

## Cooking Gingerly

By Longtao Liu

I had two lists, one enumerated the things I like but my mother doesn't: Japanese comic books, my bottles of cosmetic products, curls, and meat. The other listed the things she likes but I don't: loud morning radio singing Peking opera, her driving skills, short bob, fish, and ginger. "Have more ginger," she always told me, "It is good for your health." Well, it is never too hard to imagine how a teenager in adolescence would respond to an imperative sentence. She never gave up though. Ginger appeared anytime and anywhere in our dining table.

As a kid, I always wandered in the kitchen after school, eavesdropping on my parents' conversation and peeking at those fresh ingredients laying on pottery dishes. Little did I know that the pile of pale-yellow timber stacked on the corner of cutting board would become my life-time nemesis. Nevertheless, as the ignorant audience deceived by the magicians Penn and Teller for hundreds of times, I have to hand it to my mom for her amazing tricks to conceal ginger in dishes without me ever recognizing. She usually blended and fried ginger slices together with vegetables like potato or daikon — those lemony flesh was the best disguise. Sometimes for braised meat or poultry cuisines, she soaked cubed ginger long enough in the broth for a long time to fully extract the zingy essence. I could tell that just by sniffing the faint peppery air. At the same time, although unintentionally, she dyed the rough textured skin of ginger cubes with dark ruby color, enabling them to impersonate any poultry, beef or pork.

No matter what dishes ginger managed to sneak in, their taste was always unfortunately surprising and aggressive: slight sweetness in the beginning to woo you in, following by raging

fire rolling down your throat. Even after reaching your stomach, the feeling of being burnt would still remain for a while to make sure you will never forget.

Sometimes ginger even didn't have to reveal itself. As one of my mother's signature Sunday breakfasts, Tangyuan in sweet soup could easily catch any kid's attention by the sweetened taste and lovely rice balls rotating in warm brown sugar soup. After taking one sip of the syrup, the pungent ginger scent would immediately rush up and dance in your nasal cavity. Those white spheres still looked adorably innocent because the real suspect has been already taken out. Sometimes ginger showed up with some arrogant smugness. My mother always forced me to drink a bowl of ginger syrup whenever I got sick or ran home in the pouring rain. The light-yellow ginger pieces floating in the purplish-red syrup were laughing at my useless struggle with its spicy scent.

For years, I've been fighting those sneaky little bastards. From carefully observing and avoiding them to sorting them out directly, I eventually decided to take the war to the man behind the curtain. Regardless of my protest, my mother's attitude towards ginger remained firm as always, "Although not good to have too much, ginger can dispel cold and remove dampness in your body." As a faithful believer of traditional Chinese medicine, she puts a lot of trust into health tonics and considers it as the key in promoting our wellness and general health: "Don't be so picky. No wonder why you always caught cold." She stared at me through her rimless glasses with her eyes narrowing and eyebrows frowning a little. I've seen this expression for too many times — this is the face she usually has when she is trying to make a point. The conversation continued, finished, then restarted several times until it gradually grew into shouting arguments; like all the other fights that I had with her over comic books or hairstyles, it ultimately ended

with unsettled silence with her persisting cooking magic and my continuing picking-out chopsticks.

When a chance for me to study at another country — the chance for me to run away from the quarrels arrived — I seized it promptly. It seemed that I finally could take a break after I went to college in the U.S. Other than some soda and snacks like ginger cookie, I rarely found ginger in any food that Americans made. Until one day I cruised in the grocery store, looking for ingredients for my first cooking ever since I moved. I naturally, without any hesitation, grabbed a green net bag of ginger when I passed by the section of fresh vegetables and fruits. Not until I got home did I realize that I had a full bag of ginger sitting on my dining table. The panic kept on expanding when I started cooking. Although I've hated ginger for so many years, I still needed to use it when I tried to cook Chinese food. As if I was programmed by my mother, I knew exactly how to use ginger in cooking: cut into slices or pieces, preboiled with pork to get rid of the bloody smell, preheated in oil so their savor would be absorbed better. There I was, standing in the kitchen, looking down at the shinning braised pork belly whose recipe my father taught me, lost and confused.

For a long time, I had seen myself as the opposite of my mother: everything she enjoyed seemed to define everything I loathed, and ginger, symbolizes the cornerstone of our differences. As the building of self-cognition falling apart, I started to notice more and more similar small cooking habits that I shared with hers. From the way I held Chinese knife with index finger strongly pressed on the back of the blade to the off-key song mumbling in front of the ovens, all those details exploded back to life, reminding me of how much in common that I have with my mother. They all said studying abroad is like a new adventure where you meet new friends and explore the new possibilities of yourselves. Indeed, I've tasted the sweet joy of freedom when I

dyed my hair for the first time, the exhausting bitterness of a cup of espresso at a 2am library. It never occurred to me that this is also a trip to discover what has been engraved into my system for the past decades.

Through my adventure, I discovered that the path of defining myself is more than mirroring myself in the others. It should not only be an easy math about subtraction of differences and adding similarities. Even though it would make everything look easier. I always got this one question from different people, taxi drivers, teachers and strangers I talked to. *Don't you miss your family?* With a sorrowful smile and sympathy in their eyes treating me a glass puppet. I got stuck for the first time, when my host family asked, and learnt how to answer it over time. A small nod and shrug. *Yep... I miss the food and the... you know.* Look away and leave the rest unspoken. People will always get the answer they want. The answer I've been searching for. The only response I knew I cannot give is a straight No. I knew this would make the questioner freeze and turn me into a heartless monster. I can still recall my host family's shock when I told them that I never said *I love you* to my parents. I remember the shame running down my spine. After the "ginger incident", I looked back again at my embarrassment at that time, realizing that I was not mortified by the fact that I never said *I love you* to my parents, but the cultural gap I sensed. Being a sixteen-year-old desperately trying to fit in a completely new environment and culture, conformity was the best cover and protection.

In the six years immersed in western culture, I slowly understood the way of expressing feelings between me and my family. Coming from China, a country which admires the beauty of taciturnity, my mother did not speak her love aloud, but her love manifested in assorted details that I hardly noticed before. Like the way my mother performed the ginger magic tricks, the love and care she interweaved into those meals were never stated and were hidden behind all the

fights we had. Although the expressions seemed to be extremely vague by appearance, once you have tasted it, it would be too hard to neglect.

Sometimes we put too much weight on those explicit labels that we tied to ourselves as if we were made up of simple arithmetic of likes and dislikes, differences and similarities. They certainly would be a great easy first step for self-evaluation, like seeing the title for a recipe to determine the essential constituents of the dish. However, labeling restrains you from thinking for and of yourself deeply. Every now and then, it turned into a getaway car which our self-consciousness took advantage of to run away from the cruel reality until you bump into unresolved the problems again. Meanwhile labels would put you in a mistaken position to view people and make you fail to see things that are subtle but more important. Going through the troubles which I encountered through the long and twisted road of self-perception, it came to me that, rather than a few static separate categories, life is a continuing and complicated process that we should embrace every moment in it, savoring all kinds of flavor, the love and the care hidden behind.

This summer I went home. On the first day I came back, my parents prepared an extravagant family dinner made up of all my favorite dishes. As I was picking out gingers slices again, a pair of chopsticks showed up and took them away. I looked up, “Still so picky, huh?” my mother frowned behind her glasses. I registered the wrinkles on her forehead, “Inherited from my mother, you know,” I grinned, “She is also a picky eater when it comes to meat.” From the corner of my eye, I saw my father’s face beamed. The sentence remained unspoken, as usual.