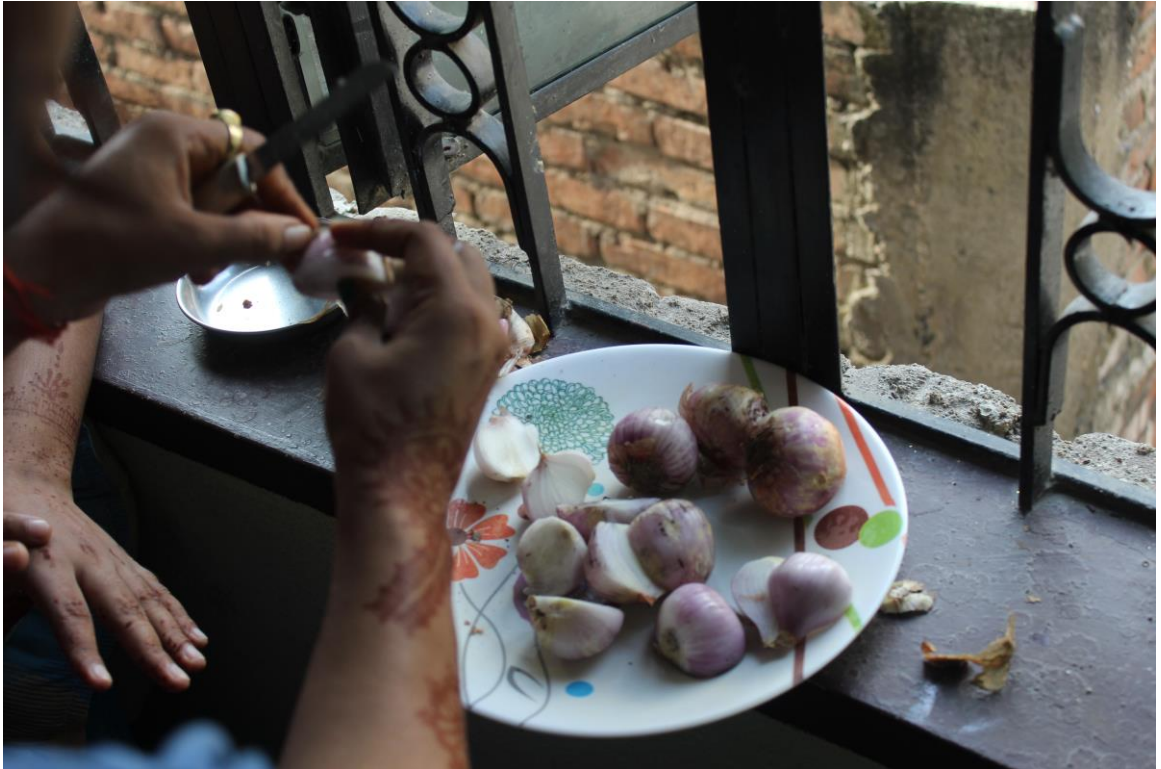


Breaking Bread Part II: Food Familiarity



What does “familiarity” mean for you? My pursuit of familiarity was a fruitless attempt to orient myself in the sensory-overload that is India. I was looking for something that I would not find; not in the way that I had expected anyways, for I had assumed that familiarity would be found in the superficiality of: A) physical spaces that reminded me of home - whether that be a busy café, or a quiet park; and B) fluent conversation in a common language that would allow for a mutual understanding of emotions, humor, and experiences. Now, this is not to diminish the importance that physical surroundings reminiscent of “home”, and engaged conversation in a common spoken language have in fostering human connectedness, however, relying on these characteristics to produce a sense of familiarity can result in the contrary.

As I described in my last blog post, I have experienced difficulty in trying to discover significant points of solidarity and familiarity in the setting of Muzaffarpur. I was misguided by my predisposition to shape my surroundings from the context of my own idea of normalcies; rather than experiencing my new home in the context of its own and allowing for my surroundings to consume me. As a result, I was overlooking the fundamental point of connection and familiarity that transcends geographical location, language, culture, ethnicity, and religion - that is that we are all people, irrespective of the dehumanizing and misleading rhetoric of governmental politics and media headlines. As we are all aware, there are a few universal biological conditions that are necessary to maintaining life, including oxygen, water, sleep, and of course, food.

It is within the context of food that I have discovered a source of familiarity, comfort and surprisingly, a means of communication. For myself, food has become the easiest form of

communication, as often times conversing through language is not an option. Communicating through food can take many forms - sharing a meal; observing, assisting in, or leading the preparation of a meal; or sharing recipes. In fact, Sam Chapple-Sokol has defined this concept through a political lens, terming it 'culinary diplomacy' - the use of food and cuisine as an instrument to create cross-cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation.ⁱ The topic of culinary diplomacy has been explored and discussed by a wide variety of professionals in different fields of work, including world-renown chef Mark Tafoyaⁱⁱ, and IR specialist Raymond Cohenⁱⁱⁱ.

Culinary diplomacy is a term that is reserved for political usage, specifically, diplomacy between states; it is not intended to describe the personal experiences of cross-cultural connections. Nonetheless, the fundamental concept is more than applicable, and the fact that this theory exists between nations, only further legitimizes the potentiality for food to bridge gaps, familiarize the unfamiliar, and widen the basis of cultural understanding at the civil level.

In considering the functionality of any theory, it is important to reflect on the challenges of such. Within the context of my own experience, I have noticed that the largest issue or point of weakness in this theory is a concept called 'gastronationalism'; described by Michaela DeSoucey as a signal for "the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food."^{iv} (Gastronationalism: Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union). Put simply, gastronationalism, in some cases, is the culinary version of national supremacy (i.e. a feeling that one's nation is superior to foreign nations). The challenge is that hierarchical social dynamics, whether they exist between borders or between people, fundamentally undermine movements toward state, cultural, or civil connectivity and familiarity. Again, this term is politically loaded, and is primarily reserved to describe political scenarios, but for the purpose of this post, I will be interpreting this term through the lens of my personal experience living and working in India.

