

Three foods to try during the Korean summer

Summer is the hottest season of the year, taking place between June and August in Korea. For me, coming from Brazil, a country with a predominantly tropical climate, one of the most striking things was how Koreans experience the changing seasons. On the peninsula, this time of year brings high temperatures, intense humidity, and noticeable shifts in people's daily routines, influencing everything from outdoor activities to the food consumed during this period.

Although Brazil also has gastronomic traditions associated with different times of the year, seasonal changes tend to be far less pronounced across much of the country. In Korea, where the temperate climate marks the passage between seasons with greater clarity, certain dishes become especially popular during the summer. Some help cool the body on the hottest days, while others are part of customs passed down through generations.

During my first trip to the country, in July 2025, I had the opportunity to try a variety of typical Korean dishes. Among them, three stood out for their strong connection to the Korean summer: bingsu (빙수), a frozen dessert made with shaved ice and different toppings; mul-naengmyeon (물냉면), buckwheat noodles served in cold broth; and samgyetang (삼계탕), a chicken and ginseng soup traditionally eaten on the hottest days of the year. Beyond being staples of the season, these dishes help tell part of the story of Korean food culture.



Mango bingsu (빙수) at Sulbing Hongdae (설빙 홍대입구역점), Hongdae, Seoul, on July 8, 2025. The dessert consists of finely shaved ice topped with fresh mango, sweet syrup, and a scoop of ice cream, and is one of Korea's most popular summer treats. Photo: Daniele Almeida

Bingsu (빙수)

The origins of bingsu date back to the Joseon period (1392–1897), when ice was stored in special royal depots and consumed mainly by the nobility. Over time, the dessert became popular and evolved into new versions, today commonly found served with fresh fruit, condensed milk, ice cream, and a variety of toppings, making it one of the defining symbols of the Korean summer.

My first experience with bingsu was on July 8, 2025, at a Sulbing (설빙 홍대입구역점) location in the Hongdae neighborhood of Seoul, where I stayed during the trip. Stepping into an air-conditioned space to try one of the most popular summer desserts in Korea seemed like the perfect combination after hours of walking in the heat.

The bingsu I chose was served in a large bowl with shaved ice, covered in sweet syrup, chunks of fresh mango and other fruits, and a scoop of ice cream. At first glance, it looked like a simple dessert, but the texture is what surprises you. Unlike the Brazilian raspadinha, whose ice tends to be coarser and already flavored, the Korean version is extremely fine and delicate, melting in the mouth with ease. It is pure ice that the customer combines with the fruit and toppings.

Although Brazil has a wide variety of cold desserts, I have not found anything quite like bingsu. The combination of the lightness of the ice, the sweetness of the toppings, and the fresh fruit creates a remarkably distinct experience.



Mul-naengmyeon (물냉면) at Baeknyeon Yukiljip (백년 육일집), Hongdae, Seoul, on July 9, 2025. The cold buckwheat noodle dish, served in icy broth with a boiled egg and slices of beef, originated in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula and is a staple of the Korean summer. Photo: Daniele Almeida

Mul-naengmyeon (물냉면)

Mul-naengmyeon originated in the northern part of the Korean Peninsula. Made with noodles served in cold broth, the dish became especially popular during the summer for offering a light, refreshing meal on hot days.

Among the three dishes on this list, mul-naengmyeon was probably my biggest cultural shock. I tried it on July 9, 2025, at the restaurant Baeknyeon Yukiljip (백년 육일집), also in Hongdae, on another hot and humid afternoon.

Even before tasting it, the idea of eating noodles with ice already seemed unusual to me. In Brazil, there are many cold foods and drinks, but no dish uses cold in quite the same way. When the bowl arrived at the table, the surprise was even greater: the dark noodle strands were submerged in an extremely cold broth, surrounded by large ice cubes floating all around.

The appearance was unlike anything I had tried before, but the flavor quickly replaced the initial unfamiliarity. The broth was refreshing, light, and very pleasant for a hot day.



Samgyetang (삼계탕) at Baeknyeon Tojong Samgyetang (백년토종삼계탕), Hongdae, Seoul, on July 10, 2025. The dish, a whole chicken stuffed with glutinous rice and ginseng slow-cooked in broth, is traditionally eaten during the hottest days of the Korean summer as a way to restore energy. Photo: Daniele Almeida

Samgyetang (삼계탕)

At first glance, a hot soup might seem like an unlikely choice for summer. However, samgyetang is tied to the Korean custom of 이열치열 (i-yeol chi-yeol), which proposes fighting heat with heat. For this reason, the dish is traditionally eaten during the most intense days of the year.

I had samgyetang on July 10, 2025, at the restaurant Baeknyeon Tojong Samgyetang (백년토종삼계탕), also in Hongdae. Unlike the naengmyeon, the idea of a hot soup in summer did not cause me as much surprise. In my country, even during the hottest periods, it is common to eat meals served at high temperatures, and coffee is drunk hot all year long.

The aroma of the cooked chicken, combined with the ginseng and the other ingredients, filled the entire space and immediately stirred the appetite. When it was finally served, the broth was still bubbling intensely. Despite the high temperature, the flavor was deeply comforting: savory and aromatic, with tender chicken that fell apart with ease, while the ginseng added characteristics I am not used to finding in Brazilian cuisine.

It was a meal that conveyed exactly the feeling Koreans describe when they talk about restoring energy during the summer. Among all the food I tried on the trip, samgyetang was one of my favorites.

The three dishes represent different answers to the same challenge: the heat of the Korean summer. For those traveling to the country for the first time, tasting the flavors of Korea goes beyond the food itself. It is a journey through culture and history, and trying these dishes is a direct way of understanding not just what Koreans eat, but why they eat the way they do when the heat arrives.