

**HERE  
AND  
THERE**  
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## CONTENTS

<i>Behind the Glass Pane</i> , by Alice Xue.....	1
<i>Unrelated Musings on Cooking</i> , by Natalia Arbelaez Solano.....	3
<i>Table for One (Riga, Latvia)</i> , by Emily Reinhold.....	4
<i>Tiny Fish</i> , by Eliza Wright.....	5
<i>Sugar Rush</i> , by Khanh Kim Vu.....	7
<i>Spirals to Eat</i> , by Uma Menon.....	9
<i>Bringing the Past to Life in Tallinn, Estonia</i> , by Emily Reinhold.....	11
<i>The Greek Collection Cookbook</i> , by Cassandra James.....	12
<i>Wasabi Zen Review</i> , by Mercedes Hesselroth.....	16
<i>Lunch Break at a Café in Bruges, Belgium</i> , by Emily Reinhold.....	17
<i>Calculus with Pickles</i> , by Aditi Desai.....	18
<i>Lotus</i> , by Lillian Chen.....	20
<i>Ghirardelli</i> , by Abby Spare.....	23

## Behind the Glass Pane

Alice Xue

All I can see when I go to H-Mart nowadays are the imaginary bodies, the 6-foot measuring tapes that I lay on the ground between me and anyone near. People's faces have shrunk to slivers. I stare accusingly at unmasked lips, or wonder where they bought their masks and if they, like me, suffer from an incorrigible case of maskne. Then there are the hands: cesspools, exposed skins. I wipe shopping cart handles. I sigh in relief at the notion of latex gloves.

But there's something familiar about this H-Mart bakery, where a row of colorful cakes hides under its glass displays. Once upon a time, my 12-year-old self would race along the bustling streets of Flushing, Queens, toward a bakery much like this one. I can see it now: its grey, rounded storefront, crown logo, and pink letters spelling out "Taipan Bakery." After Saturday class, I'd pass the bridge where fish balls sizzled and pass the Chinese moms picking fruits in front of grocery stores. On my way, the MacDonald's pick-up window, selling \$1 ice cream cones, always turned my head, but I'd fight the urge. Nothing compared to Taipan Bakery.

A waft of fresh milk bread would greet me as I stepped in. To my right, a row of displays housed egg tarts, coconut-flaked breads oozing with cream, and pineapple bread, which my family affectionately called "黄黄面包" ("yellow yellow bread") for its sweet, yellow topping. Amidst the chatter of in-house diners, aproned ladies behind the counter would shout in Cantonese – "Want bubbles with your milk tea? Hot or cold?" – while their frantic hands would fill waxed bags with baked goodies.

The real magic, however, was hidden in the back. In front of the glass pane, I would stand in wonder at Cake-man's show. Sponges twirled; metal spatulas glided cream over cake like swans swimming on a lake. Strawberries and melons transformed into wondrous shapes. The fruits painted the blank canvas in intricate patterns. Then, in a final spin, the cake would be adorned with perfect crowns of whipped cream.

生日快乐, Cake-man would write. *Happy Birthday*, to the person he didn't know. His practiced hands never committed error, assured with grace and knowledge. When the cakes were brought out, my head would turn with heart-shaped eyes to the artworks crafted under Cake-man's hands.

"That'll be \$45. Cash or credit?" says a voice at the cashier.

Behind him, a masked man has pulled out my birthday cake from the H-Mart display. A flag saying "Happy Birthday" sticks out of it.

"Do you take Apple Pay?" I ask.

A nod, a tap, then a handover of plastic-wrapped cake, from one glove to another. I'm aware of a customer waiting behind me and place another 6-foot body on the ground between us. Good.

"Thanks," I say. My voice comes out muffled, but I fight the instinct to pull down my mask to say it clearer.



## Musings on Cooking

Natalia Arbelaez Solano

*"But lady, as women, what wisdom may be ours if not the philosophies of the kitchen? Lupericio Leonardo spoke well when he said: 'how well one may philosophize when preparing dinner.' And I often say, when observing these trivial details: had Aristotle prepared victuals, he would have written more."* – Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Mexican nun, poet, playwright, and scholar, in her response to a man pretending to be a fellow nun, (alias Sor Filotea), in order to condemn Sor Juana (and women in general) for studying academic subjects instead of God (the nerve!).

I find myself thinking a lot about Sor Juana during quarantine. She was a woman who loved her quiet time, who longed for it desperately. Her room and her convent were her entire world, and she never traveled outside of Mexico, however she thought about the whole world there. She was a woman who could think about the universe by looking inwardly towards her own body (see her poem, First Dream). She died of a plague: a chilling end in this context.

I've been looking for ways to travel elsewhere and connect with what is greater than myself in my limited spaces, and nowhere have I found that more than in the kitchen. The more time I spend there, the more I internalize that the kitchen is not a room: it is an idea, just like "living room" or "dormitory," that inhabits a space perpetually transformed by activity, growth, and decay. In the case of the kitchen, the transformations are more drastic and happen daily: they are the different smells of each day's cooking, the unique messes, the ingredients... Naturally, the kitchen, a lifetime of rooms, is the perfect place to fulfill my desires.

