Ah Ma's Chilli

—Berny Tan

I have come to establish the year that I started eating spicy food as one of the big milestones of my childhood. In my mind, spiciness occupies this higher stratum on some universally acknowledged culinary hierarchy. Since it is usually introduced into a child's diet not by a parent, but of the child's own volition, one's induction into this stratum is often accompanied by a sense of triumph. However, I consider my own induction a milestone not because of an exertion of agency in the face of parental decree, but more because of the expansion of gastronomic possibilities. I believe the origin story that I have settled on is this:

AH MA'S CHILLI

I was nine years old or so, in my grandmother's kitchen. Someone had bought a batch of *Old Chang Kee* curry puffs—those half-moon-shaped pastries, packed with potatoes and chicken, and sealed at the circumference by a twisted, buttery crust. Normally, I would have carried on with my habit of nibbling just the benign crust, leaving the spicier contents for someone older and more courageous. Yet somehow, on this day, I was finally successfully coaxed into eating the entire thing.

Old Chang Kee
A snack chain in Singapore specialising in curry puffs.

I wish I could describe this memory in more detail—how biting into that well-spiced potato and chicken mixture was a euphoric experience beyond what my previous pastry-nibbling self could have imagined. But the truth is I don't have any of those sensations stored away in my memory. It wasn't even an act of defiance in the face of parental control. I'm fairly sure that I only took that first tentative bite after my family reassured me that it really wasn't even that spicy (and indeed, curry puffs are pretty harmless on the grand spectrum of spicy food). In fact, I might even have been repelled by the spiciness rather than compelled to embrace its flavour.

Sometimes I wonder if it was really curry puffs that defined that shift in my life, or if I had conflated it with some other culinary memory. But, for convenience's sake, let's just say this was how it happened, and from then on, spicy food, including my Ah Ma's chilli, became a regular feature in my diet.

In Singapore and its neighboring countries, the extensive and diverse taxonomy of chillies and chilli sauces is likely beyond the average Southeast Asian's full comprehension. The Wikipedia article on *sambal,* a Malay umbrella term for spicy relishes and condiments, presents an already overwhelming and yet inevitably non-exhaustive list that doesn't even include all possible derivatives and combinations that can be squeezed out of the humble chilli.

I like to think, perhaps to excuse my own ignorance, that it is enough to identify these derivatives and combinations by context rather than by name. Besides *sambal belacan*—a dark red mixture containing shrimp paste—I commonly identify chilli sauces as such: the kind that comes in a glass ketchup bottle, for the bastardised "Western food" sold in hawker centres; the sliced red chillies in light soy sauce for *mee pok* and in dark soy sauce for *bak kut teh;* the sliced green chillies in light soy

Hawker Centres
Open-air sheltered food courts.

Mee Pok
A Chinese noodle dish characterised by a flat yellow noodle, commonly served tossed in a sauce with fish balls and/or minced meat.

Bak Kut Teh
Literally translated as "meat bone tea," it is Chinese soup consisting of pork ribs simmered in a complex broth of herbs and spices.

sauce for *hor fun;* the garlic chilli unique to McDonalds branches in Singapore; the slightly sweet *sambal* that comes with *nasi lemak* ... the list goes on. And any list, no matter how comprehensive, will inevitably fail to account for variations on each theme, individual preferences, and perhaps most importantly, the uniqueness of handmade sauces to their makers.

In my family, Ah Ma's chilli stands on its own. "Ah Ma" is what I call my maternal grandmother, my only living grandparent. We refer to her homemade chilli sauce with exactly this hallowed phrase, "Ah Ma's chilli". Even though a similar sauce appears at every Hainanese chicken rice stall in Singapore, I would never deign to put it in the same category. One might say that proclamations of it being "different," "better," "spicier," "more *shiok,*" and so forth are moot. Such judgments might be declared about any kind of family recipe, and one never really knows if one is evaluating something

according to its culinary merit or by virtue of sentimentality and familiarity. In any case, Ah Ma's chilli has been ever-present for as long as I can remember—there is always a bottle in the fridge at home or at Ah Ma's flat, a small dish of it at a meal, a dollop of it nestled on the side of a bowl of fried rice. Before every meal, the rhetorical question is, "Do you want Ah Ma's chilli?" Sometimes, it's not a question, just: "Ah Ma's chilli is in the fridge." We already know where it is, of course, but there's something ritualistic about the statement of "It's there if you want." And most of the time, we do want.

I just opened my fridge in my apartment here in New York, took out the glass bottle of chilli, and twisted off the metal cover to sniff and stare at its contents. Ah Ma's chilli is, of course, also present in my suitcase when I fly from Singapore back to New York, where I had moved for my undergraduate studies. The reappropriated, unlabelled glass

Hor Fun
A type of broad Chinese noodle made from rice, often stir-fried with a thick gravy.

