

Southern Sentiments

By Elizabeth Wang and Sabrina Zhao

Living in the Southern U.S. often means that there are moments of isolation and exclusion. The South is big, the distance between different groups of people is bigger. For many first gen and diasporic Chinese, there was some shape of community, but many children often tried to assimilate into the environment by removing themselves by their Chineseness or face social isolation and race based exclusion. A lot of intergenerational relationships are strained because of verbal communication issues, and it still is difficult for both sides to express themselves through standard forms of communication. When we don't have time to say how we feel, or when we don't know the words to say, we turn to food to say it for us.

Wonton Soup

I used to be really lonely when I was a kid. I lived in Georgia, and I went to a school far away from me and the Chinese community.

I wasn't naturally good at making friends as a child, and it's even harder when you're in a place where the people don't like you, and they don't want to know you.

I thought it was ok. I was busy studying anyways. My entire family was busy working. My mom and dad have been working ever since they came to the US.

I think that's how it's always been, always busy.

Even though it's Georgia, in the winter the house still gets real cold. When the winter comes and the sun sets early, I often remember that the South is big. The houses are bigger. And mine always felt a bit empty.

As I was growing up, all of us were still learning how to be a family. I had my mindset, my parents had theirs. They couldn't communicate verbally about a lot of things they felt. But my parents could always speak through food.

We ate dinner together, but it wasn't lively. Then it was back to work. But the food was always good. Always warm.

Sometimes my dad knew I was up late studying and he knew I was hungry.

He always made me wonton soup.

Wonton soup is quick and easy to make. It's filling, and the savory light nature makes it comforting in any season. It's not something passed down through the family history, but rather something my family became accustomed to as we lost the time to make more complicated food. My dad would make it as a student struggling in the US. And then he would make it for me as I struggled through my youth in school. Now I make it for myself, alone. Though, because of my memories, I don't feel too lonely.

I asked him if this recipe meant anything to him personally. He laughed and said when he was around my age he would eat the things he caught in rice paddy fields after his mom stir fried them. For both of us, it's just something quick and easy.

When I asked my dad for the recipe, I thought it was frustrating that he didn't give me proper amounts, just a bit of this and a bit of that. It makes me regretful that I didn't spare time from studying to watch him make it. Then again, he said it was okay to be vague, as he never used exact measurements either. This recipe is modified based off what I feel and what I have, so I guess a bit of everything isn't too bad. It's better than nothing.

Recipe

Ingredients

A bit of seaweed
A bit of spicy pickled radish
A bit of green onions
A bit of salt
A bit of white pepper
Maybe some shrimp or clams
Wontons, homemade or store bought

Instructions

Boil water. Then add the wontons. Boil for 5-7 minutes.
While the wontons are boiling, chop the onions and boil the seafood for 5 minutes if you choose to add them.
When the wontons are done, put them in a bowl, then add every other ingredient.
Have some new hot [208 F] water to pour into the bowl. Then you're done.

Zongzi

Growing up in Mississippi was really difficult for me. Being surrounded by a homogenous community, I didn't feel white enough for the people around me. On the other hand, my parents always took me to Chinese church, but I never felt Chinese enough there either. Even going back to China to visit my family made me feel out of place. I felt like an outsider in a place I was supposed to find solidarity and in the place where I grew up.

In school, the kids around me didn't eat the same food or in the same way my family did, which perpetuated feelings of alienation and emptiness. I started to grow a resentment towards eating my mom's cooking. Although I didn't realize it at the time, she was hurt when I didn't eat the food she prepared me, or when I wanted American food instead of her Chinese cooking.

As I grew older, my appreciation for my mom's cooking is much stronger. I understand now that food was her way of telling me she loved me, even if we didn't say it out loud.

My great grandmother had seven children, so during the Dragon Boat Festival, they would have more than twenty people gather around her house to celebrate. Before the festival, she would soak the sticky sweet rice the previous night and prepare the red bean paste a couple of days before by soaking overnight and boiling them to make into paste for the Zongzi. In the morning of the festival, the zongzi would be wrapped, boiled, and soaked in cold water while the other dishes were prepared. During the festival, everyone would catch up while the children played.

Nowadays, the festival is different. My mom told me that although the feast still exists, a lot of the family chooses to eat out instead of making homemade Zongzi. A lot of family time and conversations were lost because people moved away. Since my parents immigrated to America, we eat Zongzi alone.

Originally, Zongzi are made for the Dragon Boat Festival that occurs on the fifth day of the fifth month (near summer solstice) depending on the lunar calendar. In the past, the 5th lunar month is supposedly unlucky due to natural disasters and illness. The Dragon Boat Festival acts as a festival of good fortune, so Zongzi are a symbol of good luck. There are different interpretations of Zongzi in different regions in China. Northern Chinese regions make a sweeter/dessert styled Zongzi, while Southern Chinese regions make a more savory styled Zongzi.

Zongzi are actually difficult to perfect. It usually takes a full day and requires a lot of preparation. It is something that has been passed down from generation to generation in many Chinese families, including my own. It reminds me of a past time when my family would get together to celebrate this holiday and make this food all together. I haven't eaten a homemade version of this in a long time, and thinking about Zongzi made me really miss and appreciate her cooking.

Recipe

1. Soak rice in water for 6 hours.
2. Buy wet leaves and wash off.
3. If leaves are dry, soak the night before and use the next day.

You can make savory or sweet filling.

For red bean filling

1. Use 50 g of salted butter and 55 g of brown sugar and mix
2. Make red bean paste into small balls and make a small dent in the middle and fill with brown sugar butter.

3. Mix and pinch it closed

For savory filling

1. Cut up mushroom, pork belly, shrimp, and Chinese sausage into smaller pieces and mix.

For both

2. Align two bamboo leaves together and make a cone shape with the bottom leaving the top open
3. Fill a spoonful of rice and make a small dent in the middle
4. Cover to the top with rice and lightly pack it in
5. Pinch the cone on either side and close the top part of the leave over the cone
6. Pinch the top part of the leave over the cone and tie around the cone with the cotton thread
7. Make sure to leave a thread so you can tie the zongzi together
8. Tie them all together
9. Boil water and add zongzi
10. Make sure the water covers them all
11. Sub simmer for 4 hours with a cover
12. Cool and eat!