Lunchbox Moments

is a charity zine featuring work by Asian American and Pacific Islander artists and writers that explores our relationships with food and cultural identity.

All proceeds from sales of this zine will go directly to San Francisco's Chinatown Community Development Center, which is operating the Feed + Fuel Chinatown initiative to support Chinatown restaurants and SRO residents.

Co-Curators' Statement

In 2020, we witnessed with anger and sadness the impact of racist, xenophobic fears first on Chinatowns and their restaurants–emptied even before any official shutdowns–and then on Asians throughout the country. Increased attention to anti-Asian hate amidst the rallying cries of "Black Lives Matter" forced us to contemplate (yet again) our place in the American racial discourse.

In our conversations, we remembered "lunchbox moments," one way in which many AAPI individuals experience their difference. Through our curation, we sought diverse stories reflecting experiences of Asian Americans of different generations, regions, ethnic and other identities. In this project, we interpreted the term "Asian American" to be inclusive of individuals identifying as South and Southeast Asian, mixed race, and queer. Thus, we present stories reflecting rage, pride, and joy through dim sum, parathas, and sinigang, among others.

This project arose out of our love and respect for Chinatowns, their restaurants, and their workers. This project also reflects our love and belief in the possibility present in stories about food. With inclusion in mind, we used a light hand editing, respecting the writers' individual voices and approaches to language. Thus, some pieces use italics

in the anglicized version of a non-English word and some do not. Capitalization of races and food items also reflect the writers' choices.

We are so proud of the work that we showcase here. We hope you enjoy these stories.

Diann, Anthony, and Shirley

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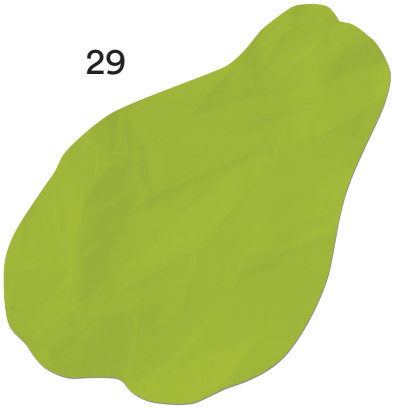

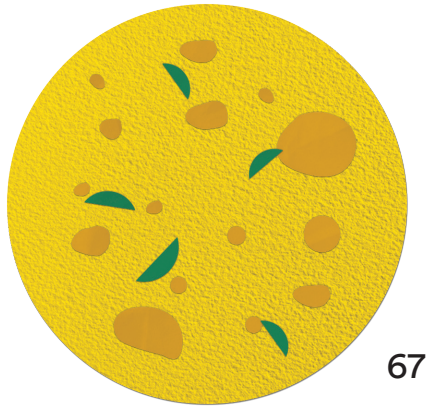

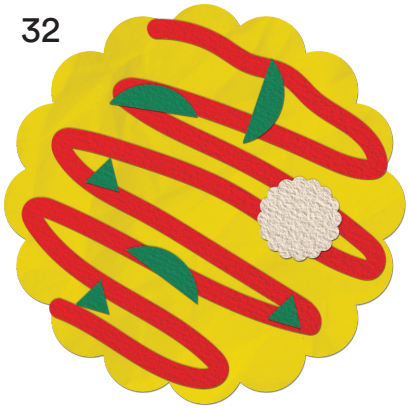

Art Direction by Haylie Chan and Jeffrey Liu

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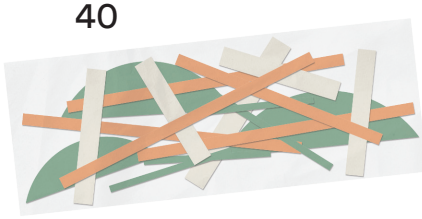

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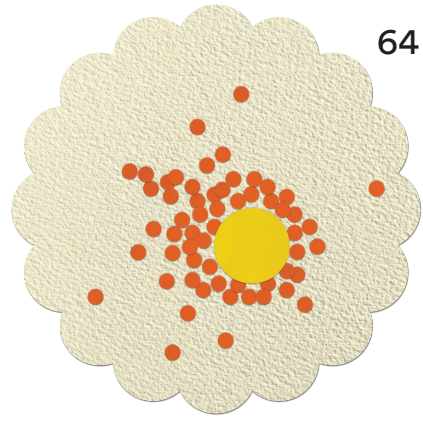

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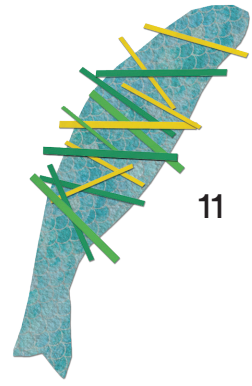

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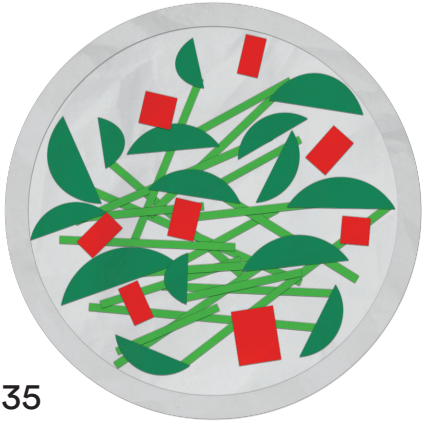

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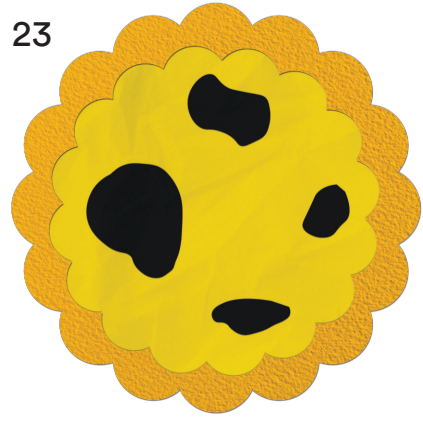


Nourishment

Tria Wen

I was a skinny kid in middle school–all corners and bones, teeth, and knuckles. “You have chopstick legs,” a classmate once commented. A girl from ballet class once asked, “Are you anorexic?” I told her no: my build was due to metabolism, genetics.

I was forgetting that also, I rarely ate lunch.

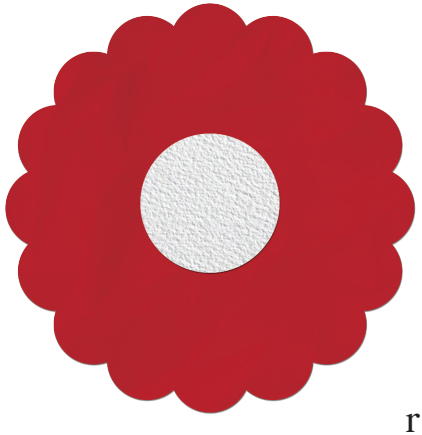
I went to a small alternative school where I was the only Chinese student in my grade. Mama treated my friends to freshly made snacks and meals at our house, so when school lunchtime came, they’d crane their heads to see if I might have something they recognized: crispy shrimp toast that Mama deep fried, her sesame noodles ribboned with multicolored vegetables, or their favorite: boiled wonton wrapped neat and tight, bursting with pork when you bit into them. On days I had lunches like that, I’d be swarmed by classmates asking for a bite and would spoon out the best parts for them, often leaving nothing for myself.

Other days, I didn’t want them to see my food. I didn’t want to explain that oxtail stew was indeed made from the tail of a cow, but thousand-year-old eggs were not really that old. On days I imagined my food being met with disgust, I’d bring my untouched Tupperware home after school and slide Mama’s carefully prepared meals into the trash, covering my misdeeds with a paper towel.

Once, Mama walked in as I was about to complete the maneuver. I quickly stashed the container in our coat closet. Months later, I heard her voice ring out from the forest of jackets, saved shopping bags, and my backpack hanging in disuse over summer break.

"Oh no, Tria! What is this?" She turned the container over in her hands, and a dark goo inside slowly obeyed gravity. To chase off my creeping feeling of shame, I snapped at her.

"Whatever, it's not a big deal! I'll clean it out."



I took the container from her hands and peeled off the stiff lid like a wax rind from its cheese. The smell hit the back of my throat, making me cough. I held my breath and tipped out the contents: a rectangle of black sludge on a bed of something dark green, wet, and tufted with mold. I couldn't recall what it was, but it must have been Chinese, and it must have been weird. I didn't mind sharing my culture with my non-Asian classmates, but only the prettiest parts. I didn't want them to see the messy, the smelly, the hard to understand.

I scrubbed and rescrubbed the empty container that day, filling my sponge with soap. The seething bubbles couldn't wash the stench out of the plastic

though. I can't remember if we kept the container or threw it away, but the look on Mama's face as she watched me still lingers: her brows stitches of anger, her eyes wells of disappointment. She shook her head. "You have no idea how hard I work on your lunches."

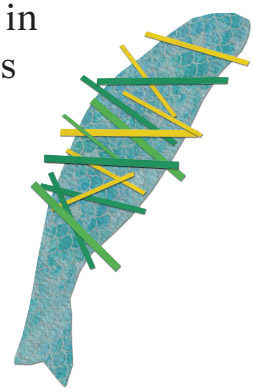
I'm no longer a skinny middle schooler, and she's no longer alive to pack me lunch. I read her journals now and see how much thought and pride she put into the meals she made us, how bewildered and rejected she felt when her children didn't eat her food.

As I've grown into myself, I've learned more about the history of my family, the history of Asians in America. I've seen the ways we've been belittled, the ways we've given the best of ourselves and taken less than we deserved, the ways we've tried to distance ourselves from the generations before us. The weight of this knowledge has shifted my habits. At restaurants with friends of varied backgrounds, instead of being afraid of not fitting in, I order what I want. I scarf down ma la niu jing, the spicy beef tendon on my tongue reminding me of my grandparents. I suck on oxtail bones no matter what company I'm in. Instead of waiting for scraps, I help myself to the best bites of crispy duck skin or chewy cartilage. I nourish myself.

