

READABLE FEAST



DUMPLINGS

CAROL PAIK

Don't judge a woman by the size of her mandoo

I never knew my mother's mother, because she died when I was six months old, but I've seen a few photographs of her so I have an idea of how she looked: four and a half feet tall, hair pulled severely back, bone-thin and close-lipped, wearing a traditional Korean floor-length skirt and short bodice. My mother has told me a few things about her. I know, for instance, that if my mother ever complained about having something in her eye, my grandmother would bathe the entire eyeball with her tongue. I also know that she was a wonderful cook.

My mother's family left Korea to come to the United States in 1941, when my mother was six years old. My mother's father became the minister of a small Korean church in Chicago which served as a center for the Korean immigrant community. At the time, that community consisted largely of homesick and hungry students, and the parsonage where my

mother's family lived was a haven where all visitors could be assured of a Korean meal, prepared by my grandmother. She used to mix the spicy cabbage kimchi in the porcelain American bathtub, kneeling beside it and reaching in with both bare hands. The students ostensibly came to hear my grandfather's sermons on Sundays, but I've been told it is the food they remember to this day.

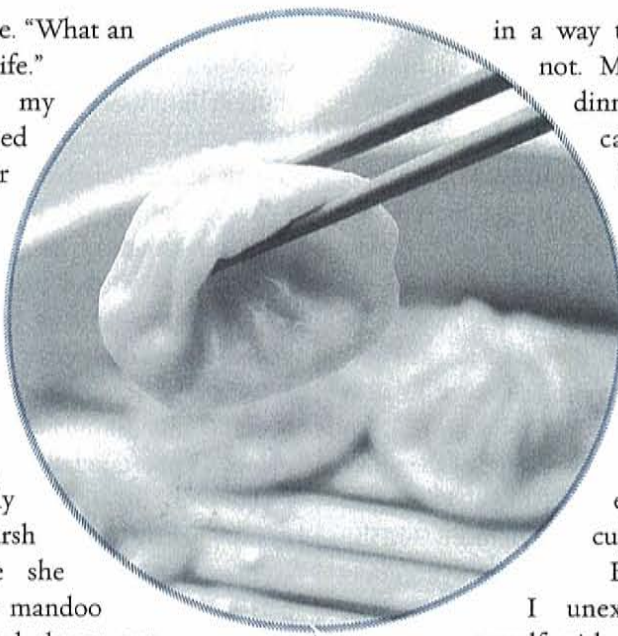
My own mother prides herself on being a bad cook. She is an accomplished pianist and teacher, a woman who has better, more important work to do and places to be. She has never had the patience for measuring ingredients or monitoring cooking times. In her mind, frozen orange-juice concentrate and canned squash, being roughly the same color and texture, really ought to be interchangeable in a recipe. She considers cooking a necessary evil, something that has to be done in order for one to be fed. "My mother was a wonderful cook," she

has often told me. “What an utter waste of a life.”

I’m told my grandmother used to judge other women by the size of their dumplings. Her own *mandoo* were perfectly uniform and the size of her little finger. When she really wanted to be harsh about someone she would say, “Her mandoo are this big!” and thrust out her palm. This story makes me understand why my mother doesn’t cook. It’s the same reason I don’t play piano.

But I’ve always sort of liked cooking. As a child, I liked to bake, and my mother encouraged my interest in order to get me to supply birthday cakes for my brothers, and contributions for the inevitable Junior Ski Program bake sales. But I never thought of cooking as a worthwhile expenditure of effort. It was a childish pastime, nothing more.

And, in fact, by the time I reached adulthood, the long hours I spent at the office and the barrenness of my closet-sized Manhattan kitchen effectively squashed any enthusiasm for cooking that may have lingered. I worked as a junior associate at a large midtown law firm, embarked upon a career that I thought would be worthwhile



in a way that cooking was not. Most nights I ate dinner at the firm’s cafeteria, partly because I had work to do that kept me there late into the night, but also because I had little incentive to come home to my empty melamine cupboards.

