

## The Jar

In my family, food is more than a necessity: it is a journey, from start to finish. Food is always savoured together in groups, whether it be on holidays with aunts and uncles whom I kindly pretend to recognize or with my best friends in which more talking than eating is done. To know someone well often means knowing what they like to eat. When greeting someone in Mandarin, we don't say "how are you," we instead ask "have you eaten yet?" For us, food is our culture and our culture is our food.

Nearly every Chinese dish has significant meanings, beliefs, or superstitions behind it. For example, we believe in eating parts of an animal's body that we want to heal for ourselves. As such, dumplings have a slight resemblance to pig ears, an effort from farmers in the winter to heal frostbite on the ears. Similarly, another tradition is to eat changshou, or longevity, noodles each year on one's birthday. However, these are not just your typical noodles. The noodle must be composed of one complete strand and breaking it means cutting your life short. And lastly, one of the most prominent superstitions is for the shape of food to be round. We believe circles represent unison, which emphasizes the importance of eating together. For example, tables, plates, and bowls, are all circular to symbolize closeness, and dishes are always spread around the table so that everyone can reach them equally.

Growing up in Vancouver, I am blessed to be surrounded with agglomerations of Chinese restaurants. Regardless of whether you're in the fancy high-end Sun Sui Wah, or the local hole-in-the-wall dim sum place, one thing is for sure: the tables are round and circular, and probably have a lazy Susan (the rotating turntable placed on top of the main table). It was probably bustling with activity: waiters yelling in various dialects from the guest's table right into the kitchen, little kids sitting on wooden high chairs with their faces dirty from devouring a

baozi, and people patiently translating Chinese for their friends who don't understand. In fact, one of my favourite foods, jiuniang wanzi, epitomizes these concepts of family and unity.

Jiuniang wanzi has two components: a soup base made with sweet fermented rice wine paired harmoniously alongside chewy glutinous rice balls. The rice wine is called jiuniang, and the rice balls are the wanzi. This heavenly concoction is usually consumed during Lunar New Year as a dessert, but it also has many health benefits. Growing up, my parents always served it to me hot and right off the stove and said that it would “warm my insides up and improve blood flow.” They even went so far as to say that drinking it on the first day of winter would keep me warm all throughout the season. While it is usually reserved for special occasions like those, my dad always stocks a jar of his homemade jiuniang that is ready to use whenever we want.

Since we always have a jar of jiuniang on hand, it only takes about another 30 minutes to make and cook the wanzi. I used to love when my parents would have a fresh bowl of jiuniang wanzi waiting for me as a reward after a successful competition or receiving straight A's. Before I even enter the dining room, the sweet yet acidic waft of the jiuniang would be first to greet me. Kicking my shoes off, I would race into the house and smile at the still-steaming bowl topped with a few goji berries for a pop of colour. Days like this were my favourite.

But those days were rare. Sometimes, when I was younger, I would steal one of those dangerously wobbly round chairs from the closet and climb on it to peek into the top cupboard where the jiuniang was stored. I would cross my fingers and hope to see a vividly coloured jar labelled “pickled onions and daikon”. My dad always managed to find the most absurd and arbitrary jars to use. I think he's used everything from a Nutella to a kimchi jar. But I always knew to look for an out-of-place clear jar. If the jiuniang jar was full, I would tell myself I

needed to work a little harder to make my parents proud. If it was nearing empty, I would give myself a little pat on the back.

At that time, I thought the volume of jiuniang represented my parent's love for me. They uprooted their entire lives to immigrate me and my brother to Canada, so I thought the very least I could do is to put a smile on their faces through my accomplishments. As much as I knew it was not the healthiest mindset, I wanted quantitative awards and achievements to show them. I wanted them to see that all the money, time, and effort they put into taking care of me paid off. I wanted to show them easily measurable results. And, of course, I knew that they valued much more than just grades and medals. So maybe it's that I didn't know how to communicate my appreciation for them. Maybe first places and 100 percents were the only way I knew how to thank them for all that they do. And for them, maybe jiuniang wanzi was their way of saying "I'm proud of you."

But over time, I've learned that there are so many more genuine ways to make them proud. The only thing my parents want, and have ever wanted, is for me to be happy. Yes, they want me to succeed in school. Yes, they want to see me at the top of every podium. But most importantly, they want me to be true to myself. They want me to pursue what makes me happy without losing sight of who I am and where I came from.

I come from China. I come from the mother of silk, father of gunpowder, and home of dragons. I come from an exuberant culture with beautiful, long-lasting traditions. I come from a nation with hardworking citizens who understand compassion and respect. And of their many contributions to the ancient and modern world is jiuniang wanzi, a food that has both emptied and filled me up.

Now, I look forward to the day that our jar of jiuniang is empty. The day it empties is also the day that I can spend time in the kitchen with my dad. It is a day of him cracking unfunny dad jokes, showing off his culinary skills, and telling childhood stories. It is a day with no outside distractions; just us, sharing stories and laughter. And through the process, as we roll each ball of rice, the smell of the wine pungent around us, we are filling not only the jar of jiuniang, but also our hearts.