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Fried Rice: My Taste of Culture, Home and Family

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On a cold and rainy evening, I return to my dorm after another long day of classes. Despite the drudgeries of the day, I am looking forward to my dinner: a serving of my dad's fried rice. After microwaving the dish, I eagerly bring it to my desk. As the first forkful enters my mouth, I cannot help but smile and savor the deliciousness of the dish. In a moment of glorious gustatory gratification, I experience the wonderful contrast of flavors and textures as I taste the salty and savory roast pork, the buttery and fluffy eggs, and the crisp and crunchy bean sprouts. I am inundated in a wave of flavors as the dish seemingly hits each and every one of my taste buds. And that is just the first bite. As I continue consuming the fried rice, I am struck by a feeling beyond simply the deliciousness of the food itself and begin considering the significance of the dish. For me, fried rice has developed the power to affect more than just my taste buds; it has become associated with my family and representative of my identity as a Chinese-American. With the ability to trigger emotions and represent culture and identity, certain foods are especially meaningful to us.

While fried rice holds personal meaning to me, rice itself has enormous cultural implications as well. Among the Chinese, rice is the single most indispensable food, constituting a large portion of the diet. In Chinese meals, there are two general components: *fan*, or starchy staples, and *cai*, or other dishes (Jensen and Weston 178). Because of their relative abundance and affordability compared to meat and vegetables, rice and other starchy staples are the primary components of traditional Chinese meals. *Fan* is also the Chinese word for "rice" and "meal," a synonymy indicative of rice's cultural significance in the Chinese diet (Cheung and Tan 87). Besides being served as plain white rice, rice has a myriad of other uses in Chinese cuisine, forming the base for dishes such as congee, rice noodles, and, of course, fried rice. These dishes utilize leftover rice, reflective of the Chinese tendency of not wasting food. In a country that faces food scarcity even today, the Chinese find ways to use any and all parts of foods. Chicken feet, tripe, and fish heads, considered inedible by some, are commonly eaten among the Chinese. Fried rice similarly can accommodate any number of leftover foods. Just about anything is fair game, and I have seen fried

rice that has included everything from the ordinary- peas, ham, carrots, and onions- to the unusual- bamboo shoots and dried squid.

The original reason for my attachment to my dad's fried rice was simply because of its outstanding taste. His unique combination of ingredients brought together many of my favorite things to eat. His version contains barbequed roast pork, dried Chinese sausage, shrimp, eggs, bean sprouts, and scallions, but just about any meat or vegetable can be added or substituted. Additionally, the ingredient quantities in this dish are extremely flexible allowing more or less of any particular components to be used to suit one's tastes. Give the scallions and bean sprouts a rough chop, and then dice the roast pork, sausage, and shrimp into pieces of roughly equal size. Microwave the sausage for about sixty to ninety seconds and drain the excess oil. Besides beginning the process of cooking the sausage, this step removes some of the excess fat. Add about a tablespoon of oil to a hot frying pan and scramble the eggs, setting them aside once cooked. In a large wok, add about two tablespoons of oil. Once the oil is hot, add the white scallion stems. After a minute, add the sausage and cook for about two minutes. Adding the scallion stems at this point in the cooking process flavors the oil and provides an aromatic base for the dish. The smell of the sweet scallions and smoky sausage is intoxicating and enough to whet my appetite. Next, add the roast pork and allow it to cook for about two minutes. At this point, mix in the cooked rice and turn the heat to medium. Toss the ingredients well, and then add the shrimp, bean sprouts, soy sauce, and some salt and pepper to taste. Cover the wok for about five minutes, and then mix in the chopped scallions and cooked eggs. Mix the contents well, cover the wok for another two minutes, and then remove the wok from the heat and serve immediately.

While the dish has significance in part because of its taste and flavor, fried rice holds meaning to me extending beyond its qualities as a consumable good. Fried rice has developed into a representation of my culture and identity, revealing a bit about myself and my heritage. Raised in the suburbs of northern New Jersey, I grew up in a diverse neighborhood surrounded by many different ethnic groups. In my elementary school, students were encouraged to celebrate the diversity of the student body by teaching their classmates about their own cultures through particular holidays or celebrations. While other students taught me about Israeli, African, and Jamaican cultures, it was up to me, as one of the few Chinese-Americans in my school, to teach my classmates about Chinese customs. Each year, my mom or dad would come in around the time of Chinese New Year and would serve fried rice to my classmates, oftentimes providing them with their first taste of Chinese food that was not out of a takeout container. I asked my parents to bring in fried rice because I felt

that the prevalence and importance of rice in Chinese homes made fried rice a logical representation of my heritage. Fried rice was a dish that represented who I was, demonstrating my heritage to others, and it became a part of my self-identification. Through fried rice, I felt a greater connection with my Chinese heritage, a sentiment echoed by Donna Gabbaccia, who describes food as something that “entwines intimately with much that makes a culture unique, binding taste and satiety to group loyalties” (8). Besides tasting the delicious contrast of flavors and textures in the dish, I experience my identity as a Chinese-American each time I indulge in my dad’s fried rice. Preparing and eating fried rice is a way for me to enhance my connection with my background, something which I am more conscious of because I am American-born.

In addition to representing my culture, fried rice also evokes feelings of family and home. Deborah Lupton describes food as capable of forging strong connections to memories and emotions (320). As one of my favorite and most frequently consumed childhood dishes, fried rice has become associated with my family, particularly my dad, from whom I learned this recipe. Helping my dad prepare the dish has strengthened the relationship I share with him and forged the familial association I now have with the dish. While fried rice can be found at nearly any Chinese takeout restaurant, my dad’s version is comprised of a unique combination of ingredients that makes it different from any other that I have tried. Every time I eat it, I taste not just the savory bits of roast pork and flavorful pieces of scallions, but I am also reminded of my family and home, which have become intimately tied to the dish. Served as a part of nearly all of my childhood dinners, rice has always been a ubiquitous component of my meals at home. For this reason, even plain white rice reminds me of my family, though fried rice stands out in particular because of the extra effort and care taken in its preparation. Furthermore, fried rice is always the last course of a traditional Chinese wedding banquet and whenever I eat it I am reminded of the many relatives and family friends whose weddings I have attended, an association which further strengthens the connection I have formed between fried rice and my family.

With the power to stimulate such powerful emotions, foods are capable of holding especially significant meaning to us. For me, fried rice is not merely a conglomeration of leftover rice and bits of meat thrown together haphazardly. Instead, fried rice has evolved to represent my identity and culture, and it has also come to be associated with my family and home. Despite its relative simplicity, fried rice is a dish which holds special importance to me because it has helped shape my identity and represent my culture in a way no other food has. Whenever I find myself missing my family or in need of a pick-me-up, I simply microwave myself a bowl of fried rice. One bite and I

experience not just the delicious flavors of the fried rice, but I am also flooded with the emotions which are associated with the dish. As a food capable of evoking such a powerful effect, my dad's fried rice will always be especially meaningful to me.

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