The Lunch Room at 416

Maggie Lam

In the summer before 7th grade, I invited Becca over for dinner. We had been best friends since 3rd grade but it was her first time over at my house. Around a square kitchen table, I watched Becca use a fork to eat rice while my mom chewed in silence, avoiding eye contact with either one of us. I could only imagine what she was thinking as she stared at the steamed fish covered in soy sauce. I watched a pile of bones grow beside my mom's bowl as she spat onto the table.



Back in elementary school, Becca was the only other Asian girl in our mostly white class. When I arrived at her birthday party in 4th grade, she lived in a mansion with a Jacuzzi, two living rooms, and even had her own bathroom. I met her parents–both Korean Americans–who spoke perfect English, graduated from American colleges, and were CEOs at their companies.

Meanwhile, my parents never graduated high school. With money saved up, they were able to buy a house in Northern Virginia so that my sisters and I could go to a school with white kids. It was nerve racking when my friends or their parents asked me

what my parents did for a living. I was instructed to tell them *my parents own a restaurant*, leaving out the details: the grease stains, the bulletproof glass windows, and the dinners my sisters and I ate alone.

At school, I remember envying white kids who got peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on potato bread and how my mom was never around and didn't pack me lunch or snacks. I was always that kid asking you if you were going to finish yours. I remember devouring school lunches. On Mondays, I would put sweet and sour sauce on top of chicken nuggets and rice. On Thursdays, I would eat spaghetti and meatballs and lick the black styrofoam bowl clean. I remember always picking chocolate milk and the lovely pink milk on Valentine's Day. And I remember my best friend Becca: how I was nervous to have her over at my house; how I wished we had gotten hand soap for the bathroom so we would look a little more normal; and how I felt ashamed when she told me she was *grossed out* by my mom's cooking.

Somewhere in the middle of all this remembering, I thought about the first time I brought Chinese food in a tupperware for lunch and realized it was only a few years ago. I was a depressed college graduate and an unpaid intern for an API non-profit in Oakland. I lived unhappily at home with my parents (who had relocated to the Bay Area) and brought leftovers to work. On my hour-long lunch breaks, I stood by the microwave in the lunchroom, waiting for the food to heat up. When the aroma of soy sauce

and rice lifted into the air, my colleague walked by and told me, “Ooh that smells good!” Always the first to eat, I sat in the lunchroom alone while other Asian colleagues filed in the room, bringing in delicious take-out from Oakland Chinatown restaurants and incredible home cooking from sticky rice to kimchi. During the holidays, our office celebrated just like my family did at home–cooking hot pot on portable gas stoves. For a few hours that winter, my office mates and I ate together, away from our computers, dipping fish balls and veggies into spicy barbecue sauces. In a community, we subverted the lunchbox moment.

Mother Knows Best

Shizue Seigel

In the 1950s, Dad bought a TV as soon as he could afford it. TV showed me even more about white people than I could learn from my neighbor Patsy Smith, the daughter of an Irish American cop. She lived right next door, in a real bungalow with a front porch and a big back lawn. Almost every day, she asked me over to play on her swing set or dash through the sprinklers.

Patsy's life was like my Dick and Jane reader in school, but it was exotic and foreign to me. Before I moved to Baltimore at six, I'd lived in a strawberry sharecropping camp where I earned my first dollar picking strawberries with my grandparents. When we culled berries for market, we saved the duds, cut off the rot, and mashed them with evaporated milk and sugar.

But Patsy's mom made real desserts–cakes and pies from scratch. The family favorite was a chiffon pie made with whipped cream and strawberry Jell-O (real strawberries were too expensive). Mrs. Smith's warm wrinkly face was haloed by fluffy white hair. Her no-nonsense cotton apron reached nearly to her neck, not like the dainty organdy aprons that Jane Wyatt wore on TV. She played the mom on "Father Knows Best." She was pretty and slender, with sparkling blue eyes and a pert, yet elegant hairdo. She always knew the right

My Mother and Betty Crocker, Shizue Seigel

thing to do or say. I wished my mom was like her. Jane Wyatt wouldn't keep saying she was just a stupid farm girl. Jane Wyatt was not a hermit. And Jane Wyatt was not Japanese American.

My mom was born in 1920 on a big farm in California. She was American born, but because she was the eldest in an immigrant family, she started school with no English. She flunked first grade, which convinced her she was stupid. She stayed home so nobody would make her feel dumb. When Dad urged her to go out, she said, "Nobody likes me anyway, and I'm too old to change." She wasn't that old, only 31, but she had fat arms and never got jokes at parties, especially the dirty ones.

But it was hard not to like my mom. She wasn't really dumb, just boring. Me, I couldn't be a farm girl even if I wanted to. Mom's family lost their farm when they were put in a concentration camp during the war. Now Mom was an Army captain's wife, and I was an officer's daughter. I didn't need to know how to make sake or pickle radishes in fermented rice and raisins or cook a Japanese dinner for 25 ranch hands, like Mom before the war. I didn't want to learn to darn socks or make cupboards out of upended orange crates or sew dresses out of Woolworth remnants.

I wanted store-bought clothes like Jane Wyatt's TV daughter, Kathy. She was gawky and pudgy like me. We both yearned to be swans. But my father never called me "Kitten" or sat me on his knee. And my mom's eyes were too flat and too brown to ever

twinkle wisely.

I pored over *The Betty Crocker Cookbook*'s pictures of canapés and watermelon fruit baskets and crown rib roasts topped with little paper frills. My mother only knew a few American dishes, like fried chicken, liver and onions, and porkchops, but always with rice. Rice is so essential that the Japanese word "gohan" means both "rice" and "meal." What we had for gohan most nights was boring old "okazu"—stir-fried vegetables with thin-sliced meat.

Jane Wyatt was trim and wasp-waisted. She wore pearls when she took the cake out of the oven. My mother was afraid of the oven. She wouldn't let me join the Brownies because she was scared she'd have to make bake sale cookies.

So if I didn't turn out perfect, you can blame Jane Wyatt. She showed me I needed a mom that always knew best, but she didn't show my mother how to be one. Mom never learned how to be sophisticated or manipulative or intellectualized. She never learned how to seek attention or approval, how to compete, how to pretend to be someone else. She was a plain old farm girl. All she knew how to do was to work hard and love Dad and me.

Untitled

Brian Nguyen

Like many of my Vietnamese counterparts, my Grandma's specialty was bun bo hue. And yes, it really is better than your Grandma's. No ... really ... it is. Even though we'll always say ours is better than the other's, it's more than just a critique of actual taste. It's more so the experience and what it means when you'd sit around the table with your relatives, waiting for your individual bowls of piping hot noodle soup.

At the countless family functions where bun bo hue was being served, I was a passive observer. Glancing over the large plates of garnishes, such as meticulously cut cabbage, curly banana blossoms and vibrant green herbs, I'd game plan early on and fill my sauce plate with chili oil and the ever-so-visually-appealing shrimp paste. Mainly, I just didn't want to be summoned by my majority Buddhist family to talk about going to Catholic school or if I had a girlfriend or why I suddenly look fatter before being told I'm not eating enough today. This was home, and these were the experiences that were unique to me.

I spent most of my schooling life in the vanilla streets of Palo Alto, even so far as going to boarding school with the hopes of a new opportunity and saving my mom from the menacing Bay Area morning commute. I know there's Asian people who live in Palo Alto. But as much as I wanted to belong in that world, I

was the barely acceptable form of Asian.

At boarding school, I wasn't the lone Asian but I wasn't necessarily a "real" Asian either. I was too vanilla for the international kids and I was too yellow for the white kids. Differences aside, at least, us "dormers" had something in common. We all missed our home cooking and we could only do the cafeteria food for so long. Palo Alto wasn't necessarily a haven for Asian cuisine either. Forget even being close to a Ranch 99 (I fucking said it). Kids ran side hustles selling Hi Chews, microwavable rice, and Chapaghetti.

During the times away from home, I felt more and more disconnected from those BBH days with relatives. I had to hold onto a sense of what I knew was home for me. I'd defend my family's palate and I'd be prideful about the uniqueness of Asian cuisine in general. But one day and in passing, a classmate hit me with a "What's so special about Vietnamese food? It's just noodles and rice."

I never quite understood the combative or dismissive logic behind statements like that. Was I being pushy about it? Did I seem like a know-it-all? Maybe it was just noodles and rice? Pho, com tam, bun thit nuong? Shit, let me google what dishes aren't really centered around noodles or rice.

But at the same time, you don't see me going around telling white people it's just all meat and potatoes. Or telling Italian grandmothers that it's just pasta. I love all that shit but why was it easy for someone to be dismissive towards the food I grew up

on? The food that makes my culture unique. Food at its basic core is made up of the ingredients you have around you and making something unique out of them. Cultures may be different, but we're all just finding nourishment and fulfilling a basic human need, right?

Even though I was slightly annoyed by the aforementioned microaggression, I also felt confident in knowing that the best entryway into Asian cuisine was through the noodle. You can't tell me it's not unique or special if I see two hour waits for tonkotsu ramen or nights in centered around Chinese or Thai takeout. Why should I feel insecure or feel different that I grew up with bowls of jasmine rice and not mashed potatoes?

All in all, I'll just say this. Let's chill with the backhanded comments and the exaggerated reactions to an unfamiliar smell or ingredient. I hate the smell of durian just as much as the next person but why should I bring down others who find comfort in its custardy, delicate taste? Don't be that person. Because I know for a goddamn fact that when you scoop up that sauced up rice or chew through that toothy noodle, it's going to be fucking good.

The Customer

Vivian Qin

What they didn't tell me about working in medicine is that sometimes it feels like the golden rule of the service industry applies here too—*the patient is always right*. So in the still-early days of the virus, when I began wearing masks in the hospital, masks that couldn't hide the shape of my eyelids, I started to enter patient rooms with a hesitancy unrelated to any clinical difficulties. "You know why China always has these diseases? It's because they eat bats, I'm sure you know all about that," a patient tells me with a confidence that reminds me of those teenagers I've seen who roam Chinatown just to gawk and laugh at the butcher stalls with roast duck hanging in the windows. I tell myself my mental energy is better spent thinking about this man's heart failure and not his comments, so I grit my teeth and press my stethoscope to his chest, then proceed to explain his daily care plan to him in an airy, overly sweet tone of voice, the same voice that I've heard my uncle use with any unpleasant patrons at his restaurant. *The customer is always right*.

