

**T**he first Chinese New Year feast that I cooked solo should have been a fiasco. There were three strikes against it: First, I was hosting the dinner at someone else's home, thus cooking in an unfamiliar kitchen, which is perilous. Second, I had decided to serve several dishes that I had never made on my own from beginning to end, which is a party-planning sin. Finally, the dinner was to be the setting for a quasi blind date between two of my friends, which was just plain messing with fate.

But I felt daring; I was young, single and I wanted to create a tradition among my family of friends to celebrate Chinese New Year, which has always been my favorite holiday. The annual feast serves as a reminder to respect the cultural mores that my late father wove into my upbringing. It acts as a bungee cord that snaps me back across the hyphen from the "American" to the "Chinese." Yet I discovered that I needed my own identity within the context of the holiday. Hosting my first Chinese New Year dinner ultimately was a rite of passage.

Preparation of a New Year's feast requires an understanding of flavor balance in individual dishes and how those dishes play off one another within the meal. Also, a typical Chinese New Year menu shrink-wraps symbolism around each food. You must always serve a whole fish, for example, to bestow continuous prosperity. Eating dumplings, which have the bulbous shape of gold ingots, also brings good luck. The Chinese character for orange sounds like the word for wealth, so gifting a bowl of oranges becomes a requisite gesture. The Chinese language is concise yet lyrical, so it's easy to confer double meanings on words and phrases. A Chinese cook wastes nothing in the kitchen—not even the names of dishes.

The menu I chose as my proving ground was less about symbolic relevance, however, than about feeling connected to my parents and two younger brothers, who were two time zones away in Missouri. I craved eating my mom's Sichuan peppercorn-studded crispy duck, whole steamed ginger-scallion fish, beef with sour mustard greens, "lion's head" braised pork meatballs with Chinese cabbage, and winter melon soup with ham hock. I had seen my mom prepare these dishes many times over the years and had picked up some technique by osmosis, though it in no way guaranteed I could replicate them, especially under pressure and unsupervised.

## Lion's

- 1 lb ground
- 2 stalks g
- 2 Tbsp so
- 1/2 tsp whi
- Plain v
- 1 head C
- 1 bunch

1. In a bowl, c  
and white pep
- 3 heaping ta  
meatballs in  
them all the v
2. Place the  
enough water  
to a boil and  
simmer for a  
has develop
3. Meanwh  
squares. Ad  
water if nee  
will shrink  
taking the p  
to the pot t  
Serve as pa

Makes 4 ser

The crispy duck alone is a project. The process begins by rubbing the duck with a mixture of salt and Sichuan peppercorns. It then marinates for several hours before being steamed, which renders the copious fat. After steaming, the duck must air-dry for several hours so that the skin will be extra crispy. Finally, the duck gets a coating of soy sauce and is dredged in flour before frying.

After staging about ten different dishes, the kitchen was an epic mess. But I survived in good form, and my guests smacked their lips in approval, drinking in the confluence of revelry and abundant food. I wished my parents had been there. And, yes, there was a love connection between my two friends, who tangled their chopsticks, so to speak, and eventually got married.

A few years later, I hosted Chinese New Year dinner with my now husband, Eric. We managed to squeeze a dozen people around a rented banquet table wedged between the couch and television console in our tiny apartment. There was barely any room to move, but it was the kind of party I had imagined a "big city" couple would have. We thought it would be the perfect occasion for our first

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dinner party as a couple and a chance to bring together our respective friends.

In our space-defying kitchen, I turned out handmade pot stickers, stir-fried green beans, clams in black bean sauce, steamed striped bass and favorites from previous years, such as the lion's head meatballs.

Now, my pot stickers are a signature request for all of our dinner parties. I had learned how to make the pan-fried dumplings from scratch, in part due to my father's repeated urging. "How are you going to make this for your husband someday if you don't learn?" he'd ask. So I'd stand at my mother's side, rolling out the simple flour-and-water dough with a dowel-like rolling pin and pinching the

dumplings shut. The filling consists of ground pork, Chinese cabbage, chopped scallions, a touch of minced ginger, soy sauce and white pepper. What gives them their reputation is their texture: crispy on the bottom, softly chewy on top and juicy on the inside. A friend strays from her vegetarian diet just to get a fix.

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That night, once again, I managed to build on my experience and reputation. It wasn't hard with Eric as my evangelist. I think I won him over with those dumplings alone.

My idea of Chinese New Year dinner shifted after our daughter was born and the thought of cooking for days no longer appealed to me. But I still wanted to create a sense of abundance and celebration, especially since my mother had moved in with us after my father died. It would be the first time she was a guest at my holiday table.

My solution was to host hot pot and mahjong night for Chinese New Year. The beauty of serving hot pot is that guests select and cook their own ingredients in a simmering pot of broth. A platter of ingredients might include paper-thin beef, pork, lamb, Chinese sausage, fish and shrimp; vegetables such as Chinese cabbage, shiitake and wood ear mushrooms, bamboo shoots and lotus root; and soybean thread or cellophane noodles.

The hot pot is not without symbolism. The Hakka Chinese serve hot pot with seven key ingredients, the names for which are homophones for fortune-filled words: celery for diligence, garlic for financial acuity, green onions for intelligence, fish for abundance, cilantro for friendship and chives for longevity. For me, hot pot meant I was able to prepare it while juggling the demands of an infant. It was also a quiet tribute to my father, who loved sitting around a simmering pot when it was cold outside.

Over the past decade of Chinese New Year celebrations, I've realized that the holiday has served as a milestone marker, a veritable personal growth chart of my evolution from a career girl to a wife to a working mother of two. If hosting a feast was at first a way to gain friendship and stature, the wisdom of age focuses the lens on what has always been: Chinese New Year is ultimately a time for family communion and reconciliation.

The Year of the Tiger begins on February 14, 2010. The night before, we will celebrate my father's legacy. Three generations comprising my mother, my two brothers and me, our other halves, and five young grandchildren will be together around my New Year's table. Dad would have delighted in presiding over this evening.

A feast begins the fulfillment of an unspoken obligation. My son and daughter and their cousins will grow up straddling their mixed heritages. When they decide to pitch themselves into the wide world, I hope this is one tradition that will always guide them home.

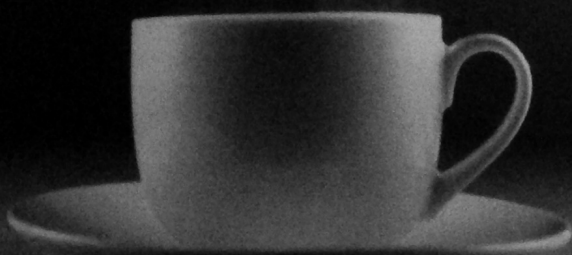
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Hsiao-Ching Chou is the former food editor at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, where she got her license to eat her way from Portland to Vancouver, B.C. Currently, she is a consultant at Suzuki + Chou Communimedia and works with clients in Washington and Oregon.

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