

Settle. Seoul

DISCOVER SEOUL · INDIVIDUAL ARTICLE PDF

# Makgeolli in Seoul: A Newcomer’s Guide to Korea’s Oldest Drink.

*From convenience-store green bottles to naturally sparkling craft brews: how fresh rice wine is bought, opened, paired and shared.*

Online guide · Reviewed November 2026 · Read online: www.settleseoul.com/articles/makgeolli-guide-seoul

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> Links in this PDF open the official source or the online guide. Opening hours, prices, programmes and access rules change — confirm with the responsible operator before you travel.

THE ESSENTIALS

- Fresh (생) makgeolli is alive: keep it cold and upright, and open it slowly.
- Read the label for 생 (fresh) or 살균 (pasteurised) before you buy.
- Drink with food, pace yourself, and never drive afterwards.

Official routes: Visit Korea · Visit Seoul · The Sool (traditional liquor portal).

ONLY IN KOREA

## Why fresh makgeolli rarely leaves the country

Makgeolli (막걸리) is a lightly filtered fermented drink made from rice or wheat, water and nuruk (누룩), a traditional fermentation starter. Visit Korea describes it as usually around 4–6% ABV, recorded in historic texts under its older name takju (탁주), and still made in more than a thousand varieties. The name is often explained as 'roughly' or 'freshly' filtered.

### Fresh · 생막걸리 (saeng-makgeolli)

- Unpasteurised, with live yeast still working in the bottle. It keeps producing gentle fizz and slowly becomes drier and more sour.
- Short shelf life and needs refrigeration, which is why it is so hard to find in good condition abroad.

### Pasteurised · 살균 막걸리 (salgyun)

- Heat-treated so fermentation stops. Shelf-stable, milder and more consistent.
- This is what most export bottles are, so the taste back home is often different from a cold fresh bottle in Seoul.

**The family tree**
Visit Korea explains that filtering makgeolli gives cheongju (청주, refined rice wine), and distilling cheongju gives soju. Makgeolli is the base of much of Korea's traditional drinks culture.

LABEL DECODER

## Buying a bottle at CU, GS25 or the mart

The chilled aisle of any convenience store usually has a few everyday makgeolli bottles; marts and department-store food halls carry regional and premium ones. A few words on the label tell you most of what you need.

### 생 / 生 · fresh

- Look for 생막걸리 on the front. Keep it upright and in the fridge on the way home.

### 살균 · pasteurised

- Fine for gifts, picnics or travel, since it does not need constant chilling until opened (check the label).

### Ingredients · 원재료명

- 쌀 (ssal) is rice; 국내산 means domestic; 밀 (mil) is wheat. Some everyday bottles add sweeteners such as 아스파탐 (aspartame); many premium brews use only rice, nuruk and water.

### Dates · 소비기한 / 제조일자

- 소비기한 is the use-by date; 제조일자 is the production date. A young fresh bottle tends to taste sweeter; an older one drier and tangier.

### Strength · 알코올 도수

- Shown as a percentage. Everyday bottles are commonly around 6%; some premium undiluted styles are much stronger, so check before you pour.

THE RITUAL

## How to open it without a fountain

Fresh makgeolli separates into a clear top layer and a milky sediment. Mixing it is part of the fun, but fresh bottles are carbonated and can erupt if shaken hard.

1. **1 · Keep it cold** — Cold makgeolli holds its fizz better. Open it straight from the fridge.
2. **2 · Turn, don't shake** — Slowly tip the bottle upside down and back a few times, or roll it gently, until the sediment lifts.
3. **3 · Crack and release** — Twist the cap just enough to hiss, close it again, wait a moment, then repeat until the pressure has eased.
4. **4 · Pour into a bowl** — Many pubs serve it in a kettle (주전자, jujeonja) with shallow bowls (사발, sabal). Pouring for others first is a friendly gesture.

> **Sparkling bottles need patience**
> Naturally sparkling makgeolli can take a few minutes of releasing pressure. Follow the brewer's instructions on the label and open it over a sink.

RAINY DAYS

## Jeon and makgeolli

When rain starts, many people in Seoul think of savoury pancakes (전, jeon) with makgeolli. A common explanation is that the patter of rain sounds like batter sizzling in oil. Whatever the reason, the bright acidity of cold makgeolli suits crisp, oily food very well.

### Pajeon · 파전

- Spring onion pancake, often with seafood as haemul pajeon (해물파전).

