

Cooking My Heritage

Category: Eating

written by Ray Zhang | December 28, 2021

My parents immigrated to the U.S. from a small village in Xinjiang, China—a place surrounded by the Gobi Desert and mountainous terrain. Due to Xinjiang's geographic location, my parents were raised on salted fish, mutton, and boiled potatoes.

Growing up, I struggled with accepting these foods despite liking their taste. At school, my friends would eat salads, burgers, and fries, while I sat there with a container of smoked mutton and rice. At some point in middle school, I remember the guilt of throwing away my lunch because I believed my mother's home-cooked meals were too Asian for my "Americanized" palate. It wasn't until I traveled to my parents' hometown that my perspective on food and heritage shifted.

I distinctly remember walking through the tightly knit village of Urumqi, surrounded by people of various ethnic groups. The sweet aroma of kabobs and naan drifted through the streets. As I ventured deeper into the market, my world seemed to transform before me. Street vendors of Kazakhstan descent sold roasted mutton marinated in raisin sauce, while those of Mongolian origin offered diced mutton filled with pickled root vegetables. All the foods I encountered that day were distinctly different from each other, yet all were reminiscent of a common origin.

It was at this tiny street market, surrounded by the immense Himalayas, that I realized how wrong my views on food had been. Food doesn't have to be defined by a place or a people; there doesn't have to be a boundary between the Asian food I grew up with and the American food I've been exposed to.

Today, food no longer holds the negative implications I once assigned to it. Instead, food has become a vessel for me to showcase the two cultures mixed within me. I now strive to find ways to craft dishes that stir together my Xinjiang heritage with a dash of American flavoring; when you walk into my kitchen, you may be greeted by the fragrance of cumin and the sizzle of a New York strip steak.

Ray Zhang

Troy, Michigan