

Joe's Shanghai

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No matter which city we ended up going to, my parents always went to its Chinatown. My fourth birthday was spent in Chinatown, Vancouver. We celebrated my birthday in an chinese all-you-can-eat buffet with an asian-style cake with fruits and cream frosting. When we went to Irvine and San Diego in elementary school for my dad's research trips, we brought a little stove so we could cook the catfish we bought from the ethnic markets there. My dad even managed to find the "Quartier Asiatique" when we visited Paris in 2012.

I remember being somewhat annoyed by these trips. I wanted to visit the normal destinations—Vancouver Aquarium, Louvre, Newport beach—without being first assaulted by the sights and smells of live fish flopping on tile floors in a wet market. I didn't want to spend another vacation afternoon shopping at an asian supermarket just because my parents thought the one in Syracuse was sub-par.

These were the things I began to dread when it came to family vacations. Perhaps, the worst of it came in New York City. Granted, we did stop in Times Square and the old toys "R" Us, watched the big screens and rode the ferris wheel. We watched the Lion King musical, and got a bag of teal and lemon-yellow M&M's at 1600 Broadway. Like normal "Americans," these things we all did. But unlike "Americans," we spent most of our time in Flushing, a Queens neighborhood known for its Chinese community.

I think it was Flushing where I became disenchanted with the rhythms of the big city. In the summers the sinuous streets and jutting billboards—some with spelling mistakes—created this sort of thickness to the air, and all around were fruit stands that spilled onto the sidewalks, roasted chestnut vendors, old Chinese men with loudspeakers talking about Jesus and foot

massages. In my later years I would shrink into the air-conditioned Queens Public Library and let my parents shop without me. The city, with its covert baby turtle dealers and questionable cloudy puddles was not for me.

Every time we went to Flushing, we would park in a little brutalist, open-air parking garage between 138th street and 37th avenue. But before we left for the day, we always found the time and the room in our stomachs to visit Joe's Shanghai. It was a few paces down 37th, squeezed between a towering radiology center and a pharmacy that I don't remember the name to. The restaurant had a bright green and yellow awning and a cramped vestibule tiled floor-to-ceiling with faded pictures of unknown origin.

We didn't need to see the menu, for there was only one thing we wanted to order. Joe's was famous for their "soup dumplings"—savory pork broth and filling, wrapped in a thin layer of pleated dough. We normally got their crab meat variant, which used a form of crab paste to make the broth even more savory.

Eating these dumplings was a difficult task. Once the dough was bitten through, the very hot broth pours out. I was in elementary school when we first went to Joe's and I could not slurp up the broth as advised by the waitstaff. Rather, I poked a hole into the dumpling with my chopstick, inverted the dumpling onto a spoon, and let the liquid drain for later consumption. My parents, of course, laughed at this. They said that I was just drinking soup and eating normal dumplings at that point.

The soup dumplings—Xiao Long Bao in Chinese—came in bamboo baskets of eight. On our first dining experience I think we ordered three baskets. My mom was a little allergic to seafood, so she got one basket of pork-only dumplings. My dad and I shared two baskets, though I was so small that I probably

only ate three or four. They came with little saucers filled with black vinegar and chopped ginger and a little spoon. The acidity balanced the richness of the broth, and the ginger softened the fishiness of fermented crab meat. We also ordered a little dish of pickled cabbage, for the cool flavors paired very well with the hot and sticky dumplings.

Dining at Joe's Shanghai became a profound motif in my life, a bizarre, delicious, coming-of-age marker. After I almost drowned during a surfing camp in fourth grade, we celebrated at Joe's with a round of Xiao Long Bao. We ordered three baskets of crab meat dumplings this time, and I remember that it was too much and I overstuffed myself with the surprisingly soporific meat concoction. After we toured the Maker Faire in 2016 we ended up at Joe's for dinner. I shared three baskets again, and I was comfortably full. During my Stony Brook summer research in 2019 we took the weekends off and ate soup dumplings. I was sitting at one of the ornately carved tables next to the kitchen area with its swinging ornamental doors and graffitied bathroom. This time, we shared four baskets. FIFA was on, and we watched the match on one of the many TV's arranged, bar-style, around the restaurant. I now slurped the soup like we were supposed to, dripping the vinegar into the hole I made not with the chopsticks, but with my mouth. And all throughout was a weird feeling of home. Home, as much a home that a little muggy restaurant next to a parking garage can feel like home. Home, because in a gastronomic sense Joe's Shanghai had watched me grow up, basket by basket, nibble by nibble.

I am still not a city person, and probably will never be. But there's a special place in my heart for the green-marbled walls of Joe's Shanghai restaurant. There, with its soup-sticky tables and no-credit-card policy, I realized that the American life is not of homogeneity, of well-maintained, perfectly-spelled billboards, of vacuum packed fish fillets. Rather, it is this unforgettable,

regrettable cultural chaos, the contortions of a shifting identity. It is through this noise that I am Chinese-American. Two hyphenated words for one single person.