July 17, 2020

Gather. Prepare. Cook. Eat. Clean up after. A cycle most people stuck at home with some food supplies have gotten used to during the quarantine. The day is like any other, more than four months into the quarantine here in Metro Manila.

While the heat of the day simmers in the late afternoon sun, I plan for my meal. *"Cauliflower and bacon with tomato and herb pasta sauce? No, take out the cauliflower and keep the bacon. Use the last of the raw spaghetti you bought in the container."* After I take out all my ingredients, I do a quick inventory: Tomato sauce, bacon, garlic, dried basil, *Parmigiano Reggiano,* and olive oil, with salt and pepper to taste.

The prep is methodical, almost meditative. '*Chop the garlic into fine pieces and make the bacon strips into bits. Fry until slightly crispy then add the garlic to enhance the aroma. Scoop out some tomato sauce into the pan and then add some pasta water. Sprinkle some basil while the mixture is boiling. Add salt and pepper to taste. Easy does it.'*

On my bowl, it's pasta on the bottom, sauce on top, and grated cheese to finish the look and taste. A quick glance tells me that it's good to go but maybe a bit too much in one sitting, but oh well.

I make my way to the table with the bowl and a glass of wine, then I take a moment to ponder on my week and the several months that have passed.

Physically, I'm ok. But since testing in private hospitals and even the Red Cross cost around 10k right now, I can't afford to check if I'm really well or I'm asymptomatic. Sure, I had no direct contact with almost anyone, save for a grocery trip or three, but yeah. There really is no way of knowing, and if I tested positive, who would take care of my cat? The thought frightens me.

However, truth be told, I feel mentally tired with just me and the cat here at home. I'm not alright even though I get the job done sometimes but feel ineffective. To help me cope, I cook and I focus on the meals I'm creating daily, even if I might be 5 minutes off the computer screen before lunch break just to prepare my freshly cooked meal (plus eat it) to keep it within the break.

Every meal feels like a Masterclass mystery box, and I either cook something simple or something a little more complex, depending on my mood. I also reminisce about the memories of cooking with my siblings, my fiancée, and my dorm mates, along with the things I've learned from them. I also enjoy how each of my senses is used to prepare each meal, just like the pasta for tonight.

There's my Sight if my bacon is the right color I'm aiming for while sauteeing, Smell if the chopped garlic is aromatic or burning, Sound if my water is just heated or is already on that rolling boil I need, and Touch in order to check if the heat emanating from the pan is hot enough for the oil. Lastly, there is Taste, if the pasta sauce needs more pepper or salt as preferred.

Kim Lee Chua

I start enjoying my dinner while keeping our curious ginger tomcat away from it. *"Noodles are firm, sauce binds well, and with the right amount of pepper. Just the way I like it."* I tell myself while multitasking by eating, watching a youtube video of people who played computer games, and chatting with my fiancée.

After dinner, I place the dishes at the sink. A few years back, I confessed to my siblings that I do like cleaning dishes since it's a form of meditation for me. So I start washing my plates and emptying my mind. I focus on the enjoyment I feel of suds and running water on my hands, scrubbing the pan, bowl, and utensils thoroughly until they're squeaky clean.

Eventually though, like all things, I'm done and I am left to look at the city skyline from a condo I'm renting and would be the first home when I get married this year. Things are quieter now at EDSA. It is something I wasn't and still am not used to as someone who grew up in Manila.

It is quiet times like these that I am left to ponder as to what was missing in my delectable dinner. A moment passes and to sum it up in a word, *'company'*.

'I miss the company and community sharing a meal provides. I miss cooking with and for my fiancée and siblings. I miss sharing meals with loved ones and officemates. I miss the laughter, the banter, and listening to the experience of others. I miss the dates and the smile I only give my love when we've had a great meal outside. I long to write another entry into our healthy food blog about a restaurant we ate in. I miss leisurely walks with food in my hand and stolen glances that speak novels.'

It is frustrating, truth be told, that her house is only a 30-minute walk away but it feels like the opposite side of the world. I've seen her only twice in the span of four months and it will be that way for a while. *'Someday, I'll cook for you again'*. And with that, a memory surfaces, harkening back to a simpler time almost four years ago.

It was a year before I started studying law, and my girlfriend (now fiancée) helped me buy groceries and bring them to my humble studio apartment.

As thanks, I decided to cook something simple, quick, and filling for both of us. Looking at the bundle, I brought out some marble potatoes, olive oil, and dried rosemary. *'I guess some quick herbed potatoes then.'*

After I boiled the potatoes until just soft enough to be pierced effortlessly by a fork, I removed them from the water and sautéed them with olive oil and rosemary. Then I placed them on a serving plate, then utensils and two bowls for her and me.

It isn't the meal that I remember the most though; I have her face and features engraved into my mind. Her eyes lit up upon having food served. Her smile that shined more when we shared this meal in between some mundane and intellectual conversations. And most especially the peace in her countenance for the quiet afternoon of quality time. That day was perfect.

Kim Lee Chua

The memory passes by in a blink and here I am in the present with a quiet night ahead. Just me and my rescued ginger cat. I focus on her smile one more time and I whisper, "One less day until we get married this year, my love, so I won't have to eat alone anymore."

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