

Down and Dirty

MATTHEW CHAN



*WRITER'S COMMENT: Some years before I was assigned to write this food-related memoir in Professor Demory's advanced writing class, I remember watching an online marathon rerun of Julia Child and Jacques Pepin's *Cooking at Home*. With only brief exposures to the recipes and no concrete measurements in the episodes, I was startled by how much I learned to recreate (to an extent, haha) their luncheon salads and beef stews, among other things. This "rapid gustatory absorption" seemed to be something innate, like it was already hard-wired in my brain, as well as my ancestors' brains. By just watching them cook and heeding their instructions, I, too, could become a wonderful chef. As with learning a new language, I would have to start by babbling and dabbling. But it was a magical feeling: food was such a powerful way to communicate with others. To me, having a conversation and having a meal are nearly the same thing.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Matt Chan wrote this essay in response to the first assignment in my advanced writing class (UWP 101)—to write a memoir having something to do with food (the theme of the course). Memoir, I tell my students, is a piece of writing in which the writer identifies some key moment(s) in his or her past and, through writing about it, comes to some understanding of what that experience means—perhaps a deeper truth or revelation. An effective food memoir must be developed with plenty of specific details to help readers see, feel, hear, taste, and smell the details (after all, it's about food!). And I tell them that the most interesting essays are going to be those that contain something unexpected—some surprise or

twist. Matt's essay achieves all of this. From the first draft (and this essay has gone through numerous drafts, each one tighter and more polished), I knew that Matt's piece was special—it made me laugh, wince, drool, groan . . . but it also made me think. Because below the surface of this funny, snarky narrative is a thoughtful, complex re-examination of his relationship with food, his father, and the whole notion of being safe. And I now cannot cook a chicken or eat Thai food without thinking about this essay.

– Pamela Demory, University Writing Program

Did some sick person blend doggie doo-doo's and turn them into scented bath bombs?

“Yikes, Steve, how the hell can you stand that smell?”

My bewilderment amused my shift trainer, who chuckled as he garnished some dishes. Today was my first day at Thai Dee-light as an “expeditor”—a.k.a. a food sorter, stationed to a metal rack stocked with sauces and peanuts. The preparation shelf stood atop some sort of rushing drain that shot forth brown sludge, and the pu pu platter was not on my list of orders. Mr. Drain begged to differ and splattered some “sauce” on my shoes.

“Gross!”

“Try to stay positive, rookie,” Steve replied, a stolen sprig of cilantro bouncing up and down with each syllable. “Meal time ain’t until the end, so you can always eat with your eyes! Give this guy a spoon, will ya?”

He handed me a plate of Thai beef salad. A heaping mass of finely seared and crusted beef flank glistened atop a clean square plate. Basil, coriander, chili flakes, and lightly sautéed onions mingled with the meat, with ground rice powder sprinkled on the top like snowflakes. Juicy butter lettuce acted as their chaperone, staying in the background and supporting the lovely composition from the bottom. Before I could finish eating with my eyes, Steve pulled me out of my starved trance.

“I’m pretty sure you’ve got this all carved into your brain. But just to reiterate: all of our appetizers require some sort of sauce on the side, except for this and the garlic mushrooms.”

What he said flew over my head like a tossed pizza, but I nodded and continued my training in the same scatterbrained manner the whole night. I was so lost in thought: how could such deliciously presentable,

divine food be born from a ghoulish hellhole of a kitchen like this?

A dirty facility was something my father would never stand for, and our whole house was his facility. In my youth, my dad had to keep everything sterile. He was a hypochondriac, to say the least. The floor was to be wiped down if any miniscule particle fell, the bathroom to be thoroughly cleaned biweekly, the countertop to be polished until reflective, and the stove to be never, ever tarnished. As such, only certain, approved methods of cooking were allowed.

“Dad, dad,” I beamed from ear-to-ear, my eager ten-year-old face delighted at the sight of string beans on the counter, “this is the first time you’ve gotten string beans. I love them!”

“Come,” he beckoned with purple latex-protected hands. “I shall instruct you on how to deal with the beans.”

I followed his procedure as I climbed the stepstool and poured all the beans into a steel vat of boiling water. After what seemed to be a bubbling eternity, my favorite dish was apparently completed. On our pre-cleansed dinner table sat an overcooked pile of pale green mush. All sweetness, freshness, and color had been boiled away. It had a dull sheen from the collected water, which matched the depressingly dull taste. It smelled like home, I suppose.

While processing the green goop through my gums, my taste buds were remembering a different dish. We had recently eaten at a Chinese restaurant, which did the greatest service any parent could wish for: make children love vegetables. I still remembered how the smell of roasted garlic sauntered through the restaurant, as steaming green bunches of stir-fried string beans were delivered to the middle of the table. Perfectly browned bits of fatty pork, slivers of garlic, and red peppers found their place besides the beans. The taste hit like a heavy slugger, with so much umami and sulfuric herbs packed into each little green pod. Earthy and salty, it was a dirtier dish than what was before me now.

“Dad,” I asked, idly munching the flavorless fibers, “why do we always have to boil everything?”

