

# Cookbook Club Cook(s) Korean! – A Review of Robin Ha’s A Comic Book with Recipes

written by Carrie Helms Tippen | April 2, 2018



I texted my friend Katie, “I’m pretty sure I’ve had this exact nightmare before.”

I was about to be at a party where I had never met a single one of the attendees. And I was the host.

Around Christmas, a member of one of my beloved Facebook groups for food lovers shared [this article from Serious Eats](#). The article described a Cookbook Club where guests cooked dishes from the same cookbook and then shared them in a communal meal.

The community immediately agreed it was a fantastic idea. Pretty soon, someone in my city took that excitement a step further and started to make a concrete plan. She asked people to comment if we were interested in Cookbook Club and to name a book we wanted to start with.

I was attracted to the Cookbook Club on several levels. Professionally, cookbooks are my thing. I’m an English professor, but [I write and teach about cookbooks as literature](#). I’ve been interested for a long time in how people actually read and use cookbooks – and what it is that moves them from being readers to users. I wanted to sit in a room full of these real people and ask them all my nerdy questions.

Personally, I was settling into my city. Even after two years, I still had a pretty small circle of [IRL](#) companions and acquaintances. I loved the creativity and compassion of this Facebook group. It was an oasis in a sometimes (okay, always) depressing social media desert. This was my tribe. We just hadn’t met yet.

I commented cheerfully, “I’m in!” and made my suggestion for a book. I had already begun to write a review of a fascinating little cookbook, [Cook](#)

[Korean!: A Comic Book with Recipes by Robin Ha.](#) The book is based on Ha's web comic called "[Banchan in Two Pages.](#)" Ha's book offers a beginner's guide to Korean cuisine in brightly colored drawings and comic script.

It's an interesting blend of the expected cookbook conventions with a comic twist. The introductions and chapter interludes are narratives like one would find in any cookbook: the story of how the author learned to cook and the rhetorical purpose of the cookbook, an informative introduction to the cuisine, a description of key ingredients and common pantry items. Only in *Cook Korean!*, the story is delivered in comic panels.

The recipes are mostly two-page spreads in a layout typical of most cookbooks. A short descriptive headnote follows the decorative titles. A list of ingredients is provided on what looks like a notepad held in place by a cartoon tack. It reminded me a little of Hugh Acheson's *A New Turn in the South* and its hand-made scrapbook aesthetic with doodles and handwritten titles on scraps of paper. However, where Acheson provides paragraphs of step-by-step instructions in standard sans-serif type and plenty of colorful photos, Ha's recipe procedures continue the hand-drawn comic style.

I'm not terribly practiced at reading comics, not nearly as practiced as I am decoding traditional recipe texts. I'll admit to some anxieties. Just looking at the recipe pages made me a little nervous, afraid I'd make a mistake or miss some important step. But Ha does just about everything she can to prevent that. The steps flow logically left to right, top to bottom. Ha provides a lot of graphic clues to keep the reader moving in the right order. Yellow dashed lines separate the units of text and drawings instead of panels or paragraphs. Big yellow arrows direct the reader to the next step. The drawings depict ingredients, procedures, serving suggestions, and cute little anthropomorphized animals and vegetable slices; each recipe is "hosted" by the character of Dengki, a young woman in traditional Korean dress who provides information or instructions in speech bubbles.

*Cook Korean!* is charming to look at and engaging to read, but when the idea for the cookbook club came up, I hadn't yet been brave enough to try to cook any of the recipes. It looked like a book made for reading, even if it was a kind of reading I'm not used to. Though realistic photos certainly give traditional cookbook readers plenty of material for food fantasies, the fanciful comic layout seems to further require readers to use their imaginations to visualize each step. Comic books as a genre have a historical connection to fiction, fantasy, super heroes, amazing tales. The genre invites a reader to dream, not to do. I've never looked at a cartoon of food and drooled.

I've got a significant professional stake in convincing folks that cookbooks are valuable for reading. So I wondered if I was starting to be like one of those hammers to whom everything looks like a nail. I wondered if my relative inexperience as a comic reader was keeping me out of the kitchen, not the author's intention. I wondered how experienced and adventurous cooks like the ones in our Facebook group would react to the comic style of the recipes and artwork. I decided to take advantage of a focus group.

After a bit, we had a date and a time. And then, since I was the only commenter to suggest a book, I won the pick, and I volunteered to host. The first two people to accept my Facebook friend request were colleagues I knew well. Then more joined up. Folks started claiming dishes they wanted to cook: Soy Garlic Beef over Rice (bulgogi dubap), Braised Beef in Soy Sauce with Eggs (jangjorim), Sweet Potato Noodles (japchae), Spicy Beef Soup (yukgaejang), Seaweed Rice Roll (gimbap), Cool and Spicy Cucumber (oisobagi), and Square-Cut Kimchi Gazpacho (nabak kimchi). When it looked like the guest list was complete, I checked our list against Ha's "Korean Meal Guide," a diagram of the "typical Korean dining table," to see if we had it covered. I decided to cook sticky rice (bap), Pan-Fried Tofu (dubu buchim), Spicy Bok Choy (cheonggyeongchae muchim) for our blanched vegetable (namul), and a Brown Sugar Pancake (hotteok) to satisfy our American need for dessert and to round out the table.



