

The Significance of Soup, or, Roast Duck Revelations By Su-Jit Lin

No matter the culture, no matter the upbringing, certain foods will always bring back certain memories; whether those recollections are good or bad, the strength of the association is such that time stands still, and for that one big moment as you inhale the aroma, settle your teeth down, and let the flavors fill your mouth, you are who you once were.

For me, that one dish that spoke those volumes was roast duck soup from Chinatown in New York City.

Forget the fish markets, floors slick with briny water, rubber boots squeaking on cheap tile as the odor permeated the bottoms of your unhemmed pants. The fruit stands with their displays of hand-written prices in uniform penmanship on corrugated cardboard—they mean little. Asian pears in soft plasticene nests, shiny Fuji apples, and oversized red grapes and California oranges—all these associations are nothing compared to the one between growing up and roast duck soup.

Imagine this: chopped duck, dark and gamey, marrow unobtrusively seeping out of brittle, splintered bone, covered in crackling skins shining with grease. A rich, fragrant broth gleaming golden, tasting faintly of toasted shallots and green onions. *Al dente* egg noodles, floating like dense bundles of seaweed among translucent, plump ground pork-and-shrimp wontons. Tender baby bok choy, Chinese broccoli, or crisp mung bean sprouts add a splash of color and a refreshing, vegetative foundation to the heavy flavors. No matter how much my taste evolves or my standards rise, this will forever be the dish that personifies myself and what has shaped that self. I can tell my life lessons in bowls of soup.

Coming from an underprivileged family in the restaurant industry, I learned early on in life that although cash may change hands, food was the ultimate currency. In our house, money wasn't used to coerce the kids to do the right thing, but promises of tasty treats were always fair game. This method worked in elementary school, and it still works today.

My first realization was this, when at seven years old, it already became obvious that natural selection hadn't done its work. Though I had the thick, shiny hair of my father, I unfortunately inherited the stubborn, crooked teeth of my mother. Little baby teeth with roots firmly entrenched in gums with a Krazy glue core. Every trick in the book was used, from tooth-tying to red-faced pulling to hard candy, and ultimately, some of the little buggers had to come out with the help of a white-gloved pro: the dentist. Kicking and screaming, cheeks flaked dry by streams of hot-tempered tears, getting me there was a struggle for my luckless father, responsible for trips to the dentist, until he stumbled upon bribery by soup. My parents found that nothing quieted down an angry, newly gap-toothed child like a big bowl of slightly cooled soup with tender duck morsels slowly congealing into the noodles.

This relationship with roast duck soup grew as it became a tradition for the rare solitary days spent with my often-elusive father. Constantly stuck at the restaurant he struggled to maintain, trapped behind lines of hot cauldrons of pork shoulder stock, open gas flames, and shiny industrial broilers, vying for his attention was a lost cause when we kids were there. So it was a no-brainer to volunteer to accompany my father to jaunts to

New York City, whether the task at hand was as boring and mundane as picking up menus, as disgusting as examining empty-eyed sea bass, or sitting on a pile of boxes as he selected new woks. It was always worth the tedium for a bowl of hot soup in a noisy shop on Mott Street and the unfettered attention of my dad, a man who immigrated from son-hungry China to father a houseful of daughters; an educated man weighted down by dashed dreams and bitter disappointment for life in America. For the length of our meal and the satiated drive back over the rickety Williamsburg Bridge, I was the special one, the son of the family, and the winner of this special lunch, the remainder of which would be in a plastic container in a little brown bag clasped to my chest, close to my heart. And no matter how much my sisters would wheedle and whine, it was mine ... this afternoon with Dad condensed into a few scraggly pieces of fatty meat and soggy noodles.

Times, however, got hard, and these special afternoons trickled into nonbeing as competition increased and business dissipated. They ended in seventh grade, the last one being a dinner-sized bowl after a terrifying wintry evening at the dentist as the final tooth was pulled to make room for my braces. Cotton wadded in my bleeding mouth, faces tight against the icy blasts of dirty air, it was a struggle that night to find a noodle shop that was open. But a promise was a promise, and after I'd been ready to call it quits for about an hour, my dad hustled me and my aching mouth into a warm, raucous little shop in God knows what part of lower Manhattan. I wasn't in the mood, but I ate it still, accepting my father's wordless apology for a pliers and blood-filled hour and a half in the dentist's chair. He wasn't an emotional man and still isn't, but I was old enough to know that the determination to find my favorite dish meant more than it seemed, just as my sisters knew that the hoarding of my younger years meant that I was his right-hand girl that day, and the honors would not be passed on lightly.

As I got older, rebellious, and developed an embarrassment for the ethnicity I was, I distanced myself from everything that tied me back to it. I turned my back on the foods that defined my days as good or bad, and all of the connotations each plate had. Afternoons with Dad were no longer a desirable commodity as I hid my face in shame to hear his accented English, his loud jokes with gold-toothed men with scraggly moustaches, and I was no longer proud to walk around with him in his work-stained favorite Dockers. And so *he* was no longer proud to have his "whitewashed," sulky daughter accompany him on errands she looked at with disdain.

My teens were filled with resentment on both sides, and roast duck soup became a forgotten tradition. That is, until I "ran away," storming out of the house in anger at my father and running over decorative shrubbery in my haste to get the hell out of Dodge. I drove at near-reckless speeds, gulping down sobs of frustration, and made my way to my boyfriend's house, refusing to answer my dad's angry messages and giving my mother cryptic answers to her tearful pleadings to tell her where I was. I told her I would never speak to my father again, that we were done and that I was out for good since I was starting college soon, anyway. A proud man that I've never heard the word "love" come out of, I had no doubt that an apology was never to be. So I played at this war for one day, two, then three, forwarding calls from my father's number to voicemail, and hanging up when I heard his voice, only answering calls from my mom. She figured this out and ambushed me on the fourth day, handing the phone off to my father, begging as she did so not to hang up on him.

"I hope you're not hungry," he said gruffly.

“No,” in a tone that was coldly polite.

Awkwardly, he said, “Well, I went to the city today. I brought home some roast duck soup. I hope you’ll eat it.”

Touched by the fact that he had driven out to Chinatown an hour away to bring me the soup that designated our special bond and the times we shared when I was a little girl in poofy dresses and patent leather shoes, the frosty feeling began to melt away. My voice shaky, I answered simply: “Okay.”

Since that moment, the moment of the closest validation I ever received from my father of love and regret, our tradition has been reinstated. Chinatown in the afternoon led to roast duck soup. Visits home from college created the same result. And the long drives sitting shotgun in the minivan had that same camaraderie we shared in the sedan of a decade past. The only thing that had changed was my awareness of just how much every steaming spoonful of noodles, wontons, duck, and bok choy really meant, and how even though it was never spoken aloud, I was and will always be my father’s right-hand girl, the eldest daughter, the first son.

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