Across-the-Bridge Noodles

Winnie Yang

She hands me a slightly rumpled sheet of paper, the list inscribed painstakingly in a hand that looks, quite remarkably, like my mother's. I chuckle inwardly when I read "soup spoon" and "boil water" but I am charmed. She smiles at me shyly, and I note that she has nice teeth -- not an entirely unremarkable thing out here in Chengdu. I marvel at the lengths she's gone to in compiling this list for me.

Only yesterday, I'd stood opposite her in this very room, struggling to make myself understood, her lunch crowd looking on bemusedly as I fumbled for the right phrases. It was embarrassing -- my Chinese barely passes muster when I converse with children, and I'd quickly exhausted my limited repertoire. She doesn't understand any English at all. In Mandarin, I said something like: "Your noodles. I like very much. I go home soon. Want cook noodles. You cook. I see. Okay?" No wonder she looked so confused. She grabbed my arm and took me next door, where a group of grizzled middle-aged men were playing a rather rowdy card game. She beckoned to a girl who was watching and asked her to translate. The girl grumblingly complied, and after some false starts and twenty more minutes of mingled frustration and incomprehension, her high-school English came through for us and she explained that I wanted to learn how to make these noodles.

These aren't just any noodles, you understand. Three of our students had dragged us to this hole-in-the-wall eatery behind the school where we were teaching, insisting we try this specialty of the Yunnan province, míxiàn. Ordinarily I resist eating too frequently at one particular restaurant, but not only did I return to this place nearly every day of our two weeks in Chengdu, but I also ordered the same thing on each visit.

In Caroline Liou's Lonely Planet China, the story behind míxiàn is this:

Once upon a time there was a scholar at the South Lake in Mengzi who was attracted by the peace and quiet of an island there. He settled into a cottage on the island, in preparation for official examinations. His wife, meanwhile, had to cross a long wooden bridge over the lake to bring [him] his meals. The food was always cold in winter by the time she got to the study bower. Oversleeping one day, she made a curious discovery. She'd stewed a fat chicken and was puzzled to find the broth still hot, though it gave off no steam. The oil layer on the surface had preserved the temperature of the broth. Subsequent experiments showed that she could cook the rest of the ingredients for her husband's meal in the hot broth after she crossed the bridge.

The name míxiàn means literally "Across-the-Bridge Noodles."

The restaurant looks like the interior of a car garage. One eats at worn, rickety fold-out tables and sits on plastic stools, avoiding whenever possible the cracked blue one with the unsuccessful duct tape job. The old discolored electric fan is ineffective in the stifling summer heat of Southwest China, and the equally ancient black-and-white television bolted up in the back corner plays really terrible syndicated American shows dubbed in Mandarin. But the noodles -- the noodles are a revelation. They arrive at the table in a
medium-sized cast iron pot. The smells steaming up from the soup are so intoxicating that one can never wait quite long enough to avoid scalding the tongue. The layer of chili oil sitting on top of the soup might intimidate some, but is just standard issue in Sichuan province, the region that is home to some of the fieriest Chinese cuisine. Some of the other ingredients are obvious enough -- I spent many a meal trying to determine my pot's contents in hopes that I might recreate it myself. But in the end, I figured the only way to know was to ask.

So I find myself in this restaurant at nine o'clock in the morning, paper and pen in hand. She doesn't say a word, but leads me instead out the door and down the street to the open-air market where everyone in the neighborhood buys their provisions daily. She navigates expertly through the throngs of people rushing from stall to stall for bread and fruit, live eels and stinky melon. I, on the other hand, am nearly blindsided by speeding bicyclists and wayward wooden carts as I try to catch up to her quick steps. She stops in front of one stand and with a practiced eye surveys a pile of pale gourds, selecting one which to me didn't really look all that different from the rest. All the while, she points to various vegetables in turn, asking, have I had that before? Do they eat this in America?

We return to the restaurant and sit down at one of the tables while her family makes the necessary preparations for the day. She goes through her ingredients list, proudly showing me the tattered Chinese-English Concise Dictionary she used to copy each word onto the paper for me. She tells me her name, Peng Jin, as well as her five-year old daughter's, Zhang Xiao Hui. She writes the characters for both names for me, and I do the same for my name. She calls her daughter over to put her hair up, off her neck. "It's too hot," she explains, as she fixes Xiao Hui's hair into pigtails. She asks me about school and my plans for the future and I explain what I can, both of us struggling to understand each other, searching the dictionary for help, finally resorting to pantomimes and drawings. Communicating becomes tiring, but soon, duty calls and we take baskets of vegetables outside to trim.

