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Report Highlights:

In 2025, the Korean food industry embraced three major trends: collaborations with K-culture, retro-inspired products, and health-conscious innovations. Partnerships with K-culture icons, such as Netflix's K-Pop Demon Hunters and K-pop stars, drove global appeal through themed snacks and branded packaging. The retro trend revived nostalgic products like Nongshim Ramyun and Ghana Chocolate, appealing to multiple generations. Meanwhile, the rise of "slow aging" and healthy living led to high-protein, low-sugar offerings like CJ CheilJedang's Hetbahn Rice Plan and Ottogi's High-Protein Cup Noodles. These trends indicate that U.S. products with strong cultural appeal, nostalgic branding, or health-focused attributes may resonate more with Korean consumers. Understanding these preferences could help U.S. producers and exporters identify areas of potential demand in the Korean market.

1. 2025 Korean Food Industry Trends

1) Collaboration with K-Culture

In 2025, the food industry and K-culture saw numerous notable collaborations, fueled by the global popularity of K-pop and K-content.

Netflix's animated film K-Pop Demon Hunters, released last June, quickly became the platform's most-watched film of all time. Following the film's worldwide success, the food industry capitalized on its global appeal to promote their products. Paris Baguette, Korea's leading bakery café chain, introduced items such as "Soda Pop Cake," "Golden Butter Bun," "Yakgwa Tigre," and "Mugwort Rice Cake Cookie." Nongshim, the top instant noodle producer, launched Shin Ramyun cup noodles featuring the main characters of K-Pop Demon Hunters, selling 1,000 six-pack sets in just 1 minute and 40 seconds. They also released other products, including Shin Ramyun and Saewookkang (Shrimp Crackers) with character designs. GS25, one of Korea's largest convenience store chains, collaborated with K-Pop Demon Hunters to release gimbap, rice balls, and snack sets.



Figure 1 Nongshim and K-Pop Demon Hunters Collaboration (Source: Nongshim)

Another noteworthy collaboration was with the drama Bon Appétit, Your Majesty. Tous Les Jours, a popular bakery café chain in Korea, introduced black sesame and rice macarons featured in the drama, while KSB Food launched "Gochujang Butter Bibimbap," which also appeared in the show.

The food industry further expanded its partnerships with K-pop stars. Ottogi, one of the largest food manufacturers in Korea, released Jin Ramyun which includes a collectable sticker featuring BTS member Jin, selling 13 million multipacks in just 50 days. GS25 teamed up with NCT Dream to launch the "Idol Comeback Sandwich," which showcased the NCT Dream logo on its packaging and included

38 types of limited-edition stickers randomly enclosed. GS Retail announced plans to collaborate with additional K-pop artists to release more products in the future.



Figure 2 Jin Ramyun containing a collectable sticker of BTS member Jin (Source: Ottogi)

The surge in collaborations between the food industry and K-culture is driven by the global influence of Korean entertainment and the strong emotional connection consumers have with K-pop, K-dramas, and related content. Korean consumers, especially younger generations, are highly engaged with pop culture and seek products that reflect their interests and identities. For companies, partnering with popular media and celebrities offers a way to differentiate products, create buzz, and tap into established fan bases. The international success of K-culture also means that such collaborations can boost both domestic and export sales, as global consumers increasingly seek out products associated with their favorite Korean stars and shows.

2) Retro Products Make a Comeback

The retro trend in the food industry continued into 2025. By reviving discontinued products and utilizing retro packaging, companies evoked nostalgia and sentimentality for older generations while offering fresh experiences to younger generations. From a business perspective, reintroducing products that have already proven successful in the market minimizes the risks and costs associated with developing new products. Additionally, companies can expect stable sales by leveraging existing brand recognition and established customer bases.

Nongshim celebrated its 60th anniversary by re-releasing Nongshim Ramyun, originally launched in 1975. Seoul Dairy Cooperative, Korea's oldest and largest dairy company, revived "Minos Banana Milk," a popular product from the 1990s. Lotte Wellfood, one of the largest food and confectionery companies in Korea, marked the 50th anniversary of Ghana Chocolate by launching five retro packaging designs, one of which recreated the original packaging from its debut in 1975.