I do think that as the language of food at the state and civil level becomes more common, and the world becomes more aware of the history and context of food, it is possible to conquer the challenges presented by gastronationalism. In order to exemplify how this is possible, I will be using the language of food through the dialect of recipe sharing.

The recipe that I am presenting has been a childhood favourite of mine; it is a dessert that in my family, appears only once per year. The Danish Christmas Rice Pudding (risengrod) is a recipe that has been passed down through my Grandma's Danish family heritage. There are two versions of the pudding - ris a la mande is the sweeter version, which contains whipped cream, and is typically served cold and saved for the end of the meal; risengrod is less sweet, and is served with cinnamon sugar, butter, and cream or juice (I prefer the flavor combination of cinnamon sugar, butter, and the juice - the tart undertones compliment the rich sweetness in an unexpected, but cozy kind of Christmas-y way).

The dish is always associated with the "almond gift"; an almond is hidden in one of the bowls, and whoever has the great fortune of receiving the bowl with the hidden almond wins a gift (usually a glorious chunk of marzipan that has been molded into an animal figure). The leftover pudding is taken outside for the "nisse" men to enjoy. The nisse was known as a household spirit controlling domestic fortunes, and it paid to stay on the good side of him. My Grandma, a feminist in her own right, is quick to point out that there are no female nisse.

This recipe is perfectly simple, but has held deep significance in my family, forming many cherished Christmas memories and traditions that will continue to be passed down. Han Christian Anderson once wrote: “a Danish Christmas is magnificent, quite unforgettably magnificent”.

Risengrod

2 cups short-grained rice
10 cups (approx.) whole milk

The risengrod is cooked in a slow cooker or double boiler for three to four hours. If you please, cream may be added at the end. In separate dishes, serve the cinnamon sugar, butter, cream, and fruit juice (currant, cranberry, or raspberry pair nicely).

After years of associating rice pudding with my Danish heritage, I had formed the assumption that the history of this dish belonged to the Danes, and in a way, it does. The context in which I know this dish to be celebrated is specific to Denmark, which helps in forming an identity that differentiates this dish from other variations. However, it was not long into my internship that I was introduced to “kheer”, a spiced rice pudding dessert. My first taste of kheer was at a roadside stall in the midst of bustling Old Delhi. It was served warm in a small clay pot, spiced with freshly ground cinnamon and cardamom, and topped with dried fruits and nuts. I shared this dish with a small group of new friends, while surrounded by dedicated observers of Ramadan breaking their daylong fast. The context and physical space in which we ate the kheer was completely unfamiliar to me, however, the collective enjoyment that comes with sharing a mouthwatering dish with others, accompanied by the resurfacing memories of home and family that were triggered by the recognizable dessert, provided me with the comfort of feeling at home in this moment. The Danish dessert that I fell in love with in my Canadian home quickly became my favourite Indian dessert.

Kheer is a common dessert in India; unlike many local recipes, kheer transcends state borders and remains familiar to most regions of India. There are several variations of kheer, which primarily depend on the preference of the cook. I learned how to make this dessert during my time in Muzaffarpur, Bihar. My teacher was a friend, Rajni, who I had met at the office, however, the language barrier between us was perverse, and our forms of communication were limited. Food became our way of connecting; I spent most weekends at her home watching her family cook, learning new recipes, and feasting together. I explained through photos and exaggerated hand gestures where my love for kheer originated from, and Rajni insisted that she and her sisters teach me how to cook the Indian rice pudding.

Although kheer can be consumed casually, as my friends and I had done in Old Delhi, it is also commonly served for special occasions such as festivals and family get-togethers. The relatively simple recipe is inexpensive to make; it is resourceful, as the ingredients are cultivated in abundance within India; and it is a convenient dish to make when serving large gatherings of people (which is often in Indian culture).

I used the recipe taught to me by Rajni and her sisters, however, measuring cups are rarely used in the Indian cooking that I have witnessed; recipes are often cooked from memory, and “handfuls” and “pinches” are used as measurements.

Kheer

1/2 cup of basmati rice (always use basmati, other rice variations will not create the same aroma and taste)

1 Liter of milk

1/3-1 cup of sugar

A few pinches of freshly ground cardamom

A couple handfuls of cashews and raisins (may be substituted out by any nuts and dried fruit of your choice)



Bring the milk to a slight boil before adding the washed rice. Continuously stir the rice until the milk is boiling more aggressively, then turn down the heat slightly, and stir the rice every couple of minutes to avoid any burning. Add the cashews, raisins, and cardamom. Once the rice is cooked and cooled, then add the sugar. Serve and enjoy!

“Something as seemingly small as our approach to food can transform the world in ways both small and vast, opening up new paths of understanding between even rivals.” – Chef Mark Tafoya.

ⁱ Chapple-Sokol, Sam. “Culinary Diplomacy: Breaking Bread to Win Hearts and Minds.” *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 8 (2013): 161-183.

ii See Tafoya, Mark. "Diplomacy of the Dish: Cultural Understanding Through Taste," in Fritz Allhoff and Dave Monroe (eds). *Food and Philosophy*.

iii See Cohen, Raymond. *Theatre of Power: The Art of Diplomatic Signaling*. London: Longman, 1987.

iv DeSoucey, Michaela. "Gastronationalism: Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union." *American Sociological Review* 75 (2010): 432-455.