Nasi Lemak
A Malay dish consisting of coconut rice served with various side dishes, commonly wrapped in a banana leaf.

Shiok
A term used in Malaysia & Singapore to convey a feeling of sheer pleasure.

bottle—which has probably been reused by Ah Ma so many times since it first held jam or something else that looks, smells, and tastes very different—is always wrapped obsessively by my mother in layers of kitchen towels, bound by too many rubber bands, and hermetically sealed in one Ziploc bag within another (for fear that it might somehow explode in my suitcase).

Even with the sauce at hand, it is difficult to describe it in an appetising way. Perhaps this is the bane of all sauces, which are visually ambiguous by nature. Here is my attempt: Ah Ma's chilli is a bright red-orange pulpy liquid, embedded with small, white, and lethal chilli padi seeds. Its pungent fragrance contains a slight sting that tickles the back of your throat to warn you of its spiciness. Taste-wise, there isn't much I can really say besides "spicy" and "garlicky," which makes it seem as if it tastes like a lot of foods when in reality it tastes like nothing else. A sauce connoisseur might be able to do better, but my attempts

at capturing Ah Ma's chilli in words shall remain futile.

Despite the fact that Ah Ma's chilli is one of the staples of her culinary arsenal, it probably isn't strictly a "traditional recipe." It wasn't a family secret that was passed down from mother to daughter across generations, and it wasn't something which Ah Ma mastered before she boarded a ship from China to Singapore at the age of 14. This kind of sauce has no place in mainland Chinese cuisine, even if one accounts for the country's many regions. It was something Ah Ma had learned in Singapore. This much, I always intuitively knew.

Before this past August, I had never borne witness to the chilli-making process in my 24 years. (Neither had my sister at the age of 28.) I don't live with my grandmother, and so my presence in her kitchen

Chilli Padi
Also known as bird's eye chilli, it is a small but very spicy chilli.

has mostly been limited to consumption of products rather than observation of process. I'm sure someone might interpret this as the disconnect between the younger generation and old-fashioned domesticity, but I believe that Ah Ma just isn't the kind of matriarch to make demands of her children and grandchildren in the kitchen department (and I wouldn't be one to refuse if she did). She just wants to provide enough food to make sure we're well fed.

In recent years, however, I have felt a rising anxiety in my family about preserving Ah Ma's recipes. My mother might make a comment about wanting to compile a cookbook, or I might arrive at Ah Ma's flat to see my uncle watching her stir-fry potatoes with a notepad in hand. Most significantly, we are going out of our way to ensure my presence in the kitchen while she's cooking, rather than sequestering me in an air-conditioned bedroom just so my clothes don't absorb the smell of the oil that Ah Ma uses so liberally.

Ah Ma just turned 80 this year, and her body is showing it. I don't mean the wrinkles and the sagging skin on her face—that's to be expected. It's the shrinking that scares me. She was always a plump woman with a robust physicality, but now she seems…smaller. I remember being easily amused by the swinging fats on her upper arms when I was a child, in the way a baby is amused by a mobile hanging over its crib. I had long forgotten this, but she reminded me of this recently by holding up her arm and indicating that there was hardly enough flesh left to swing freely.

Now, I don't and can't play with the excess flesh on her upper arms. Instead I massage her legs when they are in pain from arthritis, the way she used to massage my bruises with her special "magic ointment." This slow deterioration of her body anticipates an impending loss, and we are responding with this anxiety, this urge to remember and archive. We know that she will leave eventually, and it seems

that we are simultaneously attempting to retain some essence of her, and some part of ourselves that we are afraid we might lose when she is gone.

My mother's references to the chilli-making process with such adjectives as "tedious" and "time-consuming" had formed this image in my mind of Ah Ma alone in her kitchen, pounding a pestle rhythmically into a mortar filled with red chillies. This fantasy of her solitary, meditative act involved her squatting on the red-brown tiled floor rather than sitting at the dining table, supplementing the toil with further discomfort.

I must have overlapped my construction of this scene with a memory of her bringing down her cleaver on a durian's spiky exterior—durian-opening was something that I had previously witnessed and knew to be a floor-based endeavour.

A couple of weeks before I was due to learn how to make Ah Ma's chilli, I asked my mother about the process, and she duly informed me that Ah Ma hadn't used a mortar and pestle for quite a long time. Instead, Ah Ma's weapon of choice was a blender. And so began my gradual realisation of how straightforward the whole process actually is.

ON THE DAY
OF THE
SEMINAL EVENT,

my mother drops Ah Ma and me off near the Chinese temple at Waterloo Street. A visit to the temple for Ah Ma's peace of mind is a mandatory activity whenever I'm back in Singapore, and we had planned to buy the ingredients for the chilli at the nearby wet market. Ah Ma holds onto me, or me to her—she needs the support nowadays. After we go through the usual motions at the temple to ensure the health and happiness of the extended family, we proceed to the market.

