

Joe's Shanghai

In the summer of fourth grade, my mom, dad, and I went to Joe's Shanghai. The restaurant had a location in Flushing Chinatown, next to a SUPER HK market with lettering that glowed lucky-red as we ordered our *Xiao Long Bao*. Many times since then, my mom has slipped a triple-tier steamer over our stove and tried making *Bao* herself. She'd gelatinize the bone broth and fold it with the meat filling, but her *Bao* got too hot and exploded in the steamer. She never made a successful *Bao*, so every time we stopped in Flushing, it was dinner at Joe's Shanghai. We ate nothing but soup dumplings and pickled carrots to clean our palates from the sticky broth.

In school, when I had to draw out my favorite food, I sketched this soup dumpling: marble-white skin filled with hot broth, a nugget of meat, and many, many pleats of dough up top to seal it in. *What's that?* My friends and teachers would ask. I come from a village of four thousand, and only five percent are non-white. *It's like a dumpling except there's soup in it*, I would say. But I could find no satisfying analogy. Eventually I stopped trying and said my favorite food was fondue.

When I was younger, traveling as a family meant finding creative ways of being Chinese in any American city. Even before Joe's, we once flew to Irvine with a plug-in stove and a soup pot in checked luggage. We went to 99-Ranch that same afternoon, because we didn't have any real Asian supermarkets back at home. I remember the sound of the stun-mallet on the catfish we picked out, and that night, on the hotel bathroom countertop, my mom made fish stew. She fed me from a metal ladle, and that's all I remember. How bizarre it was to stink up a Hilton room with all the restaurants a few blocks from the hotel. Back then, those questions never came to me.

It would be years before I found out that New York City was a place larger than main street of Flushing. My friends talked about the giant Ferris Wheel they rode in the Toys "R" Us of Times Square. All I could share was Joe's Shanghai, with its aggressive lemon-lime awning and vestibule tacked with pictures faded from the sun.

Xiao Long Bao came in baskets of eight, and there is a certain way that a soup dumpling should be eaten. My dad showed me back on that fourth grade trip. He put the dumpling in his spoon, bit the corner, and slurped the soup before dropping the dumpling into his mouth. I tried it, but the soup scalded my tongue. Instead, I poked a hole with my chopsticks, drained the dumpling into the spoon, and sipped the soup. My mom laughed at this. What's the point of *Xiao Long Bao* if you're drinking the soup out of a spoon? *And look at how he's stabbing the dumplings like westerners with forks.*

I started to squirm every time we'd go shopping at an Asian supermarket. *What's wrong with Tops Friendly Markets? BJ's Wholesale?* Mom would buy arm-sized Daikon roots from the market that later opened in Syracuse. She'd peel them and eat them raw, teeth crunching through white flesh like an apple. It made the house smell of sulfur, and I would burn cinnamon candles.

I hated cities, especially the main street of Flushing, where old men raved with amplified voices about Jesus and foot massages. When I grew older, I stopped shopping with my parents and spent those city afternoons in a public library. Still, Joe's kept happening, year after year. Every time we drove the six hours from Syracuse, we ate *Xiao Long Bao*, no exceptions.

Joe's burned down sometime in 2020, and Google Streetview shows workmen pulling boards from a pile of rubble. At the center is the old kitchen, its ventilation duct still thrusting upwards, unsupported.

The last time I would ever eat at Joe's was in the summer of 2019. We sit at a table near the back. The glass tabletop is greasy and the air is thick with soup steam. Nothing much has changed since that fourth grade summer. I'm sitting in an old chair carved from mahogany, and right by the cash register, there's the same sign from years ago. CASH ONLY NO CREDIT CARD.

Right away, we order three baskets of crab roe dumplings and one basket of plain pork for my mom,

who is allergic to seafood. They give each of us a dish of chopped ginger doused in Chinese black vinegar for dipping. A few minutes later, our waiter comes out of a flapping door with our bamboo stack and lifts the top.

I look over at my dad. With the tongs he puts a dumpling in his spoon, bites it, and sucks the soup out. The honey-hued broth shows from beneath the dumpling skin in my own spoon, jiggling and translucent. I lift it to my mouth, feel the heat against my upper lip. I take a nibble, and the soup streams onto my tongue. It burns for a second, but it gets better.