

# Chef Ok Dong-sik: Respect, Simplicity, and a Bowl of Gomtang



Chef Ok Dong-sik

Courtesy of Ok Dong-sik

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Chef Ok Dong-sik, a proud alumnus of Kyung Hee University (KHU), has drawn international attention after appearing on Netflix's hit cooking competition show "Culinary Class Wars Season 2." Known for introducing Korean cuisine to global audiences through his restaurants around the world, Ok's journey has been guided by a distinct culinary philosophy centered on respect and simplicity.

**"This bowl of *dweji gomtang* represents my entire life and my journey as a chef."**

## A Moment of Respect Over Competition

Chef Ok Dong-sik says he didn't join "Culinary Class Wars Season 2" to prove he was better than anyone else. Instead, he wanted to cook in a way that matched the principle he has followed for years: respect.

That idea became visible in a one-on-one round against Venerable Seonjae, a Buddhist monk known for temple cuisine. Ok could have used meat, but he chose to follow the same plant-based restrictions as his opponent. He won the round, but viewers remembered the choice more than the result.

Rather than a strategic choice in a competitive show, Ok described his choice as an act of respect. He recalled his first encounter with Venerable Seonjae's temple cuisine during his student years—an experience that left a lasting impression. Ok said he felt compelled to choose her, not as a rival but as someone to cook together. "For me, it was not about winning. Just being in the same space and cooking with the same ingredients with Venerable Seonjae felt meaningful and something to be grateful for," he stated.

This perspective reflects Ok's definition of good cook-

ing. He does not explain it as fancy techniques or perfect visuals. Instead, he focuses on the ability to bring out the natural flavors of ingredients—whether on television or in his restaurants.

## One Bowl, One Idea

Ok's restaurant brand, Okdongsik, is closely tied to that philosophy. The name, Okdongsik, is derived from his own name, written with slightly altered Chinese characters to mean "a single-item restaurant" and "a restaurant where everyone dines together." True to its name, the restaurant embraces simplicity. The main dish is *dweji gomtang*—a traditional Korean pork soup—served with minimal side dishes.

Ok's *dweji gomtang* breaks expectations of Korean pork soup. Many people picture pork soup as thick and milky, but his broth is clear—made through slow simmering that highlights the natural taste of the ingredients. He chose the name *dweji gomtang* rather than the more common name *dweji gukbap* to signal that this was something different.

"I wanted people to understand that this was not the pork soup they are used to," Ok said.

## Introducing Korean Food to the Global Stage

Ok's approach has traveled abroad. Okdongsik operates multiple locations in Korea and overseas—including New York, Honolulu, Los Angeles, Tokyo, and Paris. Ok tries to keep one rule consistent across these locations: Use local ingredients whenever possible.

Unlike many overseas Korean restaurants that rely on imported ingredients from Korea, Ok prioritizes local sources wherever possible. Ok said tastes change from place to place, even the pork and water. Instead of replicating identical flavors worldwide, he aims for consistency in philosophy and direction, adapting to the local environment while keeping the dish's essential character.

Ok compared this approach to the Korean concept of *shintobuli*, which means harmony between one's body and the land where one lives. "Just as Koreans believe in *shintobuli*—that what is ours is good for us—people in other countries must have their own *shintobuli* too," he explained.

Despite international attention for "Culinary Class Wars Season 2," the restaurant's menu remains simple. Still, Ok is open to expanding within the broader category of *gomtang*. To respect religious and cultural differences, he has introduced variations using beef, chicken, and mushrooms. In Paris, a vegan mushroom *gomtang* is offered as a regular menu item, and a vegan pop-up in New York in January received positive responses.

## A Life in Every Bowl

Ok did not describe cooking as a career he chose simply because he loved it. He began adult life as a noncommissioned officer in the military and later prepared for medical school. After repeated rejections, he entered KHU on a full scholarship in culinary arts, finding his way into the culinary field through an unexpected path.

Over the years, Ok said cooking became a language for his life. "This bowl of *dweji gomtang* represents my entire life and my journey as a chef," he said.

To students who aspire to become chefs, he emphasized patience over quick recognition. He noted the 10,000-hour rule, underscoring the value of sustained effort. "Even if it feels difficult right now, I hope you endure and face it with courage," he said.

Ok's advice fits the tone of his food: Simple on the surface, demanding underneath. While his restaurants span continents, his philosophy of respect and simplicity remains unchanged. For him, the goal is not spectacle. Good things take time to mature, and fundamentals matter more. His bowl of *dweji gomtang* stands as proof.

Ok's *dweji gomtang*

Photo: Okdongsik (okdongsik.net)



Ok and Venerable Seonjae on "Culinary Class Wars Season 2"

Photo: Netflix Korea Youtube (youtube.com/@NetflixKorea)