There is something very satisfying and complete about combining the abstract concept of the kitchen with the act of cooking itself, a deeply physical, grounding activity. Every day that I'm at the cutting table, it is an opportunity for me to find awareness in my hands: how the ingredient feels, how it cuts, how it smells. There is unpredictability there too: every onion makes me cry but in different levels of intensity; some garlicks smell stronger than others, some doughs require less water than others.

The physicality of preparing food also means that it is ever changing. The movements of the knife are hard at first, then you're a natural, and then the horrible joint pains make you stop. My mom, who taught me how to cook when I was just eight or nine now has osteoarthritis and carpal tunnel syndrome. It's hard for her to use her hands, so I've been doing a lot of cooking recently. I can't help but feel a deep sense of gratitude (and maybe some dread, too) for my (currently) healthy strong hands.



Table for One (Riga, Latvia)  
Emily Reinhold

Tiny Fish  
Eliza Wright

Three women from my office, saddled with a myopic and bewildered me, were going to travel to the more rural regions of Cambodia to chronicle the successes and failings of their programs. Rany, Lyde, and Mary were far kinder to me than they needed to be. Their English was far, far superior to my truly pitiful Khmer, and we spent most of the trip blissfully unaware of what each other was saying.

I had successfully managed to never leave my hometown, not even for college, and the shock to my system, I am ashamed to say, had not brought out my best. As my mother later delicately described it, it was like I had a little food poisoning, all the time. Emotional food poisoning. We traveled across the country in a small van driven by a man, who would pass the tuk-tuks, motos, and ox-pulled carts by occasionally veering into incoming traffic. If Lyde, Mary, and Rany judged that he was being a little too brave, they would immediately and unceremoniously begin whacking him with their newspapers.

We would drive for days on end, passing miles and miles of rice paddies. One day I fell asleep surrounded by rice paddies as far as the eye can see in every direction, and woke up surrounded by marijuana fields, as far as the eye could see in every direction. Each night we would pull over to eat in restaurants, my elbows practically touching my ankles as we sat on shiny red plastic chairs. I had a feeling Mary, Lyde, and Rany had perfected their cross-country food tour, and they ordered for me at every restaurant. It was a gift. One night we ate sticky-sweet barbecued duck that had been grilled over a gas flame and burning lemongrass, surrounded by a halo of rice and sliced carrots. Eating in the smoky open air, a cockroach swirled in the summer heat, and in a perfectly executed pirouette, dove down the front of my shirt. As I screamed, Rany calmly leaned over, peered down my shirt, and fished the cockroach out of my bra with her chopsticks.

We ate bowls of tender noodles that swam in slicks of fat, with one roasted duck leg neatly portioned out, the perfectly manicured nail still attached. On the border with Vietnam, Mary told me dirty jokes, as I tried a green papaya dish so spicy we all silently wept into our bowls, grinning drunkenly into each other's faces. Sometimes, I think out of kindness to me, and in acknowledgement of the comforts of the familiar, we would stop at the coffee chains that became increasingly rare as we drove, and shared icy coffees topped with sharp whipped cream. The baristas, carefully dressed from head to toe in uniforms that were specific to each chain, would dust the top with cocoa powder over a mold, leaving behind a perfect insignia.

Each morning, we would pull ourselves out of our hostels, and go across the street to eat breakfast at a cart. I loved the potent and sickly-sweet coffee that quickly percolated as I ate breakfast, a crispy omelet stuffed inside a baguette.

One day, we drove to a dock, where we climbed into a long, skinny boat powered by what seemed to be a glorified lawn motor, piloted by an eleven-year-old boy. We flew past a community that was built entirely on stilts, lifting them above the muddy waters of the Tonle Sap. I watched a man drop a neatly woven cage the size of a school bus into the water.

We stopped at a golden temple with a curlicued roof, also suspended above the river, where the cats had one blue and one green eye, one for the spirit world, and one for the earthly plain. From the long, skinny boat we moved to a barge that included a restaurant, where we ate a bowl of rice porridge dotted with tiny iridescent fish, each no bigger than a dime.

## Sugar Rush Khanh Kim Vu

8pm once again found us sitting in canvas chairs on the sidewalk outside The Coffee Bean. The Saigon traffic – mostly scooters but increasingly cars – passed before us, the exhaust fumes so familiar we did not notice. This seemed to have become a family tradition after dinner: to watch the streets over a five-dollar coffee, shared between me and my parents.

Café-going has become a strong symbol of modernity and the West for Saigon's youth. It began as the remains of French colonialism, with their *cafés*, *pâté-chauds* and *baguettes* taking on Vietnamese names and forms. It began as small plastic stools on the sidewalk and small cups of thick loose-leaf tea alongside bitter black coffee. But now, with the resurgence of Westernization, café culture came back in full force but with varying sources: it was no longer just the open-air sidewalk congregations that characterize Paris for some tourists – it was now also the Korean trend of Instagrammable desserts and pastries, the Chinese obsession with bubble tea, and the American empire of sugary drinks.

