

A UNIVERSAL LOVE LANGUAGE

Inside Adam's Taqueria on West Euless Blvd, the air is always filled with the irresistible aroma of sizzling tacos. It was a frantic day the first time I stepped into that hole-in-the-wall for a quick meal. A chime notified the entire gas station of our entrance. The first thing I saw was a giant "TACOS" sign hung from the low ceiling; then I noticed three women hurrying around the kitchen, warming yellow tortillas on a giant industrial griddle.

"¿En que te puedo ayudar, amigo?"

"I'd like to try some Tacos Al Pastor, please."

When I took my first bite, I experienced what can only be described as a "ratatouille moment." The tacos came piping hot, filled to the brim with mouthwatering spit-roasted pork, golden rice, crispy lettuce, and cilantro and lemon. I devoured one after another, discovering extra space in my stomach as the mouth watering flavours competed for the attention of my taste buds. But it was about more than just the taste. I could feel the love in the food as well. I detected a sweet tang in the salsa, which brought back memories of eating Tostitos at my friend's house, where his mother also added a drizzle of honey to her salsa – her secret touch. The pieces of onion – some small, some large, homogeneity – reminded me of how I cried and laughed the first time I chopped onions in the kitchen. The garnish of cilantro on the last taco nearly moved me to tears, because my grandmother decorated her dishes with those same green sprigs. One of the women noticed how much I enjoyed the food and let me watch as she assembled another taco. Another held up a steaming pot full of tamales, and I basked in their glorious smell.

Adam's taqueria doesn't appear on any local food guides, and a full meal costs less than 10 dollars. Yet everyone eating here knows that they have discovered something truly special

because the time and love put into each bite is palpable. Good food doesn't need food critics to shine. Its brilliance lies in the smiles and relieved "mms" of those who indulge in it.

I know my grandmother loves me because she shows it everyday through food, the universal love language. Love manifests as crispy fried sesame balls, savory roast beef, and sweet slices of strawberry. Cooking my favourite dishes. Stuffing me and offering me seconds and thirds and fourths. Asking whether I've eaten yet and worrying if I haven't eaten enough. Brewing citrus tea when I am sick. When my grandmother cooks, I feel deeply loved.

One day when I was around 8 years old, I watched my grandmother add a packet of white powder to a pot of sticky rice. She covered it in saran wrap, then smothered it with a blanket carried and carried it to the sweltering attic.

Curiosity piqued, I asked "Won't the rice grow moldy in there?"

She smiled warmly. "No, this is a special recipe. Just wait, in two days it will taste unlike anything you have ever tried before."

After two days of painstaking anticipation, I bounced up the steps to the attic to see what had happened to the pot of rice. I discerned that there was some clear liquid at the bottom of the bowl, and that the saran wrap was slightly bulging.

My grandmother removed the saran wrap when we returned to the kitchen. The smell, slightly sweet and fruity, tingled my nose in a good way. She presented me with a large, dripping spoonful. "Try it." The soft kernels dissolved on my tongue and journeyed into my brain. Sweet. Light. Delicious. It didn't taste like any candy I'd had before; it reminded me more of a refreshing soft drink, but with floral notes. I felt like I was tasting the stars. "Don't eat too much, it's not good for you," my grandmother warned with a smile. She always looked out for my health.

Jiu niang (酒酿), became my new favourite food. In the morning, I slurped down a hot, sweet soup of poached egg swirling like a galaxy in a sweet broth of jiu niang. At night I'd sneak spoonfuls from the fridge, the cold fermented rice a thrilling jolt on my tongue. I helped my grandmother make pot after pot of the stuff, never getting tired of the taste. I savoured every bite as if it might be the last. Before returning to China, my grandmother made enough jiu niang so that I would be able to enjoy it the entire time she was gone.

She was about to return to America when COVID-19 struck. As the world went into lockdown and a flight became an impossibility, I felt cheated. When the jiu niang ran out, my grandmother's warmth seemed to fade.

One day, I found myself standing in my own kitchen. I remembered the packet of white powder, the saran wrap, the warmth of the attic. I remembered the care with which she steamed the rice. And I started to make jiu niang myself. My first attempts were disastrous, but with each batch, I improved. The flavor grew closer, and with it, my memories of her returned. And as I stirred the rice, I realized that even across the distance our love remained.

I am a very lucky person. I've always been very happy and consistently loved by my family. Wherever I went and whatever I did as a kid, I always had a warm and fuzzy feeling in my heart. I now realise that much of that feeling was because of my grandmother. Warmth radiated from her tiny frame. She will always be in my heart.