

Mi Pham

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The Chick Who Was Sheltered in The Egg: A First Generation Asian American

Born after a Snake and before a Tiger, I was born in the year of the Chicken. Growing up, I had a lot of curiosity in store. “What year were you born?”, I questioned my schoolmates who were hanging upside down on the monkey bars. “I was born in 2004!”, some of the children in my grade replied. “Oh, that means you were born in the year of the Monkey!” I replied saying that due to being born in 2005, it meant that I was the year of the Chicken. The classmates asked me where I had learned that; I had learned from the Chinese zodiac. “I can swear in Chinese!” many replied holding up their pinky fingers. “Chinese!” They said pulling their eyes upwards. “Japanese!” they exclaimed pulling their eyes into horizontal slants. “Vietnamese!” they sung using their fingers to slant their eyes downwards. “Look at these!” I was quite baffled as my eyes did not look like that; nor was I Chinese. I had grown up in two separate communities, the suburban one where I lived, and the Vietnamese group that I had been a part of since an early age. Nobody in my grade looked alike; I had always wondered why my gym teacher mixed up the only three Asian girls in our grade. The Vietnamese culture that I had grown up to know and love was nothing like what people assumed about it.

“I had balut, or in Vietnamese Chung Vit Lon for breakfast.” was my answer to that day's question. My middle school classmates inquired, “What's balut?” I explained that it was fertilized duck egg, and that my family usually boiled it for about thirty minutes and then added a little salt and pepper once the top of the egg was cracked open. “Ew, that is so nasty.” some kids in the class gagged and pretended to vomit. “Who would even eat that?” others proclaimed while

making disgusted faces. I was certain that never in their lives had they ever tried balut. In fact, in traditional Vietnamese folklore, it is said to have restorative abilities to women who are about to give birth. Eating warm balut on a freezing winter day when you have just gone inside from playing just warms everything inside of you. Balut in Vietnam is sold as a street food, similar to how you would see a hotdog or taco stand in America; the dish is quite common and loved by locals. Communities in other countries such as China like to eat balut in the morning hours; contrasting to that, in Vietnam, people generally eat Balut in the later hours. My parents used to buy and fix up houses for rent. One day while we were fixing up a house downtown my grandmother came to visit the progress, as a gift she held a four pack of balut in a plastic bag. We all went to go greet her at the door, and the four of us took a break to enjoy the snack. The taste of this egg varies depending on the part you eat, and the incubation period. The egg white is often extremely hard and rubber like so many set that part aside. The egg yolk is very creamy and smooth; The duck embryo is unbelievably soft and salty. My favorite part is the “soup” that forms in the egg after boiling, it is so smooth and savory, plus is heavily influenced by the flavors of the rest of the egg.

In America, many people lose their appetite when they can recognize the part of the animal they are eating. This includes dishes such as chicken feet, pork feet, cow tongue and pig ears. During my junior year, I was tasked to present about my culture. My classmates were shown a glimpse of lion dancing for a Lunar New Year celebration, then I presented on Vietnam’s past and about the various wars and how my parents were forced to immigrate. Then we got to the food portion, “I would never eat chicken feet, yuck!” “Pork feet sound dirty, why would you eat a pig’s foot?.” I was incredibly frustrated; these dishes were delicious. Fruits and vegetables are grown from the dirt and mud as well, of course you clean your food before you eat it. Many do not know that pigs' feet are made into gelatin powder, which is used in many

soup bases and gummies. They contained so many things that were beneficial to a person's body. Both pork feet and chicken feet are made up of collagen, which is useful for the skin. Collagen can smooth out wrinkles and promote good joint health. Many beauty and skincare companies in Asia use collagen in their products. Popular media influencers, socialites and Asian idols also take and promote collagen jelly and supplements. Two of the many other foods I had shown in the presentation were beef tongue and pig ears. Beef tongue is a reoccurring meal in my household, my family utilizes it in dishes such as congee, pho, and spring rolls. My favorite way to eat beef tongue is just by itself and some fish sauce. I always remember coming home from school and seeing my mother preparing beef tongue for my siblings and I to eat, just plain cooked with fish sauce and a bowl of rice. Although the room did not say anything, it was clear on classmates' faces that this was something that they were not used to. People eat beef and pork all the time, why should a different part of the body change their view? The tongue and ears of animals have great health benefits as well- often better than the strip steak or beef chuck found in supermarkets. Eating pork ears will give you many health benefits, like better heart health. Beef tongue contains good vitamins, the Vietnamese community often serves this for the ill in hopes that they will recover sooner. Beef can be served in many several ways, from tacos to just boiled with fish sauce on the side.

Not only limited to sight, people also often judge things by their smell. One prominent one that many have heard about is durian, a stinky fruit that has been banned from many forms of transportation. Even a place in Thailand has started to breed durian that does not have that stench. It is a unique looking fruit with a spiky hard green outer shell and bright yellow pods inside with seeds within the flesh pods. People will refuse to eat it just off the smell. Durian does not smell bad; the smell is just strong and something many people are not used to. Freezing durian is what my family does; it lowers the smell without hindering the taste as much. There are

numerous ways that durian can be served, such as in popsicle form, as a smoothie, and as a tea. Another one of these flavorings that have a distinctive scent to them would be fermented shrimp paste. It is usually a brown paste with a very concentrated smell. I invited a few friends over once and they were looking through my fridge, “Hey Mimi, what's the brown looking stuff?” I explained to them that it was a shrimp paste that had been fermented, then I offered to let them smell it. “Bro, that stuff smells like the rotting ocean.” They did not understand how someone could eat it due to it being so strong. Shrimp paste is like tomato paste, you are supposed to put only a little to flavor a lot. It is used in spicy dishes to give a seafood flavor and a thin coating on the noodles. One time one of the aunties in my church group was telling the other mothers that she was shocked that her daughter enjoyed it and wanted shrimp paste in more meals.

Vietnamese parents are always so surprised that I can eat all kinds of Vietnamese foods. Many Viet immigrants have it in their mind that people born in America don't enjoy their unique foods

There is always something “different” or “strange” about foods that people have never seen before and the result of their judgment makes them miss out on new experiences. Everyone wants their food to be respected and not judged before trying the dish out. Throughout my life, the dishes that I grew up with have been looked down upon. Food brings communities together, and it will always be a part of everyone's lives. Food makes up a multitude of your memories; whether it be eating with the people that you love or getting over your feelings with your comfort food. If you do not like the food, so be it; No one is going to force you to eat it your whole life. They just ask for you to be mindful about it. Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, respect the food. Look at that.