

From comfort to high-tech: Food a serious quest at Olympics

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In this Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2018 photo, United States figure skaters Adam Rippon, left, and Vincent Zhou pose for cameras after a press conference at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Food is a big deal for Olympians. The U.S. team has its own chefs and dietitians, as well as two "nutrition centers" at the Winter Olympics. Zhou said he needs a lot of carbs, "before, between and after sessions," to fend off fatigue. While Rippon said sheer abundance can be a danger for athletes. (AP Photo/J. David Ake)

First, U.S. snowboarding star Chloe Kim tweeted about being "down for some ice cream" while competing in Pyeongchang, then about being "hangry" because she hadn't finished her breakfast sandwich.

Clearly, food is a big deal for Olympians, and it's usually much more complicated than ice cream and sandwiches: the very specific, highly calibrated fuel they put in their bodies—for energy, for health, for warmth, for a psychological and physiological edge—is an important part of what makes them excel.

Korean food is some of the world's finest—savory, salty soups with fish so tender it falls off the bone; thick slabs of grilled pork and beef backed with spicy kimchi that many Korean grandmothers swear cures the common cold. But it's very different from what many foreign Olympians are used to.

"What I recommend for [athletes](#) right now in competition mode is to be as safe as possible. This might happen once in a lifetime; you don't want to blow it with just having an upset stomach because you've eaten something that's different to what your body's used to," Susie Parker-Simmons, a sports dietitian for the U.S. Olympic Committee in Colorado Springs, Colorado, said in an interview in Pyeongchang. "I say, as soon as the games is over, go at it; enjoy, be adventurous."

FEEDING THE ATHLETES

The U.S. team has its own chefs and dietitians, as well as two "nutrition centers" here. And then there's the food at two athletes villages, where nearly 3,000 athletes from 90 different countries—most of whom strictly follow unique food routines—get fed.

The goal is to provide lots of everything.

The two villages each have massive, 4,000-square-meter (43,055-square-foot) dining rooms where nearly 500 chefs and cooking assistants provide a combined 18,000 meals per day. Each dining room is open 24 hours a day and offers about 450 different types of food in buffets that include Western, Asian, Korean, Halal, Kosher, vegetarian and gluten-free dishes, David Kihyun Kwak, the director of food and beverage at the Pyeongchang Olympics, said in an interview.

To determine what to serve at Pyeongchang, Kwak's team analyzed food data for the past five Olympics and also worked closely with other nations' nutrition specialists.

The amount of raw ingredients used each day to feed the athletes is staggering: 700 kilograms (1,540 pounds) of beef, 450 kilograms (992 pounds) of eggs, 350 kilograms (771 pounds) of lamb, 200 kilograms (440 pounds) of bacon, 170 kilograms (374 pounds) of chicken, 100 kilograms (220 pounds) of rice, 3,800 kilograms (7,495 pounds) of fruits and vegetables, about 15,000 pieces of bread and 800 pizzas.

FOOD SAFETY

Most Olympic athletes don't eat outside of the villages because of worries about the purity of ingredients, Kwak said. The United States did tests before the 2008 Beijing Olympics that found some local chicken contained enough steroids to trigger positive test results.

Experts examine ingredients closely for possible contamination that could threaten athletes' health or disrupt doping tests. South Korea's Ministry of Food and Drug Safety has sent more than a dozen food safety specialists to take ingredients samples to buses equipped with fast-testing laboratories to look for potential problems before the food even gets eaten.



In this Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2018 photo, United States figure skaters Vincent Zhou, left, and Adam Rippon answer questions during a press conference at the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Food is a big deal for Olympians. The U.S. team has its own chefs and dietitians, as well as two "nutrition centers" at the Winter Olympics. Zhou said he needs a lot of carbs, "before, between and after sessions," to fend off fatigue. While Rippon said sheer abundance can be a danger for athletes. (AP Photo/J. David Ake)

HOME COOKING

Finland's Riikka Valila, the oldest women's ice hockey player in Olympic history at 44, likes the food options here but misses the "really good bread" back in Finland. She said some of her teammates on gluten-free diets have brought food from home.

The Americans shipped over 85 pallets, each about 6 feet tall and 3 feet

deep and wide, filled with pastas, sauces, [peanut butter](#), grains and plants like quinoa, and spices, Parker-Simmons said.

There's food meant to help with performance and recovery, but there's also "psychological food," which Parker-Simmons explains like this: Say an athlete training her whole life for the Olympics fails. She takes it hard; she stops eating. This is when the dietitians will turn to something special—a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, maybe, or Cheez-Its.

Vincent Zhou, a U.S. figure skater, said he needs a lot of carbs, "before, between and after sessions," to fend off fatigue. "It hasn't been very difficult finding comfort food," he said.

EATING FOR PERFORMANCE

The work to optimize nutrition can seem as thorough as the work to perfect the sports skills.

Dietitians have to regularly test cross-country skiers, for instance, who have the highest energy expenditure of any sport in the world, Parker-Simmons said. An average-sized woman will need 4,000 calories or more per day to train and compete; a typical man needs about 7,000 calories, she said. Ski jumpers, on the other hand, sometimes have to drop 10 kilograms below their natural body weight, while keeping up their muscle mass and energy.

FANS SPLIT ON KOREAN FOOD

Foreign fans, of course, have their own food worries and routines.

South Korean officials have tried to provide menus in English and other languages to thousands of local restaurants. And the Korea Tourist Organization has published a brochure, complete with a hotline in

English, Japanese, Korean and Chinese, that outlines "must eat" dishes and where to find them.

Some tourists embrace the exotic.

"I was impressed with the little fish, the eyes and everything," Julie Thibaudeau, 53, from Quebec, said as she celebrated her son's gold medal in mogul skiing in a local Pyeongchang restaurant. "I tried, and it was salty, but it was good. And after that I had a good glass of ... beer."



A Korean family eats at a traditional restaurant in Jeongseon, South Korea, Thursday, Feb. 15, 2018. Korean food is some of the world's finest - savory, salty soups with fish so tender it falls off the bone; thick slabs of grilled pork and beef backed with spicy kimchi that many Korean grandmothers swear cures the common cold. But it's very different from what many foreign Olympians are used to. (AP Photo/Felipe Dana)

Others play it safe. Very safe.

"We found Papa John's (pizza) today, which was literally life-changing because ... we haven't eaten a lot for the last few days," Rachel Basford, 31, a teacher in Shanghai who's from Kent, England, said while drinking in a fried chicken restaurant. "I'm not that adventurous when it comes to trying local foods. I just like to eat British food in various places around the world."

Asked if she planned to try Korean food she said, with a laugh: "No. Absolutely not. We're going to Seoul tomorrow so there's the McDonald's at Seoul Station, so that should be good."

WILLPOWER IN THE DINING HALL

For the athletes, sheer abundance can be a danger.

When U.S. figure skater Adam Rippon got to Pyeongchang a coach told him about the last Winter Games in Sochi, when one of her athletes became very excited about all the [food](#) available even as his performance in training tanked.

The coach finally understood what was happening when the athlete donned his costume for the short program: "He'd been in the cafeteria the whole time; he'd gained seven pounds before the competition," Rippon said with a laugh. "And my coach is sitting next to me, and he was like, 'ha, ha, ha, ha,' and he turned to me and said, 'You'd better not get fat while you're here.'"

Chloe Kim, by the way, finally got her [ice cream](#)—and a gold medal. She could be seen eating her treat while being swarmed by reporters.

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