IT'S LATE
FOR GROCERY
SHOPPING;

it's lunchtime and almost all the stalls are either closed or in the process of cleaning up for the day. But Ah Ma knew, as grandmothers often do, that there is one vegetable seller that stays open this late, and true enough, it was the only stall open. The vegetable seller greets her with the familiarity of an old friend, the kind of familiarity that she offers to all her customers. Ah Ma doesn't need to hold onto me anymore—she is on a mission, and instructs the vegetable seller to pick out one kilogram of red chillies and a handful of chilli padi as she starts gathering 500 grams of limes.

Wet Market
Open-air sheltered markets mostly selling fresh meat and produce.

I'M MERELY A
PROP AT
THIS POINT,

and as the vegetable seller notices me silently standing to the side, she tells Ah Ma that she should let me choose the limes. Ah Ma dismisses her, saying that I wouldn't know how to do it, and the vegetable seller teases me with some generic comment about having to know these things so I can cook for my husband. I'm not upset at Ah Ma's declaration of my ignorance (it's one of her habits) nor at the vegetable seller's sexist comment, partly because the fundamental assumption is true—I don't have any idea how to pick limes, whether or not the end goal is a meal for my future husband or not.

AH MA,
SATISFIED WITH HER
LIME HAUL,

moves on to selecting 400 grams of shallots. She asks for garlic; the vegetable seller apologetically replies that she only has young bulbs. Again, the implications of this are foreign to me, but Ah Ma buys four sleeves of five bulbs each anyway, so I assume it must be fine. My mother arrives, having parked her car, and at the end of our brief shopping trip engages in the customary argument with Ah Ma about who should pay.

**AFTER
LUNCH,**

my mother drives us to Ah Ma's flat, and I'm put to work quite soon after snapping a photo of our purchases for Instagram purposes (this afternoon's activities call for a before-and-after).

MY FIRST TASK IS TO SQUEEZE THE JUICE OUT OF THE LIMES.

Just as I'm about to grab a knife to slice the limes in half, Ah Ma presents me with a contraption that resembles some sort of medieval torture device. This lime squeezer is a small metal dish with holes on the bottom and two handles attached, like pliers. Ah Ma demonstrates, putting the lime in the dish, squeezing the handles together, thus causing the ridged surface to push the lime mercilessly against the edge of the dish. Lime juice drains out of the holes, while the mangled lime and its seeds lie limply in the dish, ready for disposal.

ONCE I GET THROUGH ALL THE LIMES,

I am put on shallot duty. Ah Ma shows me how to peel off the skins and cut off the "bad parts"—the parts that are dirty or bruised. Thankfully, there's no dicing involved at this stage, and I don't have to worry about onion-induced tears. While I've been handling the limes and shallots, Ah Ma has been peeling the garlic (not the young bulbs that she bought at the market, but a few presumably "older" ones that she had stashed somewhere in the kitchen).

BY THE
TIME
I'M DONE,

she has already moved on to the sink, where she is rinsing the red chillies, slicing them down the middle, and removing the seeds. She doesn't want me to touch them with my hands (I once made the mistake of rubbing my eye after handling chillies, and will never make it again). So I use chopsticks to fish out the gutted chillies floating in a bowl of water. The far smaller and spicier chilli padi lose their green stalks but retain their innards; their seeds are the main source of spiciness in this recipe.

WE MOVE
ON TO BLENDING
AND BOILING.

The shallots, ginger, and a few slices of garlic are the first victims of the blender's rotating blades, with a bit of water thrown in to help their reduction to a light brown pulp. A large pot is already sitting on the lit stove, and Ah Ma pours in a liberal amount of sesame oil. The light brown pulp goes into the pot, along with a few pebbles of rock sugar and a couple of teaspoons of salt. (At this point, Ah Ma throws in a small amount of unidentified white powder, which I assume at the time to be corn starch or flour. Later, in my verbal report to my mother, my mention of this powder arouses her suspicions. She confronts Ah Ma, who admits, to my mother's horror, that it is MSG.)

WHILE THE MIXTURE
IN THE POT IS BROUGHT
TO A BOIL,

Ah Ma and I start blending the chillis. We fill up the blender, turn the knob... and nothing happens. We try it a few times; still nothing. Ah Ma and I laugh nervously, and I begin to panic inwardly about the whole process ending here, so close to the end, because of a technical difficulty. Just as I'm wondering how an 80-year-old, technologically-challenged woman and her 24-year-old, not very domestic granddaughter are supposed to resolve this, we figure out that the blades are probably just obstructed. After removing some of the contents of the blender, a little rearrangement, and a splash of water, we finally get the blender to work. We add in the chillis a handful at a time, until the blender only contains a liquid of that familiar bright red-orange colour.