But one weekend I unexpectedly found myself with free time on my

hands and, staring into the void of the refrigerator, felt the urge to have my home, such as it was, smell of food. I decided I would cook dinner. I was at a loss as to how to go about this. I had no clear image that could serve as a goal, no nostalgia for any smell or flavor from the family dinner table. My mother made meals that could be thrown together with the least possible amount of fuss—meatloaf, spaghetti with canned sauce, fish sticks—serviceable and nutritionally balanced, but unmemorable.

I could, however, remember quite distinctly the few times I had tasted Korean food. This was always when we were visiting relatives. On those few occasions, food was the central activity, the main topic of conversation, the *reason* for being there—and my memories of those events are full of the bright reds and greens of the

vegetables, the fermented smell of kimchi, the hot and salty flavors of Korean food.

I decided to try to make mandoo.

The Barnes & Noble a few blocks away carried an array of Korean cookbooks, colorfully bound with full-page pictures of the dishes in photogenic lacquered bowls. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I still wasn't used to the thought that enough people might be interested in Korean cuisine to support the publication of Korean cookbooks, plural. When I was growing up in the suburbs of Boston, none of the other kids had even heard of Korea. "Hey, Chinese?" I would be asked—not nicely—in the playground. "Japanese?" Some little genius would occasionally think real hard and say, "Vietnamese?" But no one ever guessed Korean. Pacific Gate, the one "ethnic" restaurant in our town, served "Chinese-Polynesian" food which involved gluey fluorescent pink sweet-and-sour sauce, and its existence mortified me because I feared the other kids thought that was what I ate at home. So it almost annoyed me to find these beautiful books: after I'd spent my childhood and adolescent years trying to be as bland as possible in order to blend in, now ethnic had become fashionable—now, when my personality was fully and immutably formed and it was too late for fashionableness to do me any good.

After I secured a cookbook and pinned down the recipe I wanted, I then had to buy the groceries. As it so happened, the nearest grocer was Korean. I routinely stopped in at that corner grocery to buy my yogurt and coffee, and those visits were

always awkward for me because when the storekeepers discovered I was of Korean descent but spoke essentially no Korean, they looked at me with a mixture of scorn, sorrow, and personal offense. "You Korean? Why you not speak Korean?" And then they shook their heads and made clucking, air-sucking noises. I had come to expect this reaction whenever I bought anything from a Korean grocer.

Not to generalize, but Koreans are the nosiest and most judgmental people on the planet. I'm certain they overcharge me.

Because I never cooked, I had nothing in my kitchen that could have been called an ingredient and anything perishable had perished long ago. I had to buy everything I needed anew, and as it is impossible to buy individual servings of vegetables I was forced to haul home quantities of food I would never use. Then, once washed, the bounty of vegetables had to be minced. My mother's theory about Korean food, which applies equally to dishes from all chopstick-wielding countries, is that the reason everything has to be minced is so that the women will be kept busy in the kitchen all day. After an interminable mincing session, I began to think her theory had merit.

The miniscule vegetable slivers had to be mixed with ground meat, sesame oil, garlic, and salt. The cookbook specified, "Use your hands." Next, the wrappers needed to be filled, and the soup prepared. It was a heavily labor-intensive process, meant to be accomplished by teams of women—grandmothers, mothers, daughters, sisters, and sisters-in-law—laughing, gos-

siping, gesturing with garlicky, oily hands. I soldiered through on my own, lonely in my cramped and quiet kitchen. I vaguely remembered helping my aunt make mandoo when I was a child. She too lived in a tiny New York City apartment, and the trays of dumplings covered every surface in her kitchen. I remember that my mother sat down and helped as well. My aunt would hold the dumpling skin in one palm, fill it with two deft motions of a teaspoon, and seal its edges shut into a perfect half-moon with her thumb and first finger. I couldn't duplicate her ease then, and I certainly couldn't now. But at least I had seen it done. Surely that gave me some advantage.

