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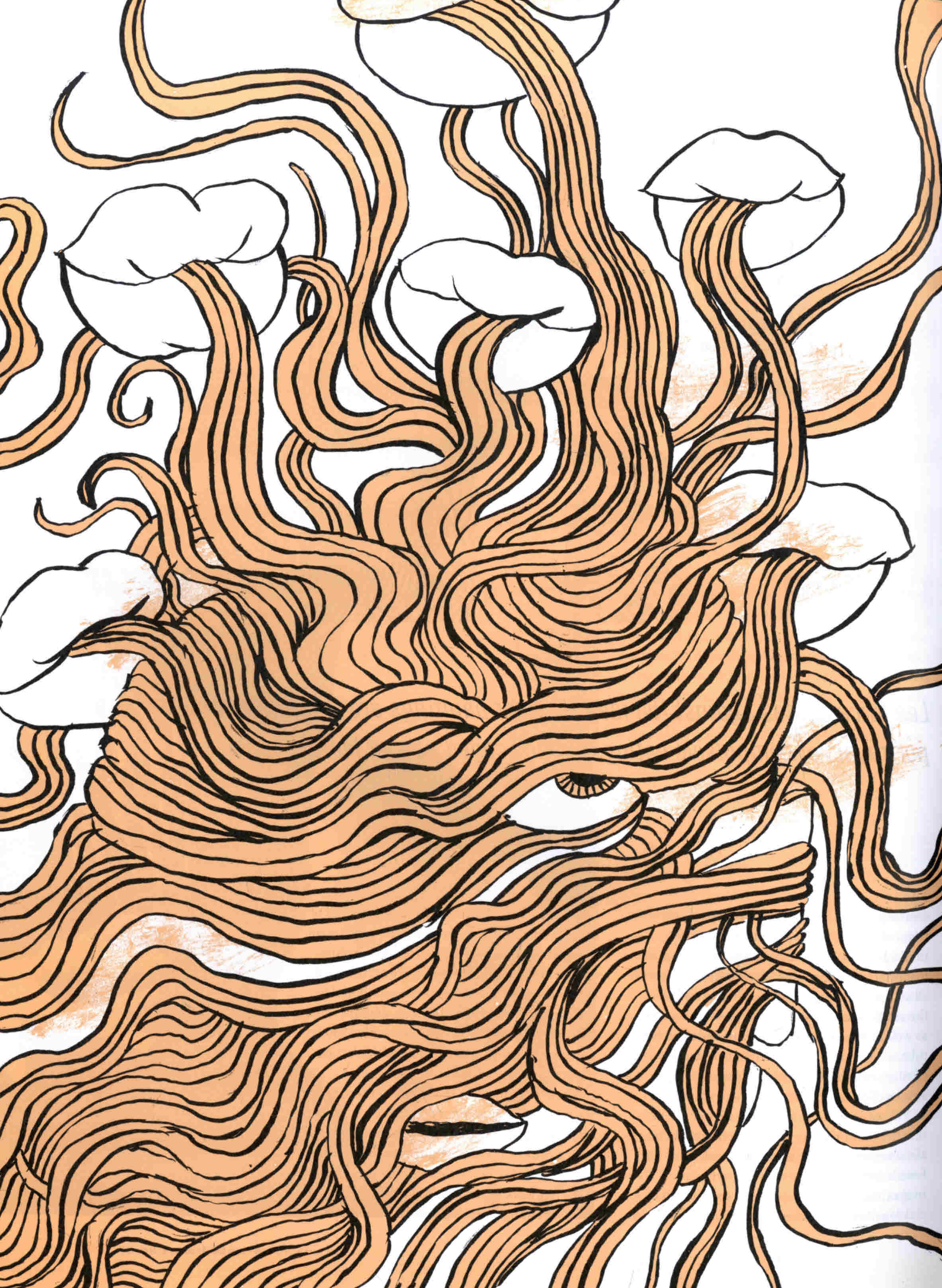


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Graving the Other

ONE WOMAN'S BEEF WITH CULTURAL APPROPRIATION AND CUISINE

by Soleil Ho / illustrations by Ana Benaroya

For a long time, Vietnamese food made me uncomfortable. It was brothy, weirdly fishy, and full of the gross animal parts that other people didn't seem to want. It was too complicated.

