The Sichuan Peppercorn

And a love letter
to Chinese food

by SIERRA TRIBBETT-COLLINS

In Jonesboro, Arkansas, in the early 2000s, my hippie-dippie, West Coast transplant parents stuck out like a sore thumb—my dad with the braid, my mom with the tattoo and long denim skirts—and their diets were no exception to the rule. As a result, I grew up vegetarian until I was deemed underweight; I tried a TLT (tofu, lettuce, and tomato) before I tried a BLT; I regularly ate celery and raw broccoli as a snack (and enjoyed it); I could pronounce grains like quinoa and couscous, yet I had never tried grits or gravy.

Naturally, takeout was not a staple in our meal rotation, and Chinese food was ordered least of all. Chinese was an indulgent occasion, a paper box full of near luminescent meat coated in a sheen of grease. My dad's favorite was General Tso's chicken, which my mom tried often to replicate with tofu, and which he complained multiple times that they skimped on the broccoli. My own favorite was sesame chicken, essentially fried doughy balls with no vegetables whatsoever. As conservatism and the 2000s health craze ran hand-in-hand throughout my childhood, I started hearing everywhere that MSG, a vital ingredient in Chinese American food, caused insomnia and headaches and was generally terrible for you. This racialized discourse was nothing new—the *New England Journal of Medicine* first published a doctor's writings detailing his symptoms after eating Chinese food in 1968—but it certainly had a resurgence in the Bush era. Nicknamed "Chinese restaurant syndrome," MSG, or monosodium glutamate, became a dirty word for several years, and my parents often scanned potato chip bags and blamed my lack of sleep on whatever sodium-laced snack I ate the night before. Our brief affair with our local Chinese restaurant, Dragon City, came to an end.

Even in my adolescence, something about the fixation on MSG, and the rejection of the meals that included it, seemed strange to me. For one, as I learned several years later in life, MSG is no less healthy for you than something like salt or pepper. Any sort of seasoning used in moderation elevates a dish's flavor harmlessly; there isn't some dangerous foreign ingredient out there chipping away at your otherwise perfect health. For another, Americans were the ones who'd created a demand for this inauthentic and supposedly unhealthy version of Chinese food in the first place. Small Chinese restaurants began popping up in America during the California Gold Rush, and although they initially were operated with other Chinese immigrants in mind, the cuisine was eventually adapted to suit the taste of American customers, mainly miners and railroad workers. Today, the oyster pail—the iconic folded paper takeout box that comes to mind in reference to Chinese food—is symbolic of New York City, convenience, and being on the go; corporate bigwigs, such as the fictional lawyer Miranda Hobbes of *Sex and the City*, are often portrayed rifling through their fridges and turning up endless oyster pails. Chinese food is essential to plotlines in American media: the bottle episode of *Seinfeld* titled "The Chinese Restaurant;" the infamously racist duck dinner at the end of 1983's *A Christmas Story*; and the Corleone family gathered around the table eating takeout in the first *The Godfather*.

Even the design of Chinese restaurants in filmography is Americanized. Although your average hole-in-the-wall likely has minimalist decor in a very neutral setting, the American audience has created a need for restaurants to "look Chinese," to dine amidst golden dragons and paper lanterns and red embossed wallpaper. This is both a lingering effect of turn-of-the-century Orientalism and a genuine reflection of how Chinese restaurants once catered to American taste. A quote from a New York guidebook published in 1920 warns out-of-towners of Chinese tourist traps:

Few homegrown Chinese take nourishment in these places, because they feel kind of out of place and they hate to break in on the nice [White] people from uptown and Brooklyn. But the waiters are all Chinese, for the same reason that the walls have Chinese dragon tapestry. The lights are shrouded in fantastic shades, and the place is redolent with the perfume of fire cracker punk, which exhales a not unpleasant odor.

America, especially large and sleepless cities like New York, has tangoed with Chinese food and culture for more than a century. We love the ease of takeout, and we love our sodium and our high fructose corn syrup, and we of course love exoticism, feigned or otherwise. Why, then, do we fail to venture outside of Chinese cuisine that is familiar to us? And why do we blame our choices on those we view as outsiders, when cheap, easy, and terribly unhealthy food has always been a foundation of our country?

