

By Hsiao-Ching Chou
Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 2003

I shop in two languages. This occurred to me while I dug through the mound of ginger root at Uwajimaya, looking for the knob that would provide the largest slice, which then would allow for long, fine slivers. Were I at Larry's, my usual haunt, there would be no more than a few chunks to choose from and my selection would be based not on size but which piece looked the freshest.

When I see common vegetables at Uwajimaya, such as carrots, cabbage, mushrooms and asparagus, a stir-fry comes mind. The cabbage could be stir-fried with soy sauce, vinegar and red chilies to make hot-and-sour cabbage. I did buy asparagus, recently, which I cut into short sections, and a zucchini, which became large dice, then stir-fried both with sliced beef and soy sauce. That and a bowl of rice was dinner.

At Larry's, those carrots would go in a salad with a vinaigrette, the cabbage in a gratin, the mushrooms in an omelet, and the asparagus would be left whole, sauteed in olive oil and sprinkled with sea salt.

In an Asian grocery, it's acceptable to be picky. You could displace half a display to retrieve the perfect bunch of you cai, if you wanted, and no one would bat an eyelash. Do that at a non-Asian market and you'll get the hairy eyeball from the produce guy or an irritated fellow shopper.

The meat department at an Asian store offers different cuts. For example, I felt like making red-cooked pork, so I went to Uwajimaya knowing I would be able to find a pork shoulder with the skin attached. (And I took it home, started it in a wok on the stove, then transferred it to the Crock-Pot to simmer overnight. I'm mixing my languages here; call it "Chinglish" -- Chinese-English.)

I also can find chicken carcasses packaged in threes for less than \$2. A whole chicken with those extra bones makes the richest broth. Ground pork with extra fat, which makes great dumplings, doesn't have to be special-ordered.

My sensibilities change in the ramen aisle at Uwajimaya. I have been known to buy a few packs of the spicy beef flavor of Kung-Fu brand instant noodles. It was a childhood treat and I boil one up when I crave nostalgia. But you'd never catch me buying instant noodles at Larry's. At an Asian store, you might see someone buy a case of instant ramen, but that person usually also has a cart full of fresh greens, bags of mangoes and apples and oranges, and bones for stock.

Oddly, and perhaps unfairly, I believe it's OK to buy instant noodles when you also cook fresh foods regularly. When I see people buy packaged products at Larry's (or wherever), that's all they buy.

Even the checkout experience is different. Asians, in general, aren't so effusive. After I load my groceries onto the belt at Uwajimaya, or any Asian market, I'm lucky to get a "hello." Sometimes, I won't hear a peep until the checker informs me of my total. It doesn't bother me; it's just the way it is. I slip into my Asian-ness and restrain my enthusiasm.

Also, you don't hear, "Paper or plastic?" You get paper and plastic.

At a non-Asian market, it's standard to be greeted with, "How are you? Did you find everything all right?" And it might continue:

"Yes, thank you. How are you?"

"I'm good. Hey, that's an interesting necklace you're wearing."

"Oh, thanks. I found it in a junk shop in Barcelona."

"Would you like paper or plastic today?"

"Paper, please."

"Would you like help out with that?"

"Oh, no thanks."

"OK. You have a nice day."

It's all kind of interesting, if you think about it. I can slip from Chinese to American and back pretty easily. I wonder what language I'd shop in if I were in a Mexican or Middle Eastern grocery.

I'd probably depend on the language of food.