FREE GUIDE · 8 PAGES

The Korean Pantry, Explained

Five jars, how to read their labels, and three weeknight dinners you can make tonight.

Gochujang · Doenjang · Kimchi · Toasted sesame oil · Gochugaru

Evidence-checked. Every number in here comes from a product label, USDA FoodData Central, or a cited study, and we say which.

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Five jars, one shelf

You do not need a Korean grocery's worth of ingredients to cook Korean food at home. You need five things, and most supermarkets in the US now carry all of them. This guide tells you what each one is, what to look for on the label, how to store it, and what to make first.

How to read any Korean pantry label in 30 seconds

On the label	What it tells you
Sodium per serving	The number that varies most between brands. Convert to per tablespoon (most labels use 1 Tbsp = 17–20 g for pastes). Gochujang runs 400–540 mg; doenjang 600–900 mg; a tablespoon of kimchi juice is a meaningful dose on its own.
Ingredients, first three	Fermented pastes should list soybeans (or rice/soybeans) and salt near the top. If corn syrup, wheat flour or 'seasoning' comes first, you are buying a sauce, not a ferment.
'Fermented' vs 'flavored'	Many supermarket tubs are pasteurized or made quickly with added flavoring. That is fine for cooking; it just means you are not getting live cultures, whatever the front of the jar implies.
Added sugar	Expected in gochujang (it is part of the recipe); a warning sign in doenjang or kimchi.
MSG / 'yeast extract'	Not harmful at normal amounts, but a sign the maker is boosting a weaker ferment.
Price per ounce	Divide price by net weight. Traditional pastes cost 2–4× the mass-market tub; whether that is worth it depends on the dish. For a stew, the cheap tub is fine. For ssamjang eaten raw, pay up.

The one rule that saves the most salt

Taste before you add salt. Between the paste, the kimchi juice and the soy sauce, almost every recipe in this guide needs no added salt. The 'to taste' line in a Korean recipe is not a formality.

JAR 1

Gochujang

Fermented red chili paste: chili flakes, glutinous rice, fermented soybean powder, salt, and a sweetener. Sweet, hot and savory at once. It is the jar most Americans buy first, and the one most often used wrong — as a hot sauce instead of a base.

What the label says

- Sodium: 400–540 mg per tablespoon across the big brands. That is a quarter of the day's recommended limit in one spoon, which is why it is a seasoning, not a condiment.
- Heat level: most tubs carry a 1–5 scale on the front. 'Medium' (3) is the right default for glazes and noodles; 'hot' needs more sweetener to balance.
- Pasteurized: nearly all supermarket gochujang is heat-treated, so the 'live ferment' story does not apply. The human evidence for gochujang's health effects is two small trials of gochujang capsules; eat it because it tastes good.
- Brand notes: the mass-market Korean brands (Chung Jung One Sunchang, CJ Haechandle) are sweeter and smoother; 'traditional' or small-batch pastes are darker, funkier, often hotter.

How to use it

Memorize one ratio: 2 parts gochujang · 2 parts honey (or maple) · 1 part soy sauce. Loosened with a splash of water or pasta water, that is a glaze for noodles, roasted vegetables, tofu, chicken, salmon and sweet potatoes. One teaspoon in fried rice adds body without heat.

Storage

Fridge after opening. It keeps for a year or more; the color darkens over time and that is normal. If the surface dries out, scrape it off.

JAR 2

Doenjang (and how it differs from miso)

Korean fermented soybean paste. Same bean as Japanese miso, different road: doenjang is made from blocks of cooked soybeans (meju) left to wild molds and bacteria — chiefly Bacillus subtilis, plus Aspergillus, Mucor and Rhizopus — then brined for months. Miso is seeded with one cultivated mold (Aspergillus oryzae, koji) on rice or barley. That one choice explains the difference: doenjang is saltier, coarser and louder; miso is sweeter and smoother.

What the label says

- Salt: traditional doenjang runs about 15–20% salt (Korea's Rural Development Administration); factory tubs about 9–12%. Miso is 5–13%, with sweet white miso at the low end. Per tablespoon, expect 600–900 mg sodium from doenjang.
- Ingredients: soybeans, salt, water — and ideally little else. Wheat flour, corn syrup, alcohol and flavor enhancers mark the quick-fermented tubs. They are fine for stew; buy traditional for ssamjang.
- Doenjang is boiled; miso is not. Doenjang's flavor is built to survive a 20-minute simmer. Miso's aroma compounds blow off above a gentle heat, so it goes in at the end.