### Bindaetteok · 빈대떡

- Mung bean pancake, closely associated with market stalls.

### Gamja-jeon · 감자전

- Crisp potato pancake. Visit Korea suggests haemul pajeon and gamja-jeon as makgeolli pairings in Insa-dong.

### Dubu-kimchi · 두부김치

- Warm tofu with stir-fried kimchi, an easy shared plate if you want something lighter.

A TASTING NOTEBOOK

## Styles to look for

There is no single 'correct' makgeolli. Use these broad styles to describe what you liked, then ask staff or a shop for something similar. Brands and recipes change, so treat these as style notes, not rankings.

### Everyday · 대중 막걸리

- The green and white bottles in convenience stores. Light, often a little sweet, inexpensive, and the easiest place to start.

### Sparkling · 스파클링 막걸리

- Naturally carbonated in the bottle, sometimes compared to sparkling wine. Usually pricier and needs careful opening.

### Undiluted / strong · 원주

- Less water added after fermentation, so thicker and stronger. Small pours and plenty of food.

### Flavoured · 밤 · 옥수수 · 꿀

- Chestnut (밤, bam), corn (옥수수, oksusu) and honey (꿀, kkul) versions are common and often sweeter.

### Regional · 지역 막걸리

- Visit Korea notes that almost every region has at least one representative brewery. Trying the local bottle is a good habit on day trips.

WHERE TO TRY IT

## Learn, then drink

Start somewhere that explains what you are tasting, then try a traditional pub. Opening times and programmes change, so check the official pages linked in Sources before you go.

### The Sool Gallery · 전통주갤러리

- 18 Bukchon-ro, Jongno-gu (서울 종로구 북촌로 18), about a two-minute walk from Anguk Station (Line 3) exit 2, per Visit Seoul.
- An exhibition and tasting space for traditional Korean drinks. Visit Korea lists free entry, 10:00–19:00, closed Mondays and major holidays, and English tastings at 15:00 except Mondays.

### Brewery visits · 찾아가는 양조장

- The government-backed brewery visit programme, listed on thesool.com, offers tastings and experiences around the country — a good weekend trip.

**Combine it with a day plan in Explore Seoul by theme →**

### Insa-dong · 인사동

- Visit Korea describes Insa-dong as lined with traditional bars and features a pub there offering dozens of makgeolli with jeon pairings.

AT THE TABLE

## Phrases and etiquette

A few words go a long way. Romanisation is a guide; showing the Hangul on your phone also works.

1. **Two hands for elders** — When someone older pours for you, hold your bowl with both hands (or one hand supporting the other).
2. **Pour for others** — It is customary to fill other people's cups rather than your own.
3. **Saying no is fine** — Leave your bowl partly full or simply say 괜찮아요 (gwaenchanayo, I'm fine). Nobody needs a reason.

### 생막걸리 한 병 주세요

- saeng-makgeolli han byeong juseyo — One bottle of fresh makgeolli, please.

### 주전자로 주세요

- jujeonja-ro juseyo — In a kettle, please.

### 덜 단 거 있어요?

- deol dan geo isseoyo? — Do you have something less sweet?

### 건배!

- geonbae! — Cheers!

> **Drink safely**
> Korea's legal drinking age is set by birth year (generally those turning 19 that year), and staff may check ID. Makgeolli can feel lighter than it is: alternate with water, eat, and never drive or ride a scooter after drinking.

SOURCES

# Sources & verification · Makgeolli in Seoul: A Newcomer’s Guide to Korea’s Oldest Drink

Reviewed November 2026. Check the official links before relying on dates, fees or rules.


- Visit Korea: Makgeolli, the people’s brew with unique regional charms (20 February 2025)
  https://english.visitkorea.or.kr/svc/contents/contentsView.do?vcontsId=221402
- Visit Korea: Explore Korea’s makgeolli culture in Seoul
  https://english.visitkorea.or.kr/svc/whereToGo/hdrdslt/hdrdsltView.do?crsSn=304969
- Visit Korea: The Sool Gallery (전통주갤러리)
  https://english.visitkorea.or.kr/svc/contents/contentsView.do?vcontsId=187352
- Visit Seoul: K-Liquor making class at The Sool Gallery
  https://english.visitseoul.net/hallyu/K-LIQUORPROGRAM/ENNhor604
- The Sool: traditional liquor portal and brewery visits (Korean/English)
  https://thesool.com



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