

Lunch Time!

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The bell rings in a little suburban school in the heart of Minnesota. 4th period is over. The teachers all breathe a sigh of relief and pile into the crowded lounge. We shut the door, effectively shutting out the students for our half-hour break. Plastic bags and Tupperware are thrown on the table. Everyone has something different. Marcy's husband took her out for Italian last night; she is reheating the leftovers. Michelle made herself a tuna sandwich like she does every day. Kevin, of course, has some weird bachelor creation of his, mac and cheese with frozen green beans. We all discuss our days and munch away at our food. Three minutes before the next bell we rinse our dishes and head back to our classrooms. I assumed a Korean teacher's lunch hour would be similar. Not even close.

No teacher in Korea brings lunch from home. I've never seen it and I have never heard of it happening. Everyone hops in line in the cafeteria and eats what is served. Yes, we eat in the cafeteria. Yes, this means the kids are all around you and you are not safe from the constant "hello, teacher!" Every day it is pretty much the same, to the western palate anyway. Kimchi, some other vegetable, some sort of protein (meat, fish or tofu), rice and soup. Every day. At first I was told it was buffet style and that I can have as much or as little as I want of everything. I'd pick and choose from the five or six items, usually piling my plate with three of the tastiest foods. Soon it became clear that I needed to take at least a little bit of everything if I didn't want to cause a stir. If I don't put something on my plate it will be pointed out. I'll be asked if I don't like the food, if the food is good enough, if it's too spicy. If I didn't take it, it must be because I have some huge objection to that food. I usually respond by saying I'm just not that hungry (which is usually true). Sometimes I'm honest and admit I don't like a certain food.

My vice principal is fascinated by my eating habits. I don't know if she knows my name, but she knows every dietary preference of mine. Every day she goes through every item on my tray and asks if I like it, what it's called in English (usually the same word in Korean) and if I have it back home. Every item. Every day. Many Koreans have admitted to me that they don't eat a lot of foreign food as a culture. This leads them to be curious about what I eat. My coteacher once told me that Korean people often assume other cultures eat their own food as exclusively as Korea does. They think Italians really only eat Italian food, Americans only eat American food, etc. There is a stereotype here that westerners cannot

handle spicy food. I think this stems from the thinking that we never try the food of other cultures. Hamburgers, hot dogs, fried chicken, pizza, none of that is spicy, therefore we are not accustomed to the spice of Korea. I often get warnings about how hot something is, or if I have left a food off of my tray they ask if it's because it's spicy, despite the fact I just put a huge piece of kimchi in my mouth.

Overall, I like eating in the cafeteria. I have tried so many foods I would have never considered otherwise (the caramelized lotus stem is to die for!) It can be frustrating being stared at and interrogated every afternoon, but ultimately I enjoy it. It gives me a chance to teach my fellow teachers about my culture, and I get to learn a bit about theirs.