My uncle had another, smaller restaurant before his current one, but all I can remember is the current restaurant, with the decadent tablecloths and decor from his hometown, and the large round tables with glass turntables, because a meal at his restaurant was always an affair, where you laugh too loud, stay

too long, and eat far too much. When I first met my cousins, we all slurped noisily on his specialty soup dumplings, and when I graduated college, my parents and I enjoyed dishes of soft shell crab and a whole steamed flounder. There are so many memories that I associate with the flavors and spices of those moments, and before this year I couldn't imagine the restaurant ever being empty. But suddenly, these dishes, and an entire culture of people responsible for their creation, were now seen as contaminated, untrustworthy.

The next patient I round on is an elderly woman and I can see from the doorway that she is intently watching the news, and these days the news is dominated by only one topic. I take a deep breath and move forward with pleasantries and my exam; she is recovering well and will likely be discharged soon, and my mood improves. I'm ready to leave, but she turns to me intently and asks, "Where are you from?" The pit of dread in my stomach returns, so I put on my airy, unaffected voice, and give her the answer I know she's after: "My family is from China." She gestures towards the television, where they are showing heat maps of new cases, and I prepare myself for another comment about eating bats. "How awful this virus is," she sighs, "Do you still have family living there? I hope that they are doing okay and staying safe." She gently pats me with a wrinkled hand, a hand that reminds me of the grandparents overseas that I haven't seen in years. I struggle with finding words for a moment. "Thank you." *Sometimes, the patient is alright.*

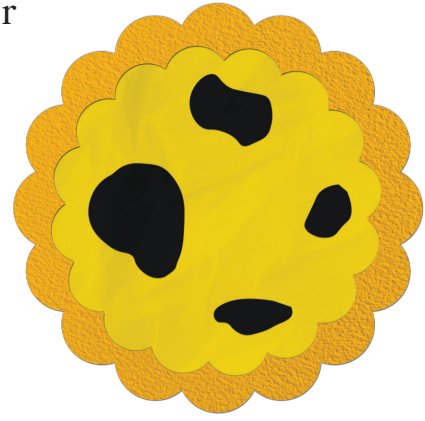
2 Char Siu Baos, 6 Wontons, 1 Egg Tart, and a 7UP

Willow Woo

I was eight and sitting in class watching the red second hand sweep the clock. The hands of the clock were stuck at 11:59 a.m. My char siu bao sat stuck to its white paper in my locker, waiting and wishing it was under a heat lamp. Finally, the alarm rang. Feeding time!

I was first out of class, opened my locker, grabbed my lunch, and ran to my favorite brick wall to sit down. I opened my Sesame Street lunchbox and smiled at two char siu baos, wontons that Mama put in an old cream cheese container, a side of sauce in a condiment cup, and a fat egg tart smushed in a to-go bowl. There was a 7UP from my aunt's garage stash of soda for our weekly family reunions. It was Monday, so my lunch always included leftovers from a Chinatown visit.

As I bit into the bao, a blond girl walked up, scrunched her pale face, and screeched, "Gross! Your food stinks!" But the only thing that seemed to stink was her. I continued enjoying the taste of candy meat, which was what my sister and I called char siu. My



Chow/Akita rescue, Mushu, taught me by example to look away from anything not worth seeing. The girl tried again with, "You know, your food stinks?" How long was she going to watch me eat?

Nearly every kid at school had a Mom who attended Tupperware parties. Hence, the girls had identical orange lunchboxes with handles that were challenging to open and close and matchy-match containers. My immigrant Mama reduced, reused, and recycled containers long before it was trendy. Containers didn't matter. What was inside did.

I knew what this girl had in her lunchbox as they all had nearly identical lunches. There'd be a crustless PB&J on Wonder Bread, a Capri Sun, Pringles, and an apple. It was a sea of scentless sameness.

I checked the boxes for Chinese and lower-middle class, which appeared as poverty when my classmates had parents who were movie stars or real estate moguls. At our private school, the kids would often jump into the wrong blue Volvo station wagon at carpool as their parents drove identical cars. Mine had an old, white American wagon with a rear door that doubled as a bench when opened. We lived in a haunted house on the other side of town with my best friend, a ghost. I was never envious, as being riddled with differences made everything better.

I had widespread eczema that I proudly showed off in the hot L.A. weather. I didn't need my ethnicity, gender, or class to stir any blatant or micro-aggressive smack. Eczema forced me to literally grow thick

enough skin to withstand these slurs. This was long before sensitivity training and the term political correctness was even uttered. I grew up hearing people of all ages and backgrounds shriek, “Ewwww, what’s wrong with your skin?” I refrained from ever replying with, “What’s wrong with your face?” as I refused to be cruel. I lived by the golden rule. Those of us with differences believe me; we already know.

Would I respond to her stink? I lined up my chopsticks, picked up a wonton, and dipped it in sparkling white vinegar sauce. The bright yellow egg tart called softly. In a second, it would be in my belly. My reply was silence and relentless joy. That day, my lunch was extra sweet because it was drenched in resistance. I raised my 7UP to toast what looked like no one since they couldn’t see my best ghost friend cheering me on. I licked my fingers, closed my eyes, and lay down. I pictured our breakfast nook with the 1940s stained glass windows, the sun shining through Mama’s sewed curtains, and smelled the multi-layered flavors frying in the pan. Baba was coming in from the yard. Mama chopped uniformly with a cleaver as my sister watched. I saw the avocado green Formica table with perfectly mismatched dishware holding steaming pancake skins and hoisin sauce. It was moo shoo night. And I couldn’t wait for dinner!

3rd Grade

"Can I try some?" Her pale blonde eyelashes flutter at me with intrigue.

"Sure!" I scoop some of my lunch onto her spoon.

"Woah, the noodles are clear! How cool!" She inspects it with awe before excitedly slurping it down.

Her enthusiasm confuses me, so I taste my now-lukewarm thermos of *miến gà* again. It tastes like home. But home is only two blocks away, so it doesn't seem that special at all.

6th Grade

I'm nibbling on my instant noodles when I spy, from across the table, my classmate excavating from her lunchbox what looks to be toast topped with ... chocolate sprinkles?? (Keep in mind, this was before Nutella was popular.)

"Michelle, what is that?" My eyes glued to the sugary treat.

"*Hagelslag*! It's a common Dutch breakfast. Wanna try?"

She hands me a piece, and I end up taking minuscule bites to savor it. I am starting to see how special food can really be.

7th Grade

"Hey, Kim! That looks so good. Can I have a bite?"

Kim-Vi Tran

I look up from my half-eaten *bánh mì* (Vietnamese sandwich) to my friend Sandhya.

"You can have some of my lunch too!" She negotiates.

Never one to turn down more food, I happily agree.

We exchange lunch boxes, and I open hers to see a stack of thin pancakes, two small bowls of brightly-colored substances, and a side of cauliflower. She instructs me to dip the pancakes, which I learned were called *dosa*, into the *idli podi* and *chutney*. We both end up finishing each other's lunches, and consequently, strengthening our friendship.

"Can I try?"

These three words encapsulate the innate and innocent curiosity within every child.

I know now exactly how fortunate I was to grow up in a highly diverse community: a community where cultural identity was not ostracizing, but embraced.

Because I am a first-generation immigrant who grew up in a mostly English-speaking household, food was, and still is, one of the only strong ties I have to my Vietnamese culture.

These "lunchbox moments" are treasured memories that taught me how to take pride and comfort in my identity as a Vietnamese-American, as well as how being open and enthusiastic to trying new things can give me a glimpse into what "home" looks like to others.

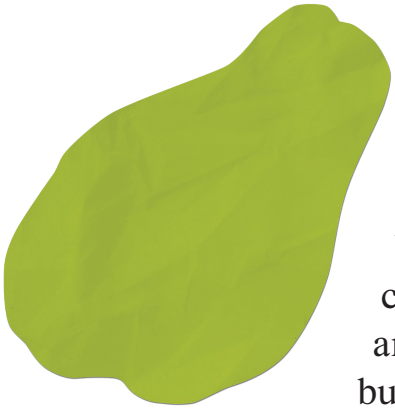
The Taste of Labor and Love

Nicole Doan

The sharp scent of ginger wafted through my tiny New York City kitchen as I struggled to prepare an alien vegetable, one of the main ingredients for tinola, a Filipino soup. I watched my mom cook it a million times, but I didn't anticipate the frightening sensation that overcame my hands as I handled the odd-looking vegetable called sayote. After peeling its thin green skin, a slimy sap coated my hands. I sliced the slippery vegetable into rough chunks, and suddenly my hands lost feeling. I rushed over to the sink and scrubbed my hands with soap and warm water, but I still couldn't feel anything. In the meantime, the gingery chicken broth boiled violently on the stove, impatiently waiting for me to throw in the sayote.

I stood frozen in my tracks, stupidly staring at the pot, then at the sliced jade sayote, and finally at my fingers and palms. They opened and closed, as if on their own, and it felt as though an invisible layer of hardened film was slightly cracking as my phalanges wiggled. I felt incompetent for my inability to cut vegetables for a simple soup I had watched my mom make throughout the early days of my youth.

"What if I'm having an allergic reaction?" I thought to myself. "What if I'm *deathly* allergic to sayote? Maybe I'll have to cut off my hands. I'll never be able to eat tinola again!"



The last thought sunk my heart to the pit of my stomach, making me sadder than having to lose my hands. Despite not being able to feel anything, I clumsily grabbed my phone and Googled "sayote allergy," but nothing helpful came up. Most of the search results merely discussed what the vegetable is.

I groaned to myself at the thought of calling my mom. Shame quickly spread from the depths of my belly, shooting upwards until my cheeks were flushed.

"It's not like Mom or Dad ever explained to me how to cook any of the Filipino or Vietnamese food they make. They can't make fun of me for not being able to prepare *everything* correctly," I thought.

I fumbled with my phone and punched the glass screen with my numb fingers. It was 7 p.m. in New York and 4 p.m. in California, which meant my mom was probably watching TV, since it was Sunday after all.

"Hi, Nik. Kumusta ka na?"

My mom never taught me Tagalog or Ilocano properly, and my dad didn't speak any Vietnamese to my sister or me. We pretty much only spoke English in the house, so my primary connection to their cultural heritage was through food. Clearly, I struggled with that as well.