I wanted the straightforward, prefabricated snacks that I saw on television: Bagel Bites, Pop-Tarts, chicken nuggets. When my grandmother babysat me, she would make tiny concessions, preparing rice bowls with chopped turkey cold cuts for me while everyone else got caramelized pork. I would make my own Bagel Bites by toasting a normal-size bagel and topping it with Chinese sausage and a dash of Sriracha. My favorite snack was a weird kind of fusion: a slice of nutrient-void Wonder Bread sprinkled with a few dashes of Maggi sauce, an ultraplain proto-*banh mi* that I came up with while rummaging through my grandmother's pantry. In our food-centric family, I was the barbarian who demanded twisted simulacra of my grandmother's masterpieces, perverted so far beyond the pungent, saucy originals that they looked like the national cuisine of a country that didn't exist.

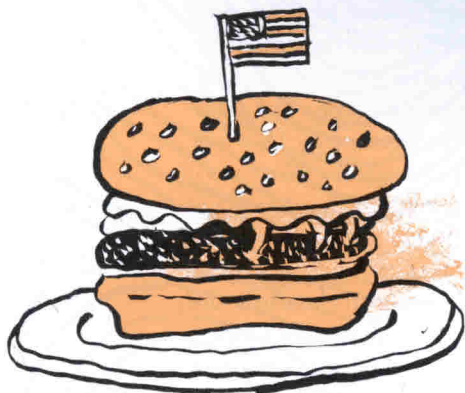
When I entered my first year of college in Iowa, a strange pattern began to emerge as I got to know my classmates. "Oh, you're Vietnamese?" they'd ask. "I love *pho*!" And then the whispered question—"Am I saying that right?" The same people who would have made fun of me for bringing a stinky rice-noodle salad to school 10 years ago

talked to me as if I were the gatekeeper to some hidden temple that they had discovered on their own. *Pho* seemed like a shortcut for them, a way that they could tell me that they knew about my culture and our soupy ways without me having to tell them. I would hear this again and again from that point on. I'm Vietnamese? They love *pho*! I told people to pronounce it a different way each time they asked, knowing that they would immediately march over to their racially homogenous group of friends to correct them with the "authentic" way to pronounce their favorite dish. I'm sure that they were happy to learn a little bit about my family's culture, but I found their motivations for doing so suspect.

What can one say in response? "Oh, you're white? I love tuna salad!" It sounds ridiculous, mostly because no one cares if a second-generation immigrant likes American food. Rather, the burden of fluency with American culture puts a unique pressure on the immigrant kid. I paid attention during playdates with my childhood friends, when parents would serve pulled-pork sandwiches and coleslaw for lunch. (It took me a long time to understand the appeal of mayonnaise,

which, as a non-cream, non-cheese, non-sauce, perplexed the hell out of me.) From watching my friends, I learned to put the coleslaw in the sandwich and sop the bread in the stray puddles of sauce in between bites. There's a similar kind of self-checking that occurs when I take people out to Vietnamese restaurants: Through unsubtle side glances, they watch me for behavioral cues, noting how and if I use various condiments and garnishes so they can report back to their friends and family that they learned how to eat this food the "real way" from their real, live Vietnamese friend. Their desire to be true global citizens, eaters without borders, lies behind their studious gazes.

When I go to contemporary Asian restaurants, like Wolfgang Puck's now-shuttered 20.21 in Minneapolis and Jean-Georges Vongerichten's Spice Market in New York City, it seems the entrées are always in the \$16–\$35 range and the only identifiable person of color in the kitchen is the dishwasher. The menus usually include little blurbs about how the chefs used to backpack in the steaming jungles of the Far East (undoubtedly stuffing all the herbs and spices they could fit into said backpacks along the way, for research purposes),



and were so inspired by the smiling faces of the very generous natives—of which there are plenty of tasteful black-and-white photos on the walls, by the way—and the hospitality, *oh, the hospitality*, that they decided the best way to really crystallize that life-changing experience was to go back home and sterilize the cuisine they experienced by putting some microcilantro on that \$20 curry to really make it worthy of the everyday American sophisticate. American chefs like to talk fancy talk about "elevating" or

"refining" third-world cuisines, a rhetoric that brings to mind the *mission civilisatrice* that Europe took on to justify violent takeovers of those same cuisines' countries of origin. In their publicity materials, Spice Market uses explicitly objectifying language to describe the culture they're appropriating: "A timeless paean to Southeast Asian sensuality, Spice Market titillates Manhattan's Meatpacking District with Jean-Georges Vongerichten's piquant elevations of the region's street cuisine." The positioning of Western aesthetics as superior, or higher, than all the rest is, at its bottom line, an expression of the idea that no culture has value unless it has been "improved" by the Western Midas touch. If a dish hasn't been eaten or reimagined by a white person, does it really exist?

