

## A Canned Meat Tradition

I often picture my grandmother in her blue pin-striped apron, printed with smiling teddy bears in the center. Once my grandfather Velcro-ed the straps on her back, she was ready to go -- chop, fry, boil, and stir her way through the recipes she knew by heart, trusting the faded cloth to faithfully catch every splash of kimchi juice and soy sauce. She and my grandfather usually worked as a team, whether she tasked him with peeling garlic or washing dishes as she hovered over whatever was stirring on the stove: oxtail bone broth soup, savory scallion pancakes, stir-fried japchae noodles. But that was dinner. My grandmother, ever the social butterfly, frequently made plans to meet a friend for lunch. Lunch was the time for my grandfather's specialty.

“How about Spam and bap?”

My grandfather sizzled thin slices of Spam in oil until the edges turned a flaky brown, then cut them into strips with the kitchen scissors. My younger siblings and I scooped steaming white rice (bap) into our bowls, added cool water to create a kind of impromptu porridge, and set out the Tupperware we always kept full of salted kim (seaweed laver) on the table. Each bite was a delicious three-part affair: one spoonful of watery rice, one piece of kim, and one strip of Spam.

Soft and pink, Spam tastes salty, sweet, and slightly juicy. The pork-and-ham canned meat crept its way into many other family favorites while my grandparents lived with us, including spicy kimchi jjigae, neatly rolled kimbap, and my grandmother's bokkeumbap, or fried rice. It astounded me when I first discovered Spam's pathetic reputation among my friends, even other Asians I assumed would relate to at least some of my family's culinary preferences. “Spam is disgusting,” my Taiwanese friend observed during Sunday school, to the agreement of several of my peers. At \$3 a can, but packed with a mind-bending quantity of sodium, Spam is precious to me because it appeals to every member of my family, binding us together across the divisions of culture and experiences.

My grandmother, Soonja, first discovered Spam when the rest of Korea did: during the Korean War. Born in 1940 near Pyongyang, North Korea, she and her family escaped to the south shortly before the war began; my grandfather's family escaped later with the wave of refugees fleeing from the North. During and after the war, many Koreans bought U.S. products from the so-called “goblin” markets (doggaebi sijang) that smuggled goods out of military retail

stores for underground resale. As a young girl, my grandmother bought dishes, candy, clothes, and canned foods from these markets, convinced that anything America produced was “number one,” far superior to her own country’s products. She especially admired the American-style shoes, buying them up along with her cans of Spam.

America was still “number one” in her mind when, years later, she and my grandfather decided to immigrate with their family to California in 1976. They believed America could provide a better education for their children. Family troubles in Korea and the invitations of my grandmother’s siblings living in the U.S. further persuaded them to leave their comfortable life in Seoul. In the small town of Lodi, the family navigated the struggles of a new financial situation, the language barrier, and the paucity of other Asian neighbors in their predominantly white community. It was in this setting that my father and aunt grew up with Spam—and eventually my siblings and I came along and inherited the canned meat tradition as well.

Thus, Spam stretches over three generations and two cultures in my family, resisting the Korean American dichotomy that at times divides us. Sometimes it takes a few tries to get the meaning of a sentence across to one another because my grandparents maintain Korean as their first language, while my siblings and I speak English. For a long time, we utilized two separate TVs because our favorite shows were so different: soccer, volleyball, and Korean dramas and news channels for my grandparents; American football and Marvel movies among my parents and siblings. The way I hold my chopsticks will never compare to the extensions of the arm that they become in my grandparents’ practiced fingers, and sometimes we disagree about how tolerable the persistent smells of oily fish are in the house or whether beef should be eaten rare or well-done. And though they’ve lived in the U.S. for years, my grandparents remain partial to the cuisine of their homeland, though admittedly they’ve come to enjoy tacos, Burger King, and bacon and eggs as well. But none of us had to make a concerted attempt to like Spam.

Indestructible and delicious as it is, the food has its limits. It hasn’t unlocked a perfect fusion of identities in our family or announced itself with the fanfare of our other traditions. It hasn’t even sparked many conversations about my grandparents’ childhood. Spam is simply one more food I have subconsciously disassociated with its ethnic origins because it doesn’t belong to either Korea or America -- it’s simply something small that brings my family together. Whether my grandfather’s Spam kimchi jjigae (his other specialty), my mother’s bibimbap, or my grandmother’s potato salad sandwiches on road trips, food reminds us of the innumerable

tiny connections that bind us together. Though my grandparents moved out of our house once my siblings and I grew up, the memories of prayers, tears, and laughter around the same table keep us close. Little things remind us of what we have in common, even if it only costs \$3 a can.