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## Journal of Ethnic Foods

journal homepage: <http://journalofethnicfoods.net>

Original article

## Siwonhan-mat: The third taste of Korean foods

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 7 November 2015

Received in revised form

17 December 2015

Accepted 7 January 2016

Available online 4 March 2016

## Keywords:

compounded taste

gipeun-mat (깊은 맛)

kan (간)

Korean food

siwonhan-mat (시원한 맛)

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Smell and taste are frequently referenced senses when describing flavors of food. In addition to these two senses, Koreans have regarded that there is another sense of taste experienced through the body. This third sense, *siwonhan-mat* (시원한 맛), describes the sensation of the body including the tongue, stomach, and intestines when eating. While smell and taste play an important role in the enjoyment of food, it is also crucial to evaluate what your body can experience from eating. In this context, *siwonhan-mat* is the sense acquired through the digestion of food.

**Methods:** This paper will discuss the third taste found in Korean food, *siwonhan-mat*. In addition, expressions, key elements, and examples of food with *siwonhan-mat* will be explored.

**Results:** *Siwonhan-mat* is regarded as a unique taste found in Korean food. Of course, there are other descriptive Korean words for flavor such as *kipeun-mat* (깊은 맛, deep taste or deeper flavor) and *kusuhan-mat* (구수한 맛, one of delicate or pleasant taste), but they are similar to the traditional five tastes found in Korean food (saltiness, sourness, sweetness, bitterness, and spiciness) in the sense that they are received through the tongue. By contrast, *siwonhan-mat* is a refreshing taste experienced by the body during the digestive process. As for umami, part of the modern five basic tastes, it would be practical to subdivide it into a few different compounded tastes, such as *kipeun-mat*, *kokumi*, and *kusuhan-mat*. After conducting many studies about temperature, acidity, and sweetness of foods in order to find a determining factor for *siwonhan-mat*, researchers have concluded that *kan*, balancing the salt concentration of food, is closely related to the creation of the *siwonhan-mat* sensation.

**Conclusion:** *Siwonhan-mat* is a unique sensation found in Korean food. Understanding *siwonhan-mat* is a key to learning about Korean food and its food culture. Therefore, this paper serves an important role in understanding Korean food. *Siwonhan-mat* is often mistranslated using words to describe temperature, such as *cool*. This misinterpretation has resulted in confusion over the original meaning of *siwonhan-mat* and contributed to the incorrect usage of the word.

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## 1. Introduction

While there are several ways to describe the characteristics of food such as smell, taste, color, nutrient content, and composition, the most frequently used is taste (*mat*; 맛). Taste is the sensory impression of food in the mouth reacting with taste buds along with smell and trigeminal nerve stimulation. Taste can be defined in both a narrow physiological way and in a broad general sense

[1]. According to the physiological definition, taste is the chemical sensation produced when a substance reacts with taste receptor cells in the taste buds, which is then transferred through chemical reaction to the central nervous system by way of gustatory nerves. Research has revealed that there are five basic tastes (味)<sup>1</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> Based on the teaching of Korean and Chinese medicine, the five traditional tastes (五味) found in Korean food are sourness (酸), bitterness (苦), sweetness (甘), saltiness (鹹), and spiciness (辛). Although spiciness is related to the sense of pain, it is included in the five tastes since they were established before the development of physiological science. Each taste has a unique effect on health. For example, sour tastes have a fluid recollecting function and help reduce a cold sweat and diarrhea. Bitter tastes are used to treat conditions associated with dampness due to its cleansing action and ability to reduce moistness. Sweet tastes signal the provision of nutrients and have a calming, soothing, and moistening effect. Salty tastes soften hard masses and provide nutrients to the blood. Spicy tastes activate circulation of qi (氣) and help with the digestive process [3,4].

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sweetness, sourness, saltiness, and bitterness, along with umami, which was found in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Japanese scientists [1,2].

However, in some cases, this physiological approach is inadequate to fully explain the characteristics of tastes found in food. Alternatively, taste in a broader sense includes the sense of pain that stimulates somatosensory nerves such as the spiciness of peppers and astringency of persimmons. Experiential characteristics of tastes such as *siwonhan-mat* [5,6], *kipeun-mat*, and *eolkeunhan-mat* (얼큰한 맛, taste, a little spicy and hot) [1] are also included in taste in this broader sense. In addition, the sense of temperature, such as cool and hot, plays an important role in enjoying food [7].

As we have seen above, taste is crucial in assessing the quality of food and initiating preference. Generally, flavor and quality of processed foods are determined solely by taste sensed through receptors on the tongue. However, there is a unique taste, beyond the chemical or physiological definition of taste, found in traditional foods of various countries. This unique taste, the third taste, is experienced not through gustatory cells. The diverse sensations of food touching soft tissues in the mouth, swallowing food in the throat, and digestion in the stomach, and appreciating the color of foods are examples of the third taste [8]. Therefore, in order to understand the ethnic food of a country, one is required to understand cultural expressions and the components of food found in that country.

In this sense, studying traditional Korean food, or K-diet, entails a thorough understanding of the unique tastes of Korean food. Despite the importance of food culture currently, there is a lack of funding and research on the tastes of Korean food beyond the five basic tastes (味). A scientific and systematic evaluation of the tastes found in Korean food is needed in order to develop and improve the exposure of Korean traditional food in the global market.

