Despite its name, which means “fire-meat,” Bulgogi is popular for its soft texture and mild yet distinctive taste. The secret lies in the careful preparation process of cutting, tenderizing, and marinating the meat. It is a healthy dish as well as a tasty one: the marinade of soy sauce and sugar suppresses the formation of unhealthy cholesterol oxidation products (COPs), and its other ingredients are healthy as well, containing a range of key vitamins and beneficial organic compounds which aid digestion. Although a meat dish, it is generally eaten in a vegetable wrap, making it a nutritionally balanced meal.

Bulgogi is the most famous and beloved of Korean beef dishes. Its texture is tender and sweet, and people generally become devoted to it after tasting it just once. The literal translation of Bulgogi is “fire-meat” (bul-gogi). Its origins can be traced back to the Koguryo period (BC 37-AD 668). The people of Koguryo used to have a beef dish called maekjok, which was prepared by marinating skewered beef in soy sauce and garlic and grilling it over a fire. The recipe travelled to China, and gained a reputation as something of a delicacy. During the Six Dynasties Period, Gan Bao recorded in his book, In Search of the Supernatural: “Maekjok is a foreign dish, but the Chinese enjoy it greatly, and always serve it at parties hosted by the wealthy or high-ranking.”

When Buddhism was adopted as the state religion during the 4th century, meat dishes became less common in Korea, as Buddhism strictly prohibits the taking of life. During the 13th century, the practice of eating meat was revived following the Mongol invasions. For the nomadic Mongols, meat was a staple food, and the culture of Korea was naturally influenced by their customs. In the capital city of Kaesong, a centre of international trade and commerce, various meat dishes gained popularity. In time, this revival led to the appearance of a beef dish reserved for the royal palace called nobiani, which later became known as Bulgogi.¹

¹) Myeong-jong Yoo, Images of Korea: 12 cultural symbols showing the true inside of Korea (Seoul: Discovery Media, 2006), 18.

The unique taste of Bulgogi has appealed to people from many different countries. The secret of its taste lies in the cooking process and the preparation of the meat. Traditionally, the tender and less fatty portion of sirloin or short ribs have been used for Bulgogi. The fat and the tendons are carefully removed from the meat. To tenderize the beef, one gently pats the lean meat with the back of a knife. During this process of cutting and tenderizing, the meat becomes much softer and the marinating is more effective as a result. The marinade consists of pear juice and rice wine (red wine can also be used). During the marinating process, the meat is
softened by enzymes, making it easier to digest. The meat is then combined with a mixture of soy sauce, honey (or sugar), chopped spring onion, minced garlic and ginger, powdered sesame, pepper, and sesame oil. After twelve hours the meat is ready to be grilled or sautéed in a pan without oil. Since Bulgogi is marinated before it is grilled, no other sauce needs to be prepared. The grilled meat has a mild yet distinctive taste. Research has shown that marinating meat in sugar and soy sauce before grilling is better for one’s health. In June 2006, the Journal of Agriculture and Food Chemistry, published by the American Chemical Society, released findings showing that cooking meat with sugar and soy sauce suppresses the formation of cholesterol oxidation products (COP). These are generally formed when food containing a high level of cholesterol is heated or cooked. It is known that an excessive quantity of COPs can damage cells in the body and cause heart disease or cancer.

In order to research the effects of marinated meat and the formation of COPs, a team of researchers at Taiwan’s Fujian University prepared a sample of pork and hard-boiled egg in three different marinades, the first using soy sauce, the second using sugar, and the third using a combination of both. According to their research, when meat is marinated in soy sauce or sugar, the formation of COPs decreases. The role of the sugar was found to be particularly important. Professor Chen, who led the research team, explained that the sugar and soy sauce marinade produce a browning reaction product which acts as an anti-oxidant, neutralizing COPs. In addition, beneficial nutrients contained in soy sauce, such as isoflavones, also suppress the formation of COPs. This proves that marinated meat dishes are not only tasty, but good for one’s health as well.2


It should also be noted that while the marinade used for Bulgogi contains soy sauce and sugar, the spring onion, garlic, ginger, and sesame oil are also very healthy ingredients. Not only do they counteract the odor of the meat, as well as tenderizing it and giving it a pleasant flavor, but they also enhance its health benefits. For example, sesame oil contains many beneficial unsaturated fatty acids such as linoleic acid, which helps suppress cholesterol. Sesame itself contains acids which suppress cholesterol and assist bowel movement. It also contains high levels of calcium, iron, and Vitamin B1 and B2. Garlic helps reduce cholesterol and total fat in the liver and blood serum. The allicin contained in it has an antibacterial effect, helping the production of digestive enzymes in the gastric juices. It also assists the intestinal movements and overall digestion. Bulgogi is therefore suitable even for those with weak digestive systems, such as the old or very young. The ssam is the finishing touch in the preparation of Bulgogi. Ssam is a kind of vegetable wrap, made with vegetable leaves such as lettuce, sesame, or crown daisy, and is generally eaten with ssamjang sauce. The ssamjang consists of soybean paste (made with fermented soybeans) and hot pepper. It is therefore an excellent fermented food, and contributes both to the taste and the nutritional value of the ssam. As the meat is eaten in a vegetable wrap, moreover, the meal is nutritionally balanced, and so counteracts the onset of arterial diseases, hypertension, and cancer. If its taste, nutritional value, and health benefits are considered together, there is no better meat dish than Bulgogi.