

MARKETS

Geumsan Ginseng and Herbal Market

Kim Mi-ok
Freelance Writer



Korean ginseng has long been an export item of the country well known for its high quality in markets around the world. However, ginseng accounts for only a small percentage of Korea's total agricultural production.

In *Samguksagi* (*History of the Three Kingdoms*), a history book written during the Goryeo Dynasty (918-1392), it notes that in 513, ginseng was presented as tribute to the emperor Liangwu of China's Liang Dynasty on behalf of Muryeong, the 25th king of Korea's Baekje Kingdom. In *Sinnongbonchokyeongjipju* (*Shennong Bencaojing*), a pharmacopoeia written by Tao Hongjing of the Liang Dynasty 1,400 years ago, ginseng is described as a plant that has three branches and five leaves, grows in the shade, and can be gathered among linden trees. In the journal, medicinal herbs are ranked in three categories according to their usage and value. Ginseng is given a high value, and is said to be non-toxic



Ginseng harvested in Geumsan (left)

A painting at the foot of Mt. Jinaksan depicting the legend of the Gang family (below), and Gaesamgak, a memorial to the ginseng plant in Seonggok-ri where the son of the Gang family first cultivated ginseng (bottom)





A ginseng field (top)

A farmer harvesting ginseng (above)

and not harmful to the body no matter how much is consumed.

Ginseng, an Indigenous Herb

The scientific name of the ginseng grown in Korea is *Panax ginseng*, which means a universal remedy, or cure-all, but it is commonly referred to as Goryeo ginseng. Ginseng has been regarded as an intriguing herb in both the East and the West from long ago, and is even mentioned in *Geupchwipyeon* by Shi You of China's Yuan Emperor era of the Western Han Dynasty (BC. 48-33). Since ginseng cultivation began in the 16th century, the efficacy of ginseng has been noted in almost every medical journal in the East while numerous doctors in Korea and elsewhere have cited its outstanding attributes. One of the scientific-



ly proven medicinal properties of ginseng is its ability to enhance the body's homeostasis. Research also indicates that ginseng is effective for relieving stress and fatigue, helping fight diabetes and cancer, and stimulating brain activity, as well as treating hypertension, arteriosclerosis, and gastroenteric disorders.

In particular, ginseng is extremely sensitive to its environmental conditions in terms of temperature and soil composition. Although ginseng is produced in both Japan and the United States, Korea is recognized as having an ideal environment for growing ginseng. Thanks to the geographical location of the Korean peninsula and its related environmental conditions, Goryeo ginseng is known for its superior quality as compared to that of other nations. The vegetative period for

ginseng is 180 days in Korea, which is relatively longer than the 120-130 days in other locations. This helps ginseng develop a root with a firmer texture and incomparable fragrance. Goryeo ginseng is divided into two different strains based on where it is grown: Gaeseong ginseng in South Korea and Gaeseong ginseng in North Korea. Plump and soft Gaeseong ginseng differs from the thin and white Geumsan ginseng, which is also called *bakjesam*. Ginseng is grown everywhere in Korea, except the island of Jeju-do, but ginseng coming from the rich sandy soil of Geumsan has earned quite a notable reputation.

Geumsan Ginseng

Geumsan, located in Chungcheongnam-do province, has a terrain over 70



The red berries of a ginseng plant (above)



On market day, this elderly woman is selling ginseng she raised herself (below). Business is good today as a vendor sells a generous amount of ginseng to a customer (bottom).



percent mountainous, providing excellent conditions for growing ginseng and herbs with moderate temperatures and sufficient rain and sunlight. Located in the middle of the Korean peninsula near the southern branch of the Han River, the open fields in Geumsan are too steeply sloped and soil conditions are not conducive to growing vegetables. With the bleached soil there being acidic and nutrient-poor, the residents of the area have been forced to cultivate ginseng and herbs for a living rather than grains.

