



## **I couldn't go out, so I went within**

*Wilda Wong*

It took 30 years of missed opportunities and a pandemic for me to reconnect with her in this way. In fact, I've never felt as close to her since her passing as I do now.

My grandmother died from lung cancer in 1990, less than a month after my parents, brother, and I emigrated from Hong Kong. I had always felt immense guilt for not being able to take her with us, and an even bigger void where her cooking had been.

My grandmother, named Nip Shui (聶瑞)—that uncommon two-character Chinese name—was a magician in the kitchen. In our high-rise apartment just one story below the rooftop deck, the stove was always on, something brewing or stewing. Even when she was tending to me and my brother, even when she was cleaning or doing other chores.

I am no magician in the kitchen, but I've always loved to eat. I went to college in the Bay Area, and honestly, at the time, I chose the school not based on what it was known for or had to offer, but the location—proximity to hustle, bustle, and all the other wondrous things a metropolis held for me memories of the Hong Kong of my youth.

I worked between classes, so I could try acclaimed restaurants, attend cookbook signings (who was I??), and take advantage of the incredible offerings at Berkeley Bowl so I could make meals from said cookbooks. Somehow, though, I never felt talented or patient enough for the trial and error of mastering my own dishes.

What I'd eat at home changes radically depending on my living situation. Living with my family in the 90s, I ate whatever my parents prepared. In the beginning, going from my grandmother's masterpieces to my mom's attempts, the transition was rough. (Or rather, I was a harsh judge.)

In the few years following college, living with a food-obsessed roommate and talented cook in her own right, I regained my love of home cooked cuisine. Her cooking honored her multicultural heritage (Mexican and Chinese) with a culinary curiosity I related to.

Living with a domestic partner for the first time after that, preparing meals from cookbooks never translated into incorporating them into an everlasting and beloved repertoire of oft-repeated yet never tiresome dishes like those my grandma created from passed down knowledge and muscle memory.

My cooking was not that of delicious sustenance, and sadly, not always made with love. Mine was emulated from published bourgeoisie. I wasn't trying to be something I wasn't; I just didn't know how to cook like my grandmother did, and frankly, I was too

scared to try. Scared that I would ruin the dishes I remember so fondly. Scared that I would feel more disconnected from her if I ruined them.

A marriage to a different partner and separation later, I spent my four years living alone throwing together quick meals like noodle soup made with dried noodles and basic flavorings, only occasionally attempting dishes that had more than two food groups. I had a Vitamix for occasional green smoothies, and later even got an Instant Pot so I could create meals that could last me all week (I didn't). My lunch at work mainly consisted of frozen meals from Trader Joe's.

My time was spent mainly outside of the home. The repertoire never solidified.

On March 15, I started working from home like so many others who were lucky enough to do so. Lucky to not have to be on the frontlines. Lucky to be able to go from my kitchen to my coffee table to start my workday. And like most things in life, this was a double-edged sword.

I don't know how other people fared, but in those early days, the idea of working from home during a pandemic was laughable to me.

Doomscrolling aside, the walls in my once-adequate apartment closed in more and more each day as I continued using my coffee table as a makeshift desk, which I was already using as a makeshift dining area for my sad one-person meals, as well as a makeshift entertainment center of a Kindle Fire streaming Netflix or Prime.

Two more weeks in, I knew I was going to lose my mind if I didn't change my environment. In April, a friend and I decided to take a gamble—ditching our tiny spaces and pooling our resources for a place that could help us feel a bit saner during an insane time.

The place we get to call our pandemic retreat is a gorgeous and spacious first story of a house with a large range—and track lighting (!)—in the kitchen. It is here and in the past few months that I mustered up the courage to attempt making those dishes I loved as a child: To-die-for braised beef made with *Chi Hou* paste that took hours to prepare; minced meat with fried egg on rice that I never bothered learning to make properly; flavorful steamed pork patty with preserved vegetables, a humble worker meal that could feed a dozen on very little.

How and why did I go those years without trying to recreate this *umami* that I grew up loving?

It's not that I've since magically learned how to make those dishes. I've had to refer to online recipes, relied on memory, asked my parents—experimenting with different proportions of ingredients each time. But I'm willing to perform the trials and experience the errors.

Now, our kitchen is always stocked with fresh scallion (and even regrowing each stalk)—a favorite garnish of so much Cantonese cuisine. My roommate and I hardly go a week without meal planning. (Who am I now??)

As we head into a new year, perhaps with not a whole lot changing, I can at least say that I've been able to accomplish one thing—I've been able to feel my grandmother's presence not just in my heart, but in my belly.