For me, the café craze began at thirteen. I still have the photo of the day Starbucks first came to Vietnam – I was wearing a long-sleeve V-neck green-and-grey striped sweater I had just bought the day before, standing amongst the crowd holding my very first Starbucks. The famous American coffee chain was selling drinks the price of some Vietnamese' daily wages, but that didn't deter me from posting the photo on social media, showing off to my peers not only that I had participated in this trend, but also that I had been able to afford it. An American family friend immediately shared my photo, but with the caption: "A young Vietnamese friend choosing American chain coffee over the world-famous Vietnamese coffee. A misguided trend!" I showed it to my mother, who shook her head and said, her eyes the color of disappointment – although with whom I didn't know – "One day you will understand."

But I already understood: that I was not the Vietnamese this woman thought I should be. I didn't mind though: that was something only someone not Vietnamese enough would fear.

At the time, I was young and still able to forget. I didn't think about this comment again until a decade later. But the woman had taught me one thing: that these cafes were as far away from being "Vietnamese" – as far away from my house, my ordinary life, and myself – as I could get. And that was enough, because it was a little closer to something special – wasn't it that all the magical and heroic things of books happened there, in "the West"? In Vietnam, one does not walk to a locker to find in a note that the world rests on one's shoulders. So, you won't blame me when I say I couldn't help a sense of excitement every time I stepped into the air-conditioned room filled with coffee aromas – every time I ordered a drink with an English name, molding my tongue



around the syllables — every time I held a plastic cup with an American brand on it, waiting for the sugar rush that simply didn't exist in Vietnamese cuisine. *This*, I would think to myself, *now this is what America tastes like*.

So after my sister left to study abroad in the US, I went to cafes every weekend with my parents. It was there that I allowed myself to sink into questions of the future: What was my sister doing over in America? When and how will I get there with her? Most importantly, what kind of life will I lead — what kind of person will I be? I still believed then that my life was in my hands alone. These questions, I never related to my parents, because they were mine, and only mine. This new world called America was where I could remake myself, free of the chains that previously defined me, free even of my parents' presence. I imagined myself living outside of my parents' house for the first time, going anywhere I pleased, doing anything I wanted. It didn't occur to me that the price of sleeping in was falling asleep alone.

It took me only a few months in the US to realize that dreams are often made too sweet. Maybe the American woman was right about Starbucks — that I was only following a blind trend, that I had forsaken my culture too easily, that I had embarrassed my people. But I couldn't stop going to these Westernized cafes, even after my first years abroad. I never went to Starbucks in the US, but in Vietnam somehow the drinks tasted different: its extreme sweetness was no longer sickening, because what was addicting was not the sugar, but the possibility of being something more. In America I was only a Vietnamese girl, but in Vietnam I was a Vietnamese girl who could have a future in America, and that alone meant more than anything. What the American woman didn't know when she shared the photo years ago was that those coffee cups were not drinks, but simply containers of dreams. And if it takes five dollars for me to feel what America is like, it is a price I am willing to pay.

## Spirals to Eat Uma Menon



The first time I try to spin murukku, my hands are much too small to wrap around the cold steel press. My mother kneads the dough like a fresh ball of snow, adding ingredients by measure of confidence rather than tablespoons and ounces. The bright red of chili powder sparkles in the even beige color of the rice flour. Beneath my fingers, the dough feels soft and sticky – an unlikely combination. I pick at the small pieces stuck to the meat of my thumb and roll them back into a ball.

I sit at the breakfast table, feet dangling above the ground, and watch my mother lay week-old newspapers flat across the surface. I tilt my head to read their contents: furniture advertisements and calendars of gardening workshops typed across the crease of the paper. My mother begins in the corner, at the sports section. She holds the steel press in her left hand and grips the crank handle in her right, rotating it over and over until each murukku is the size of a coffee cup stain. Her elbow forms a perfect right angle at each turn of the murukku.

When each one is finished, she pinches its tail, preventing the murukku from unraveling when it reaches the hot oil. The dough is like time: when left alone, it continues to escape from the press like a worm inching out of the dirt. In between murukkus, my mother rotates the handle counterclockwise, in the opposite direction, to prevent too much dough from escaping. The small pieces that do escape are pressed back into the large ball of dough to be reused. The steel press is filled over and over

again, until nothing is left of the dough ball. By then, every inch of the breakfast table is filled with murukkus, packed close together to save space. The advertisements, calendars, movie reviews, and lifestyle columns are all covered just the same in the beige spirals.