How to use it

Two tablespoons in 2½ cups of broth is a stew (page 8). Two parts doenjang to one part gochujang, with garlic, scallion and sesame, is ssamjang — the lettuce-wrap paste — in two minutes. A teaspoon mashed into butter with a squeeze of lemon makes a compound butter for corn, green beans or a roast chicken under the skin.

Storage

Fridge, lid tight, for a year or more. A white film on top is usually harmless yeast; stir it in or scrape it off. Pink or black growth means throw it out.

JAR 3

Kimchi: three stages of one jar

Napa cabbage salted, then packed with chili flakes, garlic, ginger, scallion and usually fish sauce or salted shrimp, and left to ferment. The thing most people miss is that kimchi is not one food. It is three, depending on the age of the jar, and each stage is right for different dishes.

On the label	What it tells you
Fresh (0–7 days)	Crisp, salad-like, barely sour. Eat it as a side, in wraps, on rice bowls. Too mild to flavor a pan.
Ripe (1–3 weeks)	Tangy, fizzy, the stage most Koreans prefer at the table. Best for kimchi cottage-cheese toast, tacos, grain bowls.
Sour (3+ weeks)	Sharp, soft, smells like it has turned. This is the cooking stage: fried rice, stew, pancakes. The acid and the juice become a sauce in a hot pan.

What the label says

- Live or pasteurized: refrigerated jars with a vent or a bulging lid are live and will keep fermenting at home. Shelf-stable jars are pasteurized — stable, milder, and they will never reach the sour stage.
- Fish sauce or not: most Korean brands use fish sauce or salted shrimp; vegan versions use kelp or miso. Both are real kimchi.
- Sodium: roughly 400–800 mg per 100 g by brand — the widest range of any jar in this guide. A ½-cup serving is 300–600 mg.
- Sugar: a little is traditional (it feeds the ferment). More than 3 g per serving means it was added for taste.

How to use it

Squeeze the kimchi over the board before chopping and keep what comes out. Two tablespoons of that juice season a whole pan of fried rice — it is also where most of the sodium lives, which is why you then add no salt.

Storage

Fridge, pushed under its own liquid, lid tight. It keeps for months and only gets more useful. A jar that is too sour for the table is exactly right for the pan.

JAR 4

Toasted sesame oil (and its cousin, perilla oil)

Dark amber, intensely nutty, pressed from roasted seeds. It is a finishing oil: a teaspoon stirred in after the heat is off, never the oil you fry in. The roasting is also what makes it keep — sesamolin in the seed converts to sesamol, an antioxidant, and the roasted oil resists rancidity far better than the raw kind.

What the label says

- 100% sesame or a blend: cheaper bottles cut sesame with soybean or canola oil. The ingredient list should say sesame oil and nothing else.
- Roast level: darker is stronger. Korean brands tend to roast harder than Japanese ones; either is fine. If you are new to it, buy a small bottle.
- Pressing method: 'cold-pressed' on a toasted oil is marketing; the seeds were roasted first. 'Expeller-pressed' vs solvent-extracted is the real distinction, and worth a dollar or two.
- Price per ounce: Korean supermarket brands are the best value; the premium is mostly the bottle.

Perilla oil, the one to refrigerate

Korea's other finishing oil, pressed from perilla seeds. About 60% of its fat is alpha-linolenic acid (ALA), a plant omega-3 — more than flaxseed in several analyses. Two honest caveats: the body converts ALA to EPA at well under 10% in men (around 20% in women), and to DHA barely at all, so it is not a fish-oil substitute. And all that ALA oxidizes fast: keep perilla oil in the fridge and use it within about two months of opening. Toasted sesame oil, by contrast, lives happily in a dark cupboard.

Storage

Sesame: cool, dark cupboard, cap tight; use within 6 months of opening for best aroma (the 'one year' on labels is unopened shelf life). Perilla: fridge, 2 months.

JAR 5

Gochugaru, and your first shopping trip

Korean chili flakes — sun-dried red peppers with the seeds mostly removed, ground coarse or fine. Fruity and only moderately hot (far milder than crushed red pepper), and bright red rather than brown. It is what makes kimchi red, and the easiest way to add color and warmth to a stew or a dressing without reaching for the gochujang.

- Coarse flakes for cooking and kimchi; fine powder is for making paste and for a smooth red broth.
- Look for a bright, almost orange-red color and a bag with a zip; the dull brown ones are old.
- Store in the freezer, where it keeps its color for a year. In the cupboard it fades in three months.