“Son,” he sternly declared, “do you want to eat a bug? Do you want to get sick? We boil to clean the vegetable. We boil to protect ourselves. No one else will help us.”

Looking back, I am sure my father suffered from some serious anxiety disorder. He grew up during the Great Chinese Famine, able to

gather only muddied water in which to boil dirty morsels and scraps. From rats to gnats, my father was left with no choice but to scavenge oddities crawling in the grimy nooks and crannies of alleyways. He told me that he will never forget the lessons he learned in those days.

I'd never gotten sick from eating his food, so I decided there was merit in his thinking. I thanked him for teaching me his lessons.

In my sophomore year I moved out of my house, out of the pampering college dorms, and into a separate apartment with some of my friends, looking forward to a period of grand autonomy.

With no more all-you-can eat dining commons to cater to my developing undergraduate palate, I looked forward to improving my cooking skills. Upon moving in, then, I headed straight to the kitchen—and was horrified at the sight.

Clumps of discolored rice, moldy vegetable chunks, and other perishable debris littered the linoleum floor. Several trash bags in the corner waited their turn to be taken out; clearly, they'd been waiting a very long time. Worst of all, the stove top and counter were caked in a dried, splotchy, brownish-yellow material.

How could anyone cook in such an environment?

To my surprise, though, my housemates could—and they could do so very wonderfully. Our potlucks were glorious feasts for college students. Tonight, it was soy sauced honey onion chicken, gooey carbonara pasta with pancetta, and savory garlic and chili-braised pork belly. Everything was absolutely delightful—except for my dish. I had planned to stir-fry the string beans like my housemates requested, but I just couldn't bring myself to. So I contributed exactly what I had helped cook a decade ago: boiled green mush.

“Aw, don't worry bro, we'll always be your buddies.”

Once I realized they felt sorry for me, the sympathy hurt so much more. Blandness strikes again. I just couldn't bring myself to get into the thick of the culinary mess. It was exactly the same as at Thai Dee-light. With conditions so harrowing, so filthy, how are chefs able to cook up such drool-inducing—and nontoxic—works of gustatory art? And how could I force myself to think past my preconceptions? How could I, too, achieve culinary mastery?

My teacher was someone unexpected: my girlfriend's mom. We

were on Thanksgiving holiday and it was poultry-prepping time.

“Today,” she beckoned across her war-torn cooking stadium, “we are going to make some Peruvian chicken.”

“Mrs. Fong, aren’t we going to wear aprons or gloves first?” In our house gloves had always been a necessity: cross-contamination meant cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die.

“Bah, more bacteria means more flavor.”

It may have been my imagination, but my eyes felt wider than usual.

“I’m kidding, of course. But what’s good cooking without some rustic technique?”

We did it the way she had with her mom back in South America: first marinate the bird by sticking your fingers in between the slimy skin and meat, and then “spatchcock” it by hacking away at the spinal column, ripping it down the middle, and folding the dislocated wings behind the chicken’s back. All of the above was done with bare hands, and I felt as if I had committed my first murder.

There it was all in cold blood, but my “clean morals” were shed without a care after tasting that baked chicken. With a furious kick, the cumin, paprika, garlic, and ground habaneros slammed into my nose as I opened the oven door. And as I was carving the poor bird, I could only salivate as I saw tender, fluffy pieces of chicken flesh begging to be eaten. Each bite was an explosion of South American spice, salt, and oil, catering to the basest part of my brain. The crisp skin and unbelievably moist white meat fought with the Peruvian jalapeno and garlic aioli as to which had more flavor. Such intense taste made my mind go blank, and I knocked out immediately after dinner.

When I see my father in the afterlife, I’ll be sure to let him try a little of this recipe: it might help him defeat his inner demons.

After that religious experience, and after my experience at Thai Dee-light, I was more than prepared for my chance at redemption in my junior year at a potluck with my housemates. The table was decorated for a glorious feast once more, but this time everyone stepped up their culinary game. The pepper and herb rib stew stood intimidatingly beside the delicately fried and breaded pork cutlets, while the garlic mushroom and tofu stir-fry sat among the pantheon.

But towering above them was my own proud piece, a rosemary garlic butter and lemon roasted chicken. The golden, hulking mass glistened on

the messy table, like a bruiser ready for fowl play. Steve would've liked that joke, and I also hoped he'd be proud.

"Hey bro, how did you manage such a fine roast?" My housemates were patting me on the back this time, grateful for the large source of protein to gorge on.

I thought a moment for the right words to say. Should I have told them about my old job in that rank, greasy kitchen? Or about hacking away at a dead bird and tearing it open? No, what I should have told them was about the struggle to overcome my former mind-set. I should not abandon the old methods—my father's methods—because being sanitary prevented many sicknesses. His teachings kept me safe. But always sticking to what was safe meant I would never progress. So I learned to weigh things in my mind and think flexibly. Old plus new probably equaled what I did right this time.

With an answer ready, I smiled as I left the bloodstained, oil-splattered kitchen behind me.

"I learned that, in order to make good food, sometimes I need to get my hands dirty."