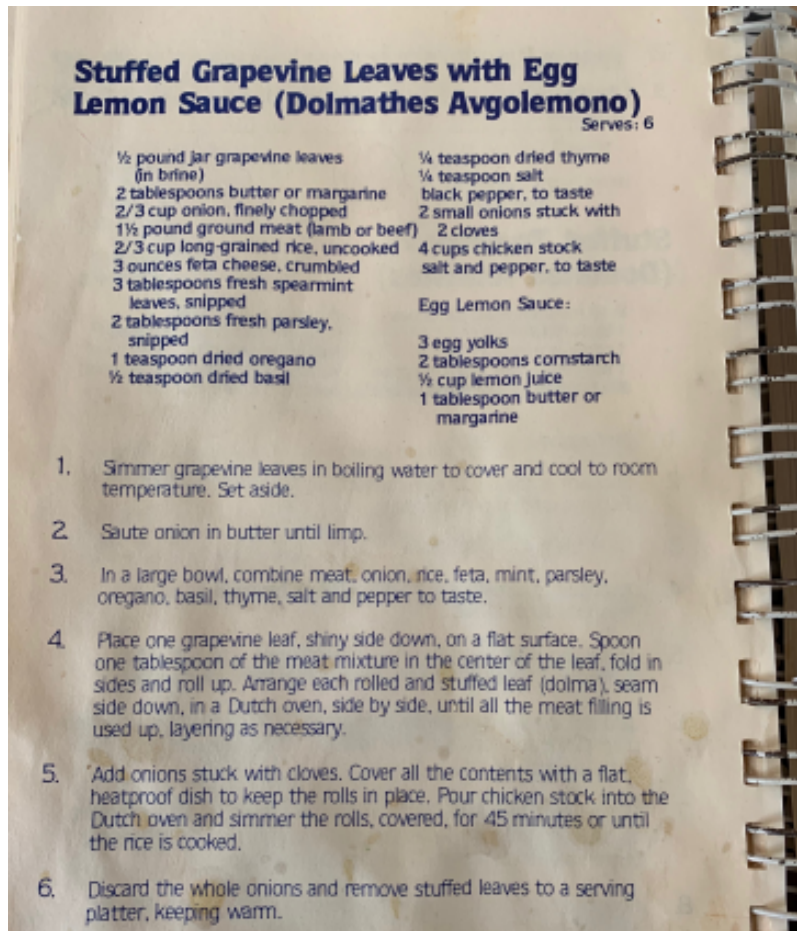
My mother hands me the press to spin my own murukku. I leave a bead-sized hole in the center and make rounds around the imaginary bead. My spiral is too gaping, the rings too far from each other. I squish the dough closer to itself with the flesh of my thumb. Under the weight of my hand, it becomes a lopsided ellipse. I crush the ellipse in my palm and knead it back into the dough. Over the hour, my ellipses take shape into perfect spirals with grooves that turn all the way around. The web between my left thumb and index finger stretches and aches as I tightly grasp the steel press.

My father whisks each murukku away with a spatula and tosses them into the bubbling warm oil. The spirals sizzle and brown on the stove. My mother watches closely to make sure the color is just right to pull out of the pan. We lay them on newspapers to cool and break off tail by tail as we eat to the center of each spiral.



Bringing the Past to Life in Tallinn, Estonia  
Emily Reinhold

The Greek Collection Cookbook  
Cassandra James



1. *Simmer grapevine leaves in boiling water to cover and cool to room temperature. Set aside.*

My sister and I prepare our hands. We wash them with hot tap water, scrubbing soap into our palms. We flick droplets off our fingertips into each other's faces. My sister's laugh is like the bark of a fox, high and sudden, and our bodies are pressed closer than the size of our kitchen requires. Today, we are two Greek girls. Our sloped noses would give us away, even if we didn't know *dolmathes* from *pastitsio*. From the other room, our mother hears our laughter and asks us if we're sure, if we can do this on our own. We exchange a glance—it is the kind only sisters can share, layered with unspoken cynicism—and scoff. We're two Greek girls. We've been shaped like marble statues by loving hands; we've been sculpted towards readiness from the day we were born.

2. *Saute onion in butter until limp.*



It is the first time we have attempted to make *dolmathes* without our mother's help. We brush our fingers over the yellowed and oil-stained pages of *The Greek Collection Cookbook*, hoping to divine its secrets. Our mother did this once, too – when she married our father, the cookbook, a manual for married life, was passed down from our Yia Yia. As the young Colombian wife, she struggled with the foreign words; she turned them over inside of her mouth, learning the taste. There is an Olympic expectation for the wife of a Greek man: she will continue where his mother left off. The torch has never been, and must never be, dropped. Just think! – the whole world might be plunged into darkness.

This is the foreword of *The Greek Collection*, its five-sentence origin story: "The Greek Collection is the culmination of a dream which began in 1971 when the first Taverna of Saint Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church, Weston, Massachusetts, was held. The Tavernas and bake sales brought many requests for recipes. A cookbook committee was organized, and recipes were submitted by the Parishioners. The recipes, tested, tasted and edited, reflect the heart and soul of the community."

I like to think that my sister and I are the culmination of a dream – that we reflect, like living mirrors, the heart and soul of a community. I like to think that we are the next in a saga of women, a rich tapestry unfolding over decades on yellowed and oil-stained paper. I read their names, now, as I write: *Sophia Giokas. Frances Petrakos. Athena Padis. Renee Argyris. Presvytera Manikas. Cynthia Zervas. Electra Hatzis*. The authors of my childhood. They don't know us, the two girls barefoot in the kitchen with their fingers buried in ground meat and onion; and they never will. But we have grown up with their food in our stomachs. We will raise our children on their recipes. The torch will sit propped in our kitchens, disguised, so cleverly, as a spiral-bound cookbook.

