

Your Identity Is In Your Palate

By Gloria Han

I grew up in southwest Michigan, the daughter of two immigrant parents from Taiwan. I was the second of three children – the *Mei Mei* (younger sister) of the family, sandwiched between my *Jie Jie* (older sister) and *Di Di* (younger brother). On Friday nights, we attended Chinese School and each year I'd look forward to performing a traditional dance with my Chinese School class in the annual Chinese New Year celebration. My family took frequent trips back to Taiwan and China to visit our Taiwanese family members and learn about our heritage (my dad's family had immigrated to Taiwan from China so we had connections to both places). When I think about my childhood, what I remember most is the food – I *loved* authentic Chinese food. Every night at the dinner table, my dad would remark with a grin, "You might be born in this country, but you are my daughter, both Taiwanese and American. Your identity is in your palate." He wasn't wrong – of all three children I seemed to have the most "authentic" taste buds, with a special liking for oxtail soup, pig ears, fried pig intestines, *mapo* tofu, bitter melon soup...I could go on.

I was in 8th grade when I declared to my parents at the dinner table that I no longer liked authentic Chinese food. Of course, it wasn't the food I didn't like. It was what it meant to be so different from my peers, to overhear them talking about "how gross" certain Asian foods sounded. Hearsay was enough for me to stop touching delicacies that to this day make my mouth water. At the time, though, my culinary sacrifice was totally worth it – how else would I get the cute white boys with blonde hair and blue eyes to like me? Acceptance from my peers was the objective, even if it meant rejecting a part of me that deep down, I knew I loved.

After high school, I was thrilled about leaving for college, but I think that with me, the thrill of possibility that most graduates experience was coupled with eagerness to shed aspects of my Asian heritage that I associated with shame and disconnect from my peers. I told my new friends that I'd never eaten a dumpling (for many years, I was my family's all-star dumpling maker and eater). When the Taiwanese American student association sent out welcome emails, I pretended that I didn't know why they would reach out to me. A guy in my dorm remarked that I looked half-Asian. I took this as a compliment and didn't bother to correct him. Maybe by distancing myself from my heritage, I thought I would be more accepted by my peers.

In my young adult years, I had a great group of friends and a job I loved, but something was missing. This realization led me to drop the rope in the lifelong tug-of-war between my Asian and American identities. I'm not sure what inspired me to do this, but one night I decided to make, for the first time, oxtail soup from scratch. It took a few hours, but when I finally sat down to sip the subtle yet flavorful broth, I was immediately met with a wave of tasty nostalgia. That first sip opened the door to re-accessing the parts of my cultural identity that I had worked so hard to neglect. Just as my dad had predicted, my palate led me back to my identity.