

Koreatown: Eating Our Way From Past To Present

Old Koreatown, Toronto

On May 6, 2023, choa magazine led a group of around 50 people on a “food-and-history” walk through Tkaronto’s Old Koreatown. The walk explored the intersections between the development of the local Korean diaspora, colonization, national and local policies, culture, food, and identity. In collaboration with Jason Lee, the Chairman of [Koreatown BIA](#) and the 2nd-generation owner of Korean Village, this tour was led as part of the [Jane’s Walk Festival 2023](#).

Recognizing the traditional territories and history of colonization

We gathered on the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anisnabeg, the Chippawa, the Wendat peoples, and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Participants and readers are encouraged to learn more about the traditional Indigenous territories on which we stand through this [interactive map](#). Those in Canada may also use [Whose Land](#) to identify local Indigenous Nations, treaties, and communities.

A big theme of the walk was the ways that the Korean diaspora explore, reflect, and interrogate our connections to family, food, and culture in Tkaronto. However, choa magazine recognizes that these conversations are incomplete, if not impossible, without first recognizing whose land we gather on.

The role of the United Church and Canada’s Multiculturalism Act of 1971

The earliest Koreans in Canada were seminary students in the 1940s who, with help from local missionaries, settled around the University of Toronto to study theology. Until 1966, there were only 100 Koreans living in Toronto. In 1968, the Bloor United Church opened its doors and soon became an important space for the first wave of Korean immigrants to Canada in the 1970s. This wave was prompted by Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s—father of current Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau—[Multiculturalism Act](#), which facilitated the immigration of several communities. By 1975, the number of Koreans in Toronto had grown to 10,000.

While many Korean families benefited directly from these institutions, both the United Church and the Canadian Government were simultaneously responsible for the cultural assimilation and erasure of Indigenous communities through violent means. These include [residential schools](#) (the last of which only closed in 1996) and the separation of Indigenous children from their families in the “[Sixties Scoop](#).”

Today, the Indigenous youth population in Toronto continues to grow and surpass the population living on reserves. The [Native Youth Resource Centre](#), which sits across the street from Korean Village, was established 30 years ago, along with the neighbourhood’s oldest Korean institutions. The Centre provides services to youth and families in the city, while representing the ongoing challenges of reconciliation in a changing neighbourhood.

While the role of the church in colonization and the complex history of the Korean diaspora in so-called Canada are not deeply explored in this walk, choa magazine recognizes this is the underlying context to the political, socioeconomic, and urban planning factors discussed below.

“Origins” of Koreatown: Bloor Meat & Grocery, PAT Central

The largest, most recognizable grocery store in Koreatown is PAT Central. Today, the supermarket is run by Edward Lee, but the idea of the grocery business goes back to his grandmother, [Sun Ok Lee](#).

The Lee family was among the first wave of Koreans who benefitted from the Multiculturalism Act, with Sun Ok Lee being one of the few women who immigrated to Toronto at the time. With most Koreans being young male seminary students, there was a lack of both Korean food products and cooking capacity. As Edward Lee tells it, when his grandmother packed lunches for his father and uncles, “she’d pack a few extra for their colleagues. And as the Korean community grew, feeding her sons’ friends got expensive and the family saw the need for a market for Korean groceries.”

Bloor Meat & Grocery, located across the street from PAT Central, has also been providing families and businesses with wholesale kimchi and side dishes from the same location since the early 70s, before PAT Central was established.

Although we do not go into depth about Korean history prior to the 1970s, these offerings of culturally significant foods are not separate from the impacts of colonization, globalization, and trade. The Japanese Occupation in Korea officially lasted from 1910 to 1945 and had significant economic and cultural implications long before and after.

Cornerstones of Koreatown: Hodo Kwaja & Korean Village

Hodo Kwaja is home to the city's best-known hodo kwaja (walnut cakes), madeleines, hoddeok (brown sugar pancakes), and other Korean snacks. The store was founded by Jong Sik Lee in 1992 and has been owned and operated by the Lee family ever since. The Lees use [mechanical kwaja maker](#) to make their hodo kwajas. Their current machine was imported directly from Korea 23 years ago and has been in daily operation since. As Suki, Jong Sik's daughter, tells it, there weren't any mechanics experienced with this type of machinery at the time, so her father has always maintained and repaired their hodo kwaja machine by hand. However, her father had no previous engineering experience, having worked as a front desk manager at a 5-star hotel in Korea before immigrating. While it was a steep learning curve, his familiarity with the machine has gotten such that he simply needs to listen to the machine to know what to fix.

While most machinery of this type uses electricity for easier operation and maintenance, Hodo Kwaja's machine uses natural gas and open flames to cook their snacks. The reliance on open flames means that the machine is extremely sensitive to the slightest changes in temperature and weather. Even a gust of wind could throw off the rhythm of the machine.

Hodo Kwaja's batter is made every morning with whole, locally sourced ingredients by Suki's parents. Their day continues for 12-14 hours and ends with daily cleaning of the machine. While their routines have barely changed over the past 30 years, Hodo Kwaja has noticed a significant shift in their customers. Whereas their earlier customers were entirely Korean, the Lees estimate that 80% of their current customers are non-Koreans or 3rd- and 4th-generation Koreans. Of their Korean customers, there still remain families who have gotten their regular fill of snacks from Hodo Kwaja for multiple generations, and friend groups who have been coming in to get the same, exact order of kwajas and coffee for decades.