“Hi Mom. I need your help,” I grumbled, my cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

“Uh-oh. What did you do now?”

“I’m cooking tinola for the first time. I was craving your home-cooked meals, so I’ve been trying to recreate them. The broth tastes right, since I added loads of ginger to the chicken stock. I prepped the oyster mushrooms, chicken thighs, and spinach already, but the sayote has been giving me trouble. I, uh, can’t feel my hands.”

I thought my mom would laugh. Instead, she calmly explained that sayote’s sap needs to be extracted by slicing off the tip of the vegetable and rubbing it in circles with the rest of the sayote. She didn’t know why, but somehow this prevented the odd sensation my hands were experiencing.

“Or you can wear gloves next time,” she said. “Don’t worry. Your hands will go back to normal soon.”

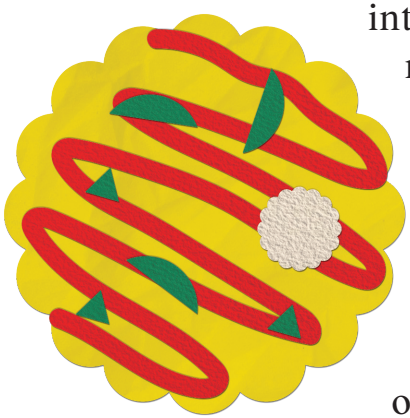
A wave of relief washed over me, and after giving her my thanks, I threw in the troublesome vegetable and remaining ingredients. The green sayote bobbed up and down in the pot teasingly. When I sat down for dinner with my bowl of tinola and a plate of rice, my hands gradually began to regain feeling again. With each gulp of food, the prior stupefying humiliation that had seized me slowly melted away with the fragrant soup sliding into my stomach. The taste of home brought me back to memories of my childhood, and for once, it tasted like my mom’s own labor and love.

Secret Menu

Grace Hwang Lynch

I look across the table to my mother, who is scanning the menu. “Can you order ô-á-chin?” I ask, craving the chewy Taiwanese omelet packed with oysters and fresh greens drizzled with tangy sauce. Children often ask their parents for permission to order a certain food at a restaurant; I am a daughter, but I am also a middle-aged adult. Will I ever be able to order the foods of my childhood on my own?

Not being able to read characters, I feel like one hand (the one that holds the chopsticks) is tied behind my back when it comes to ordering foods of the Chinese diaspora. I’m not talking about the dishes in the vinyl laminated book, but the secret menu. While English-speaking diners get the choices of mu shu pork or broccoli beef lunch plates, there might be another universe opened for Chinese-literate patrons.



Shatteringly crisp you tiao to dip into bowls of steaming soybean milk or delicate pea shoots that taste of newness and spring.

The secret menu is simply a photocopied half-sheet of paper featuring a chart of hanzi. Diners check off which items they want and

hand the slip back to the server. There is no sales pitch, no explanation, not even any English translation. Those characters, which seem to swim before my eyes, hold the keys to chewy radish luo bo gao, flaky green onion speckled cong you bing, or juicy xiao long bao.

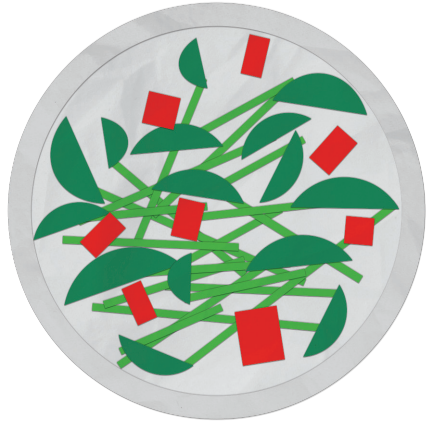
One of the reasons I've always loved going to Cantonese dim sum in San Francisco Chinatown is that the offerings are displayed on rolling carts pushed by ladies eager to pull the lid off a bamboo steamer to reveal a glimpse of siu mai, har gow, or cheung fun. The smart ones notice when the table is becoming covered with empty metal steamers and start hawking the desserts. It usually works.

Part of my motivation for studying Mandarin for a year in college was to finally be able to order food from the secret menu–all by myself. But while the *Practical Chinese Reader* taught me vocabulary to describe the adventures of Gubo, Palanka, and their comrades, there was no chapter on ordering in restaurants. I can pick out a few basic characters, but I might think I'm ordering tian dou jiang, sweet as mother's milk, and instead receive xian dou jiang, savory with sesame oil but clabbered with vinegar.

The advent of digital photography and cheap printers brought forth the Chinese restaurant picture menu. Many eateries that serve these kinds of "small eats" or street fare use these laminated menus with harsh photography and inexact English translations. Once, when a group of my girlfriends gathered for lunch at a suburban strip mall, we giggled over the

images including the full-page close-up of some kind of meat (geoduck? kidneys?) that looked like it came out of a medical textbook. “You should offer your photography services to them,” my friend Linda joked.

While they may not win any beauty pageants, those picture menus are a lifesaver for an American-born Asian like me. I was imprinted with the taste of Chinese food but not the reading comprehension to order it. Just like how images of Big Macs and fries allow non-English speakers to ask for a number one meal by simply holding up a finger, these menus allow me to point to number 21 instead of staring helplessly at a grid of characters and then resigning to a lunch special with orange chicken.



Cultural Interloper

Stephen Li

Growing up, I never explicitly considered myself Asian-American. The second half was tacitly implied; none of my friends were first-generation, nor were most of their parents. I barely thought about the first half, as living in Hawaii effectively necessitated some Asian ancestry. Most of us could trace our American roots to the early twentieth century, when our forebears crowded into steamers and crossed the Pacific to toil on sugar cane plantations or escape the whispers of war.

I imagine this is the way most white Americans inhabit their racial identities: basking in the auspices of whiteness, and by extension their Americanness, without ever interrogating their place in the American narrative. I didn't confront this until I left Hawaii and moved to New Jersey for school. In Hawaii, I was a member of the dominant culture and lived with the careless leisure afforded that status—both my Asianness and Americanness felt axiomatic. In New Jersey, I was an outsider and minority. I began to feel the dull, daily barbs white people lobbed at me about my otherhood—"wow, I didn't realize people from Hawaii are American citizens," or "you don't even speak English with an accent." I spent my early days in New Jersey feeling unwanted by, and alienated from, my peers.

In the art and literature that I loved growing up, much of which was tinged by the dishonest lens of nostalgia, the dinner table was a haven: societal ills were suspended at the table's edge and replaced by good food and company. When I found a Korean restaurant in town, I invited my roommate, a quiet white kid from Pennsylvania with whom I was nominally friendly, to dinner. I didn't admit it at the time, but I now see that I was trying to manufacture a home-field advantage for our relationship, which had existed strictly in his milky-white environ of dining hall pot roasts and pastas.

We sat down and were greeted with a selection of banchan. As I picked through my favorites, he asked me what each dish was called and how it was prepared. His questions were intended for his edification or perhaps to oxygenate our relationship—in either case, they were well-meaning and innocent. I had little in the way of answers. I had never been asked to explain my Koreanness, nor did I know anything about Korean food beyond what I liked and didn't. When our server came to take our order, she addressed me in Korean. I responded in English, having only understood annyeonghaseyo, and could see the disappointment splashed across her face. I have never felt more a stranger in ostensibly familiar circumstances than I did looking at her.

You could throw a dart at a map of East Asia and hit a country where my ancestors lived. I've always felt tethered to each of my Asian identities despite

not speaking any of the languages or knowing much about my family history. When my roommate asked for a primer on Korean food, I reflexively felt like the victim of a Socratic trap. How could I explain my culture to him if I had never explored it myself, and if I knew nothing of that culture, was it even mine? It was, however, far more disruptive to feel spurned by our server.

American media conditions us to interlace whiteness and Americanness, so every non-white American learns to calculate a certain distance between ourselves and the American portion of our hyphenate. But to also lose the first half, to be not-Asian-enough, is to be a cultural nomad seeking refuge in the margins of the margins. The same community mechanisms that have, in part, underpinned the model-minority myth—Chinatowns and Korean churches and other Asian-American silos—fashion a wrought-iron fence for those deemed "too American" or otherwise unworthy of entry. We are left to endlessly justify our identities—our Americanness to non-Asians, our Asianness to Asian-Americans, and our Asian-Americanness to ourselves. Our paradox is that we are simultaneously not enough to one group and too much to another. We strain to navigate toward either of these artificially opposed poles, leaning desperately into cultures that will never grant us admission, and in doing so, we further impede our ability to understand the uneasiness of being Asian-American.

Goddess of Rice and the Rice Sack “Noren”

Lucien Kubo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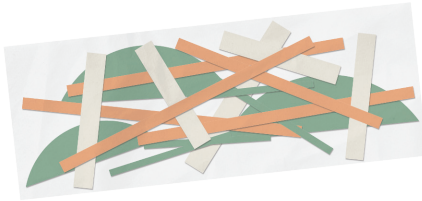
Show and Tell

Doanan Phan

Somewhere in the blissful 90s is where many of my elementary school memories lie. I had not reached middle school yet. Sundays were often filled with learning Vietnamese at a local Buddhist temple. When I came home, Vietnamese came first and English was relegated to second.

One day in class during elementary school, all students were required to do a dreaded show and tell. Public speaking was never my scene but at that young age, the only choice I had was to pick my topic and do a demo. My sweet mother encouraged me to be unique and insisted if I showed my classmates how to roll bì cuốn chay (vegetarian spring rolls), I wouldn't have to worry about anyone else giving the same presentation. My mother and I practiced a few times at the kitchen table so I would remember how to build my nước chấm (dipping sauce) and how to arrange all my ingredients for easy spring rolls.

When it came time to present, I carried my plates of ingredients, mixing bowl, and dipping bowl to the front of the class. I enunciated every step of the bì cuốn show and tell, just as I rehearsed at home. First, I wet the rice paper, laid down lettuce, mint leaves, sliced cucumbers, rice noodles, and vegetarian bì (made with jicama, toasted rice powder, carrots, cellophane noodles, and tofu rather than with the



traditional shredded pork skin and pork loin). I folded the opposing edges of the rice paper then I rotated the plate. I gently folded in the ingredients while firmly gripping the roll so the filling would be neatly tucked in. I did it at least three times for good measure to have three rolls to display on the serving plate. Next, I mixed soy sauce, water, lime juice, sugar and vinegar to create nước chấm chay (vegetarian dipping sauce). Everything went according to plan. I finished my presentation and if my mom was present, I'm sure she would have been pleased that I rolled my bì cuốn without tears and somewhat tidy execution. She was also right: no one else had the same topic.

