

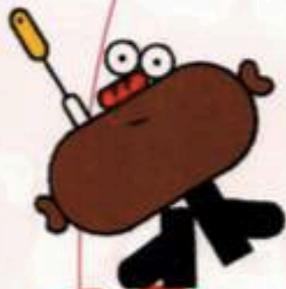
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**FOOD
& FIRE**

**THE MSG ISSUE
ISSUE 09**

**THIS ISSUE
CONTAINS
MSG**

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IT'S THE QUEST FOR THE FLAVOR SALTS

Charlene
Wang
de Chen on
her journey
towards
noodle
nirvana



I was 23 and had just moved to Bangladesh from Washington D.C. for my first overseas posting as an American diplomat. After an 18-hour journey with layovers in Hong Kong, Bangkok, and finally landing in Dhaka,

I was dropped off in my new cavernous and empty apartment in the Gulshan neighbourhood, close to the US Embassy.

Feeling motivated to explore my new neighbourhood I went to the local market and bought some dry lentils, which were for sale in abundance. Returning to my new home I thought I could make myself an easy enough local dish: lentils and rice. I boiled some water in the kitchen and added the lentils.

As the jet lag caught up with me, I lay down on the couch to rest, but when I woke up it was a different time of day: the unfamiliar apartment now a dark indigo blue. I felt disoriented. Where was I? Why was I so alone and dizzy? And why did it smell like something was burning?

I felt so far from home; the most alone I have ever felt in my life. I was hungry, and I had burned the lentils.

A few weeks later, for our first travel adventure, an American colleague Sarah and I took a weekend trip outside of Dhaka together to Sreemangal: the historic tea-producing region in northeast Bangladesh that borders Assam, India. Sreemangal is in the region of the subcontinent where the British first set up their colonial tea-growing industry in the 19th century, to compete with the Chinese-dominated global tea trade.

We took the train and stared out the window as the landscape changed from Dhaka's crowded frenzy of rickshaws, cars, buses, trucks, and jumbled tangle of power lines to endless plains, lush green rice paddies and tropical trees.

Arriving at Sreemangal station, we were met by a representative of the guesthouse who whisked us to our dusty accommodations. Sarah and I were thrilled to be outside of Dhaka and seeing the countryside of Bangladesh.

The next day, after a sunny morning spent gleefully exploring the surrounding tea fields on bicycles, Sarah and I decided to sit down on a little patch of green to eat our lunch. We parked our bikes and relaxed on the

grass, opening the lunch bags the guesthouse packed for us.

I pulled out a stainless-steel tiffin and my curiosity was piqued. Expecting some sort of lentil, or maybe egg dish, what I saw instead looked like fried noodles. They were white with some green flecks of green chilli and cilantro, and some scrambled eggs.

When I took my first bite, I thought these were the best fried noodles I had ever tasted. Even though their colour, texture, and size were foreign to me, the feeling of chewing on them was familiar, bringing back memories of eating fried noodles with my family in southern California's Chinese restaurants. Though instead of the flavours of soy sauce, scallions, and vinegars I was accustomed to, I was tasting a non-soy saltiness and slight spiciness reminiscent of chilli and cumin; familiar enough to feel comforting but different enough to be intriguing.

With each new bite, Sarah and I marvelled at how good the noodles tasted. Maybe we were just hungry. These noodles, though, were satisfying in a deep elemental way I'm not sure I'd ever experienced before. I was so far from home, and this was my first taste connection back across the 7,817 miles of Pacific Ocean to my parents and sister.

Arriving back to the guest house, I made it a point to walk over to the kitchen and tell the cook the noodles were delicious.

I'm not sure we were speaking the same language – even though I was technically speaking the Bangla I spent the last seven months learning full-time – but I'm sure my enthusiasm and fervour were communicated.

When we got back to work at the US Embassy in Dhaka, I started asking my Bangladeshi colleagues about these fried noodles, but they seemed somewhat surprised, especially my colleague Firoze – a proper, kind and restrained gentleman who wore knitted vests over his Oxford shirts. An expert on the local political scene, he also taught me about regional food delicacies.

When mangoes were in season from Rajshahi in northwest Bangladesh, Firoze

‘With each new bite, Sarah and I marvelled at how good the noodles tasted. Maybe we were just hungry. These noodles, though, were satisfying in a deep elemental way I’m not sure I’d ever experienced before’

had a box of them at his desk, which he shared with me. He was the person to introduce me to the pleasures of *dhab*, the juice from a freshly cut green young coconut, and the first to acquaint me with the nuances of free range freshly butchered *deshi* (country) chicken korma, a chicken spiced with cinnamon, cardamom, coriander seed and braised in ginger, onion, garlic and its own juices and then enriched with yogurt. Firoze insisted *deshi* chicken korma tasted superior to the urban megapolis chicken kormas in Dhaka.