Korean Village, founded in 1978 by Ok Re Lee and Ke Hang Lee, is one of Canada's oldest Korean restaurants in continuous operation. Similar to Hodo Kwaja, the founders had no prior experience in the food industry as Ok Re was an actress and Ke Hang was a physical education teacher in Korea, before immigrating to Canada. 45 years later, the restaurant is now owned and managed by their son, Jason, who carries on his mother's memory by serving her food to customers who come from near and far.

As Jason tells it, Korean Village was always a hub of gathering for Koreans, then more recently, non-Koreans in the region. To date, there are regular customers who host their birthday parties at the restaurant, a group of students who drive from Whitby to Toronto 4-5 times a year to eat at Korean Village, and families who continue to enjoy Lee's kimchi and marinated barbeque meats.

A Changing Landscape: Chung Chun Rice Dog & Yupdduk

Restaurants like Chung Chun Rice Dog and Yupdduk are two franchises that recently made their way from Korea to Toronto to benefit from the popularization of Korean food and culture. While they're a step from the traditional foods from Hodo Kwaja and Korean Village, they reflect the larger appetite and customer base for fusion takes on Korean food.

Chung Chun Rice Dogs are a Korean version of the American corndog, simply called "hotdogs" in Korea. Korean hotdogs have been a popular street food since meat was readily available in the country. "Chung chun" means "youth" in Korean and many people who grew up in Korea will recognize the hotdog as an easy after-school snack. The batter is made with rice flour, which gives the hotdog an airiness and crispiness difficult to achieve with wheat flour or panko breading.

Mobilizing Support in Koreatown

While food was the focus of this event, it is imperative to recognize the role of organizing in radical ways to support our community members. In Old Koreatown, Korean-specific institutions were created and continue to provide essential services since the 1970s. We stopped by KEB Hana Bank Canada, which was founded in 1981 to offer deposits, remittances, trade finance and loan services to Koreans who had difficulty obtaining or navigating conventional financial services at the time. With 1 in 4 Koreans in Canada working as

entrepreneurs, compared with 1 in 8 people within the general population, these institutions were critical to supporting Koreans in establishing a life in this country.

The neighbourhood also saw the establishment of Korean newspapers, a Korean YMCA, and Korean organizations like the Korean Canadian Women's Association and Korean Senior Citizens' Society.

Where Do We Go From Here: Toronto Public Library, Palmerston Branch

Each branch of the Toronto Public Library (TPL) system caters to its specific neighbourhood. Accordingly, the Palmerston branch has housed one of the largest Korean collections in the city since the late 1970s. The Palmerston branch first opened with a children's collection in 1971, and it was one of the five locations to cater to children in underserved areas during a period of great expansion for the TPL. During the late 70s and 80s, the Palmerston library was also integral to the Korean YMCA, which was [founded in 1977](#). The YMCA hosted classes for English, citizenship, income tax, among other topics, at the library. However, since then, both the Korean YMCA and the library's children's Korean collection have closed.

These closures reflect the dramatic and subtle ways in which the neighbourhood continues to change. What we now know as Koreatown was previously the home for many in the Central and South American and Greek diasporas before it cemented its identity as Koreatown in the 70s. For instance, the building of the Hana Bank used to be a beauty salon that was first owned by Spanish immigrants, and then by Greek immigrants before converting into a bank. The building of Korean Village, originally constructed in the early 1900s, has a history of being a bakery, grocery, fruit store, and Greek restaurant before becoming a Korean restaurant.

Today, there is a declining number of Koreans living and/or working in this neighbourhood. Following the first wave of immigration in the 70s, there was a second wave in the 90s that followed different settlement patterns. During the 90s, Korea was facing an economic depression, which led to a greater influx of wealthier and more educated Koreans who prioritized property ownership and good schools for their children. At the time, it was easier to find both in areas like North York, so this led to the development of another Korean enclave around the Sheppard and Finch area.

Furthermore, the area surrounding Old Koreatown experienced significant changes in the late 2010s. Most prominently in 2016, this period saw the closure of Honest Ed's, a massive, beloved institution for the city, for the development of new condominiums. During this period, there was an increase in bike lanes and the opening of smaller Korean supermarkets in the city's downtown area. As many of Koreatown's oldest customers were families living in various municipalities, these changes made it much more difficult to drive into the neighbourhood, and Old Koreatown is no longer the same cultural and shopping hub for Korean families as it once was.

While we can observe demographic changes from census data and reports, the changes in Koreatown are tangible to all the businesses we heard from today, all of whom have observed dramatic shifts in their customers. Suki from Hodo Kwaja takes delight in watching how her customers change over time and Jason from Korean Village has picked up different phrases in a variety of languages spoken by his customers. On the other hand, the shifting demographic is causing businesses like Bloor Meat & Grocery to reconsider their product offerings and role in the community. Others, like Chung Chun Rice Dog, as well as other businesses like Ave Maria and international language schools, are institutional manifestations of the shift.

Today, the Korean community shares this physical space with a diversifying neighbourhood with more representation from Indigenous, Portuguese, Chinese, Latin American, and 2nd- and 3rd-generation communities, with whom we share a deeply intertwined history in the push and pull of different economic, religious, and political factors.

Koreatown now is becoming more symbolic in our collective imagination and less practical as a place to live and work for the Korean community. While it can be viewed as a decline of a neighbourhood identity, this also opens up space and opportunities for other institutions, organizations, and businesses to occupy these spaces. What does this mean for the cultural communities in Toronto? Should these neighbourhoods be protected as defined entities? If so, how and by whom?