Staring at the grocery store produce, my mind begins to wander. I am thinking of how my experience would be different if I were able to shop at a traditional Korean market.

The produce at the traditional market would be full of life, perhaps just delivered fresh from the farm on one of the passing motorbikes that squeezes through the market’s skinny pathways.

At Seongdong Market in Gyeongju, Seongju chamoe melons can be purchased straight from the sidewalk, earning a gracious local smile in return and, on occasion, a few extra pieces of fruit.

The traditional markets in Daegu are a perfect place to enjoy a variety of food delicacies: jokbal (pigs’ hocks) at Suseong Market, memorable pork guk bap (soup and rice) at Bongdeok Market, and cool, refreshing milmyeon (cold noodles) at Seomun Market, which also thrives for its large number of Seomun clothing and textile vendors.

Gwangjang Market in Seoul is another traditional market that shines for its collection of fabrics and fashions, not to mention its massive selection of street food specialties, most notably Gwangjang’s famous bindaetteok (mung-bean pancakes).

Seoul is home to several different traditional markets, including Jungang Traditional Market located near the city’s center. Serving hotteok, tteokbokki, and other Korean snack specialties from portable food carts, Jungang just might be the ultimate traditional market for street food in Seoul.

No visit to a traditional market would be complete without the sight of numerous glass aquariums filled up with a variety of living sea creatures. Two of Korea’s most famous markets for seafood, Jagalchi Market in Busan and Dongmun Market on Jejudo Island offer rare, inexpensive opportunities to sample and explore the tastes of sea treasures that are local to each area, such as Busan sea eels and Jejudo belt fish. With the hallucinating aromas of Jejudo’s famous black pig samgyeopsal and fermented salted fish (jeotgal), a visit to Dongmun Market guarantees an intoxication of the senses.

No matter where you are in Korea, if there is a traditional market nearby, take advantage of the affordable, authentic, and sincere experience of Korean culture that a traditional market offers. With so many of them located in Korean cities, traditional markets offer an opportunity for the city to join hands with its mountainous countryside.

Some vendors call out and beckon to customers, while others wait patiently and quietly for a business exchange. Follow your own gut instinct when deciding which vendor to do business with. However, a crowd surrounding a vendor is usually a good indication that the vendor is offering trusted, high-quality products.

While some individuals shop at traditional markets for entertainment or the novelty of it, others depend on traditional markets as the central source for daily living. No matter what the occasion, shopping at a traditional market helps to support local merchants and honors a Korean tradition of face-to-face discussion and negotiation.

The bustling sounds of human interaction at Korean traditional markets echo the harmony of Korea’s past, present, and future while offering a glimpse of locality that is unparalleled.

From produce, street food, meat, seafood, and medicinal herbs to clothing, furniture, and souvenirs, you can find almost anything at a traditional Korean market.

Shopping at the grocery store, the spirit of the traditional Korean market is alive and strong in my heart. For a moment I think to pick up an order of tteokbokki to go. Or so I wish . . .