

Cook like an artist

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My wife, Ratna, tells me that her brothers were professional cooks, especially for Chinese weddings. However, for inexplicable reasons, they did not allow her to be a part of their demanding enterprise. Perhaps “demanding” may hint at the reason. However, Ratna learned to cook by herself, and often prepares healthy and tasty home-cooked meals for us (a family of 6: Ratna, our 2 sons, 2 cats and me).

I must confess that although I almost never complained about food, coming from Malacca (the old-world city of Melaka, which goes back to the 14th century), I am partial to spicy Melaka food. Ratna’s cooking style is Teochew (潮州話 Cháozhōuhuà), which is very more Chinese in taste (that is, very much less spicy and hot than Melaka cuisine).

One of the vital rules of a happy married and family life is never to complain about another family member’s cooking. My elder son, too, cooks, but his taste is more exotic, mostly Korean and Japanese. However, he also makes exceptionally good pizza (better than any we can get from the pizza outlets here!). His “som.tam” (Thai green papaya lime salad) is another masterpiece (it is certainly cheaper than any we can get from the Thai ghetto in the Golden Mile Complex, Beach Road, Singapore).

The three of us (my two sons and me) have different ways of responding to Ratna’s cooking when we feel it could be better. Our younger son is most diplomatic: he would ask what the ingredients are, how much were used and how. A fuller feedback would usually come from my older son who has a great eye for details. He would give a long feedback (or lecture we could say) on what should have been added, how much and how.

As for me, I constantly remind or hint to the cook “never to forget our culture” (by which I specifically mean “food”). Hence, we do have our occasional ikan asam pedas (hot spicy tamarind fish), sambal prawn (prawn fried in spicy chilli), pongteh (pork in black sauce with bean paste), curry chicken, nasi lemak (milk-rice) and, of course, “sambal belachan” (hot chilli shrimp paste). “Itek teem” (salted vegetable duck soup) is one of our culture’s signature dishes which is a favourite with my two sons.

My eating style is usually to keep to one main dish, say a generous spread of curry gravy over the rice and a bit of fish or vegetable. However, like other family meals (it’s vital I state this), there are occasions when we simply do **not** feel hungry enough despite the dishes on the table.

However, there is at least one occasion when I did not feel like eating any of the dishes served. I gingerly sprinkled some Chinese black sauce over my rice and ate it with some tofu and broccoli. I have told my family before this was how my family in Malacca took their rice (but without any tofu or broccoli!) during the Japanese Occupation (1941-1945), when food was difficult to obtain.

No one openly commented on the way I ate. Ratna knows I’m simply hinting at my lack of appetite for the dishes that day. It must be noted that all this is done in good humour, and, I

must say, good taste—especially with what I’m going to say next, which is actually the title of this reflection.

As far as I recall, I have never expressed any anger over the kind of food we have. And we should not, for the simple reason that the cook has taken so much trouble and effort in preparing what sustains our lives. In fact, more often, we would buy hawker food (so that we don’t have to cook) which saves us significant time for sutta work, updating the Dharmafarer website, replying mails, doing house chores and so on.

To me, the Cook is an Artist. In an important sense, everyone’s cooking is unique. He puts together some ingredients, spices, and so on, in a manner that an artist would paint a picture. Even when the painting is not to our liking, we do not say how bad the work is. The rule is that we rather speak of the excellent and admirable aspects of the work. In short, every meal prepared is **a work of art**, and should be respected so, especially when prepared with love: **an art of love**. Whether the meals are to our taste or not is a matter of personal taste.

Furthermore, Ratna advised me to take yoghurt, too, which is not a personal favourite. How would the Buddha or a practicing meditator eat, I ask myself. He would first set aside what he regards are extra (for others or for animals), and mix up the rest well. This he will bring to his mouth, opening it only when the food touches it. Then, mindfully he chews the food—just the food—maybe reflecting, “Chewing, chewing,” or “Tasting, tasting.” Food, any food, never tasted better that way. Eating, too, is an Art—in Buddha Dhamma surely.

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