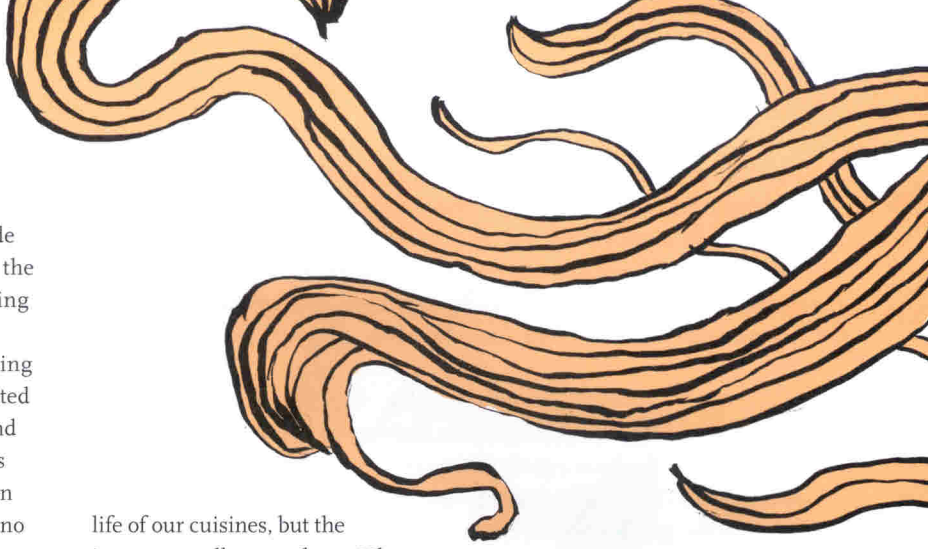
Andrew Zimmern, host of *Bizarre Foods*, often claims that to know a culture, you must eat their food. I've eaten Vietnamese food my whole life, but there's still so much that I don't understand about my family and the place we came from. I don't know why we can be so reticent, yet so emotional; why Catholicism, the invaders' religion, still has such a hold on them; why we laugh so hard even at times when there's not much to laugh about. After endless plates of *com bi*, *banh xeo*, and *cha gio*, I still don't know what my grandmother thinks about when she prays.

Others appear to be on a similar quest for knowledge, though they seem to have fewer questions than answers. Like a plague of culture locusts, foodies, Chowhounds, and food writers flit from *bibimbap* to *roti canai*, fetishizing each dish as some adventure-in-a-bowl and using it as a springboard to make gross generalizations about a given culture's "sense of family and community," "lack of pretense," "passion," and "spirituality." Eventually, a hole-in-the-wall reaches critical white-Instagrammer mass, and the swarm moves on to its next discovery, decrying the former fixation's loss of authenticity. The foodies' cultural cachet depends on being the only white American person in the room, braving inhumane spice levels and possible food poisoning in order to share with you the proper way to handle Ethiopian *injera* bread. But they can't cash in on it unless they share their discoveries with someone else, thereby jeopardizing that sense of exclusivity. Thus, happiness tends to elude the cultural foodie.

MENUS USUALLY INCLUDE LITTLE BLURBS ABOUT HOW THE CHEFS USED TO BACKPACK IN THE STEAMING JUNGLES OF THE FAR EAST (UNDOUBTEDLY STUFFING ALL THE HERBS AND SPICES THEY COULD FIT INTO SAID BACKPACKS ALONG THE WAY, FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES).

Why am I being such a sourpuss about people who just want to show appreciation for another culture? Isn't the embrace of multiculturalism through food a beautiful expression of a postracial milieu? Aren't *I* being the *true* racist here?

