



# **‘Persimmons & Gal-ot’ by Brenda Paik Sunoo**

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**Island Diary: Real stories  
shared by Jeju residents**

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— Ed.

Dear Island Diary,

The minute the woman walked into the restaurant in Seoul, my eyes enlarged with curiosity. What was that she was wearing? I recognized the Korean traditional clothing, known as “hanbok,” which includes a short jacket (jogori) that covers the upper chest and the tubular skirt (chima) with its high, pleated waistband tied tightly above the breasts with long sashes. Most of the women’s hanboks I had seen or worn were made of colorful silk. This one was made of stiff cotton. The color, a cross between rust and honey.

“What an unusual hanbok,” I remarked. “The color is so different.”

“It’s gal-ot (persimmon clothing),” she said.

“I’ve never seen anything like this before. You get this color from persimmons?”

“Yes. My friend made this hanbok. She’s a master of persimmon dyeing.”

“Where?”

“Jeju Island.”

“Really? What a coincidence! That’s where I’m headed.”

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Several weeks later, after I had arrived on Jeju Island in 2007, I took a taxi to Mongsengee, the clothing and home decor design company founded by Yang Soonja. Although my priority was to conduct field research for my previous book on the haenyeo [Jeju women divers], I discovered that gal-ot is the traditional clothing of Jeju farmers, haenyeo and fishermen. It was certainly relevant to learn more about this historical proletarian textile, as Jeju’s sea women not only dive, but farm. (Persimmon, in standard Korean, is known as “gam.”)



*The author (center) with Yang Soonja (right) and friend. Photo courtesy Brenda Paik Sunoo.*

As soon as I arrived in Myeongwol-ri, where Soonja's former showroom and manufacturing operations were then located, she greeted me with a broad smile. Today, we are like sisters...similar in height, values, energy, rhythm, and interests. We are both grandmothers, determined to remain healthy and purposeful. When my book ("Stone House on Jeju Island") still was a concept, she reminded me, "Unni (older sister), we're not young anymore. Don't wait too long. Begin soon."

Through my relationship with Soonja, I have come to appreciate the varied beauty, tastes and uses of Jeju's persimmons. Although there are numerous varieties of persimmons, they can basically be broken down into two categories.



One type is “tteolbeun gam” or sour persimmon. This variety has a deep orange flesh, is acorn shaped, soft, and looks similar to a tomato. Once ripe, its soft and sweet pulp offers a sensuous taste. If eaten before ripened, your lips will quickly pucker because of the astringent tannin.

Another type is “dan gam” or sweet persimmon. It has a light-colored orange flesh, is round with a flat bottom, and offers a pumpkin-like taste with the texture of an apple. One can eat them when they are almost ripe, with or without skin.



*Photo courtesy Brenda Paik Sunoo.*

Soonja uses the astringent persimmon to make gal-ot. But the persimmons have to be young, green and unripe, she explained. August is her busiest month of the year because that’s when she must harvest

the persimmons in her 18,000+ square-metre tree farm and pulverize the green rounds into fresh pulp and juice.

The sun is the strongest at that time of the month. Once the fabric (cotton, ramie, linen or silk, for example) is soaked in the crushed and juicy green pulp, it is hung and naturally colored by the alchemy of juice, sun and wind. Depending on the tone of orange-brown that is desired, she may go through 7-10 repeated cycles of soaking the dried fabric in water and hanging them again in the sun to deepen the color. Sometimes, Soonja will add mugwort to the second rinse, resulting in shades of taupe. If a flower or volcanic ash is used, another brown tone emerges.



*Photo courtesy Brenda Paik Sunoo.*

I have been able to participate in various stages of her production. But my favorite part—and assigned duty—is stomping on the fabric during the rinsing cycles. At Mongsengee’s outdoor work facility are three deep concrete tubs. Barefooted, I can step inside a two-foot deep pool of cold water and move about like an Italian stomper, dancing in a vat of grapes. Once the fabric is well-soaked, we hang the fabric again on the clotheslines to bathe in the sun and gently blow in the wind.





*Photo courtesy Brenda Paik Sunoo.*

Admittedly, I have accumulated a fine collection of Mongsengee's gal-ot creations: scarves, hats, blouses, dresses, pants, tote bags, pillowcases, jackets... even underwear. Indeed, one of the best virtues of gal-ot is its antibacterial property. It doesn't stain, it blocks the sun's rays and absorbs sweat without smelling and acts as a natural insect repellent. Since living on this semi-tropical island, I wear gal-ot most often—narrowing my choice of daily wear, but dressing with a distinct indigenous style.

When we bought our land in Aewol, Soon Ja was happy to see two healthy persimmon trees on our property. “Save them,” she said. “Even when you construct your house, you can move the trees elsewhere on the lot.” During the fall, I soaked some white clothing in persimmon juice and hung them to dry on the clothesline that my husband, Jan, attached to one of our trees. In the early winter, we enjoyed the beauty of the orange persimmons covered with fresh fallen snow.

Once a year, these ubiquitous persimmons are one of the most favored dessert treats among Koreans. They can be served as a fresh cut fruit, dried naturally in the sunlight, or chilled like slush. They are sold everywhere in Korea—from traditional five-day markets in Jeju to subway stations in Seoul. People also eat persimmons because they are rich in potassium, magnesium, and vitamin A. They’re delicious in smoothies and yummy when added in persimmon bread.





*Dried persimmons. Photo courtesy Brenda Paik Sunoo.*

Granted, I first encountered Jeju persimmons as the dyeing agent in a finished textile. But now, I admire them at their original source—in abundance on two of our backyard trees. According to Buddhist beliefs, persimmons are a symbol of transformation. If so, then I pray they bring us luck in this traditional village of former haenyeo, farmers and fishermen—an enclave changing as quickly as water and wind passing between stones.

**About the author:**

Brenda Paik Sunoo ([brendasunoo.com](http://brendasunoo.com)) is the author of “Moon Tides: Jeju Island Grannies of the Sea” and “Stone House on Jeju Island: Improvising Life Under a Healing Moon.”

