The most famous Southern corrido is simply titled "Raleigh," recorded by *conjunto norteño* Rey Norteño in 2006. "Raleigh, North Carolina/I carry you in my heart" croon the singers a cappella, before a waltz-inflected accordion rushes in. The protagonist has "left my sweat" in the state and is back in Mexico—but "without a doubt, when I can/I know I'll be back." And, in a sly flip on the fieldworker-as-victim trope, Rey Norteño conveys pride in working the soil: "I cut from your garden/The most beautiful of your roses."

**AS MEXICANS HAVE MADE THE SOUTH THEIR PERMANENT, INSTEAD OF TEMPORARY, HOME,** *more songs incorporate it as a setting.*

Farmworkers also play a key role in the music video for "El Corrido de la HB 56," recorded in 2012 by Agave Norteño. The band and the National Day Laborer Organizing Network protested an Alabama law that made life difficult for undocumented people. Over scenes of men and women harvesting tomatoes and potatoes, the singer sighs, "Sometimes I cannot comprehend the heart of the gringos."

My favorite Southern food corrido is "El Güero de Tennessee"—"The Light-Skinned Guy from Tennessee." It was written and performed by Chuy Quintanilla, infamous for his *narcocorridos* (songs celebrating drug cartels) and mysteriously murdered in Texas in 2013. "El Güero de Tennessee" isn't as ominous. Backed by a hard-charging accordion, the raspy-voiced Quintanilla regales listeners with a story about a Honduran who ended up in Memphis "without a passport." The immigrant "triumphed in Tennessee," and the song celebrates that the *güero* is the owner of El Rodeo Sports Bar, where he's "surrounded by his friends/and everyone is a partier." The cantina has closed, but El Güero joins the pantheon of fun-loving Southerners immortalized in music.

These *corridos* and *rancheras* are just one chapter in the Sur-Mex songbook. This immigrant generation will add to the catalog, but the future is in their kids, who'll turn to hip-hop, punk, and country to capture *el Sur*. Here's hoping that out there in Appalachia or the Delta right now, Mexican and American balladeers are trading licks and verses in their native tongues, united in a common pursuit of documenting their South.

*Gustavo Arellano is the editor of* OC Weekly *and* Gravy*'s columnist.*

# KOREAN MONTGOMERY

## From bowling alleys to barbecue

BY ANN TAYLOR PITTMAN

Illustrations by Haejin Park

DRIVING DOWN EASTERN Boulevard in Montgomery, Alabama, then over to the corner of Bell and Vaughn Roads, a roll call of signs hints at a sizable Korean population. Hangul letters accompany English to identify a hair salon, a chiropractor, a pest-control company—but more than anything, restaurants. A dozen or so Korean restaurants dot the city, far outnumbering the two in my hometown of Birmingham.

I visit Korea Garden with my husband and our twin sons, hoping to chat it up with our server. This does not happen, as a profound language barrier presents itself. I whip out my business card and attempt to explain that I'd like to talk about the Korean community in town. Our server shyly giggles and hands over some menus. As she scurries away, the kids declare that they are "dying of awkwardness." I switch my focus to the food;

that, I can navigate. The boys share a cauldron of tteokguk, a brothy soup filled with chewy rice cakes; Patrick eyes a platter of japchae, slippery glass noodles tossed with beef and vegetables; and I dig into soondubu jjigae, a fiery tofu and seafood stew.

I'm in Montgomery to research immigrant communities and, I hope, nurture my own roots. I'm a half-Korean Southerner, born and raised in Mississippi by a South Korean mom and a white Mississippian dad, and though I look more Korean, I am decidedly American. Definitively Southern. When my mom immigrated to the States, her goal was to become American. She did, officially, and set her own cultural heritage aside so she and Dad could raise their two children as Americans. I don't speak Korean, and I've only been to Korea once, five years ago. As I get older and try to raise my own children with knowledge of their broader heritage, I yearn for meaningful Korean connections. My little tiptoe trips to Montgomery opened up a new world, revealing a cultural and personal awareness that brought me face-to-face with one of my greatest fears: being exposed as a phony.

I already knew what gave rise to this Korean community in Alabama's capital city. Maxwell Air Force Base has long attracted an international community, though Koreans never dominated it. The real catalyst was Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama (HMMA), a Seoul-based company that announced plans to open in 2002 and rolled out its first cars in 2005. Many Koreans have since come to Alabama to work for Hyundai, but that's not the only stimulus. Interstate 85 connects Montgomery to West Point, Georgia, the site of Kia Motors Manufacturing Georgia (KMMG), another Seoul-based company and part of the Hyundai Motor Group. Along this route, more than seventy Korean-owned suppliers turn out flywheels, radiators, and batteries, and employ thousands of Korean nationals.

The official Korean population of Montgomery is challenging to track—many of the jobs that call them here are temporary. Those who stay years bring families, but since they will return home to Korea, their aim is not to assimilate or immigrate. Protestant churches have become gathering places for the estimated 10,000 to 13,000 Koreans in the area; more than a dozen Korean churches have assembled in Montgomery since 2002.

