

Beef Bulgogi

This popular Korean dish features flavorful strips of marinated steak that cook in minutes. Bulgogi is quick enough for a weeknight but also impressive and fun to serve to company.

≧ BY ANNIE PETITO ≦

When I first tried bulgogi (literally “fire meat”) at a Korean barbecue restaurant not too long ago, I immediately fell in love—not just with the dish but the whole experience. Diners used chopsticks to spread thinly sliced beef, wet with a sweet soy marinade, across a hot grill in the center of the table. The meat sputtered and hissed, and after a few minutes was lightly browned and cooked through. Each diner then piled a few pieces into a lettuce leaf, spooned on a deeply savory chile sauce, wrapped up the lettuce into a package, and ate it. Rice was served alongside to help balance the intense flavors, along with an array of different sauces and pickles collectively known as *banchan*.

Eating in this communal way, with each person customizing their own bites of the dish, was fun and convivial. It’s no wonder that bulgogi is one of the most popular dishes in Korea, at restaurants and at home. I couldn’t wait to re-create the experience in my kitchen.

A Cut Above the Rest

Tender and/or fatty cuts are common for bulgogi so that the thin slices, which end up fairly well-done, don’t turn tough or dry. Popular choices include rib eye, sirloin, tenderloin, and skirt steak. After tasting all the cuts side by side, we chose rib eye for its rich beefiness and generous marbling.

Traditionally, the steak for bulgogi is sliced razor-thin, and we’ve found that partially freezing the meat makes this task much easier. I divided a single rib-eye steak into 1½-inch-wide pieces and



Tuck pieces of the beef inside a lettuce leaf and top them with a dab of spicy *ssamjang*. Kimchi, white rice, and pickled daikon radish are eaten alongside.

then froze them for 35 minutes before slicing them thin. As I worked, the steak was transformed into an impressively large, wispy pile of shaved meat (see “One Steak, Four Servings”). It was now time for the marinade.

Balancing Act

The marinade for bulgogi skews sweet, but in addition to sugar, it contains a good amount of soy sauce and garlic. I put together a batch

containing soy sauce, garlic cloves, sugar, toasted sesame oil, and pepper; tossed it with the meat; and let it sit for 30 minutes.

I cooked the slices (without wiping off the marinade, per tradition) in a nonstick skillet over moderately high heat, let them sit for a minute to brown slightly, and then stirred until they were no longer pink, just a few minutes longer.

Unfortunately, this beef had a sweetness that screamed teriyaki, not bulgogi. I decreased the sugar from 6 tablespoons to 4, increased the soy sauce from 2 to 3 tablespoons, and for savoriness, doubled the garlic cloves to four and added ¼ cup of chopped onion—an ingredient I had seen in some bulgogi recipes. I pureed the mixture (also common) and then marinated and cooked the beef as before. Much better: The sweetness was still apparent, but much more tempered.

Treat It Right

The meat tasted great and wasn’t dry, but it was a bit chewy, since the thin pieces couldn’t help but be cooked well beyond medium-rare. Many bulgogi recipes address this issue by including certain fruits such as pear for the enzymes they contain that supposedly tenderize meat. But I found that tossing the beef with baking soda (our go-to treatment

Punch Up Your Pantry with These Korean Staples

Our bulgogi recipe features three mainstays of Korean cuisine that can be used in all sorts of ways.

KIMCHI: In Korea, this accompaniment is on the table at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There are hundreds of variations, but the best-known type, which is tangy and spicy, is made of salted fermented napa cabbage and seasoned with chili powder, garlic, ginger, and scallions. Add it to grain bowls, stir-fries, scrambled eggs, burgers, hot dogs, or grilled cheese.

GOCHUJANG: This thick, sweet, savory, and spicy paste is made from *gochugaru* (Korean chile flakes), dried fermented soybean powder, sweet rice powder, salt, and sometimes sugar. Use it in Korean Fried Chicken, marinades, or dipping sauces or to pep up soups, stews, and even deviled eggs.

DOENJANG: Fermented soybeans give this coarse-textured, miso-like, salty, rich paste a slight sourness. Use as a replacement for miso in soups, stews, and dressings or as a coating on meats, fish, or tofu.



A POWERFUL TRIO
Keep *doenjang*, *gochujang*, and kimchi on hand for authentic Korean flavor.

for tenderizing meat) and letting it sit for a few minutes before marinating it was more effective, as pear and other fruits turned the surface of the meat mushy (for details, see “Try a Little Tenderness [But Not Too Much]”).

But I had one more question about the marinade: The test kitchen learned long ago that marinades do most of their work on the meat’s surface, and my thin slices were nearly all surface. What’s more, the beef was cooking directly in its marinade. Was soaking the slices for 30 minutes superfluous? When tasting three batches—one marinated for 30 minutes, one for 15 minutes, and another just before cooking—no one could detect a difference. A quick soak just before cooking was the way to go.

I cooked up another batch of meat, this time adding a handful of scallion greens during the last 30 seconds for freshness and a vibrant green color. The salty-sweet beef was ultratender and moist.

