

## Fresh Food

It was dark at the beach. The waves crashing onto the shore gave an audible clue as to where the ocean met the land as the inky blackness of the East Sea stretched out to invisibly kiss the star-studded sky on the distant horizon. A few comatose bodies were strewn haphazardly across the sand-scape, laid prone by excessive consumption of *soju*; the local firewater. Those still upright had formed congregations, outlined by the glowing tips of cigarettes being furiously puffed, creating smoke signals ascending to the heavens. Apropos of nothing, a group of twenty-something-year-old men burst into raucous laughter, triggering a sing-along from the next group, which sparked a loud debate within the subsequent circle, as if social exchange were contagious. For these revellers, it was an ordinary Saturday night. For us, it was a foray into a new world; a cultural exploration triggered by a bevy of beers at the bar across the street.

Our intrepid party of assorted nationalities had been thrust together by occupation, as novice English teachers on a government teaching programme. We were celebrating the start of our new lives after being released from a rule-laden two-week orientation. The Korean beachgoers were locals and friends, familiar with each other's foibles and faults. We formed a vanguard to weave through the occupied territory, acutely aware of the curious gazes levelled at us – the outsiders. Reaching a clear patch, our fearless commander kicked off his shoes and we fanned into a circle that slowly sank to the ground. Bottles of beer slipped from bags and backpacks, to be gently warmed by the sultry night air, beads of condensation trickling down to form wet patches on the beach.

The hours crept past in the shadows as we talked and laughed, digging our feet into the sweet, cool sand, the grit wedged between toes and under fingernails. During a lull in conversation, we were infiltrated by a posse of students, keen to practice their limited English. "I...sit..." stuttered a young man with an apologetic glance, gesturing to the

empty space by my side. A nod of acceptance and he filled the void, smiling constantly as he searched for the words that played hide and seek in his head.

"Jun-Ho," he declared, his thumb pointing towards his chest. "Giselle," I replied, mirroring his antics. So began a faltering conversation, the blanks filled with grimaces and grins as we thrust our outstretched hands towards each other across the communication gap.

Soon we were all firm friends, bonds quickly formed in that way that only youth and alcohol can cement. "Hungry?" Jun-Ho asked, tapping gently on my shoulder. "Starving," I declared, and he leapt to his feet, pulling me up in his wake. He was a man on a mission, making a beeline for a trio of tents, their orange canvas flaps rippling in the sea breeze.

The middle-aged chef inside the centre tent lifted her gaze from the pots bubbling merrily in the makeshift kitchen as we entered and slid along the bench seats. Her eyes lit up in keen anticipation as Jun-Ho reached for a laminated menu card, and she whipped two glass beer mugs from under the counter, pushing them towards us. Swiping a bottle of beer from its nest of ice in a nearby cooler, she deftly flicked the cap onto the floor with a bottle opener conjured from mid-air, splashing the amber fluid into the waiting vessels.

A long conversation ensued, the guttural language punctuated with hand gestures and pointing as if Jun-Ho were at a market, haggling for our dinner. Finally, with a curt nod the order was complete, an abrupt silence filling the fish-tinted air. Our host flashed a brief smile in my direction, her stern outlook belied by her twinkling eyes. "Odiso oshiossoyo?" she asked in Korean, the upward inflection at the end of her sentence implying a question. The unfamiliar words meant little to me and I crinkled my eyebrows in the universal expression of bafflement. "Doko kara kimashita ka?" she tried in Japanese. "Australia kara kimashita," I blurted, my relief at understanding evident in my exuberant response to the simple question of my country of origin. Jun-Ho and the

chef paused, their mouths agape and eyes wide. Neither had expected the foreigner to speak Japanese.

Thus began a surreal, triangular conversation, all manner of speech now possible with the chef translating between chopping, dicing, sprinkling and slicing. “Yaki ebi,” she said, depositing an enormous platter of grilled prawns dusted with chilli-salt in the midst of a multitude of side dishes; each of the small white bowls filled with a colourful mess of exotic edibles.

Gripping the slender, oblong stainless steel chopsticks I reached tentatively into the closest bowl, packed with layers of kimchi. The selected morsel of pickled cabbage burst in a fiery ball of flavour on my tongue, making my eyes water and Jun-Ho handed me my beer to dampen the coughing and spluttering. He watched intently as I reached into the next bowl, swimming with tiny dried fish that exploded between my molars in a salty tang. His eyes crinkled in simple happiness when I gave him the thumbs up, just as one chopstick slid down my fingers, landing on the countertop with a loud clatter. Embarrassed, I neatly paired it with its twin as if I’d meant to take a break and plucked a generously proportioned prawn from the central plate with my fingers.

I swivelled the critter to face me and twisted its neck, discarding the head as I prepared to dismember the body. I gently prised its legs apart before digging my thumbnails through the thin shell into the soft flesh, cleaving the armour asunder. Pinching the tail, another twist released the white pulp from its pink wetsuit. Popping it into my mouth I nearly groaned at the exquisite sweetness, offset by the powdery chilli-salt coating my lips. Beaming with satisfaction, I reached for another.

Between bites, we shared occasional sentences but the plated-flavours drew most of our attention. Chef was busy dicing and it was with a flourish that she presented the *pièce de résistance*: our final dish. I tried hard to mask my horror, while Jun-Ho clapped his hands together in delight.

The plate was squirming with bite-sized pieces of squid so fresh that it was technically still living. The roiling mass brought to mind a pile of earthworms, made even more tempestuous by the lemon chef squeezed in her fist, juice dribbling down her wrinkled fingers onto the ribbons of squid. “Dozo, go ahead,” chef pronounced, urging me to feast on the poor wriggling strips. Gulping down my distaste in the name of cross-cultural compassion, I picked up my chopsticks, holding them hovering over the plate as I prepared mentally to dive in.

“Chotto matte! Wait!” chided chef, offering advice on how to proceed. “Move the squid quickly from plate to mouth,” she advocated. On asking why she explained that the squids’ suckers continue to function, so speed is necessary to prevent the creature clinging to the chopsticks.

Like a Kung Fu master, my hands whipped over the plate, selecting a piece and plunging into the depths of my mouth. At this moment, I surmised I would also have to chew quickly to prevent the tentacle suctioning onto my teeth. I gnashed my choppers together frantically in a bid to obliterate the life within. As the desiccated remains slid down my throat, I was sure I felt them trying to grasp my tonsils.

In a lifetime of eating, this is the only time my dinner has tried to eat me back.