THE MIXTURE IN
THE POT IS BUBBLING
BY NOW,

and the red-orange liquid is poured in, along with the lime juice. The large pot is now almost filled to the brim, and Ah Ma begins to add more sugar and salt. All I had left to do was taste—this batch was a little sour, but it was good overall. Now, my job was to remember. The whole process was so clear, so straightforward to me that a week or so later, I could still type out the recipe from memory and email it to my mother and sister.

The fact that Ah Ma and I completed this whole afternoon with very few hiccups was quite a feat. There exists a language barrier between us that can make it difficult to communicate without a third party to act as translator. I'm fluent in English, and I continue to have false hope that I'm fluent in Mandarin, but Ah Ma speaks only the Chinese dialect Henghua. I actually understand Henghua more than my family thinks I do, but an "atypical" conversation with Ah Ma is challenging. Included in "atypical" is her instructions to me in the kitchen. I can decipher Henghua based on contextual clues embedded within any given sentence, but when she says, "Pass me the _____," I can be completely confused by a missing noun in my vocabulary. My response often involves me picking up a lot of different objects, while Ah Ma gets frustrated because all she really wanted was a pair of scissors.

Because of this, I've never really had the opportunity and the linguistic ability to ask her how she learned the chilli recipe. It was only when I started writing this piece that I realised I needed to know. Thus, I picked up my phone and typed a message to my mother.

Henghua
A Chinese dialect spoken mostly in China's Fujian province and by immigrants to Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.

ME

Hi Mum, do you know how Ah Ma learned the chilli recipe?

MUM

Trial and error most likely. Why?

ME

I'm writing something about the experience learning it and I'm wondering.

MUM

I have to ask her tomorrow. You have a list of questions?

ME

No, just "where did you learn to make the chilli" haha.

MUM

Ok then.

(HOURS PASS)

MUM

She said when we were kids, Gramps always bought us the famous Hainanese Swee Kee chicken rice and the chilli was delicious. So she tasted and smelt and tried out on her own and perfected her own version, and what we all have been eating all this time.*

ME

So she made it up?? She never ask anyone for ingredients?

MUM

No.

ME

How can. Are you sure she isn't saying that to make her look smarter hahaha

MUM

Only she knows

ME

Okay...

MUM

When you are very good in something, you will know.

***I'M NOT SURE WHY MY MOTHER HAS TAKEN TO REFERRING TO MY GRANDFATHER AS "GRAMPS." WE USED TO CALL HIM AH GONG, WHEN HE WAS ALIVE.**

It seemed so easy for me to believe that at her age, Ah Ma could still be grinding up chilli with a mortar and pestle. But in that moment of finding out the truth—or Ah Ma's version of the truth, refracted through my mother—I reacted with incredulity. I truly thought that she had learned the whole process, just like I had done, by sitting in someone else's kitchen and going through the recipe step-by-step, or at least by asking someone for a list of ingredients. I had instinctively romanticised the manual labour that one assumes to be inherent in "the way it used to be done," but here was this testament to Ah Ma's intuitive culinary genius, and my first reaction was skepticism. My mind had failed to comprehend an ability to reverse engineer recipes by pure tasting alone, not least that this ability should be present in my own grandmother. Maybe this is because I lacked any kind of culinary prowess beyond the most utilitarian. Maybe I had hoped that her level of skill would be attainable, and this seemed proof that it would never be.

Underlying my reaction were binaries of labour vs. genius, hard work vs. talent. Those things aren't mutually exclusive, of course. Ah Ma knew how to reverse engineer the chilli recipe precisely because she had laboured in the kitchen for so many years. But I had also constructed this image of my grandmother, perhaps because our language barrier prevented me from fully understanding and knowing her.

It was not
that I had
built
Ah Ma
into a
myth,

but rather that
I had filled in
so many of
the voids in
her narrative
with my own
interpretations.
Or maybe I
had simply
accepted that
these voids,
her personal
history that I
didn't have the
right to claim,
were just that
part of her
that would
remain hers.

This same August, when I was back in Singapore, I spent a lot of time with Ah Ma. She usually talks *at* me, and while I try to absorb what I can, I can hardly reciprocate. She knows less of my life than I do of hers, though she knows exactly what kind of food I like to eat, and persuades me to eat the food I don't like with promises of me developing smoother skin (this apparently applies to all types of food). I let her talk, and I hold her hand, or massage her legs, or put my head on her lap as if I were a child. I stand in the kitchen as the oil fumes rise from her large black wok, as she tries to tell me that she wants me to pass her the scissors, as she stirs the pot full of bright red-orange pulpy liquid with small white seeds.

Ah Ma's Chilli
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