My teacher asked the class, "Who wants to try these spring rolls?" My classmates were silent. My relief in finishing the presentation switched to worry as I looked left and right to the rows of students. No one raised their hands. After awkward silence hung over the room for an incalculable amount of time, one of my female classmates volunteered. To this day I'm unsure if my classmate pitied me that no one offered to try my creation or if she was truly interested in my spring rolls. I was not ashamed of who I was or what I presented. Still, I felt a lingering sadness and sense of confusion by the lack of acceptance or possibly a

rejection of my dish, something I had eaten countless times with family. Bì cuốn was usually the appetizer that paved the way for family gatherings. Rolls of various savory fillings came before large platters of Vietnamese food sumptuousness.

In hindsight, this fuzzy memory remains one of many experiences which has shaped my present-day Vietnamese American identity. My adult self recognizes that I was creating a dialogue with my classmates. Albeit slightly one-sided, the dialogue still existed. These interactions with my family, peers, people I meet, these are chances to delve into my identity. This identity is inherently shaped by my parents, who shared their homeland stories with me, and required my brother and I to speak Vietnamese exclusively at home or with other Vietnamese people. My parents prepared home-cooked meals, went on constant Asian grocery store runs and supported local Asian businesses. They put their whole selves into raising their children with a connection to their heritage. My knowledge of Vietnamese food and culture is part of my identity, and it will be a lifelong journey. If I want to nurture my Vietnamese American cultural identity, I must continue the dialogue as my 90s self once did. Instead of show and tell, I now learn and share.

Viz Valley
James Cerenio

I turned the corner out of the lunch line. Just as the plastic-gloved cafeteria worker dropped the half-pint of chocolate milk onto my lunch tray, another quicker hand snatched the same carton of chocolate goodness right off my lunch. "Shit," my heart hollowed out.

Darryl was a head taller, two grades older, and three times an asshole more than me.

He casually tossed the milk to his homie. He smirked to his friend and said, "Take another milk. He don' want it." Darryl knew I wouldn't do shit.

He knew that me and the other Asian nerds wouldn't do shit. Mike slid by with his head down, not wanting to be picked on next. My strategy was to hide my Filipino self with the Chinese and Vietnamese kids who actually wanted to pass their classes. No one stood up for me. Including me.

He was right. I didn't do shit. In lieu of chocolate milk, I quietly swallowed the anger and embarrassment down my throat. I felt my cheeks burn red.

Visitacion Valley, known as Viz Valley, is a largely working-class neighborhood located in the southeastern quadrant of San Francisco. After World War II, more African Americans relocated from the Fillmore District and the Western Addition. Government redevelopment programs provided

inexpensive housing. Many landlords would inflate rent for African Americans and other minorities or not rent to them at all.

Mike and I crossed the empty schoolyard 30 minutes after the last bell. We walked quickly, looking down, trying to reach the metal gated exit as quickly as possible. The rumble of sneakered footsteps came up fast behind us as we were pushed hard with such force that our necks whiplashed. A voice yelled, "Give us yo' shit mother-fuckers!!" "God-damn chink mother-fuckers!" It was Darryl and his crew again.

I stood by as Darryl turned Mike's backpack into a tug-of-war rope. Darryl yanked the backpack out of his hands, dug his cruel hand into the bag, and threw a breadcrumb of pencils, notebooks, and erasers into the air, yelling, "There ain't any good shit in here! Fuck it!" He tossed the backpack away into the air across the schoolyard and sprinted off.

I stood by and watched him get tormented. Fuck Darryl, I thought. I hate him and those kids. But I hated myself more.

One Saturday morning, I breathed a sigh of relief that I didn't have to go to that prison cell of a school today. Champarado, with its heavy scent of chocolate and sweet rice, floated into my bedroom.

I walked into the kitchen and saw Dad spooning the thick and rich champarado into two cereal bowls. Dad said, "Son, sit down and eat. We have a guest. He's your classmate."

My jaw dropped and stomach sank. Darryl was

sitting at our kitchen table. His hands were on his lap, his face polite, as he nodded at me and said, “Wassup.”

Dad explained that Darryl was the son of his best friend, Uncle Marcelino. I was like, “...What? You’re Filipino?” Darryl said, “My Dad ... Marcelino, is Filipino. My mom is Black. I’m half.”

Dad says, in his heavily accented English, “Hap Pilipino, means you’re Pilipino.” Darryl nodded his head.

Dad looked at Darryl and said, “Apter he got lock up, I promised your dad that I’d help you and your mom any way I could.” He paused, wiped a rag across the stove where he had cooked our breakfast, and said to me, “Get the old rice cooker from the garage and give it Darryl. Theirs broke.”

I walked Darryl outside the house. Darryl looked down at the ground. “Look man. I’m sorry I fucked with you. I ain’t gonna do that no mo. Your dad helped my family out a lot. More than just rice cookers.” He paused. “I didn’t know he’s your dad.”

He lifted his head and looked me in the eye. “You need to stand up for yourself.”

I shrugged with hands dejected, “How?”

“If someone says ‘fuck you’, you say ‘fuck you’ back. If someone pushes you, you push back. This is Viz Valley.”

Made with Love

Celine Lota

Just like every first-gen Asian American, I had to straddle the line between being an American while also being Filipino, trying not to step on anyone's toes in the process. The identity struggle throughout my childhood was absolutely brutal—from wanting to be white like Sleeping Beauty, or idolizing the Japanese because of Sailor Moon, to feeling a sense of pride when people mistook me for being Latina since all the Latin kids treated me as one of their own, while my Filipino peers ostracized me for not being "Filipino enough." They believed I was actually Mexican and was lying about being Filipino just to fit in at a predominantly Filipino school, which really did a number on my psyche. For a long time, I was embarrassed to be Filipino and not Filipino enough to the standards of my peers.

It took several decades and all the right conversations to finally feel at home within my cultural and ethnic identity as a proud first-gen, first-born, Asian American woman. A sense of nurture and a deep need to feed as many people as possible is a common quality amongst Filipinos, and I feel closer to my ancestors whenever I'm able to feed the people around me. So I began to cook Filipino food, lots of it, with lots of love.

I remember, though, the time I brought sinigang

Celine Lota

to work. As I was slurping the sour tamarind broth at my desk, two of my colleagues walked into the office and made faces while sniffing the air, as if someone had left a soiled gym bag or some food that perspired overnight. I knew it was my soup. Instead of embarrassment, I felt a slight sense of disappointment that two white men (both of whom happened to be romantically involved with Chinese women) hadn't graduated past lumpia.

Everybody loves lumpia. It's the gateway food to Filipino cuisine and apparently the culture too. I'd be rich if I had a penny, no, a PESO for every single time a person said, "Oh you're Filipino? I LOVE lumpia!" Boom. Instant cultural bond. Lumpia does know how to get a party started. It's the egg roll's little cousin that everyone remembers by name and connection. Everybody loves lumpia, because compared to the other more traditional Filipino dishes, lumpia is approachable, familiar. "Safe." Anything past lumpia can be very intimidating for the skeptic with the unadventurous palate. Filipino food isn't the prettiest on a plate and can smell aggressively pungent to the untrained nose.

Surprisingly, and perhaps for the better, lunch box moments had been nonexistent for me throughout my childhood, mainly because my *Lola* would be the one to pack my lunches and send me off to school with an array of popular junk foods, like Lunchables pizza on a good day. Had not my grandma packed me those highly coveted snacks, the other kids would have never

even bothered to talk to me, other than to trade me for my Gushers. Looking back, I'm not sure whether she did that just to provide me with all the things she never had as a kid, or if she was just tired from all her years working to fly her husband and three kids out and Frito-Lays were just the easier option? Or was she protecting me? Inherently camouflaging me from my Asian-ness? I'm grateful for whatever the intention, but I would often trade my entire lunch for a wholesome, turkey sandwich, because what I craved most was something real, and made with love.

Back to my office lunchroom, as my co-workers searched the office for the smelly culprit, I unapologetically raised the butt-end of my sinigang-filled to-go container, and motioned that the mysterious stank was probably my soup. I gulped it down, releasing an exhale of satisfaction, and from the looks on their faces, I sensed what I *hope* to have been slight embarrassment for any offense or uneasiness I may have taken from their genuine unknowing. I wasn't offended though. I actually felt both pride and pity for having known something they didn't. I also felt like a bad Filipino for not having brought enough sinigang to attempt to let them in on what they've been missing–some home-cooked heritage, made with love.

No Lunchbox Moments Here ... Except at Home

Tamiko Wong

I feel lucky that I grew up in San Francisco and that my parents chose to send me to schools where "diversity" was the norm. I attended Nihonmachi Little Friends Preschool in Japantown where I sang songs in Japanese and learned to make rice balls. In the Japanese Bilingual Bicultural Program at my public elementary school, most kids were of Japanese heritage, and some were born in Japan. At Presidio Middle School and "Wash," Chinese children and other kids of Asian descent made up about 50% of our student body, so I was never "othered" for what I brought to school for lunch.

In elementary school, I instead envied the tasty-looking bentos brought by kids with moms from Japan. In high school, I learned from friends in the know about salted fish and chicken fried rice and Hong Kong-style shrimp and eggs over rice when we would cut class to have a sit-down lunch off campus.

However, my food life at home was another story. My American-born Chinese father was not a fan of Japanese food. For him, it was "teri-yucky" not "teriyaki," and the rice was too sticky for him. So I learned to make Japanese short-grain rice on the stove at a very young age since the rice cooker was always preparing my father's preferred Texas long-grain. My dad would say, "They play too much with their

food" and "It looks nice but there's never enough." His Chinese American sensibilities just would not embrace the food from my mother's side of the family.