To get a sense of the impact of this community, I visited a few grocery stores. While Korean ingredients haven't found their way into Winn-Dixie, a few items—Shin brand ramyun noodle soup, toasted seaweed—are available in the local Costco. Seoul Market, a small but well-stocked store, offers an astounding assortment of Korean ingredients, from sesame oil to gochujang chili paste to kimchi. Hmart, a major Korean-American supermarket with locations from Southern California to New York and New Jersey, plans to open a store in Montgomery soon.

I happily ate at several Korean restaurants, noting that they fall into two camps. Places like Budnamu or Korea Garden reach a predominately Korean clientele. Korean newspapers pile up in the entryway, and the staff speaks little English. Restaurants with touchstones of Japanese and Chinese offerings bridge the cultural gap for diners less familiar with Korean food culture.

Korean eating customs can be

intimidating. You might not know to push the button on the wall when you need service, or that spoons and chopsticks are in the wooden box at the end of the table. What are all the side dishes, and which food belongs to whom? Answer: Korean food is meant to be shared, *out of the same dish.* This can be a cultural barrier. In Korean culture, you are supposed to chopstick the food out of communal dishes. That's what I love—the instant intimacy.

All these observations aside, I needed to talk with Koreans. With such a sizeable population, multiple organizations exist to foster better relationships between the greater Montgomery population and the Korean community that drives so much economic growth. I phoned and

**WHAT ARE ALL THE SIDE DISHES,** *and which food belongs to whom?*

emailed for weeks before I could get anyone to talk. One person passed me to another, to another, each time saying in perfect English, "Sorry, I can't help you," or "my English isn't very good." I would gently protest. Each time, I would stress that I'm half-Korean, thinking that might give me an "in." Didn't work. I was turned away so many times, I felt like folks were wary of me.

Two Americans would serve as my way in. One was Jeanne Charbonneau, a cultural liaison employed by the mayor's office. When she came out of retirement to take this job in 2002, it was supposed to be temporary. She still holds the position today. It's that important to the city. Despite the broader rhetoric of outsiders taking American jobs, that negativity is absent here, she explains, because "whether it's strictly HMMA and the suppliers or if you're looking at all the secondary and tertiary jobs that come with that, they probably impact forty to fifty thousand jobs in the region." Charbonneau helps Korean families get settled—assisting with everything from housing to immunization forms to music lessons.

The other American was Christa Springs, assistant program coordinator at Alabama-Korea Education and Economic Partnership (A-KEEP). I was humbled by Springs, an African American student who took an interest in Korean culture and has immersed herself in the community, forming deep connections and learning the language. She is way more Korean than I. Springs introduced me to A-KEEP executive director Meesoon Han, who first came to Montgomery fourteen years ago with her husband, who was stationed at Maxwell.

I eventually made contact with local attorney Soo Seok Yang through the Korean-American Association of Montgomery. I would come to know Yang; his wife, Doh Ah Kim, an attorney in the governor's office of minority affairs; their four beautiful children, and Yang's mother, visiting from Korea. Yang talked of Korea's history. For centuries, Korea suffered invasions, yet never invaded another country. The Japanese occupation from 1910 to 1945 nearly wiped out Korean culture. The language and currency were

banned, and Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names. These wounds deeply impact the national story.

Meesoon Han instructed me on South Korea's swift economic rise and the cultural ramifications of that ascent. After being split into the North and South in 1945, South Korea grew from extreme poverty to economic prosperity by the mid-1980s; it's known as the "economic miracle." Han said that this happened because the country chose to focus exclusively on itself. In reaction to their adversity, Koreans became intensely tied to their culture, more nationalistic, and incredibly protective.

Then it clicked. I told Han that I sensed suspicion from the Koreans with whom I tried to connect. "That's right. Oh, yes. That's Korean," she responded. I floated the same idea past Charbonneau. Her reply: "You come in as a half-Korean person not speaking any Korean, and there is going to be a bias against you."

I must stress that this was subtle; no one was rude to me. Through what was at best naïveté and at worst arrogance, I thought I would enjoy instant familiarity with the Koreans of Montgomery because I'm Korean, too—or at least I say I am. In reality, I'm Korean-American, emphasis on the second word. It was obvious to everyone but me.

I come back to the language of food and family. Yang told me about taking an American friend to the new Korean restaurant near the bowling alley. When the banchan came to the table, Yang explained each dish's cultural and personal significance. That's what we all do, no matter our background: We share ourselves through our food. I do this when I eat Korean food with American friends.

Han taught me a word whose meaning would soothe my cultural identity crisis. *Sikgu* is one of the Korean words for family. "Sik" means rice, and "gu" means mouth. *Sikgu* means eating and sharing food. This is the way you eat a Korean meal: You share food out of the same dishes. And in doing so, you become family.

I have since made the drive back to Montgomery with my Korean mom to have dinner with the Yang family. They opened their home to us, shared bulgogi and japchae with us, and embraced us warmly. *Sikgu.* I am a member of the family—a large, *Korean* family.

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