3. *In a large bowl, combine meat, onion, rice, feta, mint, parsley, oregano, basil, thyme, salt and pepper to taste.*

My sister's name is Irish. Kaitlyn Rose. It was conceived as a tribute to a great grandmother on my mother's side, a formidable woman remembered, mostly, for her private and consuming love affair with Elvis Presley and Southern Comfort. When we were small, I convinced our little brother that Katie had been adopted from Ireland – it was a believable enough explanation for her fair skin, light eyes, and strawberry-blond curls, contrasting so sharply with our darkness in family photos. My brother cried into my shoulder: he didn't want to be separated from our sister by an ocean. Then our mother came running, I was punished for knowing better, and my sister laughed at us all with her Irish eyes.

As in most cases, the truth is more confusing than the lie. I could have told our brother that we have Greek names and Colombian tongues, that the Italian in our veins is muddled by a distant combination of Irish and Welsh. I could have told him that if our limbs were mapped by a cartographer, there would be oceans between our hands

and wrists, mountains between our ribs and stomachs. But he might've cried at the monstrosity of it, and our mother would've come running anyway.

*4. Place one grapevine leaf, shiny side down, on a flat surface. Spoon one tablespoon of the meat mixture in the center of the leaf, fold in sides and roll up. Arrange each rolled and stuffed leaf (dolma), seam side down, in a Dutch oven, side by side, until all the meat filling is used up.*

We smooth the cool, slippery grape leaves against the cutting board. We toss the yellowed ones in the trash can; we choose only the thickest leaves, the ones least likely to dissolve in hot water. It's a beginner's mistake, to end up with a pot full of swirling clumps of meat—but we're experts by now. Our dolmathes won't fall apart. We place our balls of meat in the center of the leaves. We take the edges of the leaves between careful fingers. Then we fold and roll, forming tiny green packages that we stack in the soup pot, competing against each other for the quickest pace, the tightest roll.

Altogether, rolling good *dolmathes* can take up to three hours. Our heels bruise against the kitchen floor. We stretch our spines to release the tension from our bones; we move our necks side to side. Our mother checks on us periodically: do we need any help? Did we remember to keep the shiny side of the leaf down? Did we make the meat balls too big? We laugh her off—but we look at each other and pray we have done everything right.

Four years ago, on American Thanksgiving, we plowed through platter after platter of *dolmathes* at a rooftop restaurant in Santorini, all of the food on the house—the owner, an aging Greek man with crooked teeth, kind eyes, and a belly that sagged over his belt, had discovered my father's Athenian heritage and was bent on spoiling him, "You and your beautiful family!" When we'd finished eating, the owner waved my father and brother into the kitchen (he'd also discovered, inevitably, that all three of them shared the name Nicholas) for a full tour. Left alone at the table, my mother, sister and I sat in silence. We listened to the men laugh over a bottle of wine in the next room. The taste of *dolmathes* soured in our mouths. For the first time in my life, I was grateful for my Americanized Greekness—I was grateful for the water in my blood. To this day, my father insists that our *dolmathes* are better than any you could find in Greece. We're not so certain, but take quiet pride in the compliment.

*5. Add onions stuck with cloves. Cover all the contents with a flat, heatproof dish to keep the rolls in place. Pour chicken stock into the Dutch oven and simmer the rolls, covered, for 45 minutes or until the rice is cooked.*

When I was twelve and mythology obsessed, I discovered that I shared my name, Cassandra, with the princess who was tossed from a wall during the Trojan war. I was sitting cross-legged on the floor of my childhood bedroom, an abridged version of Aeschylus propped in my lap. I read the passage over and over again,

assembling and reassembling the words in my mind – and I was understandably furious.

As Aeschylus tells it, the Trojan princess Cassandra predicted the eventual downfall of her people by wooden horse. But after spurning the god Apollo's advances, she'd been eternally cursed – to deliver true prophesies and never be believed. So, the men of Troy branded her a madwoman, and subsequently tossed her from the ramparts.

My parents chose the name for me because it was strong, beautiful, and Greek. That is what I told myself, and I learned to love saying it, and signing it with a swirling cursive "C." And it is, after all, only a name; it's only fictional. It isn't something stolen from the body of a dead woman.

Now, I sometimes wonder whether Cassandra screamed as she fell from the walls of Troy; I wonder if she had a voice, at all.

*6. Discard the whole onions and remove stuffed leaves to a serving platter, keeping warm.*

My sister and I prepare our hands. We wash them under hot tap water, scrubbing soap into our palms. One by one, we pull our *dolmathes* from the pot. My mother smiles, watching over our shoulders; she kisses our cheeks. My sister pulls the plastic bucket of Greek yogurt from the fridge – we always trade the eggy avgolemono sauce for yogurt, however unorthodox it might be. Then, we eat. We dunk the *dolmathes* in ramequins of yogurt and plop them into our mouths. We swallow them almost whole. In mere seconds, three hours of work is demolished. Our brother complains of his too-full belly. We laugh as we work to clean up our disaster of a kitchen, and the air is thick with memory.