The shopping list

On the label	What it tells you
Gochujang	1 tub, medium heat, 500 g. Check sodium per Tbsp; under 500 mg is good.
Doenjang	1 tub, 500 g. Soybeans + salt + water near the top of the list.
Kimchi	1 refrigerated jar, napa cabbage, 'live' or with a vent. Buy two if you cook with it: one for the table, one to go sour.
Toasted sesame oil	Small bottle (under 10 oz), 100% sesame, expeller-pressed.
Gochugaru	Coarse, 1 lb bag. Freeze it.
Nice to have	Roasted sesame seeds · anchovy-kelp dashi packets · a sheet of seasoned gim (roasted seaweed) · frozen sanuki udon.

Where: any H Mart, Lotte Plaza, Zion Market or 99 Ranch has all of it in one aisle. Most Whole Foods and Trader Joe's now carry gochujang, kimchi and sesame oil. Online, Weee and Amazon carry the rest. The whole list is under $40 and lasts six months.

MAKE THESE FIRST

Three weeknight dinners

Kimchi Fried Rice With a Crispy Egg

Serves 2 · 15 min · about 450 kcal · 15 g protein per serving

Ingredients

- 2 cups cold cooked rice
- 1½ cups sour kimchi, squeezed and chopped + 2 Tbsp of its juice
- 1½ Tbsp neutral oil, divided
- 1 clove garlic, 2 scallions
- 1 tsp gochujang · 1 tsp soy sauce
- 3 eggs (1 in, 2 on top)
- 1 tsp toasted sesame oil · gim and sesame seeds

Method

1. Heat 1 Tbsp oil over medium-high; cook scallion whites and garlic 30 sec.
2. Add kimchi and gochujang; 2–3 min until it smells sweet-sour.
3. Add rice, kimchi juice, soy. Press flat 1 min to crisp; stir; repeat.
4. Push rice aside, scramble 1 egg, fold in. Off heat: sesame oil, scallion greens.
5. Fry 2 eggs hot until the edges crackle. Serve on top with gim and seeds.

No salt needed — the kimchi juice does it. Full version: myhealthyfoodlife.com/kimchi-fried-rice/

15-Minute Gochujang Honey Noodles

Serves 2 · 15 min · about 465 kcal · the 2:2:1 sauce

Ingredients

- 2 blocks frozen udon (or 7 oz dried noodles)
- 2 Tbsp gochujang · 2 Tbsp honey · 1 Tbsp soy
- 1 tsp toasted sesame oil · 1 tsp rice vinegar
- 2 cloves garlic, grated
- 4 scallions in 2-inch lengths · 1 Tbsp neutral oil
- Sesame seeds; soft-boiled egg optional

Method

1. Boil noodles (2 min for frozen udon). Save ½ cup of the water.
2. Whisk gochujang, honey, soy, sesame oil, vinegar, garlic; loosen with 3 Tbsp noodle water.
3. Char scallions in hot oil 2 min without moving. Remove.
4. Low heat: sauce in 30 sec, then noodles. Toss 1 min, adding water until glossy.
5. Top with scallions, seeds, egg.

Kid version: 1 Tbsp gochujang + 1 Tbsp peanut butter. Full version: /gochujang-honey-noodles/

Twenty-Minute Doenjang Jjigae

Serves 2 · 20 min · about 190 kcal · 16 g protein (stew only)

Ingredients

- 2½ cups water + 1 anchovy-kelp dashi packet
- 2 Tbsp doenjang · ½ tsp gochugaru (optional)
- 1 small potato, diced · ½ onion, sliced
- ½ zucchini, sliced · 1 clove garlic
- 7 oz firm tofu, cubed
- 1 green chili (optional) · 1 scallion · rice to serve

Method

1. Boil water with the dashi packet; simmer 5 min, remove packet.
2. Dissolve doenjang in a ladle lowered into the broth. Add gochugaru.
3. Potato and onion: simmer 6–7 min.
4. Zucchini and garlic: 3 min.
5. Tofu and chili: 2 min. Taste; add doenjang by the teaspoon. Scallion, rice.

Better the next day. Full version: /weeknight-doenjang-jjigae/

What happens next

Every Sunday, The Sunday Table brings one Korean pantry ingredient, one evidence-checked read, and three recipes you can make on a weeknight. Reply to any issue — we read every one.

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