Item: "Asian Girlz" by Day Above Ground, a wannabe-Red Hot Chili Peppers bro-band, is full of references to East Asian food juxtaposed with violently misogynistic lines about their yellow fever: "I love your sticky rice/ Butt fucking all night/ Korean barbecue/ Bitch, I love you." (Yum!) When criticism surfaced in summer 2013, the band insisted that the charges of racism were ridiculous because none of them were racists, that their many Asian friends thought it was hilarious, and that, at its heart, the song was about sharing their love for the culture. You know what they say: If you really love something, treat it with flippant disrespect.



Item: Alton Brown's "Asian Noodles" episode of *Good Eats* takes us on an educational trip to the typical Asian American grocery store—by having its host travel through a lengthy underground tunnel that is a visual echo of the idea of "digging a hole to China." He emerges onto a set decorated with noodles, a red-and-gold Chinese scroll, and that typically "chinky" erhu music that plagues any mention of Asia in any media, ever. Also on the set is a bearded white man wearing a kimono and a sumo topknot wig who acts out the stereotype of the severe Asian American grocery store clerk. As Brown shares his vast pool of knowledge with the viewer, the clerk harasses him in fake Japanese ("Waduk! Chiyabemada!"). Clearly, knowing a lot about Asian food does not preclude one's ability to be an asshole about it anyway.

These items speak to the Westerner as cultural connoisseur and authority, a theme that has shone like a brilliant Angolan diamond in the imperialist imagination ever since Marco Polo first rushed back to Europe to show off the crazy Chinese "ice cream" that he discovered on his travels. I don't doubt that these guys love *bulgogi* and soba and want more people to enjoy them, but that kind of appreciation certainly doesn't seem to have advanced their understanding of the Asian American experience beyond damaging and objectifying generalities.

Their commonality is their insistence on appreciating a culture that exists mostly in their heads; they share a nostalgia for someone else's life. Nostalgia traps the things you love in glass jars, letting you appreciate their arrested beauty until they finally die of boredom or starvation. The sought-after object cannot move on from you or depart from the fixed impression that you have imposed upon it. After all, a thing can't be "authentic" if it's allowed the power to change. Robbed of its ability to evolve on its own, the only way such a thing can venture into the future is as an accessory worn by someone who can. The pho you had at a dirty little street stall in Saigon or the fresh goat's milk you tasted in Crete as a child may both be beautiful in and of themselves, but their value diminishes if they are allowed an ounce of banality. In order for them to make you look like a more exciting, more interesting person, they must remain firmly outside the realm of the mundane.

All of this makes the experiences of the immigrant's Americanized children particularly head scratching. We're appreciated for our usefulness in giving our foodie friends a window into the off-menu

life of our cuisines, but the interest usually stops there. When

I tell white Americans about the Maggi-and-margarine sandwiches and cold-cut rice bowls that I used to eat, they tend to wrinkle their noses and wonder aloud why I would reject my grandmother's incredible, authentic Vietnamese food for such bastardizations. What I don't tell them is, "It's because I wanted to be like you."

We live in a time where the discriminating American foodie has an ever-evolving list of essentials in their pantry: *ras el hanout*, shrimp paste, lemongrass, fresh turmeric. With a hugely expanded palate of flavors, you can experiment with these ingredients in ways that used to be possible only for Medieval kings and nobles who spent fortunes on chests of spices from the Orient. By putting leaves of cabbage kimchi on a slice of pizza, you're destroying the notion of the nation-state and unknowingly mimicking the ways in which many Korean American children took their first awkward steps into assimilation, one bite at a time, until they stopped using kimchi altogether. Over time, you grow to associate nationalities with the quaint little restaurants that you used to frequent, before they were demolished and replaced with soulless, Americanized joints. You look at a map of the world and point a finger to Mongolia. "Really good barbecue." El Salvador. "Mmm, pupusas." Vietnam. "I love pho!" When you divorce a food from its place and time, you can ignore global civil unrest and natural disasters (see: Zagat declaring Pinoy cuisine the "next great Asian food trend" this past fall as deadly floods swept through the Philippines), knowing as you do that the world's cultural products will always find safe harbor in your precious, precious mouth. **b**

Soleil Ho is a freelance writer, teacher, and MFA student living in New Orleans. Whenever she visits her grandmother, there always seems to be a big bowl of chicken curry on the table, just for her.