



## THE PENINSULA

### Korean Food Shaping U.S. Perceptions

Published December 3, 2025

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Category: [Korea Abroad](#)



South Korean President Lee Jae Myung's recent appearance on a cooking reality TV show may seem like light entertainment, but it is actually reflective of a strategic highlighting of a key facet of U.S.-South Korea relations. According to [KEI's 2025 annual survey](#), food is both the most popular aspect of South Korean culture among Americans and one of the most effective factors for promoting positive perceptions of South Korea. Unlike other cultural exports that cater to specific groups, food engages people across gender, age and political orientation, making it an inclusive and scalable cultural asset. Could food-based cultural outreach be a form of public diplomacy that strengthens South Korea's image, expands goodwill, and facilitates cooperation with the United States?

While public attitudes toward South Korea in the United States are broadly favorable, interest in food stands out among other South Korean cultural exports. KEI's 2025 annual survey shows that more than 68 percent of Americans expressed a favorability

(strongly/somewhat favorable) toward South Korea, which suggests a generally receptive public environment. Culture is viewed as a strong contributor to the positive perception of South Korea. 60 percent of respondents said South Korean culture has a positive influence on South Korea's image, while only 7 percent said it had a negative effect. Those who believe culture improves South Korea's image are much more likely to view the country favorably. Culture, therefore, serves as a meaningful entry point into national perception. When asking respondents to select South Korean cultural topics that they are interested in, food stood out, being selected by 42 percent of respondents, compared to other items including K-beauty (15 percent), movies (15 percent), and K-pop (12 percent). Among respondents interested in Korean food, almost everyone, 96 percent, held favorable views of South Korea.

Figure 1. Korean food leads all other cultural categories as the most common point of interest in South Korea among Americans.

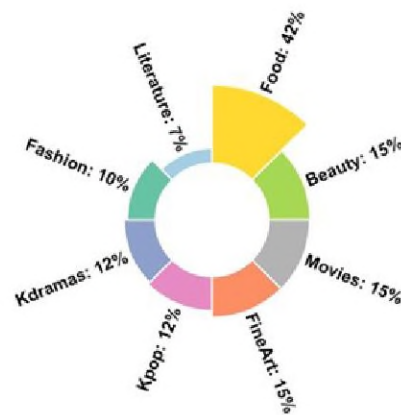


Figure 2. Among respondents interested in Korean food, 95.7 percent hold a favorable view of South Korea.



Food thus occupies a unique position: it is both the most common entry point to South Korean culture and is closely tied to positive national perceptions. This suggests that food functions not only as cultural exchange but also as a reliable and inclusive channel for building public goodwill.

**Why Food? Culinary Culture in the U.S.-South Korea Context**

Food is the most common entry point into South Korean culture for Americans. Unlike media content, food **does not require** language fluency or contextual knowledge, making it broadly accessible. In the first half of 2024, South Korea's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (MAFRA) **reported** that K-Food exports reached USD 6.21 billion, with strong growth in the U.S. market. This accessibility helps explain why interest in food is significantly higher than that of K-pop and television dramas. As South Korean cuisine spreads through restaurants, consumer products, and tourism, it reinforces cultural affinity while deepening economic ties between the two countries.

Cuisine is formally recognized as a tool of diplomacy. The U.S. Department of State's **Diplomatic Culinary Partnership**, for instance, utilizes food and the dining experience as diplomatic tools to engage dignitaries and bridge cultures. Because food is politically neutral, it can strengthen perceptions of South Korea without provoking ideological tension.

Together, these factors help explain why food may be more effective than other cultural elements in shaping U.S. views of South Korea.

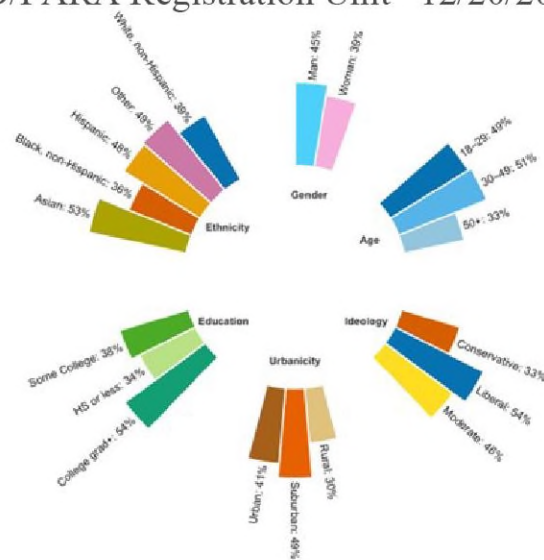
### **Which Groups Are Most Susceptible to Food-based Cultural Influence?**

According to the KEI Annual Survey, interest in Korean food varies across demographic groups of Americans. Among younger (18-29) and middle-aged adults (30-49), 51 and 49 percent of respondents reported an interest in Korean food, respectively. Americans 50 years or older had a lower interest, with 33 percent of respondents indicating an interest in Korean food. Interest in Korean food also varies along education level, with a higher proportion (54 percent) of college educated adults reporting an interest in Korean food. Among ethnic groups, 53 percent of Asian respondents reported an interest in Korean food, closely followed by Others (49 percent) and Hispanics (48 percent). White respondents (39 percent) and Black respondents (36 percent) indicated a weaker interest in Korean food.

The study finds the largest demographic differences in interest in Korean food along urbanicity. 49 percent of suburban respondents reported an interest in Korean food, followed by 41 percent in urban areas and 30 percent in rural areas. This high level of suburban interest is particularly meaningful and may reflect the significant suburbanization of immigrant and ethnic communities across the United States. As immigrant populations increasingly settle in suburban areas rather than urban cores, cultural engagement opportunities may also be shifting **outward** to these more **diverse** and dynamic communities.

Along political lines, the interest for Korean food is significantly more prevalent among liberals than conservatives. 54 percent of liberal respondents indicated an interest in Korean food, while 33 percent of conservative respondents reported the same, making up a difference of 21 percent.

Figure 3. Percent of Americans Who Expressed Interest in Korean Food Across Demographic Groups



## Conclusion

The survey findings show that food is not just a cultural product, but it also aligns with—and possibly shapes—public attitudes toward South Korea. Unlike other cultural exports that may appeal to specific demographic or political groups, food generates broad, positive perceptions of South Korea among Americans, creating a durable base of goodwill that supports bilateral cooperation even during policy shifts.

Food also acts as a social buffer that helps stabilize the U.S.-South Korea relationship beyond high politics. When Americans view South Korea favorably, it becomes easier to sustain partnerships, promote tourism and consumer demand, and maintain public support for the alliance, especially when political issues become sensitive.

These advantages underscore the importance of using food more strategically in public diplomacy. Integrating cuisine into cultural festivals, tourism campaigns, and community programs can turn everyday interest into lasting engagement. Partnerships with chefs, restaurants, and local organizations can reach audiences that traditional diplomacy may overlook. By complementing existing cultural and official channels, food provides South Korea with an opportunity to strengthen its image and long-term cooperation with the United States.

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Return to the Peninsula