When we're finished, I slide *The Greek Collection* back onto its shelf with the other cookbooks. I turn out the kitchen lights. But before I leave, I glance back over my shoulder. I see the glow of a flame. It burns bronze in the darkness, a color sharp as metal, heavenly, fierce, and unrelenting. I think to turn away but find that I can't; my feet are leaden weights. And so the flame burns, brighter and brighter, until the light fills my vision, explodes in my skull, and the night is suddenly, completely, day.

## Wasabi Zen Review

Mercedes Hesselroth

A Thursday night takeout dinner from Japanese restaurant Wasabi Zen in Olney turned out to be a meal of many surprises. Located between the Shell gas station and the library, Wasabi Zen is one of several eateries adapting to an exclusively takeout style of service.

On a whim, I ordered a strawberry Sangaria Ramuné, unaware it came in a glass Codd-neck bottle sealed by a suspended marble. After reading the label's instructions three times, I at last figured out how to use the T-shaped plastic opener to puncture the bottle's mouth like a reverse cork. The release of carbonation freed the marble so that it slid around in the pinched neck's glass chamber. The drink itself was not too fizzy and brought to mind the Icee-fake red flavoring from childhood summers that would stain the whole inside of your mouth.

Upon further inspection of the bottle, I was shocked to read one serving contained 26 grams of sugar but amused to see the following curt instruction printed under a yellow "Caution" banner: "Do not play with the bottle." The sternness of the order felt like a parent's command of warning to a child. The idea I would not have fun drinking out of a bottle dented into the shape of a Martian face or gas mask was almost adorably presumptuous. I probably wouldn't have wiggled the marble from side to side if I was actually seated in the restaurant, but there was no one around to offend with my exploration of the container.

The main dish I had ordered for dinner was a serving of nabe udon. Though usually served in Wasabi Zen's deep brown ceramic, a chipped bowl from the cabinet—the same one used for cereal and microwave mac'n'cheese—would have to do for now. Several tiny mushroom caps created a full and earthy broth. Thin, tangy strips of seaweed clung to the wheat-flour noodles, thick as a Ticonderoga pencil and cut square into the perfect size for slurping. Altogether, the chewiness of the noodles and warmth of the soup turned the at-home nabe udon into comfort food.

Though the noodles were the star of the dish, the hidden treasure was two wedges of fuschia kamaboko with spongy white bellies. Sliced at half a centimeter thick, the fish cakes brought an unexpected layer of softness to the soup.

But most surprising about the meal was a foil package at the bottom of the takeout bag that revealed a golden strip of unordered shrimp tempura. As I bit into the soggy crunch of fried batter, I wondered how it had wound up in my order - a switcheroo? A free treat from the restaurant? A way to get rid of extra, unsold food? If I was sitting at Wasabi Zen, I could have asked my server if it had been brought to me by mistake. But I was at home, no other patrons or diners beside me, left to make up the answers on my own.



Lunch Break at a Café in Bruges, Belgium  
Emily Reinhold



## Calculus with Pickles

Aditi Desai

I'm surrounded by numbers, like a piece of bread being picked at by birds. At least 8 new coronavirus deaths and 758 cases today. I back away. An overall 11% increase in cases from last week. I clutch my forehead tightly. If the numbers and percentages were people, they would emerge in large crowds and throngs, screaming for something to be done. Yet, on newspaper headlines they appear only as vague ink swallowing real people, real lives, and real voices.

When faced with any mathematical concept, I try to visualize numerical values to understand the amount of space digits can occupy. In my mind, "20" takes up half of my living room and "100" spreads farther, bleeding into my kitchen. As numbers grow exponentially larger during this pandemic, I feel lost as the space in my mind contracts like a furrowing brow. There's no room left for more numbers to fit. And then there are the variables: "xyz's" that stand for the number of deaths and infections predicted by hypothetical models. Letters belong in words, in languages, and in books -- not in equations predicting last breaths. I don't want these numbers to reach me or creep up on my skin. They're empty of comfort, only growing larger with fear.

Losing grasp of numbers as I once knew them, I feel relieved when my grandmother teaches me a different kind of math: the calculus of making achar, or Indian pickle. Achar is an everyday member of our dinner table, routinely occupying its position next to the crock pot brimming with rice. The achar is compact and swift in nature. Tightly packed into a cylindrical, glass jar, it moves rapidly across the table, being passed around with urgency, like an age-old artifact. I admire the way it looks on my plate -- a bright orange sludge occupying its own miniature corner, waiting to liven up rice or roti (plain Indian bread). And, the achar doesn't just trot out during dinner; the pickle is present during breakfast and lunch time too, expanding the pleasures of every meal, from a bowl of fresh milk yogurt to a grilled cheese sandwich.