Figure 3 Retro packaging of Ghana Chocolate (Source: Lotte Wellfood)

The retro trend is fueled by a combination of nostalgia among older consumers and curiosity among younger generations. For older Koreans, retro products evoke memories of childhood and simpler times, providing comfort and a sense of continuity in a rapidly changing society. For younger consumers, retro items offer novelty and a way to experience the past, often shared through social media. This trend is also a response to the fast pace of modern life and the digital age, as people seek authenticity and emotional connection through familiar brands and designs. From a business perspective, reviving proven products reduces risk and leverages existing brand equity, making it a cost-effective strategy.

3) Slow Aging and Health-Conscious Foods

The growing interest in healthy living has fueled a trend toward "slow aging," with consumers increasingly focused on health-conscious choices. In response, the food industry has been introducing products rich in protein, whole grains, nuts, vegetables, and dietary fiber, while keeping sugar content low.

CJ CheilJedang's slow-aging instant rice brand, *Hetbahn Rice Plan*, surpassed cumulative sales of 10 million units within 10 months of its launch. CJ CheilJedang, Korea's leading food and biotechnology company, projects that quarterly sales for *Hetbahn Rice Plan* will increase from 10.1 billion KRW in the first quarter of 2025 to over 20 billion KRW by the fourth quarter. Paris Baguette and Tous Les Jours each launched health-focused bread brands, *Blue Label* and *Slow TLJ*, respectively, in early 2025. Ottogi introduced two varieties of "High-Protein Brown Rice Porridge" under its HMR brand *Oz Chicken*. Additionally, Ottogi launched two types of "High-Protein Cup Noodles," which achieved sales of 1 million units within just one month.



Figure 4 Slow-aging instant rice “Hetbahn Rice Plan” (Source: CJ CheilJedang)

The rise of "slow aging" and health-focused products in South Korea is driven by several interrelated factors. The country's rapidly aging population has led more consumers to prioritize health, longevity, and quality of life, increasing demand for products that support healthy aging. At the same time, Korean society places a strong emphasis on appearance and youthfulness, with beauty standards and the influence of the beauty industry motivating even younger adults to seek products that help maintain a youthful look and prevent visible signs of aging. Growing awareness of preventive health, particularly through diet, has further encouraged consumers to choose foods with functional benefits such as high protein, whole grains, and low sugar. Additionally, rising disposable incomes mean that more consumers are willing to pay a premium for products perceived as healthier or beneficial for aging well.

2. 2026 Trends Forecast

According to the 2026 trend forecast by the Korea Agro-Fisheries & Food Trade Corporation (aT), the South Korean market will be defined by "hon-well" (Solo-Wellness)—a culture of healthy, high-quality eating for one. This trend moves beyond simple meal substitution toward AI-driven personalized

nutrition, where digital health data dictates customized meal plans. Key product formats will shift to "one-hand, one-dish" solutions—nutritionally dense, high-protein, and functional meals designed for maximum efficiency. Furthermore, consumer demand for eco-transparency will accelerate the adoption of sustainable, personalized packaging, making ethical production a core requirement rather than an option.

The 2025 trends of slow aging and K-culture collaborations discussed in this report will evolve into data-backed hyper-personalization by 2026. The interest in slow-aging will mature from general high-protein choices into AI-curated wellness diets, creating a significant opening for U.S. exporters of specialized functional ingredients that can be integrated into one-dish formats like premium bowls or sandwiches. Additionally, the emotional connection seen in current K-culture collaborations will merge with personalized packaging technology to target the "fansumer" on a more individual level. For U.S. producers, success in 2026 will depend on aligning high-quality American products with Korea's sophisticated tech-integrated wellness and small-scale, eco-friendly delivery models.

3. Conclusion

The 2025 market landscape has laid the foundation for a more technologically integrated and hyper-personalized food environment in 2026. Korean food industry is shifting toward individualized wellness, where convenience, health, and technology converge to meet the needs of individual consumers. The "slow aging" movement is evolving from a general dietary preference into a data-backed necessity, where "one-hand, one-dish" formats must deliver complex functional benefits efficiently. For U.S. exporters, this evolution creates a high-growth opening for specialized functional ingredients, plant-based proteins, and premium grains that can power these hyper-personalized meal solutions.

Moving forward, U.S. producers must pivot from mass-market appeal toward value-driven personalization. The success of legacy brands in the retro movement proves that Korean consumers maintain a deep loyalty to heritage, provided it is updated with modern standards like eco-transparency and ethical production. By leveraging the American reputation for safety and quality, and adapting it to Korea's emerging tech-integrated delivery models, U.S. companies can secure a dominant position in a market that is no longer just looking for new products, but for smarter, more sustainable, and culturally resonant lifestyle solutions.

Attachments:

No Attachments.