There is a legend about Geumsan ginseng involving a young man of the Gang family. According to the legend, about 1,500 years ago, this man lived alone with his mother. His father had passed away long ago and his mother was ailing. The man went to a Buddhist retreat in the mountains every day to pray for his mother's recovery. One day, the guardian spirit of the mountain appeared in the young man's dream and told him to dig up the root of an herb with three reddish fruits growing near a rock wall and then to have his mother take this. The man did as he had been told in his dream, and miraculously his mother recovered quickly thereafter. Following his mother's miraculous recovery, the man started to collect the herb's seeds and give them to his neighbors. Over the years, the plants grown from these seeds were used to cure sick people, and the local residents started to call the plant *insam*, "human plant," because the shape of its root resembled the human body. They believed that it was a gift from the gods and built Gaesangak, a memorial to the ginseng plant in Geumsan to celebrate its curative powers and mark the site where the son of the Gang family first cultivated ginseng.

The Geumsan area produces four types of ginseng: *susam*, water ginseng; *baeksam*, white ginseng; *hongsam*, red ginseng; and *taegeuksam*. *Susam* is ginseng roots that are dried without processing, whereas *baeksam* refers to gin-

seng roots that are peeled and dried in the sun, which produces a light yellowish color. There are three types of *baeksam*: *jiksam*, straight roots; *goksam*, curvy roots; and *misam*, small roots. *Hongsam* refers to ginseng roots that are steamed unpeeled and dried, whereas *taegeuksam* are roots that are boiled in water.

To enhance its medicinal efficacy, Geumsan ginseng is harvested in early July and processed in late October. Called "summer ginseng," it is known for its high saponin content, ginseng's key component. Summer ginseng contains 52 percent saponin whereas ginseng gathered in winter has only 34 percent.

Herbal Market

The Geumsan market, which is located in Jungdo-ri, begins to stir at two o'clock in the morning when people and trucks loaded with all manner of herbs arrive from all the provinces to buy and sell herbal products. Upon arrival at the market area, which is about a three-hour drive from Seoul, people are greeted by huge mounds of ginseng. The fragrance exuded by the vast concentration of herbs and ginseng is overwhelming.

Starting from the Geumsan Bridge, a number of ginseng and herbal shops cover large areas of Jungdo-ri, Geumsan, which is called "the street of ginseng." It is the place to go for a wide variety of high quality ginseng. The five-day Geumsan market which opens every five days (the 2nd, 7th, 12th, 17th, 22nd, and 27th of each month) attracts throngs of customers while providing the festive atmosphere of a traditional Korean bazaar. There are four major markets: the Old Market, where ginseng has been traded since ancient times, the International Ginseng Market, the *Susam* Market and the Herbal Market. They are all situated along the street that leads to Muju. Eighty percent of all the ginseng grown in Korea finds its way through Geumsan. Ginseng and other herbs can be found in the eight-story Geumsan Ginseng Shopping

Center as well as the Geumsan Ginseng Yangnyeong Market, which sells some 200 different kinds of herbs. On market days, the streets and roads are filled with vendors displaying their goods on vinyl mats including friendly old ladies hawking their homegrown herbs.

Nowadays, most people prefer modern and new things; however, the Geumsan market still manages to attract customers from all over the world. As soon as you enter downtown Geumsan, you get the feeling of being at a Chinese herb clinic due to the advanced development of the herbal medicine industry in this area. Another reason for visiting is to experience the annual Geumsan Ginseng Festival that has been held in September or October in Ilwon, Geumsan since 1981. It was started to celebrate the harvest and to publicize Geumsan ginseng internationally. With its local legend of the filial son of the Gang family and its central location, the Geumsan Ginseng Festival is a favorite of many, not only as a folk festival but also as a useful means of promoting Korean traditions and the effectiveness of Korean herbs and ginseng. It offers a diversity of things to see, do and eat while continuing to gain prominence as an international event. Based on the efforts of traditional Korean cooking experts, Geumsan has constantly developed and refined a variety of foods made with ginseng. Visitors can try ginseng liquor and ginseng tea as well as tasty ginseng dishes. Among the favorites are ginseng chicken soup, fried sweet ginseng cake, ginseng pickles, and ginseng kebabs.

For sometime now, Geumsan ginseng has been exported to Japan, Southeast Asia, North America and Europe. Moreover, the provincial government of Chungcheongnam-do has set up overseas ginseng exhibition halls in Japan, the United States and China to boost the popularity of ginseng and enable ginseng connoisseurs to have convenient access to the best quality ginseng. Geumsan ginseng. ♦



Dealers from across the country flock to the ginseng auction (top).
A bottle of ginseng wine containing ginseng roots (above)