The pickle does what all savory pickles do: add a tongue-smacking, tangy, salty bite to all the plain foods it is thrust upon. The grainy oil, infused with citrus pellets and chili seeds, forms a slick layer on top of the pickled vegetables and fruits. So, each bite of achar pushes me to breathe deeper, open my lungs, and fill them with the pickle's intoxicating and delicious aroma.

Before Dadi (grandma) came to live with us in New Jersey, we filled our garage shelves with an array of store-bought pickles: mango and lime achar were our favorites, followed by one made from sprouted fenugreek seeds. My mother even went as far as to purchase achar made from fat gooseberries. I suppose that there was no limit as to what Indians chose to pickle; in fact, experimentation with novel fruits and vegetables was encouraged.

When Dadi arrived at my family's house in early March, she stared at our prized achar shelf in surprise. She wondered why on Earth we would be paying for achar — an inexpensive condiment that is traditionally made at home, each family with its safeguarded, unique blend of spices and acid. They're plain vegetables and fruit soaked in salt and vinegar, she reasoned. All you need are jars, acid, and time.

Dadi quickly took over our kitchen after discovering that we'd spent hundreds of dollars on store-bought achar over the past few years. Her hands worked swiftly, cupping the mango in her palm and pulling back its thick skin. Spreading vibrant, paper-thin mango and lime slices on newspaper, she explained how fresh foods must first be sun-dried for approximately six hours to get rid of excess moisture. Try to position the slices about one inch away from one another, she commented. It's an old trick my aunt taught me, she smiled with her eyes. Under the warmth of the sun, she explained that bacteria will digest up to seventy-five percent of the sugar and produce acid to preserve the food. Now, after five days, she continued, we'll mix these fruits with a sludge of powerful spices and store in vinegar. It was somewhat of a lengthy process, but the results were both intense and delicious. It was the kind of food that you wanted tucked away in the refrigerator at all times.

What struck me most about Dadi's achar-making process were her numbers -- six hours, one inch, seventy-five percent, and five days. Unlike the numbers in the news and media headlines about COVID-19 death and infection rates, Dadi's numbers were constant and unchanging — a generational formula guaranteed to create a deeply flavorful achar. Dadi's numbers were ways to preserve sun-kissed fruits and revive flavors. For once, numbers proved to be elegant, trustworthy, and consoling.

I'm still working on my relationship with numbers, what they stand for, and how to maneuver my way around them. I want to lean on numbers to solve problems and think critically, to trust that they will remain unchanged like a formula. But, I've learned that numbers are messy despite looking clean, and that they're bound to grow and change and shift just as recipes do.

Lotus  
Lillian Chen

After lunch, you scrub the kitchen sink and floors.

I know you are thinking about the past. Somehow you know how to speak more with your hands than your mouth.

You peel the sides of what looks like an artichoke.

Except this is a lotus plant, you say.

My western mind wants to believe you are only confused.

You are digging into the lotus disguised as an artichoke, like an archeologist looking for a secret.

A hidden lotus bud.

Father found it in the grocery store earlier today. Something to slow cook the beef with, he had suggested. To bring its full flavor out.

You rip the hard petals off, testing their spikes with your dry and calloused fingers. Fingers that spent years handling the food that would keep me alive.

You speak suddenly in a way that seems both at me and past me.

Grandma used to boil these lotus leaves with clean slices of Asian pear, mix together in a hot cup of tea.

You drank it every day.

It was your version of vitamin gummies before you could afford real medicine.

A cough inhabited you for eight years, sending grandma and grandpa in a frenzied search for any kind of herb, acupuncture master or local healer to make you better.

You were always a sick child.

I guess illness and trouble are genetic traits.

But you did get better. With time. And money. More food made you well. The economy grew so you grew.

You are much stronger now. You're grateful too.

I hear the exhaustion in your voice as you say this though.

You sigh.

We're both thinking about the cancer you battled when I was eight and the eight years you fought with me and my eating disorder.

You got better when many other women did not.

You took what you learned about the power of healing. You nourished me too.

Your immunity finally surfaced after deserting you for those first eight years of life. You never gave up.

You came into this world at a disadvantage. A woman. A minority.

You know what a hard life is like.

Like the lotus plant, you developed a hard set of leaves to shell yourself away from danger.

A shelter in place.

But comfort did not stop you from leaving home. From coming here.

To a place where your tough skin was reduced to a color.

Where your armor became a "chink".

Yet to those who mocked you, who tried to stop you, you laughed back.

You found a new joy.

One deep within your core, once you picked off all the hard layers.

Inside, you are soft, sometimes too soft.

I know because if you hadn't been, you would have left me years ago.

You and your soft lotus heart.

A heart saved by a lotus plant.

I thank the lotus plant.

I know you thank it too.



## Ghirardelli Abby Spare

"I made your brownies, dear," my Grandy's Irish brogue leaped and bounced on her 'r's as she found space on the overflowing Thanksgiving table for the pile of tin foil. The contents inside were the best part of any family gathering. Apparently when I was young, on my first visit to the East Coast before moving, I had declared that these brownies were "like a fairy made them". Ever since, Grandy has insisted on baking them for every family gathering. This Thanksgiving was no different, as she squeezed my arm and lifted her 4'11" frame up to kiss the side of my temple.

