

Song Family Recipes

by Lindy Harris

My grandmother, like many grandmothers, loves to cook . . . or maybe she just loves to feed us

My mom: “It’s how she expressed love, she was always feeding us.”

Along with every dish she prepares, we always eat Korean cucumber salad.

Little me: “My favorite!!”

She knows I love it so much that sometimes she sneaks Tupperware containers full of it into restaurants when we go out to eat.

I used to love standing in the kitchen with my grandmother, watching her chop up the cucumbers into thin shreds. It was mesmerizing.

My grandmother: “Come drink the cucumber juice. It will make you beautiful”; “You go to Harvard, yes?”; “You will be great wife one day.”

No matter how hard I try, I can’t get my cucumber salad to taste as good as hers.

This is the recipe she gave me:

- 4 or 5 cucumbers
- 1 tsp minced garlic
- 2 tsp sesame seeds
- 1 tsp sesame oil
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1 Tbsp sugar
- Vinegar to taste (1-2 Tbsp)

- 1) Wash and peel cucumbers;
- 2) Shred them lengthwise using Benriner vegetable shredder;
- 3) Add salt, garlic, sesame seeds, sesame oil, black pepper, sugar;
- 4) Stir and add more salt and pepper if needed;
- 5) Add vinegar, stir, and taste again.

A few weeks ago, I called my grandmother up to see if I could pinpoint what I was doing wrong.

My grandmother: “You can use any cucumber, use English cucumber”; “You could leave out the sesame”; “Don’t use too much garlic. American don’t like too strong.”

I was not expecting my grandmother to tweak the recipe for me; to tell me how to make the cucumbers taste more American. I thought she knew that I wanted to eat it exactly as she had prepared them for me all my life—not some white-washed, flavorless, rip-off cucumber salad.

To be honest, I was a little hurt.

I have always felt a bit distant from her and the rest of my Korean family members, most of who I can't even communicate with.

As cliché as it is, the biracial stereotype is true: I feel too white for my Asian relatives and too Asian for my Jewish relatives.

(Cucumber salad was one of the few Korean foods served at my bat-Mitzvah.)

I called my mom to get her thoughts on the matter.

My mother: “The truth is a lot more complicated . . .”

My grandmother, Hea Joo Ahn, was born in 1935 in a town called Chulwon, slightly North of Seoul.

She came to the United States about ten years after the Korean War ended. She was the third of six children born into a fairly prosperous family, but her family lost everything in the years between the Japanese occupation of her childhood, World War II, and the aftermath of the Korean War. Her family was displaced during the war and resettled in Seoul.

When she was in her twenties, my grandmother secured a job as a switchboard operator for the US Army in Korea. My grandma had been with my grandfather, Il Yong Song, for four years by then. Immediately after they got married, my grandmother helped my grandfather immigrate first, who, because of US relations with South Korea, managed to acquire a visa and hop on a cargo ship that sailed the Pacific Ocean all the way to an entry-point in Hawaii. He spent roughly twenty-six hours in Hawaii before catching a boat to San Francisco, where he waited a year for my grandmother.

My grandfather was lucky—he had previously attended an elite boarding school in Seoul which provided him an extensive network of other Korean-American men, known as Seoul Alumni. These alumni gave him connections, granted him small favors and provided a little money, even allowing him to sleep in their homes.

My grandfather picked up all sorts of odd jobs—working in factories, mowing lawns, and as a handyman—and sent the money to my grandmother. When she finally had enough money saved up, she quit her job and joined my grandfather, who had worked his way up to becoming a factory foreman. On a visit to a friend, Dr. Lee from Iowa, they explored the Midwest and moved to Skokie, Illinois, when they got pregnant with my mother (the eldest of their four

children). My grandmother was twenty-nine at the time but lied on my mother's birth certificate so it said she was twenty-eight.

My grandfather's job as a factory foreman—a top-notch blue collar job—got my grandmother through design school and paid for the expenses of the births of their next three children. My grandmother became a seamstress and was hired as a designer for a bridal gown manufacturing company. She told me that another seamstress was trying to cheat her out of her vacation days, so she quit and together with my grandfather, they started their own business: Song's Bridal Manufacturing. They worked twelve hours a day, six or seven days a week, for over thirty years.

Me: "Were you sad to leave your home?"

My grandmother: "Coming to America was like coming to the moon"; "You're going into a different world"; "When you leave the country you cry and you never know when you will get to see family again"; "After you got here there is no telephone to call each other in Korea."

My grandmother was able to return to Korea for a visit ten years after she first arrived in the U.S. By that time, both her mother and her father had gotten sick and passed away. She never got to say goodbye to them.

My grandpa passed away when I was two, and my grandma never really speaks about her hardships. She has always been exceptionally vague when referring to her life in Korea and her immigration to the United States.

My mother tells me that when she was little my grandmother would tell her stories about running away from combat zones and hiding in caves during the war. She used to survive on one handful of rice a day. It makes sense that she paid special attention to how much food we were eating, always enforcing second helpings and snacks in between meals.

My grandmother: "Your mom and all my kids, they're all glad they were born in America and not Korea because of the turmoil."

My mother: "Nobody loves the U.S. more than an immigrant who does somewhat well."

My grandmother: "America is advanced and it is first class. There is a secondary or third class which is Korea. Its small, not as developed."

My mother: "We were raised to believe that America was the greatest country on earth. They definitely stressed the American dream."

My grandmother: "You want to make yourself get ahead, get advanced, to learn, to get a better life. You have to have enough money."

My mother: “They wanted us to be doctors. For my parents, fate doesn’t depend on who your family is.”

My grandmother: “Almost sixty years ago was not like now. Korea was not having much.”

My mother: “People sacrificed for us, so we have to work and study hard”; “We have to deserve the opportunity we got.”

I remember my grandmother announcing at dinner one night that “Korea is as good as America now!” When she said it out loud, though, it was like she couldn’t really believe the words coming out of her mouth. There were tears in her eyes.

It was all starting to come together. My grandmother, just like me, is stuck in a liminal space of her own—balancing the Korea that still exists in her mind with the new, transformed South Korea that exists today, and the United States which might never fully accept her. In instances of discrimination, she would tell us, “Well, what did you expect?”

But I find peace knowing that we can exist in this liminal space . . . together.