leveraged Korean cultural practices and holiday traditions, aligning the product with existing social customs while addressing practical concerns of both gift givers and recipients.

The development of diverse localized products also significantly contributed to establishing canned tuna as a legitimate ingredient in Korean cuisine. Dongwon and its later competitor Sajo (which began tuna can production in 1988) competitively introduced various flavored tuna products, including spicy tuna, vegetable tuna, curry tuna, and black bean sauce tuna. Unlike standard canned tuna, which is minimally seasoned for use as a cooking ingredient, these flavored tuna products were enhanced with spicy and salty seasonings preferred by Korean consumers, allowing them to be consumed as a side dish with rice without additional preparation. These variations of canned tuna gained popularity particularly among students and single-person households, as they provided a convenient meal option when paired with rice. The success of these products demonstrates the effectiveness of product localization strategies in the Korean market, adapting a globally recognized food item to suit local tastes and dietary habits.

Currently, South Korea has three domestic producers of canned tuna: Dongwon, Sajo, and Ottogi. Dongwon currently maintains a 70 percent market share, which makes Dongwon Tuna a national food product with annual sales exceeding 450 billion KRW as a single product. Dongwon sells more than 200 million cans annually, and in 2014, the company became the first in the industry to exceed 5 billion cans in total sales. As of the end of April 2018, the cumulative total sales amounted to about 6 billion cans, equivalent to 117.6 cans per person (based on a

⁴⁴ “Dongwon, ‘200 Million Gift Sets Sold for 35 Years... 2.5 times of the Circumference of the Earth’ 동원 ‘선물세트, 35년 간 2억 개 넘게 팔려... 지구 2바퀴 반’” *Yonhap News*, 2019. 1. 16.

population of 51 million).⁴⁵ In 2008, Dongwon signed a 363-million-dollar deal to acquire StarKist, the world's largest tuna brand and previously the most important client of Dongwon.⁴⁶

Conclusion: New Protein Metabolized into Korean Culture

Considering the strong impetus of taste of a specific group of people throughout history, the cases of duck and tuna, so far discussed, might be regarded as rather exceptional. Nonetheless, they still illustrate the evolving nature of Korean cuisine, incorporating non-traditional ingredients into familiar flavor profiles and meal structures. The widespread acceptance of these products reflects both changing consumer preferences and the increasing importance of convenience in modern Korean food culture.

Recently the South Korean duck industry has undergone a significant structural reorganization. Duck producers were not exempt from the wave of mergers, acquisitions, and vertical integration that previously affected the chicken industry. Given the smaller market size for ducks compared to chickens, it was not surprising that the duck industry revealed far less resilience to external shocks such as avian influenza outbreaks. The industry's trajectory has been influenced by various external factors over time. The 1991 liberalization of the duck market led to massive imports from China, prompting the establishment of the Korea Duck Association in response in 1992 to facilitate industry restructuring. In 2007, a Duck Fund was instituted, and by 2012, the industry reached its zenith with approximately 14.4 million birds and a total output value of 1.3 trillion KRW. However, since 2017, the industry has been compelled to restructure once again due to the implementation of winter breeding restrictions aimed at mitigating the spread of highly pathogenic avian influenza. Consequently, the industry contracted to about 9.76 million birds with a total production value of 81.3 billion KRW in 2020.

Despite these challenges, South Korea's duck industry has exhibited remarkable growth. Given its supply-driven origins with negligible initial demand, the industry's expansion to a point where the entire population consumes an average of 3-4 kilograms per capita annually, within approximately four decades, is noteworthy. This growth trajectory illustrates the process by which Korean society has embraced novel food products. Although specific demand for duck was initially lacking, its supply was driven by political imperatives such as increasing rural household incomes. While ducks were not the sole livestock promoted by political initiatives,

⁴⁵ “Dongwon Tuna, the Synonym of Canned Tuna... Total Sales of 6 billion Cans in 36 years 참치 캔 대명사 동원 참치 ... 국내 최초 출시 후 36년 간 총 60억 캔 판매” *NextDaily*, 2018. 6. 5.

⁴⁶ “Dongwon to Acquire US Tuna Company StarKist 동원,美참치 업체 ‘스타키스트’ 인수 계약” *Maeil Business*, 2008. 6. 30.

they carved out a distinct niche in Korean society, compared with cases of rabbits and goats, for example, by intersecting with contemporaneous socio-cultural factors at critical junctures: the proliferation of pork belly consumption and portable gas burners, the resurgence of folk medicine, the popularization of “sulfur ducks” in television dramas, and the expansion of school lunch programs.

In a parallel development, the South Korean deep-sea fishing industry faced severe external shocks. Escalating oil prices and increasingly stringent fishing regulations have led to a gradual decline in pelagic fishery catches. Currently, most of South Korean pelagic fishing enterprises are small-scale operations, with 54 percent possessing capital of 100 million KRW or less.

Notwithstanding these challenges, canned tuna continues to thrive in South Korea. According to the “2016 Processed Food Submarket Status” report published jointly by the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (MAFRA) and the Korea Agro-Fisheries & Food Trade Corporation (aT), canned tuna has consistently held the top position among processed canned primary products, accounting for nearly 50 percent of production value, far ahead of other products such as canned jams and jellies, canned bone broth, and canned fruit. Notably, canned tuna’s dominance extends beyond the realm of canned goods. The 2016 Mining and Manufacturing Industry Survey Statistics from Statistics Korea reveal that the total production value of canned tuna was 507 billion KRW (approximately 507.6 million USD), with a shipment value of 501.22 billion KRW, surpassing the aggregate value of all the other canned products derived from agricultural and livestock sources.

Consequently, the metabolic processes of Korean society and the protein metabolism of Koreans have incorporated novel elements that were not evident prior to the 1980s. Through the complex interplay of political, economic, social, and cultural factors, these “new foods on the block” continue to play integral supporting roles in the South Korean culinary landscape, as well as South Korean’s everyday bodily experience.

Abstract

This study examines the evolution and impact of the duck and tuna industries in South Korea from the 1980s to the present. It explores how these initially unfamiliar food products gained widespread acceptance, becoming integral components of the Korean diet and food industry. The research highlights the interplay of political, economic, technological, and socio-cultural factors that facilitated this transformation. Firstly, this study traces the development of the duck industry from its supply-driven beginnings to its current status, where per capita consumption averages 3-4 kilograms annually. Parallel to this, the research secondly investigates the growth of the canned tuna market, particularly focusing on Dongwon's history and its strategic initiatives in product development, marketing, and adaptation to local tastes. The study emphasizes how canned tuna transitioned from a niche product to a dominant force in the processed food market, accounting for nearly 50 percent of canned food in product value. It concludes by discussing how these "new foods on the block" have become embedded in Korean society, reflecting broader changes in dietary habits, food processing technologies, and cultural perceptions of food. This research contributes to our understanding of food industry development in rapidly industrializing economies and the complex factors influencing dietary transitions in modern societies.

Keywords: Korea (South), food, protein, duck, tuna