The side pieces of Grandy's brownie are the best. I will argue anyone on this point, and have done so with my older cousins at least once or twice. The insides are moist and decadent, melting chocolate chips dripping out from the cake. The side is crisp, but not like the corner piece where the crunch overwhelms the rest of the brownie piece. It is perfect when I add just a little bit of the Reddi-Whip container that our family will go through tonight with the pies, cakes, and, of course, the brownies.

She refuses to budge, to give any recipe or even a hint as to what it is she adds to it, even though she's passed down recipes before. Her casserole is always a hit in my house. But these brownies were different somehow. They weren't just exceptionally good, but they were exceptionally secret. Grandy promised she would tell me one day, and that day kept getting pushed back and back with each coming family gathering.

"Go find something sweet to make," my mom shooed me down one of the aisles during our monthly trip to Costco. I wandered through, looking at the tubs of Tollhouse cookie dough, which always was better eating from the tub than actually cooking, and considering the Betty Crocker boxed cakes, which were fine but not great. I brought back to my mom, and our overfilled shopping cart, the Ghirardelli Triple Chocolate Fudge brownie mix.

A few days passed before my dad got his weekly hankering for something excessively sweet, and less than an hour later, a tray of brownies was cooling. I cut some squares for myself and my parents and dug in. Something about the gooeyness and the melting chocolate chips in the brownies tasted distinctly familiar, tasted the same as my Grandy's brownies that I had come to look forward to for every holiday.

I asked my mother if they tasted the same to her and she laughed. "Abby, this is what she uses. They aren't homemade brownies, did you really think that they were?" I guess I had. All of her avoided questions and maneuvering around my prodding for a written recipe now made sense. There wasn't really a recipe to pass down because there wasn't really a recipe, beyond what was printed on the back of the mix box.

But still, hers will always be homemade for me, and will always have something just a

hair different. They may not be an original Doyle family recipe like I had thought growing up, but that fact does not diminish the experience of her shaky hand pressing on mine as she smiles and tells me that she made the brownies for that day's family party. The pre-mixed dry ingredients do not invalidate her love and her care.

I'm glad to have these brownies, easy to make or not, to comfort me and remind me of the woman who has given me so much.

## Meet the Contributors

**Alice Xue** graduated in 2020 with a major in Computer Science and certificate in East Asian studies. She took a creative writing class with Yiyun Li and loved it. In her free time, she enjoys jogging, watching Chinese dramas, and reading (though admittedly far less often than ideal).

**Natalia Arbelaez Solano** is a junior in the Comparative Literature Department. Over the summer, she participated in the English Department's Writing about Family workshops, and she is so excited to share that work with you!

**Emily Reinhold** is a rising senior in the Class of 2021, majoring in the School of Public and International Affairs and pursuing a certificate in Environmental Studies. She was born in Belarus, where several of her photos were taken, and immigrated to the US with her family when she was seven.

**Eliza Wright** majored in English with a certificate in Environmental Science, and graduated in 2019. Eliza is now working in Agriculture and Tech, with a lifelong appreciation for American agrarian literature!

**Khanh Kim Vu** is a member of the Class of 2020 and concentrated in Computer Science with a certificate in Creative Writing. Her favorite English class was ENG387: "Writing about Family" with Professor Rebecca Rainof.

**Uma Menon** is a student in Princeton's Class of 2024 who participated in the English Department's Writing Workshops over the summer. Her debut poetry book, *Hands for Language*, was published by Mawenzi House in 2020.

**Cassandra James '23** is a prospective English major from Celebration, Florida. She grew up in a family of Greeks, Italians, and Colombians, which means she had to tell stories to survive. Her dream life involves writing novels and traveling the world, preferably at the same time.

**Mercedes Hesselroth** is a freelance journalist and senior Writing major at Houghton College. Among other publications, she contributes to the *Washington City Paper* and *DC Theatre Scene*.

**Aditi Desai** is a first-year student (Class of 2024) hoping to pursue Neuroscience and Creative Writing. She loved participating in the English Department's Summer Outreach programs and finding a community of writers, listeners, and communicators! She's looking forward to taking Creative Writing and English courses at Princeton.

**Lillian Chen** is an Economics major with East Asian Studies and Creative Writing certificates. She's set to graduate in 2021 and is currently living at home in Houston

with her parents and black cat, Zoe, who looks like Toothless from How To Train Your Dragon. She loves traveling, hiking at sunrise, dancing to RnB music, reading children's novels, listening to podcasts on HP/being human/spirituality, and writing everything from poetry to memoir reflections to fictional film scripts.

**Abby Spare** graduated as Class of 2020 in the English Department, with minors in European Cultural Studies, Theater, and Music Theater. Over the summer before she starts working at a hedge fund administration firm, she's been catching up with all of the books sitting on her bookshelf and participating in the English Department's book club and the Writing About Family workshop. It's really given her the opportunity to return to fiction writing, after solely writing plays over the past few years. She thanks everyone for reading her work!