

From dumplings to chicken nuggets
A note to my younger self

Dear 刘圆缘,

Please don't ask your mom to bring you chicken nuggets for lunch instead of the dumplings she worked so hard to wrap for you last night. Your classmates don't know any better when they call your lunch from home "The most putrid thing I've ever smelled." Lift your chin, 圆缘, and be proud of your Chinese cultural heritage.

I've been bottling up these racial injustices and microaggressions I experience about my food through mainstream food media for too long.

It's too often that I see professionals in the food industry put forth creations to the mass media with a certain ignorance of the dishes' story. The culturally significant foods that don't fit into the white-centric standard are washed and bleached through the cycle of appropriation along with loads of other stories. Your mother's dumplings are not some inflexible algorithm that can be exploited by recipe publications because it's "trending," which has sadly become the emblem of the media industry's culture.

It's apparent that the industry is striving for the inclusion of diverse cultures; however, the issue that frustrates me is the lack of intent behind it: Where's the intentionality? Why do I continuously see chefs who clearly do not appreciate my cultural background teach me how to make dumplings? Where's the segment dedicated for BIPOC creators to share their own stories and meanings behind the foods they feel connected to? Why can't individuals in this industry be respectful and pay the appropriate homage to a culturally significant dish? How may we inspire others to find this delicate line between appreciation and appropriation?

Winter of 2020 - I fell in love with food.

It's been over a year since I entered college through a computer screen and transitioned my life online. I was recently asked, "If the COVID-19 pandemic was a person, what would you say to them?" Speaking solely from my experience, despite missing out on high school graduation and the first day of college, I still can't help but feel somewhat grateful: A testament to my privilege. It has been a time of retrospection, allowing me to slow down and decipher what's important to me.

I strongly believe that I've found a passion in life that I will continue to pursue in my future career. That winter, food bloomed from a mundane social activity to a cultural identity. I never considered myself creative until I began spending my nights in the kitchen. Some eat to live, and I live to eat.

Spring of 2021 - I realized that I couldn't fall in love with everything that surrounded food.

However, like all dreams and aspirations, I was recently struck with the reality as I learned about the discrimination that goes on in the way we appropriate food stories. The whole reason why I have a

passion for food is because I get to admire diversity. The way each person looks at food is so personal. It's personal to our upbringing, our backgrounds, and our daily activities.

I initially fell in love with food because of the core idea that one's food creations are able to represent your identity. When I see my culture misrepresented on screen, it's disheartening, to say the least. These issues have existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic; however, they've only been accentuated by the current dynamic landscape. As a result of these uncertainties, journalists in this industry are spread thin. They hold so much power in shaping public opinion: I mean, it's their job. However, when food publications repeatedly put forth the same homogeneous stories with the same celebrities the public seems to be infatuated with, it shapes the public's ideology of who deserves our respect.

So, 圆缘, going back to the point of the retrospection the COVID-19 pandemic has offered, I find myself questioning what will happen if the status quo so profoundly ingrained in food media continues to live on.

The food media space is incredibly unique in the sense that it's dedicated to a great equalizer. Food is something that is universal but just as personal. It connects us as humans, however the diverse identities and backgrounds that are intrinsically tied to food are often overlooked. Food media is becoming stagnant because it has been treated as a mere object of consumption. I hope that the COVID-19 pandemic will give rise to a more acute awareness for the overarching stories that food is the vehicle for. Therefore, I have made it a mission to bleed color and shed light on these overarching untold stories onto the monotone, white canvas.

I made dumplings last night in hopes that I can one day proudly bring them for lunch on campus at the Memorial Glade.

Lift your chin,
刘圆缘