

Okra

by Frances Yuko

"I loved that okra could be soul food or Indian food, depending on what spices you chose; she would add dried shrimp and sausage to make it like gumbo or fry it up with turmeric and mustard seeds." The Truths We Hold, Kamala Harris

Kamala grew up in such richness of culture. Not one or the other. Rather, celebrating all sides of her. I really loved when she wrote about okra in her book. How it could be done up comfort food or Indian style depending on what spices are used. I feel the same way about many foods from when I was growing up.

My childhood kitchen table showcased several improvised dishes because we could not always find the actual ingredients needed. We just used whatever was available or affordable. As a Japanese and American growing up in the Heartland, a lot of things I grew up thinking were typically Japanese (because that is how my mother expressed it here) would have been found very odd by Japanese people living in Japan. For instance, roasted soybeans are very common in Japanese culture. My family could never find them locally, so we used peanuts in the shell during our Shinto rituals. To me, that was normal.

Another food like that for me was gumbo. My grandparents were from the South which influenced my grandmother's cooking. Her gumbo had okra alongside Japanese vegetables, sticky rice, and was served with fried wontons. To me, that was normal. Okra also had its place in my mother's 'neba neba' trifecta (an onomatopoeia for slimy foods good for digestion): boiled okra, tororo-imo (freshly grated yam), and natto (traditional fermented soybeans) over rice garnished with bonito flakes and a dash of shoyu (soy sauce).

Food is a place where I feel whole. Food is a place where I understand being Asian and American. Fusion in comfort food - To me, that is normal.