



Recipe by **ANN KIM**

FUNKY TRANSFORMATION

I recently had difficulty with my cooks over a batch of kimchi. It just wasn't right. These are skilled and versatile cooks, but they weren't able to emulate the kimchi I grew up tasting. I stood there in my restaurant's kitchen, and it occurred to me: The problem was that my cooks were following a recipe.

Great kimchi is the result of a metabolic process that transforms the chemical makeup of a vegetable with the addition of a few simple ingredients—sea salt, garlic, ginger, kochukaru, sugar, scallions, fish sauce, jeotgal, time, and temperature. Kimchi means “pickled vegetables” in Korean, and can be created from any vegetable—the sheer variety available in Korea is astounding. Baechu kimchi, the napa cabbage variety, is a staple in every Korean household. My family made it by the gallons every year.

My mother started making kimchi when she was young, a tradition passed down from her mother and transmitted through generations before her. Learning to make kimchi was a rite of passage, and it was the single most important event of the year for our family. Every November we'd procure enough napa cabbage from a nearby farm to fill a kiddie pool. We literally used the plastic kiddie pool my sister and I splashed around in during the summer months because it was the only vessel large enough to hold our brining napa cabbage. Although it was fully cleaned and sanitized prior to kimchi making, we joked that the secret to our kimchi had something to do with that damn pool.

Fall kimchi production took an entire day to prepare for, and we made enough to sustain our family through the winter months and into spring. In the early days, I watched my maternal grandmother and mother work side by side in a position known as the “kimchi squat,” laser focused on the task at hand—tasting, smelling, tapping, and caressing the cabbage throughout the process. Memories of this tradition for me are visceral and vividly sensory.

Knowledge of this process came from years of making and eating kimchi. One thing I don't remember is the presence of a recipe . . . ever. Yet my mother often complained that the kimchi was not exactly right. It was either too salty, or not salty enough. It had too much gochugaru, or not enough gochugaru.

It was too funky, or not funky enough. Every now and then, the kimchi was just right, almost perfect. I asked my mother why she never wrote down a recipe so she could get it just right every time. She scoffed and explained that a recipe for kimchi isn't reliable. “You never know what you're going to get from year to year in terms of quality of cabbage, the weather, and even the salt,” she told me. Yes, my mother sometimes attributed the greatness of her kimchi, or lack of it, to the consistency of the salt in a particular year. She would tell me, “You have to be flexible and make changes based on all these variables. You have to taste and smell. Always taste and smell because kimchi is always changing.”

What I love about the process of fermentation is the unpredictability of it all. Kimchi is alive and constantly changing. Each stage emerges with the passage of time, building on its past to create something that couldn't have existed otherwise. It can't be rushed or prolonged. Most importantly, it's funky.

So why do some of us resist the funk? I had a love-hate relationship with kimchi as a child. I loved Korean flavors, but that was something that made me different from the other kids growing up in white suburban Minnesota in the late 1970s. The difference was the funk. Our house didn't smell like our neighbors'. I felt ostracized by my friends when they'd come over to play and cry out, “Ewww! What's that smell?” I desperately wanted to assimilate with the surrounding suburban culture. As an adult I've come to realize that this funk connects me to a tradition that defines who I am. Koreans have been making and subsisting on kimchi for centuries. Our family made kimchi because it allowed us to preserve food into the winter months. Fermentation is a time-tested way of keeping the things we already have and transforming them into something that will sustain us into the future.

What a recipe can't provide is human sensory connection. So I went back to work with the cooks at my restaurant, knowing that they would learn by observing, listening and asking questions in real time. It would be intentional, flexible, and thoughtful. Passing along a rich tradition the old-fashioned way takes time. Transformation takes time. Bring on the funk.