There is a substantial number of expressions in Korean language that describe the third taste or compounded taste [5,6,9]. Lee et al [6] have listed the third tastes of Korean food: *mat-itneun* (delicious), *mat-upneun* (unsavory), *siwonhan* (cool), *kipeun*, *kkalkkeumhan* (깔끔한, a taste feeling cleanliness), *keoljukhan* (겉쪽한, a taste feeling thick or juicy), *jeongkalhan* (정갈한, a taste feeling neat or nicely presented), *kosohan* (고소한, a taste feeling delicate or aromatic), *hyangkeuthan* (향긋한, a taste feeling fragrant or fresh), *tateuthan* (따뜻한, a taste feeling warm or heated), *sangkeumhan* (상큼한, a taste feeling fresh or refresh), *chagaun* (차가운, a taste feeling cool or cold), and *neukkihan* (느끼한, a taste feeling repellent or oily). Generally, compounded taste refers to taste created through combinations of the five basic tastes (saltiness, sourness, sweetness, bitterness, and spiciness/umami). However, compounded tastes in Korean food indicate combined tastes acquired from the tongue and other organs in the body. For example, *jeongkalhan-mat* and *kkalkkeumhan-mat* are compounded tastes using taste buds and vision. *Kosohan-mat*, *hyangkeuthan-mat*, and *sangkeumhan-mat* are tastes using taste buds and smell. The combinations of pain, taste, and temperature are also found in expressions related to Korean food. Of all the compounded tastes found in Korean food, *siwonhan-mat* [1,2] is considered the most important one and is often referred to as the third taste. *Siwonhan-mat* is a refreshing and pleasurable compounded taste experienced through taste buds and body organs, and includes the sensation of food touching soft tissues in the mouth, swallowing food in the throat, and digestion in the stomach [5].

This paper will discuss elements of *siwonhan-mat* and how foods with *siwonhan-mat* have been cooked through historical, anthropological, and scientific approaches.

## 2. Understanding *siwonhan-mat* from linguistic and literary approaches

### 2.1. The origin of *siwonhada* (시원하다, the infinitive form of *siwonhan*)

According to the National Korean Language Dictionary [10], the usage of *siwonhada* includes: “the weather is refreshing”, “the broth of this *kuk* (soup) is cool”, “I am relieved of my worries”, “he is merry and cheerful”, “affable and amiable”, and “clean and neat”. This demonstrates *siwonhada*'s wide use of describing combinations of mind and work (心事), words and behavior (言行), and words related to the body, food and space [11]. The diverse usage of *siwonhada* suggests that *siwonhada* conveys more than just a mere description of temperature. For example, when someone says the *kukmul* (국물, broth) is *siwonhada*, it describes the experience of having hot broth calming the stomach. It does not describe the surface temperature of the broth, but the sensation resulting from consuming the food. *Kuk* with fermented kimchi or dried pollack with *kan*<sup>2</sup> are also dishes described with *siwonhada*. In this case, *siwonhada* is used to represent the refreshing sensation experienced during digestion as well. When explaining low temperatures with food, *chagapda* (cool) is used instead of *siwonhada*.

Starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *siwonhada* began being used in diverse contexts to describe a refreshing and pleasurable sensation [13]. Starting in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, *siwonhada* started being used in association with food when quenching thirst with liquids such as water or broth [11], and when describing low-temperature food. Moreover, cathartic emotions from stories, novels, or movies are often described as *siwonhada* as well. These references suggest that the linguistic origin of *siwonhada* is being relieved of worries [10]. Also *siwonhada* means that it is pleasant and vital when cool and refreshing air is inhaled and a hot bath makes our body reboot its energy (*qi*, 氣). Therefore, *siwonhan-mat* refers to the refreshing and soothing tastes of food regardless of its temperature.

People who are not familiar with the origin of *siwonhada* and non-Korean speakers often perceive the meaning of the word as *cool* and raise questions about the usage of *siwonhada* when eating hot soup.<sup>3</sup> As a result, *siwonhada* is frequently perceived as *cool*, or another antonym of *hot*. Some scholars have tried to explain this misunderstanding through the concept of polysemy<sup>4</sup> [14], viewing *siwonhada* only as a temperature-related word. They claim that *siwonhada* is an antonymical and polysemous word<sup>4</sup> that represents two opposite concepts at the same time. Polysemous words are developed due to ambiguity and contagiousness of word meanings, the result of diachronic change, confusion of cause and result, and omitted components of the words. In this context, they suggest that the antonymical usage of *siwonhada* resulted from the ambiguity and contagiousness of the word.

However, Song's [11,13] conclusion is solely based on the perception of *siwonhada* as a temperature-related word [15] without considering that the meaning of *siwonhada* is also associated with the combination of mind and work (心事), words and

<sup>2</sup> Kan means balancing the salt concentration to enhance the flavor of food [13]. The most common seasoning in Korean cuisine is soy sauce. Salt and soybean paste are also widely used.

<sup>3</sup> When entering a bath, Koreans, generally adults, often describe the feeling as *siwonhada*. It is a hard concept to grasp for children who often perceive *siwonhada* as *cool* or *cold*.

<sup>4</sup> Antonymical and polysemous words can be interpreted in opposite ways. Examples of these words are: *Chotda* (쫓다, pursue/drive away), *palda* (팔다) in the context of dealing with grains (buy/sell), and *kkeuda* (give up/buy). An attempt to interpret *siwonhada* as an antonymical and polysemous word (cold/hot) has created a misunderstanding of the word's meaning.

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