"If I go to Japan," he'd say, "I will ask for haam-boo-gah," (since it's not native to Japan, this, well actually, <ハンバーガー (hanba-ga-)> is the word for hamburger) laughing and with a twinkle in his eye. And yet, when we finally took a trip to Japan, he was an ever gracious guest trying everything the Setos and Okadas laid out for us whether it was shabu shabu, kushiyaki ("stick food" as he called it), and even sashimi.

After that trip, my dad started joining my mom and me for meals at Japanese restaurants and learned to make shabu shabu at home. Quite to my surprise, for most of the last years of his life, Japanese short-grain filled my parents' rice cooker about half of the time. He taught me that an old dog could learn new tricks, and I no longer felt "othered."

Too Many White Guys: How Taiwanese Food Got In the Way of My Relationships

Christine Hsu

I fell in love with a Belgian when I was studying abroad. He met up with me in The Woodlands, Texas, a suburb of Houston, to meet my parents. It did not go well. My mom made a delicious meaty noodle soup with tendons and fatty bits. The Belgian barely ate it, told me he didn't like my mom's food, and pretended to choke on it behind her back. I should have dumped his ass, but I told my mom he and I would get our own food. I even took him to a restaurant on Thanksgiving for a "typical" American meal instead of hot pot and other Taiwanese dishes I adored. My love for him turned only to lust. He was a Justin Timberlake look-alike, and I was really into NSYNC. We broke up for various reasons, but food was probably one of them.

My New Jersey boyfriend knew about the nasty past my mom had with my ex-boyfriend. He came with me to D.C. for a family reunion to celebrate my grandma's 90th birthday. I pointed out my mom sitting down in the conference room at the hotel.

Before I could even introduce him, he ran up to tell her that his mom ate Chinese food everyday when she was pregnant with him and that he LOVES Chinese food. Oh yeah–he added, "I'm Christine's boyfriend." Hmm–I think he was sucking up too much for a white guy. He used to remind me that his ex-girlfriend was Chinese.

Jersey guy didn't work out either–so then there was the Californian. This new white guy took me to a restaurant in Oakland Chinatown. He was like, "Have you had pig ears before? A lot of my friends don't want to try them." WTF–I've been eating pig ears my entire life! They're on the menu all the time when my family goes out to Bellaire, the Chinatown of Houston, and my mom makes them at home sliced up cold to go with white rice. They're exotic to him, but totally normal to me. Yeah–that relationship didn't work out either.

My Taiwanese American guy friend I nicknamed, "Cousin Hsu," because we have the same last name–but are not related–asked me, "What good has any white colonizer dick done for society?" I don't want to think about my white brother-in-law's dick–but I do like my biracial nephews.

Being shamed about dating too many white guys, I started to date my current partner who is Native American, Mexican, Black, and 0.01% Asian–so people can't give me shit about NOT dating someone Asian. I told him a story about a restaurant in Williamsburg called Carino. I went there one day for lunch, and the special was pig's feet. My mom used to make

tender pig's feet in a Crockpot with soy sauce, ginger, garlic, chilis, and raw peanuts mixed in. It was one of my favorite meals. I was telling the bartender at the counter that I loved the special because it was like a Mexican version of my mom's cooking. Maybe because not a lot of people were ordering the dish that day, the bartender marched me to the back of the restaurant to compliment the chef. She was a short Mexican woman in a pristine white uniform who graciously smiled.

My partner liked that story. I try to make him Taiwanese specialties like pork dumplings and three cup chicken. He has made me delicious quesadillas, enchiladas, and burritos. Hopefully this cross-cultural relationship will work out with love and food.

A few years ago we were watching the sunset at Jack London Square. My partner told me he would surprise me for dinner with tacos. He returned and handed me one to try.

"Lengua. Beef tongue, right?" I asked.

"How did you know?" My partner responded.

"Come on, I'm Asian!"

Wrapped with Love, Eaten with Shame

Junmei

Zongzi, or zong as my family calls it in Cantonese, is a traditional Chinese dish composed of glutinous rice and various fillings wrapped in bamboo or other leaves. Zong can be sweet or savory, and many regions have their own styles of the dish. I grew up eating the Guangdong-style zong filled with mung beans, peanuts, pork belly, and salted duck egg yolk. I especially treasured the egg yolk for its rich flavor and vibrant color. Zong was one of my favorite meals growing up, ranking right below century eggs and pork congee.

Growing up, my sister and I ate the school lunch. Our parents worked full-time and didn't have the luxury of preparing home-cooked lunches every day. It was a treat whenever we got to bring zong or another dish for lunch, a respite from soggy milk cartons and flat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Newly built and without much funding, our school didn't have a cafeteria or microwaves for students. When we brought zong to school, our mom would steam them in the morning, unwrap the leaves, and place them in thermal lunchboxes so they would still be warm at lunchtime.

One day in ninth grade, I grabbed a seat with some friends at one of the tables in the lunchroom (which also doubled as our school's gym and

auditorium). I opened my lunchbox, ready to snack on some zong. Almost immediately, I heard:

"Woah, what *is that*?"

"Oh my god, are you, like, eating dog?"

"Smells kinda weird..."

My face felt uncomfortably warm. I muttered some weak comeback to the rest of the table and focused on furiously shoveling zong into my mouth. At that moment, all I wanted to do was bury myself miles beneath the school to get away from how embarrassed I felt. I imagined embracing my new life as a zong-eating mole person. My thoughts ran wild. *They're just kidding around, don't be so uptight. Maybe zong does look weird when it's unwrapped and uneaten. Has zong smelled weird all this time? Do I smell like zong? Do people think I smell?*

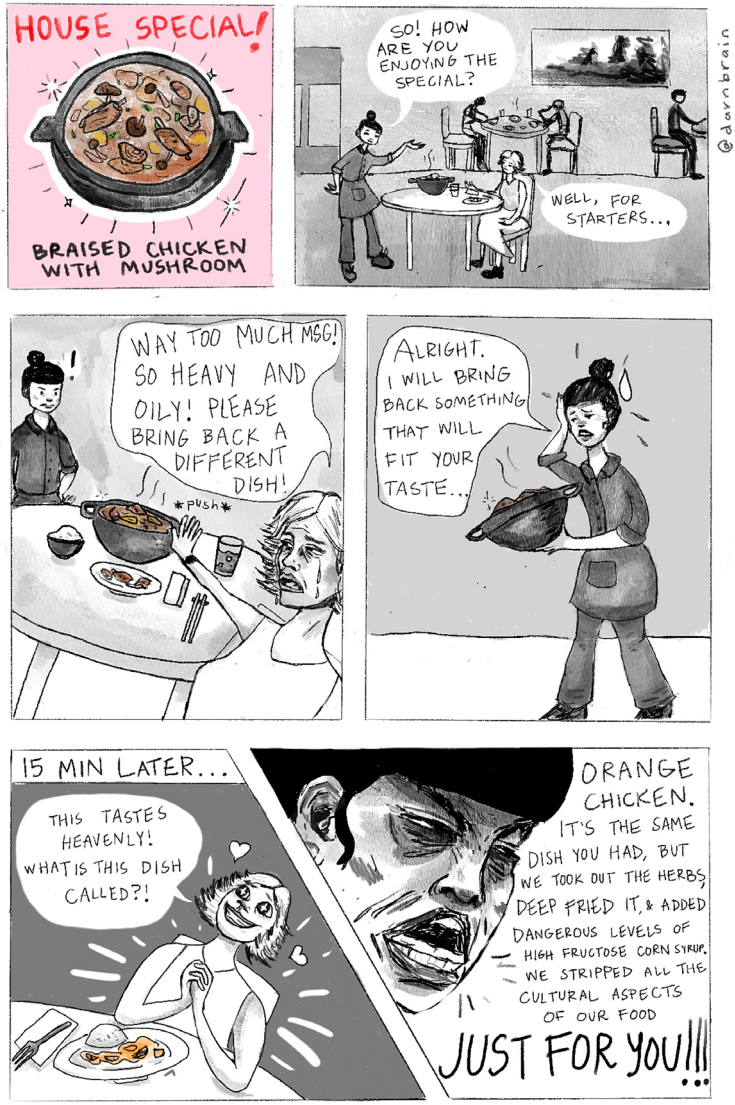
These feelings of shame and difference persist, but now I've been to enough therapy sessions. And I've seen how a soupy yet somehow bone-dry green bean casserole passes as familiar while steamed egg, rice noodles, and black sesame soup are considered exotic. I don't let that nonsense bother me now. As a queer person of color, my life is colored with microaggressions and beige nonsense. But the thick skin I possess today was nowhere to be found as a

pimply-faced, zong-loving teenager. At that moment, being othered as a "weird" Asian who ate "smelly" food at a majority white school was a slap to the face, a reminder of how I stood outside the norm.

While I was ashamed to be othered that one time at lunch, I'm even more distressed that I let people's words get to me. I let someone who considered chicken salad the only acceptable lunch option affect me. That idea is wild to me now. Zong is amazing, zong is delicious, zong is an edible labor of love. I'm done with shame (except for Evelyn "Champagne" King's 1977 single, "Shame"). Bring on pride and indifference. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get a head start on wrapping some aggressively mediocre zong in time for the Dragon Boat Festival this year.

American Chinese Restaurant

Daisy Lee



Terracotta Dream

Kingston Xu

Sounds About Right

Lydia Kim

In 1980, when the Seoul Olympics were still eight years away, my classmates asked if I was Chinese. I'm from Korea, I said, and they replied, *never heard of it*. Forty years later, K-dramas are a Netflix genre and the BTS Army successfully trolls Trump rallies. Korean restaurants are far more common now, and so are Americans (a blunt grouping, I know) who share their culinary bona fides by telling me how much they love Korean food. That's how I hear a lot of mispronunciations, each one a tiny paper cut.

They tell me, *I love* BOOL-GOH-ghee. They emphasize the two syllables they should tuck under their tongues and swallow the one where they should stick the landing. (My third-grade teacher made a joke that none of us understood at the time: "Your em-PHA-sis," she said, "is on the wrong syl-LAH-ble.") People *love* BEE-Bim-Bap, front-loaded and with a hard B. Or worse, BIM-BIN-bap. There's even a Wikipedia entry with four Ps: *pi-pim-pap*. Somewhere in K-town, an ancestor is rolling over in her grave under a Romanized headstone. The popularity of Korean food invites the mispronunciations, the sounds which go off track by a few degrees, diluting and distancing the dishes from their origins. I love everyone's love of Korean fried chicken, but I hope the masses never discover dahk-jjim. Just typing that out shows me how

impossible it is to anglicize the right Korean sounds in English letters.

