

Mama Lee, Cooking Hero

My grandma, Mama Lee, is my cooking hero. Throughout her life she has been surrounded by food; it's like she has cooking in her DNA. Born in 1933 and growing up in World War Two Singapore, my grandma was raised single-handedly by her resilient mother – great grandma lost her husband to tetanus just as the war broke out. Money was scarce so it was a bold decision to spend two Singaporean dollars on pork and vegetables, borrow rice from a friend to make dumplings and sell them to their neighbours. Mama Lee sold illegal rice wine and bought dried prawns on her own in Aukung in Malaysia, across the Singapore Bridge border, after her mother was whipped by the occupying Japanese soldiers and told that she could not cross the bridge. Great-grandma hid the rice wine in bicycle inner tubes. All this was before Mama was ten. Mama remembers constantly being told to eat rice instead of porridge, as it was 'more filling'. Finally, my great grandma managed to get a hawker stall outside Rex Theatre and Mama Lee was again enlisted to help cook - this time, sweet potato curry puffs.

My grandfather came over to the UK in 1959 and decided that London was a good place to call home, so Mama Lee joined him after a one-month long sailing from Singapore. They opened a cafe in Haringey and decided to have chop suey on the menu, but the best sellers were grilled pork chops, toad in the hole and rock cakes.

My grandparents then opened a Chinese provision shop in Kilburn, in 1970 – it was one of the first in the UK. Highlight of the week was fresh mackerel and live crabs on Saturdays. Overseas students loved stocking up on familiar Chinese ingredients and getting inspiration from Mama Lee on how to cook dishes that they missed back home; she was the food hero of many a student. My mum had to spend most days decanting huge sacks of bean sprouts into smaller individual half pound bags to sell for 15p. She had to go to a friend's allotment to collect a regular supply of choy sum.

I have never been to Mama Lee's house without being offered plates of food as soon as I enter. 'I made you chicken rice, lah' – words I always smile at hearing. Even when she calls, she asks traditionally if we have eaten yet. The entire Lee family has been blessed by the taste of her food. Everyone knows her signature dishes - Singapore laksa, Hainanese chicken rice and her special fried chicken. Even at her eightieth birthday party, her fried chicken was mentioned in the speeches. It truly is that good! I remember when I was little, sitting on the embedded lazy-Susan in the middle of the main family dining table and being spun around whilst Mama Lee cooked in the background.

For me, my favourite dish is chicken feet which are cooked in a rich broth with red dates, fresh raw peanuts, goji berries and ginseng. Mama would spend hours preparing this dish and would clean every foot scrupulously. I once recall how my brother was forced into the kitchen to help trim the nails off the chicken feet, with a pair of nail clippers. I love the fleshy plump chicken feet with the 'melt in your mouth' creamy skin. Nothing is more pleasurable than sharing a plate with my grandma spitting out the little bones and her seeing me enjoying the meal with her.

I thank my grandma for sharing her love of durian with me. Durian is the King of Fruits and is said to have the smell of rotting flesh; however, I love it as much as chicken feet. I have grown

up with durian being readily available in the freezer, its smell not being half as pungent as some of the other ingredients in my grandma's home, such as century eggs, dried scallops, belachan and sun-dried anchovies.

Even at the wise age of 87, Mama Lee still cooks for herself every day. Only last week, my mum and I got a call telling us to pick up a massive crab; we spent the entire evening shelling every last leg and adding it to soft egg noodles. As expected, it was delicious. I have learnt so many recipes from my Mama, enough to fill a whole cooking book, and I hope to continue learning more for as long as I possibly can.