Party Time

Finally, I turned to the banchan. First up was the traditional savory chile sauce *ssamjang* to dab onto the meat. I combined minced scallion whites with two potently flavored Korean pantry staples made from fermented soy beans: sweet, savory, and spicy *gochujang* and salty, rich *doenjang* (see “Punch Up Your Pantry with These Korean Staples”). I also added sugar, garlic, toasted sesame oil, and a little water to loosen its consistency. Then, for a crisp, pungent element, I soaked daikon radishes in vinegar, salt, and sugar for 30 minutes to create a quick pickle.

With steamed rice, lettuce leaves, and kimchi to go with the tender beef, spicy sauce, and tangy pickles, I had a fun, satisfying meal that I couldn’t wait to share.

ONE STEAK, FOUR SERVINGS

Sliced paper-thin and served with rice and other accompaniments in bulgogi, a single rib-eye steak is plenty to serve four people.



DIVIDE AND FREEZE A RIB EYE

Cut rib-eye steak crosswise into 1½-inch-wide pieces. Trim exterior and interior fat. Freeze until very firm to make slicing easier.



TURN PIECES ONTO CUT SIDE

Stand each piece on cut side to expose grain.



THINLY SLICE

Use sharp knife to shave meat as thin as possible against grain. Precise slicing isn’t necessary—it’s more important that the slices are thin than that they are perfect.

Chile Sauce (Ssamjang)

- 4 scallions, white and light green parts only, minced
- ¼ cup doenjang
- 1 tablespoon gochujang
- 1 tablespoon water
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced

Beef

- 1 (1¼-pound) boneless rib-eye steak, cut crosswise into 1½-inch-wide pieces and trimmed
- 1 tablespoon water
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ cup chopped onion
- ¼ cup sugar
- 3 tablespoons soy sauce
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil
- 4 scallions, dark green parts only, cut into 1½-inch pieces

1. FOR THE PICKLES: Whisk vinegar, sugar, and salt together in medium bowl. Add daikon and toss to combine. Gently press on daikon to submerge. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes or up to 24 hours.

2. FOR THE CHILE SAUCE: Combine all ingredients in small bowl. Cover and set aside. (Sauce can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

3. FOR THE BEEF: Place beef on large plate and freeze until very firm, 35 to 40 minutes. Once firm, stand each piece on 1 cut side on cutting board and, using sharp knife, shave beef against grain as thin as possible. (Slices needn’t be perfectly intact.) Combine water and baking soda in medium bowl. Add beef and toss to coat. Let sit at room temperature for 5 minutes.

4. Meanwhile, process onion, sugar, soy sauce, garlic, sesame oil, and pepper in food processor until smooth, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add onion mixture to beef and toss to evenly coat.

5. Heat vegetable oil in 12-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add beef mixture in even layer and cook, without stirring, until browned on 1 side, about 1 minute. Stir and continue to cook until beef is no longer pink, 3 to 4 minutes longer. Add scallion greens and cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer to platter. Serve with pickles and chile sauce.

Try a Little Tenderness (But Not Too Much)

Many bulgogi marinade recipes include pear or kiwi—fruits that contain enzymes that supposedly tenderize the meat. To test their tenderizing effects for ourselves, we added ½ cup each of crushed pear and crushed kiwi to separate batches of our marinade and soaked slices of rib-eye steak in each for 30 minutes. We also tossed more sliced steak in our go-to tenderizer—a solution of baking soda and water—for 5 minutes (since baking soda works on contact, longer isn’t necessary) and then stir-fried all three samples per our recipe.

While the baking soda–treated batch cooked up perfectly moist and tender, the pear- and kiwi-marinated meat cooked up mushy on the surface. That’s because the tenderizers work differently: Whereas baking soda tenderizes by unraveling and separating the meat’s protein strands, the powerful fruit enzymes (calpain in pear; actinidain in kiwi) snip the protein strands

into smaller pieces that yield a mushy effect. We’ll stick with baking soda when we need to tenderize meat.



USE BAKING SODA, NOT A FRUITY MARINADE
Baking soda leaves meat nicely tender, not mushy.

KOREAN MARINATED BEEF (BULGOGI)

SERVES 4 TOTAL TIME: 1¼ HOURS

To save time, prepare the pickles and chile sauce while the steak is in the freezer. For information on daikon, see page 28. You can substitute 2 cups of bean sprouts and one cucumber, peeled, quartered lengthwise, seeded, and sliced thin on the bias, for the daikon, if desired. It’s worth seeking out the Korean fermented bean pastes *doenjang* and *gochujang*, which are sold in Asian markets and online. If you can’t find them, you can substitute red or white miso for the doenjang and sriracha for the gochujang. You can eat bulgogi as a plated meal with steamed rice and kimchi or wrap small portions of the beef in lettuce leaves with chile sauce and eat them like tacos.

Pickles

- 1 cup rice vinegar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 1½ teaspoons table salt
- 1 pound daikon radish, peeled and cut into 1½-inch-long matchsticks

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