We start with kong xing caï, a leafy green very much like spinach, but with a hollow stem. She instructs me to remove the tougher, thicker large stems, and I clumsily follow her lead. She asks me about my family P specifically, about my mother. Is she a good cook? Does she speak Chinese? She is amazed that Mom speaks Mandarin, Taiwanese, and English and repeats this information to her brother. We move on to the green onions, snapping off the bottom part of the straggly-looking roots with our fingernails and pulling off any unattractive, dried-out bits on top. When we finish those, she takes me back to the market, this time with daughter and nephew in tow, and buys us all cong you b_ng, a savory sesame-encrusted flatbread. We thread our way through the crowds again. I must look like a ridiculously overgrown child, clutching the bread in my fists just like the five-year old and the ten-year old, blindly trailing this woman. Where is she going? We head down a different, equally congested artery, away from the restaurant, passing all kinds of caged fowl and clamoring fruit vendors who ply their impossibly beautiful watermelons, plums, nectarines, and lychees. She halts at a crowded storefront, piled high with freshly made noodles. "Those are made of rice flour; these wheat," she points out. "We want the medium-width rice stick noodles." She purchases several kilos and we carry them back in plastic shopping bags.

We finally head into the kitchen to begin cooking. It's cramped, dark, and hot back there, but it smells fantastic. A boy chops ch_ng jiao -- skinny and green hot peppers -- with precision in one corner, surrounded by different tubs of various cooked meats in chili oil. Peng Jin heats up water in a huge charred black wok; the noodles she puts in are just barely submerged in the liquid. A mixture of garlic, MSG, green onions, soy sauce, and salt (to taste) is added as well, along with the hollow-stemmed vegetable. I watch carefully and take notes but feel very much in the way, as others are forced to squeeze past me to get to the stoves and only narrowly avoid dumping boiling soup all over me. She empties most of the noodles and broth into a soup bowl the size of my head and another bowl about half that big. Before I realize what's happened, she's poured the beef mixture on top of the larger bowl and hands it to me. "Here, eat." She chooses a tofu mixture for herself and motions for me to sit down. I attack my noodles with alacrity, savoring the tender morsels of beef, the bits of deliciously salty seaweed and cured radish, the meaty chili-infused shiitake mushrooms. I eat up, knowing I will leave Chengdu the next day and Mainland China within the week. Still, I'm unable to finish my absurdly large portion; I am ashamed because I have seen...
how much work -- how much care -- goes into a single bowl, and she's made this bowl especially for me. She seems mostly indifferent, however, and we rest our stomachs (or mine, anyway) for a bit.

I find out that she is 33. I consider this, noting the lines around her eyes, the ropy veins on the backs of her hands. She looks some years older, but then I think about the long hours she must work daily, all the vegetables she trims, the meat she chops to make all those bowls of noodles. And I wonder how long she has been doing this -- how long she will be doing this. She tells me she wants her daughter to go to university in the States. She writes down her phone number and tells me to look her up when I return, and I give her mine. Her voice has become more animated, and she looks at me hopefully -- no, expectantly, as if I've already guaranteed her daughter four years at an American college. I smile, embarrassed, stand up and motion awkwardly towards the door, searching fruitlessly through my head for the Mandarin for "return home," but she understands. Disappointed, she asks, "But what about lunch?" and urges me to stay. I thank her effusively, but refuse. It is time to go.

As I walk back to the apartment, I wonder at the kindness of strangers. In this age of cynicism and mistrust, I am struck by Peng Jin's generosity, her openness. I am proud that I screwed up the courage to ask her about these noodles, in spite of my own reservations. Mostly though, I am glad to have gotten to know her in the process of learning to make míxiàn. It occurs to me that the name of this dish is oddly appropriate: these noodles gave us a way to reach each other across the gulf of languages and cultures and oceans. Across-the-Bridge Noodles, indeed.

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Across-the-Bridge Noodles

Serves 2.

Meat mixture:
3 tbsp chili oil, preferably from Sichuan chili peppers
2 cloves garlic, crushed and peeled
_ cup dried Sichuan chili peppers
_ lb. beef, chuck roast, spareribs (or other preferred cut), sliced into strips the size of 2 fingers
_ lb. chicken, cut into small strips
assorted vegetables (seaweed, shiitake mushrooms, bok choy, pickled radish, etc.)

Noodle soup:
1 lb rice noodles
2 cups, kong xing ca
_ cup soy sauce
_ cup green onion, finely chopped
2 tsp MSG (or according to taste)
salt and pepper, to taste

In a large skillet, heat chili oil over medium-to-high heat. Sauté garlic and chili peppers until fragrant. Add vegetables, making sure to put in thicker, tougher vegetables (bok choy, for example) first, cooking for slightly longer. When vegetables are about half-cooked, add beef and chicken, and cook thoroughly. Set aside and let cool.

In large pot or wok, cook noodles partially over high heat (about a minute) with just enough boiling water to submerge the noodles entirely. Add vegetable and allow to cook for another minute. Add remaining ingredients and give it all a quick stir.

Dump noodles and liquid into bowls and spoon meat mixture on top.