Tofu, a Superfood

A beloved staple food and ingredient in Korea, tofu is anything but just a substitute for meat

It’s funny how a word can change so much in connotation and ring depending on the place.

When I lived in the United States, tofu was the stuff of tofurkey and faken (tofu turkey and tofu bacon), the weird go-to food for weirdly healthy people. Here in Korea, tofu is a mainstream favorite, a food thought of not as off-putting for being so nutritious, but as delicious. Comforting, even.

Made by coagulating soymilk, which is made by soaking dry soybeans and grinding them with water, and then pressing the curds that form into soft blocks, tofu is high in protein and calcium while low in fat and carbohydrates. There is fresh tofu and processed tofu, there is soft (or silken) tofu and firm tofu. A staple food in many Asian countries, it is pronounced “doo-boo” in Korean and prepared in a variety of ways.

_Sundubu jjigae_ (soft tofu stew) is one of the most popular Korean dishes to use tofu as a main ingredient. It’s made with anchovy stock and ingredients including beef or pork, red pepper flakes, mushrooms and short neck clams. It’s topped, when sizzling, with a raw egg.

Another favorite is _dubu kimchi_ (tofu with stir-fried kimchi). Pair a square of tofu with a bit of stir-fried kimchi and the result is an intense flavor mix of fresh and fried, neutral and spicy, white and red. This is often enjoyed as a side dish with soju, a distilled Korean alcohol beverage popular worldwide.

_Dubu jorim_ (braised tofu) is another mainstay of many households. It’s made by pan-frying tofu and braising it in a soy sauce-based sauce that includes sugar, chopped green onions, garlic and red chili flakes. It goes great with rice, at any meal of the day.

Tofu is also added to kimchi, soybean paste and other stews, used to make the filling for dumplings and even spooned from little cups in a soft, fresh state like pudding. A different form of tofu, _kongbiji_ (soy pulp), is used to make a personal favorite of mine — ground soybean stew.

Healthful and tasty no matter how you prepare it, and whether you’re indulging yourself or watching your weight, tofu is one of those rare superfoods that works for just about anyone.

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Did you know?
Soy milk is really quite good. As described above, it’s not milk at all — it just looks like it — and has about the same proportion of protein as cow’s milk. It tastes wonderfully nutty and goes well with everything from cereal to coffee.