
The Korean Pantry Starter Kit

A printable checklist for your first trip to the Korean market

I've watched people stand in the aisle at H Mart for ten minutes and walk out with nothing. It isn't that Korean cooking is hard. It's that the shelf is full of red tubs with Korean writing on them and there's no obvious place to start.

So here's the list I'd hand a friend.

Twelve items. Buy the first five and you can cook most of what's on my site. The rest can wait until you're cooking Korean food regularly.

Each entry has the **Korean label** printed on it, so you can match the writing on the package instead of guessing. Screenshot this and hold your phone up to the shelf. That's what it's for.

— Sheeny

The Essential Five

Buy these first. Everything else is optional.

☐ 1. Gochujang — 고추장

Fermented chili paste — sweet, savory, spicy, funky. The most Korean thing in the pantry, and there is no substitute for it.

Look for: a 500g tub. Buy **medium heat** (보통맛) your first time. · **My pick:** CJ Haechandle (해찬들) · **Keeps:** about a year, refrigerated after opening

☐ 2. Gochugaru — 고춧가루

Korean chili flakes. Bright red, fragrant, far less punishing than they look. A separate ingredient from gochujang — you need both.

Look for: **coarse grind** (굵은 고춧가루). Do not substitute crushed red pepper — different heat entirely. · **Keeps:** 6 months in the freezer, where it should live

☐ 3. Doenjang — 된장

Fermented soybean paste. Deeper and saltier than Japanese miso, and the base of doenjang jjigae.

Look for: a tub in the refrigerated section · **Keeps:** about a year, refrigerated

☐ 4. Toasted sesame oil — 참기름

In almost every Korean dish, usually added at the very end. Buy a small bottle rather than a large one.

My pick: Ottogi or Beksul · **Keeps:** 6 months — it goes rancid, so refrigerate after opening

☐ 5. Soy sauce — 간장

Korean soy sauce (진간장 jin-ganjang) for general cooking. If you already own a Japanese soy sauce you like, that's a fine place to start.

Keeps: indefinitely

The Next Seven

Once you know you're cooking this food regularly.

☐ 6. Medium-grain rice — 쌀

Calrose is the standard American option and it's exactly right. Long-grain rice (basmati, jasmine) will not work for Korean cooking.

☐ 7. Potato starch — 감자전분

For crispy pancakes. Swap a quarter of the flour for it and everything fries up crisper — and stays that way.

Or: buy 부침가루 (buchimgaru), pre-mixed Korean pancake flour, and skip the measuring entirely

☐ 8. Broth coins or anchovy stock packets — 육수코인 / 멸치육수

The biggest flavor upgrade for the least effort in Korean cooking. One tablet per 2 cups of water turns plain water into savory broth.

Note: these are already salted. Season your dish after the broth goes in, not before.

☐ 9. Roasted seaweed — 김

Buy more than you think you need. It disappears faster than anything else on this list.

☐ 10. Dried kelp — 다시마

For making real broth when you have the time, and for adding quiet depth to almost any soup.

☐ 11. Salted shrimp — 새우젓

Small jar, refrigerated section. Seasons soups and steamed egg with a savory depth plain salt can't reach. Optional, but transformative.

☐ 12. Toasted sesame seeds — 통깨

For finishing. Cheap, and they make everything look like it came from a restaurant.

Fridge & Freezer

☐ Kimchi — 김치

Brands are debated endlessly and taste is personal. If you want one answer: Jongga (종가집). Buy the **small** size first — it lets you try new varieties without committing to a two-pound tub.

Try beyond napa cabbage: 총각김치 whole radish · 열무김치 young radish greens · 파김치 scallion

☐ Frozen dumplings — 만두

Bibigo is the reliable default. A real meal in eight minutes.

☐ Rice cakes — 떡볶이떡

For tteokbokki. Refrigerated or frozen — soak frozen ones in warm water for 10 minutes before cooking or they'll be hard in the middle.

What to skip for now

Things people buy on the first trip and then never use.

- **Plum extract (매실청)** and **corn syrup (물엿)** — useful eventually, not yet. Sugar covers it.
- **Perilla oil (들기름)** — wonderful, but it goes rancid fast and you won't use it enough at first.
- **Premade sauces and specialty pastes** — learn the base ingredients first, then decide what you're missing.
- **A giant tub of anything** — you don't know what you like yet.

Buying less on the first trip is the right call. You'll be back.

Where to buy

H Mart

The widest selection and usually the best prices. Worth going in person at least once, even if it's a drive — the heat levels and specialty items never all make it online.

Amazon

Most convenient for the shelf-stable staples. Check for a coupon on the listing before you buy; Korean pantry prices swing a lot week to week.

[affiliate links — gochujang · gochugaru · sesame oil · potato starch]

Weee!

The answer if there's no Asian market near you. Ships to all 48 contiguous states, fresh and frozen included. New shoppers get free delivery on their first five orders, plus \$20 off the first two.

[referral link — \$20 off your first order]

Your regular supermarket

Increasingly stocks gochujang and sesame oil. One thing to check: you want gochujang **paste** (a tub) and not gochujang **sauce** (a squeeze bottle). They are not interchangeable, and the sauce will make your stew thin and oddly sweet.

Five dinners from this list

Every one of these uses only what's on the checklist.

1. **Market-style tteokbokki** — rice cakes, gochujang, gochugaru, soy sauce
2. **Crispy seafood pancake** — potato starch, soy sauce, sesame oil
3. **Ttukbaegi steamed egg** — eggs, sesame oil, salted shrimp
4. **Spicy squid stir-fry** — gochujang, gochugaru, soy sauce, chives
5. **Kimchi fried rice** — kimchi, rice, sesame oil, seaweed

All five recipes are free on the site.

One last thing. Don't try to buy all twelve at once. Get the first five, cook something, and come back for the rest when you know what you actually reach for. That's how a pantry gets built — a little at a time, around the food you actually want to eat.

Thanks for reading. I'm glad you're here.

— Season of Seoul