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Heart & Sool

Alice Jun puts everything into her
makgeolli brewery in Brooklyn.

DON'T TELL ALICE JUN IT'S RICE WINE. "The words we use to describe the company are very intentional," Jun says, suddenly dead-serious after an hour of friendly talk over drinks. Makgeolli is rice *alcohol*, typically between 6 and 8 percent ABV. That's a more accurate translation of *sool* (or *sul*), the Korean term for alcoholic beverages, and Jun knows she only has one shot at getting anyone to understand what she's brewing.

If you've tasted makgeolli at all, it's probably been poured from a plastic soda bottle at a Korean bar or barbecue joint. It's milky white and a little fizzy and tastes like a creamy version of Sprite. This is likely the case whether you're of Korean descent or not; both in the United States and South Korea, the commercial makgeolli landscape is primarily dominated by sweet, low-ABV bottles you can chug like soda. If you weren't told in advance that the drink was alcoholic, you might not even taste it.

This isn't the case with Jun's makgeolli. For her Brooklyn-based brand, Hana Makgeolli, she bottles the silty sool at a minimum of 12 percent ABV and prefers it at 16 percent. The drink is at once floral and earthy, with a flighty effervescence that tingles your cheeks. It has the weight and roundness of a well-oxidized sherry and the lactic twang of a spoonful of yogurt. A sip may remind you of unfiltered saké, but this stuff is richer, more rustic, haunted by echoes of fermentation and musk. It tastes alive.

Story by MAX FALKOWITZ
Photo by ERIC MEDSKER



Alice Jun continued

As of this writing, Hana only exists on paper. Jun, a remarkably poised 26-year-old, and her mentor and business partner John Limb, signed a 10-year lease to their 2,500-square-foot Greenpoint brewery in early February. They'd show me around, she says, but they haven't gotten the keys yet. Up until December 2018, Jun brewed in a shared commercial kitchen, testing new formulas and bottling small batches for events around New York. The pair plan to open the brewery in May or June, and while the space will include a tasting room to educate the public, Jun and Limb are pinning Hana's future on the surging popularity of Korean cuisine across the U.S., driven by pioneering chefs like Roy Choi, Hooni Kim, David Chang and Jenny Kwak. These days you can find gochujang at Kroger; why shouldn't Korea's oldest drink follow in its wake?

"If you look at the way saké grew in the U.S., it was hand in hand with the growth in Japanese food culture," Jun says. "In New York City alone, the number of elevated Korean restaurants has doubled or tripled in the last few years." Los Angeles, with its 300,000-strong Korean population, is another obvious target, but Jun also has her eyes on other diverse dining cities, including Houston, Dallas, Chicago, Atlanta, and New Jersey's Hoboken, Jersey City and Paramus. With its creamy body and lactic acidity, makgeolli goes great with food, and absent the added sugars found in some imported brands, it's a versatile cocktail ingredient. Hana won't be America's first makgeolli brewery—in Wurtsboro, New York, brewer Rosalyn Kim has run a small makgeolli operation called NY Mak since 2012 that sells to some Korean restaurants and bars in Queens, and Cody Burns, a partner at Seattle's upscale Korean steakhouse Girin, has been brewing makgeolli for the restaurant since 2016—

but it's certainly the most ambitious. "I've dumped all my savings into this," Jun continues with an uneasy laugh.

Jun's parents immigrated to the greater Los Angeles area from Seoul in 1989. Her mother pursued a master's degree in traditional Asian medicine before opening her own clinic, while her father jumped from visual art to jewelry making to horology before becoming a restaurateur. Jun credits both of them for her entrepreneurial streak, but it was childhood afternoons home-brewing makgeolli with her father that inspired her to dive into the storied world of sool. "My dad made his first batch of makgeolli in the U.S. the year I was born, and he kept doing it every year after that, so it just became a part of my life," she says. "He's a hands-on kind of person: He taught me how to change a tire, how to go camping, how to make alcohol. It was one of those activities we did: washing the rice, cooling the mix, filling the jars."

When she started brewing her own, in 2011 while in college, she says, "It was all muscle memory, because my dad ingrained the ratios in me, what it should look and feel like." Failed batches led to theorizing and retesting that deepened her makgeolli-making intuition, and soon she began adding flavors to her brews with different grains, fruits and flowers. At the height of her home-brew obsession, "I couldn't sit down at my dining table because it was completely covered in fermenting jars." The decision to share makgeolli with friends through a newsletter was more about reclaiming her living room than making bank.

It's hard to overemphasize just how vital the act of fermentation is to Korean cooking. DIY kimchi is a fact of life in many Korean homes. Funky aged seasoning pastes like gochujang and doenjang



"Drinking too much makes you poorly, drinking poorly is even worse, drink a little, drink in style, drink Molinari."

— Angelo Molinari, 1968

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