Even my last name starts with a sharp K in English. It does not, in reality. In college, I met a Korean kid who spelled it Gim; I marveled at the genius of this until the bursar called out for him: "Rob Jim? Rob? Jim?" There is no way to pre-emptively anglicize our names and words enough to avoid this.

Of course, it isn't just Korean words that settle into English vernacular incorrectly. People mispronounce so many words: *wasabi*, *tempura*, *karaoke*, *Tsingdao*, *jiaozi*—even *To-ky-o*, said with three syllables like *Hy-un-dai*, both of which should have only two. I don't speak Japanese or Mandarin, but I don't have to in order to pronounce those words correctly. (Many who don't speak Italian pride themselves on saying *tagliatelle* correctly.) For us, to achieve some purchase in American culture is to be modified by it, to settle for close enough.

Lately, I hear lots of non-Asian critics saying "Mee-NAR-ee" instead of "MEE-na-rhee," in reference to *Minari*, a film in which the characters do not settle for close enough. I love that their struggle is not being Korean and that their dream is not American. The struggle is balancing their material and filial responsibilities. The dream is growing Korean food for Korean people. The film does not center whiteness but their Koreanness. *Minari* is not about foreignness or assimilation or triumph, but how to live among white neighbors without being diluted by the nearness.

I love that Korean food is more accessible, more beloved, more known. I am also selfish and protective of it. On the one hand, I don't want the price of popularity to be misspoken-ness. My mother was often dismissed by store clerks for not knowing which sounds to elide, like a native speaker. The mispronunciation of Korean makes it seem like it doesn't deserve the same effort—and the mistakes do not elicit the same consequences. The refusal or inability to curve the Western tongue around the trills and tones of Korean names shows the limits of soft power partially established through kitchen culture. But that's why I want to insist on effort, on correctness. I want it to be right, not just popular.

On the other hand, maybe the separation is a good one. 비빔밥 is Korean. BIM-BIN-bap is American, a messed-up name that is "close enough" because the need to assimilate only goes one way. Maybe it's better that way, for the two versions to remain slightly apart, since there are lots of Korean words with no good translation in English. Some feelings, smells, and tastes are exclusively Korean and don't need a conceptual counterpart in America, or in English. Maybe it is right, to keep something for ourselves, unchanged by the nearness.

Untitled
Ingrid Lai

I don't want to tell you what's for lunch

Danielle Laprise

Sometimes to get out of a conversation or avoid conflict, I'll fake the answers to questions people ask me. We all do it sometimes. Maybe I do it too much. Questions like:

"How are you today?"

"Fine."

"What do you want for your birthday?"

"I don't care."

"Do you like this outfit on me?"

"It's great!"

But I'm filled with a particular kind of dread when a coworker in the office kitchen asks me "What's for lunch?"

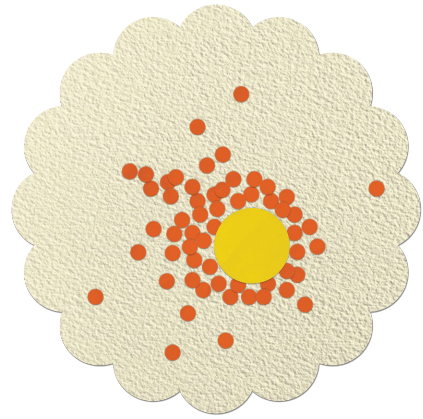
I don't want to answer truthfully because I don't want to get hurt.

The appropriate answer is to say "leftover pizza," or "ham sandwich" or something banal and ordinary, and American. "Salmon roe and raw egg yolk on top of rice with furikake" doesn't belong.

"None of your business," is what I want to say. In reality, my responses are just as blunt but more panicky. I awkwardly blurt out "Nothing," or "Food," and then I grab whatever disgusting thing I'm planning to eat and I briskly walk back to my office and shut the door.

My company spans four floors in our office

building, located in a suburb of Saint Louis, Missouri. Of the roughly 70 or so employees, I am the only Asian (and I'm only half-Asian).



I wonder occasionally what it must feel like to work in an office building in San Francisco, or New York, or Seattle, or any other city more diverse than my own. Would I have other Asian cohorts? Would bulgogi and mapo tofu dominate the limited shelf space in the refrigerator? Would our other coworkers glare at us as we reheat our pungent pancit and pork belly in the microwave?

Asian Americans are experts at concealment—skilled in not drawing unwanted attention to ourselves. I'm thankful I have an office with a door. It hides me from prying eyes and contains the scent of my lunch safely within my walls.

The office kitchen betrays me, with its cramped countertop space and nowhere for me to hide. "Please don't ask me what I'm eating. Please don't ask me what I'm eating. Please don't ask me what I'm eating..." This is my mantra when I'm alone in there and I hear someone's approaching footsteps.

Seaweed rice crackers are one of my favorite snacks, and eating them instantly fills me with fond childhood memories. One day, as part of our "diversity

week" activities, I brought in a few packages of crackers and shared them with the office, leaving them in the kitchen for coworkers to graze. My heart sank when I returned to the kitchen at the end of the day and saw someone had laid the crackers on a piece of paper towel, displayed with a sticky note that read "These are yucky!" This is why it's nobody's business anymore what I'm having for lunch.

I'm tired of my "exotic" food sparking someone else's curiosity or revulsion. I just want to eat in peace, free from judgment. I don't want to be the one to teach a coworker easily twice my age what kimchi is. I want to be spared witnessing the quizzical look on someone's face when I utter the word "fermented." I'm annoyed at how many times I've had to defend Spam in conversation, explaining how it's delicious and popular even though it's not on the menus at Applebee's or The Cheesecake Factory.

One day a coworker knocks on my office door during lunch to ask me if I have any soy sauce. Of course I do, Carol! I have several packets in my desk drawer and a bottle of the good stuff hidden in a dark corner of the company refrigerator. I offer her some and she thanks me and leaves, but I'm left wondering for days: "Did you come to me because I'm Asian? Did you ask anyone else first?"

Tomorrow, Carol will microwave some leftover steamed broccoli for her lunch, stinking up the entire suite for hours, and blissfully she will feel no shame.

Paratha Play

Mansi Goel

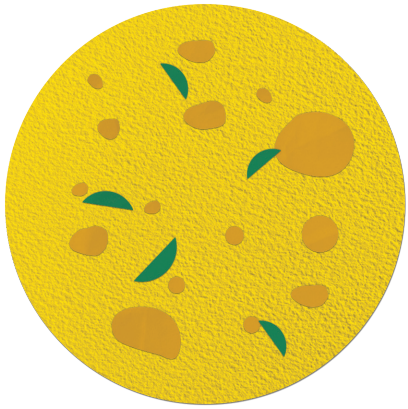
I am in the seventh grade. I am eleven years old and I have been in America for two years. I have to bring a dish to class for a potluck. My mother and grandparents are making ninety *paratha* for me so every classmate can have a generous share.

They determinedly roll ball after ball of dough, stuffing each with spiced potatoes. They roll each stuffed ball flat again, then pan fry every one. I hear the arguing and chuckling and watch the rolling and frying as they sweat on their feet for hours. I feel loved and guilty.

In class the next day, I unroll *paratha* wrapped in foil onto the food table laden with pasta and hot dogs. Someone walks by. *Eww, what's that*. I'm stung and I don't know how to respond. 'Potato pancake' won't be in my bag of tricks for another few years. I smile but I think it's a wince. I comfort my unbelonging with the familiarity of a *paratha*. I go outside to find friends. I lose myself in talking and playing. I look up and spy a boy at the top of the stairs flinging a *paratha* like a frisbee across the courtyard. He's a poor student but popular by being something else that I can't learn. He's laughing and a few others join him. They throw *parathas* at the walls like toys, like weapons.

I'm frozen, my breath locked in my chest. Every *paratha* I see on the floor is a wound where my

family's labor and love was poured. I want to gather each one and cuddle it close. I want to snarl at these kids. My body is tight. My eyes are burning. I have a lump in my throat that I will force down until it becomes a doughy ball I ferment in my flesh. I'm too unsure to challenge the happy ignorant children mangling the food my beloveds made with their hands. So, I say nothing. I will never say anything. I will never tell my family how their gift was treated. I will lie about people's curiosity as though hiding from heartbreak will keep us safe from the people we are all striving to fit in with.



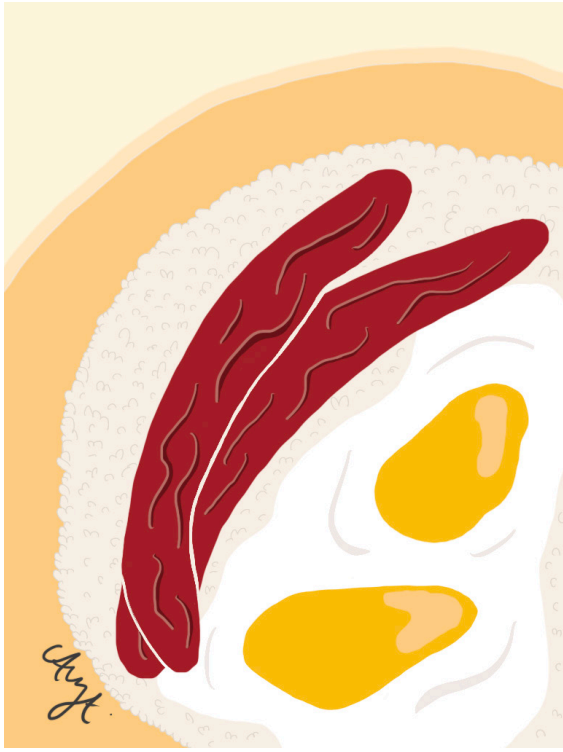
The children playing with my *paratha* are a tableau of foreigners before me. Their laughter and jeers now collapse into the words they've hurled before at our teachers and against their own parents. I am struck and suddenly repulsed by their *firangi* ways. What kind of people are these who know no respect?