In my second year at the Embassy I worked in a different section where all the American diplomatic officers were in one big group office and all our Bangladeshi co-workers were in another. We were separated by two doors, one hallway, and even though in theory we could all speak both Bangla and English, we were also all divided by different languages and lunch habits.

I loved going across the hall and chatting with Jasmin, Setu, Azahar, Mushfiq, Shaolee, Ronjon and Rina. Gradually these fun chats turned into sharing food with each other. Setu shared some cut up pineapple dressed with cut green chillies, salt, and chilli powder which reminded me of the

Mexican-style spiced and salted fruit I’d eaten in Southern California.

My curiosity and enjoyment of each of my co-worker’s home cooked dishes (for example, *shak*, a local leafy green vegetable, cooked with lentils) and our shared love of eating and merriment (*kaowa daowa*, a whole vibe with a rhyming catchphrase in Bangla) connected me to my Bangladeshi co-workers on a personal level and gave me a deeper culinary connection to Bangladesh and Bengali culture as a whole.

My co-workers were all already self-professed Chinese food enthusiasts. ‘Chinese food’ is popular throughout Bangladesh, in part because of the long history of Chinese people living in Kolkata, the Bengali cultural and political capital of the British Raj. The Chinese dishes I made were wok stir-fry dishes my Toisanese grandma in Boston taught me, centred on ingredients already in high rotation in the Bangladeshi diet: beef, shrimp, ginger, and garlic. I imported my own oyster sauce, sesame oil, and soy sauce when I moved to Dhaka and secured scallions on the local market. Co-workers noted with interest how different the Chinese food I made tasted from the Chinese food they were

used to eating in Dhaka, but either way they enjoyed and enthusiastically appreciated my lunch offering.

One day, out of the blue, Jasmin broke it to me: 'Those noodles you love, they are a throwaway snack we make for kids or if we are in a rush.'

Setu said: 'Look, you just buy a packet of Maggi ramen and you stir fry the noodles adding green chillies and cilantro.'

Packaged instant ramen was something close to a guilty pleasure treat in my Chinese American home in California but always a soup-based noodle dish, not a fried one. Maggi seasoning, a bottle of which was always in my mom's cupboard, was a familiar friend, but I had never experienced Maggi noodles before.

So I went to the local market, found some Maggi noodles and followed the directions that Setu described to me. But it failed to reach the level of supreme satisfaction and flavour saturation those noodles in the tea fields of Sreemangal did.

Another attempt to recreate the magic noodles still fell short, so I consulted my co-workers about it. They referred me to Rina who said she made the dish occasionally as a snack for her kids, and one day she made some and brought it in for me. Her noodles were so good. It was like sitting in those tea bushes again.

I cornered Rina in the office: 'What is in this? Why is this so good?'

Rina laughed at me. I mean just imagine if someone asked you how to make a PB&J sandwich and treated it like you were teaching them Fermat's last theorem.

She recounted for me: 'Well you boil the Maggi noodles, you heat some oil and onions, then green chilli, fry the noodles, add the scrambled egg, and then sprinkle some cilantro.'

'I did that. But mine don't taste like yours.'

'Well, I don't know then. That's exactly what I do.'

'OK. What if I make them and then bring them in and you tell me?'

She couldn't believe how obsessed I was. But she kept on humouring me.

So I made my batch, brought them in and she tasted them. When Rina tasted them, she agreed something was missing. That satisfying coating of

flavour on your mouth was absent. It was sort of bland even though I followed everyone's recommendations to the tee. She took a few bites more and said: 'Oh do you use tasting salt?'

'WHAT'S TASTING SALT?!' I asked in consternation.

She tried to describe and started consulting in Bangla with our colleagues. Nobody knew how to translate tasting salt for me. Is 'tasting salt' the secret ingredient in all Bangladeshi cooking? Some proprietary spice mix or trick for enhancing flavour that is passed down like a secret handshake from generation to generation amongst women in hallowed corners of the kitchen? Was I about to learn the ultimate unsaid, but always understood, secret of Bangladeshi cooking?

R

ina couldn't figure out the English translation for tasting salt and referred me to another colleague, Rownak. I quickly went to Rownak's cubicle and asked her what tasting salt was as she processed a bunch of visa files.

As she put a file back over her desk she said: 'Tasting salt? You know, monosodium glutamate.'

'You mean MSG?'

The elusive, holy grail ingredient that was missing from my attempts to recreate those heavenly fried noodles in Sreemangal was MSG?

That amazing memory of eating noodles in the tea fields, of our first taste of discovery and freedom in a new country was... the zing of MSG?! MSG!

When I left Dhaka, Jasmin organised one of the nicest gifts I have ever received: a group cookbook. On each page a Bangladeshi colleague had written out a dish they thought I would want to keep, or one they had remembered I liked eating. Sixteen years later this treasured cookbook sits in my kitchen as it has in the ten other kitchens I've cooked in since I left Dhaka. Rina did not write out the noodle dish because it would be absurd to have your contribution to a cookbook gift be the recipe for PB&J. Besides, by that point, I had already cracked the code.