When I was through filling the skins, the mandoo lined the plate in acceptably neat rows, and I thought my grandmother would have approved. Coming to America had been difficult for her for many reasons. She had left her family behind. Chicago was a hostile home for an Asian family in the 1940s. She never learned to speak English, and she had trouble communicating with her own children, but I imagine the hardest thing to bear was when they pushed her perfect dumplings aside and asked for hot dogs. Now, however, I, her granddaughter, would belatedly pay her tribute. Don't these talents skip generations? Even if she could not teach me how to cook, didn't I carry her mandoo-making ability in my DNA?

Then I dropped the dumplings in the soup and each one promptly inflated like a rubber emergency raft. By the time they

were cooked they looked like agitated sting-rays in a boiling sea with the balls of meat poking through their centers like throbbing brains. In my imagination my grandmother stepped back, disappointed, even disgusted, her spread palm too small to adequately display the breadth and width of my failure. I had inherited nothing from her.

I felt bitter about that, resentful that all my life I had borne the unpleasant consequences of looking different from everyone around me without reaping any of the benefits of actually *being* different, of knowing something they didn't. I looked around at the vegetable detritus in my kitchen. An afternoon—wasted. I turned off the heat under the pot and watched the surface of the soup come to rest.

I asked my friend Chris Han to show me how to make mandoo. I told her about my earlier mandoo fiasco and asked if she had any ideas why they ballooned up. "You made them badly," she said. 🍜

MANDOO

INGREDIENTS:

1 pound lean ground beef
½ pound. bean sprouts
2 scallions
4 cups Napa cabbage (about ¼ of a head)
7 ounces firm tofu (drained)
1 tablespoon sesame oil
1 teaspoon ginger (minced)
5 cloves garlic, minced
Mandoo wrappers (these are called a variety of things: *gyōza* wrappers, wonton wrappers, etc. They're often in the freezer section: just make sure you defrost them before using.)
Soy sauce (for dipping)
optional: 2 ounces *cheop chae* noodles (potato-starch noodles)

Blanch the bean sprouts for about 2 minutes in boiling salted water, until softened. When they're cool, squeeze out as much water as you can, then finely chop them.

Slice the scallions lengthwise and then finely chop them.

Coarsely chop the cabbage, and then blanch in salted water for about 5 minutes, until softened. Cool; squeeze (but squeeze *tenderly*, so that it doesn't get mushy); finely chop.

Season the beef generously with salt and pepper. Add sesame oil, scallion, ginger, and garlic. Combine well using your hand, or hands. (Chris suggests wearing disposable plastic gloves or putting your hand inside a plastic bag so that you don't smell of garlic for the rest of the week. But she does insist that you must use your hand; otherwise you won't be able to both mix *and* squeeze at the same time.)

Add the bean sprouts and cabbage to the meat mixture, and squeeze/mix some more.

If you're using the noodles, boil them for about 3 minutes, finely chop, and add to the mixture. Squeeze/mix.

Dump in the drained block of tofu. Squeeze/mix.

To fill the wrappers: have a bowl of warm water on hand. Hold the wrapper in your palm, floury side up, and place a rounded teaspoon of filling in the center of the wrapper. Dampen the edge of one-half of the wrapper with water to help seal it, and press the edges together. Pinch a few pleats along the sealed edge to make sure it stays together.

To cook: you can boil, steam, or panfry the dumplings. Boiling them is fastest, but Chris prefers steaming them, as she thinks they taste better that way. If you want to boil them, drop the dumplings into boiling water and boil for about 12 minutes. When they rise to the top, that's supposed to mean they're done, but Chris says the real way to tell if they're done is to taste one. If you want to steam them, line the steamer with cabbage leaves to prevent the dumplings from sticking. Steam them for about 15 minutes. If you want to fry them, Chris suggests steaming them for a little while first, and using a mixture of water and oil to fry them in; otherwise they're too greasy.

Serve with soy sauce for dipping.

Makes approximately 60 dumplings.