I hate the power and entitlement in their pale little bodies. I hate their irreverence. I feel the burn of it as it chars what is precious to me. It will be years before I understand that under this hate is jealousy. For their *freedom*. To cast insults I'm not allowed even to think. To hold nothing sacred and, so, to be free of anything divine. I won't understand for decades how

my family's loving labor forges the iron in my blood into chains. I'm jealous that honor and duty don't bind these children. Right now I can't see how the jeering power seeded in these children will fester and spread until it covers the whole land. One day, in another century, I will see these bodies, grown but still gleeful, flinging their spit and shit in the most hallowed halls of the nation just like I see them flinging *parathas* in class now. Laughing and just walking away. Free. So pale and so free.

Today, in this courtyard, I can swallow my tears because they are new and few. My eleven year old body hasn't yet battled the long years. It is only beginning to thrash in its prison of flesh, trapped between the honor and duty pressing up from inside and the bigotry and bias pushing down from outside. Today, I don't know that I will never break the bars my blood and skin make of me but maybe, in some corner of my young mind, I already suspect that someday in the middle passage of life, I will break myself–and be free.

Untitled
Ashley Hampton



Nourishment
Nancy Hom

Contributors

James Cerenio

James Cerenio is a born and bred San Franciscan. His father immigrated from Pangasinan, Philippines to San Francisco in 1927. James has been a youth organizer and advocate, a web and database programmer for a social justice organization, and is currently a civil servant in local government.

Haylie Chan

Born in Hong Kong, Haylie Chan is a Cantonese-speaking first generation Canadian who has lived in Toronto since she was five years old. Haylie received her Bachelor of Architectural Studies from the University of Waterloo, followed by a Master of Architecture from Yale University. Currently based in Los Angeles, she is a multi-disciplinary designer working in the fields of architecture and graphic design.

Nicole Doan

Nicole Doan is a Filipino-Vietnamese Bay Area native, as well as a New York based designer whose work primarily focuses on the application of humor, play, and color in architecture. In addition to design, Nicole tells her stories through writing, film photography, and food.

Mansi Goel

Mansi Goel is an insight addict and a liberation enthusiast. She is most concerned with ideas of Being and Meaning that inform how life is experienced. After escaping corporate life, Mansi spent months in silent meditation and has now crafted a version of the philosophical life that she had always dreamed of.

Ashley Hampton

Ashley Hampton is a UX/UI designer who specializes in improving people's experiences with government technology. She was born and raised in Washington state but has since found solace in the Midwest, namely Chicago. She comes from a Chinese-Cambodian background on her mother's side and grew up never quite fitting in with either Asian or white communities.

Nancy Hom

Nancy Hom has been an artist, writer, and curator in San Francisco for over 45 years. Through her posters, poetry, installations, and curatorial work, she has used the arts to affirm the histories, struggles, and contributions of communities of color. Her mandala projects range from personal reflections to community engaged storytelling.

Christine Hsu

Christine Hsu is a writer, playwright, and poet based in Oakland, CA. She has been published by The Bold Italic, xoJane, KQED, ABC News Radio Online, Slipform Poetry Anthology 2020, and DropOut Literary Magazine. Her play "I Love You But..." was a finalist in the Negro Ensemble Company 10 Minute Play Competition, and her play "Faith" is a finalist for the Crafton Hills College New Works Festival 2021.

Shirley Huey

Born and raised in San Francisco, Shirley Huey is a storyteller focused on food, culture, and equity. A VONA, KSW, and Rooted & Written fellow, Shirley has read at Eves @ the Beat, APAture, and Quiet Lightning. Her work appears in Catapult, sparkle+blink, and Endangered Species, Enduring Values, among others.

Grace Hwang Lynch

Grace Hwang Lynch is a Bay Area based journalist and essayist with an eye for Asian American culture and food. Her work can be found at PRI, NPR, Tin House, and Catapult. She is always up for a conversation about sourdough baking or Taiwanese movies.

Junmei

Junmei is an emerging writer and washed-up Neopets omelette chef living in Boston on Wôpanâak land. He descended from the Cygnus constellation in a shower of jacaranda petals 6000 years ago. His work is forthcoming in Queer Asian Project and The Untold Narratives.

Lydia Kim

Lydia Kim is a writer based in the Bay Area. Her writing has appeared in Catapult and Ursa Minor, and she has received some encouraging rejections. Finally writing a novel, a project fifty years in the making, she appreciates all the ways it is possible to procrastinate after outlining.

Lucien Kubo

Lucien Kubo is a third generation Japanese American. She loves creating artwork that reflects her cultural background. Lucien grew up in the Bay Area, California. Growing up in the 60s and 70s, she became interested and involved in the political issues of the times. Inspired by the civil rights movement, redress and reparations and community building, she incorporates the issues of the day into her art, and feels it is important that Asians have a voice!

Ingrid Lai

Ingrid Lai was born and raised in Hong Kong and has been living in the Bay Area for a long time. She volunteers for a few non-profit

organizations: tutoring elementary school students, serving seniors, and doing translation work.

Maggie Lam

Maggie Lam is a non-fiction writer based in the Bay Area. Her essays have appeared in The Bold Italic, Wear Your Voice Magazine, and the Daily Californian. Currently, she is working on a memoir about being silenced as an Asian American feminist writer.

Danielle Laprise

Danielle Laprise is a freelance writer living in St. Louis, Missouri. She is the proud daughter of a Filipino mother and a WWII veteran father.

Daisy Lee

Daisy Lee is a second generation Taiwanese American, born and raised in Northern California. Her comic embodies her Chinese restaurant experience, and her frustration with how Chinese cuisine has been sorely undermined in the West. She is a vocal advocate for authenticity and diversity in the representation of Chinese culture.

Diann Leo-Omine

Diann Leo-Omine is rooted in San Francisco (Ramaytush Ohlone land) and the colorfully boisterous Toisanese diaspora. She now resides in the North Central Valley (Nisenan land), in between the ocean and the mountains. Her writing can be found in The Universal Asian and the forthcoming anthology Write Now SF.

Stephen Li

Stephen Li is a fourth generation hapa kid (Japanese/Chinese/Korean/some kind of white) from Hawaii. He spends his free time either writing stories that never see the light of day or reading books by mostly dead white men (interpret that syntax as you will) and wondering why the Western canon feels so alien to him. He also enjoys sad-calling his friends from fast food drive-through lines to complain about how not a single thing in America (read: the world) works the way it should.

Jeffrey Liu

Jeffrey Liu is a second generation Chinese American designer born and raised in Marin County. Jeff holds a Master of Architecture from Yale University and a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture from Princeton University, where he received the Joseph Sanford Shanley '17 Memorial Prize. He is currently practicing as an architectural designer in Los Angeles while serving as an editor of Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal.

Celine Lota

Celine Lota was born and raised in San Francisco. She is the eldest of three first generation Filipino American siblings. She believes in the power of voice and the idea that the more we normalize having difficult conversations with open minds, the closer we come to cultivating understanding and change.

Brian Nguyen

Bay Area born and raised. Brian Nguyen identifies as a first generation Vietnamese American. He loves his family, his girlfriend, and his friends. He is always down to talk about food, hoops, and pro wrestling. He has never done anything like this before. Thanks for letting him share his thoughts.

Doanan Phan

Doanan Phan is a second generation Vietnamese American and a Bay Area native. She is a graduate of Santa Clara University and has worked for non-profits for over 14 years. Doanan has been part of the Marketing team at Second Harvest of Silicon Valley since 2011.

Vivian Qin

Vivian Qin currently works in healthcare and is interested in topics regarding identity and narrative medicine.

Shizue Seigel

Shizue Seigel is a Japanese American writer, visual artist and community activist who still won't make sushi because it would never measure up to Mom's. She is working on a memoir about strawberry sharecropping camps, Washington D.C. rice runs, and the food stalls in Tokyo's Seibu department store.

Anthony Shu

Anthony Shu graduated from Princeton University in 2016 and after a brief career in kitchens, he started working at Second Harvest of Silicon Valley on client storytelling and multimedia production. Also a freelance food writer, his work has been published in Eater SF and the Princeton Alumni Weekly.

Kim-Vi Tran

Kim-Vi Tran was born and raised in the Bay Area as a first generation Vietnamese American. She loves to travel, cook/bake, and paint in her free time.

Tria Wen

Tria Wen's writing has been featured in the Washington Post, NYT Now, Narratively, Ozy, The Seventh Wave, and Reader's Digest, among other places. She is also a founding editor of the Black Allyship column at Mochi Magazine and the co-creator of Make America Dinner Again.

Tamiko Wong

Tamiko Wong was born and raised in San Francisco with roots in Japantown, Chinatown, and the Richmond district. Her work has been included in the Standing Strong! Fillmore and Japantown Anthology, on Pacific Time, and in AsianWeek. She writes poetry, memoir, and song. Tamiko has also produced podcasts and zines.

Willow Woo

Willow Woo is a proud descendent of an original dreamer, a paper son who settled in SF Chinatown. She has been vegan for years and makes a tricky Char Siu Bao. Her rescue mutts, here and in spirit, keep her running. She praises closed captioning and wishes real life had subtitles.

Kingston Xu

Kingston Xu is a Bay Area native who somehow ended up back there. He enjoys eating, biking, playing more video games than he cares to admit, and making sure he doesn't get rusty at old hobbies such as playing guitar and drawing. His current go-to boba spot is Tea Era.

Acknowledgments

The Lunchbox Moments zine team is grateful for the wisdom, support, and inspiration from our family and friends and the following individuals, organizations, and their work: Sarahlynn Pablo, Lion Dance Cafe, and Storm Now for Black Lives zine; Cynthia Lin, Farrah Su, and the Family Style Zine; Food Media Lab and SF Cooking School; Chinatown Community Development Center; Thuy Tran, Kim Boral, and Rooted Recipes Project; Doanan Phan; all of the wonderful writers and artists featured in this project. Thank you all so much.

Colophon

Lunchbox Moments
lunchboxmoments.com

Contact
lunchbox.moments.zine@gmail.com
Instagram: @lunchboxmoments
Facebook: @lunchboxmoments

Curated by
Shirley Huey
Diann Leo-Omine
Anthony Shu

Art Direction (Book Design and Illustrations unless otherwise noted) by
Haylie Chan
Jeffrey Zhenhua Liu

Typeface
Circular, Vremena, and Noto Serif