I wanted to make a cocktail from the book, but there weren't many to choose from. The watermelon one was out of season for a winter party. The other was made with yogurt and Sprite, and it didn't appeal to me (though I guessed it would be a little like a lemon-lime version of the [Colorado Bulldogs](#) I used to drink in college).

I studied the recipes I picked and wrote out a schedule to have everything ready by as close to 7:00 as I could. I thought we'd make the pancakes together after dinner for some interactive theatre. I bought everything I needed in one trip to Whole Foods with a bill under \$50. I cleaned my kitchen within an inch of its life and hid piles of laundry in the basement.

Then the only two people on the guest list I knew had to cancel the day before the party, and I had a mild freak out. I'm an extrovert, but I was

raised by introverts and am married to one, and I sometimes channel their anxieties. I want – *need* – to connect with humans, but I don't want them to know how badly. *How weird am I going to be?* I called in a favor with a buddy who would back me up, and true to form, Katie came right over.

I shouldn't have worried. It turns out that *no one* in the party knew anyone at the party. We were all strangers, though we had so much in common and so many mutual friends. As we loaded (and then emptied) our plates, we talked work (two of us were writing professors, two of us were nurses, two of us were writers), relationships (two of us were divorced, two of us were partnered, four of us were online dating), cooking, eating, our mutual love of our Facebook community, which of the group trends we had participated in (That fancy Christmas tree bundt pan? The spirally one, too? The apple cider cake? The crack broccoli? The Instant Pot?). By the time we crowded in the kitchen with our glasses of wine to make the brown sugar pancakes, we were old friends – the way only people who would choose to show up alone to a party of strangers from the internet could be.



The food was good and good looking. I was impressed that even without photographs of the prepared dishes as a guide, we had each paid attention to aesthetics, chopping our veg in uniform cubes and presenting them beautifully. The recipes helped; they called for ingredients that yielded gorgeous blends of color. Ha's experience as a visual artist showed on the plate, and our social media minded crew knew just how to make them Instagram-ready.

We agreed that the comic layout of the book was intimidating, unfamiliar, and hard to focus on. I would read the next step on the page, but by the time I got to my mixing bowl, I had forgotten it. I checked, double and triple

checked. The drawings were universally entertaining, but not actually that helpful at confirming what to do next. We thought there were some steps that might not make sense to a truly novice cook. Our Euroamerican crowd was mostly new to cooking Korean food but practiced at cooking generally. What we didn't know, we were able to guess. Some ingredients were hard to find or only came in huge packages we knew we'd end up wasting. Knowing what to substitute in that case wasn't easy, but the trips to Korean markets were part of the experience.

Did they want to read it or use it? Tough one. They were glad that they had used it. The dishes were repeatable, tasty, impressive to guests but not too labor intensive. But none of us were sure we'd have used it without the incentive of the party and a community of other cooks. I thought about it after the dishes were washed (thanks, Steph!), and something about the comic genre made me interested as a reader but skeptical as a user. My inherited literary prejudices (that I recognize and actively try to fight against) do not recognize "comics" as "real books." The author is an artist, not a "real" professional chef. The pictures aren't "real." It's so playful and imaginative, but is it serious? Why should I trust this book? How do I know the author has even tried these recipes?

But I should have realized that to draw the steps, Ha would have had to experience the steps. Not only done them, but studied them, remembered them, visualized and imagined them in her head, transferred that imagination to drawn image on paper. Not like the chef cookbook I hold in so much esteem. I know full well that in those books most of the time a team of assistants does the cooking and the stylist sets up the plate and a photographer frames the perfect flattering shot and a ghost writer tells the stories. The home-made and hand-drawn quality of *Cook Korean!* ought to have communicated to me more intimacy between the author and the results of the recipe. It was hard to shake the ethos of the conventional chef cookbook that made me suspect of deviations from the formula. The details that communicate earnestness and experience and contribute to beautiful dishes perfect for people who take pictures of everything they eat – these same details make those people uncomfortable and afraid to make the leap from readers to users.

So, I say, go for it. *Cook Korean!* It's not what you're used to as a cookbook reader, but you can trust it. You can trust your knowledge to take you through the steps. Like any reader who encounters a novel form, you can be trained to read comic recipes, and Ha gives you the tools to learn the rules. The results will reward you for your efforts.