

David Ho - Common App Essay
October 15, 2021

I do not like lotus root soup.

I never liked lotus root soup. The sandy texture of the lotus root put me off, and the funky taste of the soup itself was, to say the least, undesirable. As a child, coming downstairs for dinner and seeing the Instant Pot on the kitchen counter never failed to fill me with dread. But I dared not express my discontent in front of my grandpa, whose gaze would fixate on me until my bowl was empty. Lotus root soup was his favorite, and as such, he would not tolerate any disrespect for it.

Lotus root soup was one of our household kitchen's many staples. My grandparents were the head chefs, and they spent many hours each day preparing meals for everyone. But I had fallen victim to the allure of Western cuisine. I didn't want bok choy or steamed fish. I wanted chicken nuggets and bacon cheeseburgers. But these elusive foods were seldom allowed, and my wishes to go out to eat were often swiftly denied. "All these restaurants are too unhealthy," I was told. But I persisted, and on rare occasions when my complaints overpowered my frustrated family, I made sure to eat until I was so full, I could barely walk back to the car.

One day, my grandparents announced that they were going to China for a few months to visit family. While I was sad that they would be gone, I realized that this was my opportunity to eat out as much as I wanted - a dream come true! I soon began indulging myself in the wonders of restaurant dining; but after a few weeks, the satisfaction started to wear off. The chicken nuggets were soggy and the bacon cheeseburgers were nothing but grease. I eventually discovered that I had become overweight, and in that moment, I realized that I missed my grandparents' cooking. Even lotus root soup didn't seem so bad anymore.

Soon after, I declared myself interim chef of the house. Having never touched a stove before, I chose tomatoes and scrambled eggs, an easy yet quintessential Chinese dish, as my first challenge. But tragedy struck when I cut my finger while slicing the tomatoes. As I desperately searched for a bandage, I contemplated giving up. Not even ten minutes in and I had already injured myself. But the thought of eating another box of mac and cheese revolted me, and with newfound determination, I tried again and succeeded. Sure, the eggs were a bit rubbery and the tomatoes could've used some more salt, but I was satisfied, and for the first time in a long time, so was my stomach.

Enlightened but hungry for more, I began scouring through cookbooks and websites for recipes. I remade childhood favorites like fried rice and scallion pancakes. I spent entire weekends devoted to complex dishes, such as apple pies and steak dinners. I researched international cuisines and learned about their connection to their cultures. I binge watched MasterChef and closely analyzed Chef Ramsay's demonstrations so I could replicate them later. When my grandparents came back from China, I made them lotus root soup that night, much to their surprised delight.

These days, whenever I have a bowl of lotus root soup, I can't help but be reminded of my cooking journey. While I still have much to learn, I look forward to every new recipe with curiosity and optimism. Every hour in the kitchen feels like a minute, and seeing the reactions on my friends and family's faces makes all the time and effort worth it. As I decide what to make next, I realize that I have unlocked not only a valuable skill, but also a renewing source of pride, motivation, and fulfillment. My greatest talent, then, is not the ability to cook, but rather the ability to make people happy through my cooking.