

Homemade festival foods are treasures

It was during Chinese New Year several years ago when I discovered just how ambrosial tofu really could be.

As a longtime vegan, I've purchased and consumed hundreds, if not thousands, of packages of bean curd to grant me a certain expertise in the food.



Jocelyn Eikenburg
Second Thoughts

But nothing could have prepared me for the moment when I bit into that homemade fried tofu fresh from the wok. The crisp, golden surface gave way to a surprisingly rich, buttery flavor that elevated this humble food to the high-light of the evening's dinner.

But that moment was the culmination of days of work by my mother-in-law from rural Hangzhou, Zhejiang

province, who also prepared the tofu she had fried from scratch.

One afternoon, I followed the billows of steam from her kitchen and found her pouring a milky hot liquid through a straining basket, filtering out the bean curds that would eventually turn into more white blocks of tofu, just like those neatly stacked in the tray behind her. Yet the process yielded other delights as well. She ladled out a bowl of that filtered liquid from the metal pan resting on the floor, added a sprinkle of sugar, and offered it to me as soymilk. It was creamier and more fragrant than anything I had tasted in China or the United States, where I'm from.

This experience left such an impression on me that now, whenever my mother-in-law starts making tofu, I know the holidays have arrived.

I could say the same about many other traditional Chinese New Year foods from her kitchen, such as *dongmiantang* — sweet and crunchy puffed rice squares often flecked with black sesame seeds — and those savory rice turnovers stuffed with salted bamboo shoots, pickled greens and tofu that we call *migu* in the local dialect.

To me, these are the real holiday treasures, far more than the lavish golden pyramids of Ferrero Rocher chocolates or top-shelf French wines pushed upon us by an endless stream of commercials for Chinese New Year.

I should know, because I missed out on a precious holiday food when I was growing up. Every December my mother used to layer honey and chopped nuts with paper-thin sheets of phyllo dough to bake her annual Christmas baklava. But I was such a finicky eater, not try-

ing even a single piece for fear I wouldn't like it. She passed away when I was 17, years before I would finally discover how delicious baklava really was and mourn the loss of her work.

My husband and I like to say his mother's holiday foods are a kind of intangible cultural heritage for the family — and I'm determined not to let something like that slip away again.

I hope to learn my mother-in-law's recipes. And someday, perhaps someone else will be peering into my kitchen during Chinese New Year, marveling at the wonder of making tofu from scratch.

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