One of the first meals I made for myself, living on my own in my early twenties in an apartment littered with empty beer cans, was fried rice. Takeout had initially been my way of rebelling against my parents and their healthy home cooking, my way of proving to myself that I could eat whatever I wanted—food that was bad for me, at that—and not suffer consequences. I quickly learned that there were still consequences all the same: takeout is an expensive habit, generally made me feel bad (my sensitive stomach was not used to processed foods, and I was often prone to bouts of nausea), and worst of all, caused acne and bloating. So I cobbled together some frozen peas and carrots, cooked and then fried some white rice—rookie mistake, fried rice should use day-old rice—and drowned it in yum yum sauce.

It was a perfectly below-average dinner, but it was a door to a new world: it was my own cooking. My experience had consisted of frying eggs, throwing jarred premade sauce into a pot of cooked pasta, and baking cookies. It wasn't that I disliked the food I grew up on, or more importantly that I wasn't thankful for it, but this fried rice marked a form of independence, a gentle nudge out of the nest, and a reminder that my life, an only child's life with self-proclaimed helicopter parents, was still mine.

Like many young adults, I started watching cooking videos and reading recipes to gauge how capable I was of replicating them. Moving in with a partner amplified my drive to make good food, and the pandemic provided nothing but time to do it. I got pretty good at certain meals, even ones from my childhood, and most of all, I conquered my fear of cooking meat, which I'd learned from my mom; chicken, when my family did eat it, was usually overdone and dry, and red meat never appeared on the table. Now I'd found a balance between eating takeout, which I allowed myself to have from time to time without a sense of either guilt or pride, and eating the food that my partner and I cooked together, which was sometimes on the healthier side and sometimes wasn't.

As my journey continued, I found myself drawn more and more to Asian cooking. I soon discovered that Japanese and Thai curries were some of my favorite meals on the planet. I frequented the Asian markets in Little Rock, where I learned of the highly superior Kewpie mayo, kept oils such as sesame and chili as regular pantry items, and even bought a discounted Zojirushi rice cooker to perfect the art and convenience of cooking rice. I made chana masala with succulent chickpeas, aromatic drunken noodles with Thai basil, thinly sliced beef and broccoli with a thick, brown sugary glaze. One of my absolute quick and easy favorites has become fried Spam with over-easy eggs and seaweed, derived from Spam *musubi*, a staple of Hawaiian cuisine in the tradition of Japanese *onigiri*, and a recipe symbolic of the aftermath of World War II.

There was so much overlap in the ingredients of each of the recipes I tried, yet they were all so uniquely different and rich with cultural history. In accumulating my supply of Asian kitchen staples, I felt even more like I was developing my own palate: I grew alongside my childhood appreciation of tofu

and veggies, but deviated in my preference for spicy, umami, and complex flavors. I noticed, though, that most of my meals were inspired by Japanese or Thai cooking, sometimes Indian, and less often Korean or Vietnamese. I still hadn't discovered that crucial ingredient that would cement both my love for cooking and my appreciation for authentic Chinese food: the little peppercorn that would finally erase my inner bias.

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase *mouth-numbing*? A scalding sip of coffee? Novocaine after the dentist? Would you believe me if I said the experience is a pleasant one?

Nicknamed *hua jiao* or "flower pepper," Sichuan peppercorns are not actually peppers, but berries of the prickly ash tree. The tiny red fruits are responsible for an added layer of Sichuan cooking: the mouthfeel. On top of beautiful aromatics and spices, the peppercorn causes a numbing, prickly sensation almost akin to eating Pop Rocks or drinking a seltzer. According to a 2021 *Bon Appetit* article by Chala June, this is due to a chemical compound called hydroxy-alpha-sanshool, which causes "micro-vibrations across the tongue and lips that clock in at the same frequency of some power grids."

As the peppercorn works in tandem with other chilies, the numbness allows you to keep eating no matter how much the spice builds.

The Sichuan peppercorn is used in a variety of dishes, including Chongqing hot pot and buckwheat noodles, and even in preparing blood sausage throughout Bhutan, Tibet, and China. Though for this lowly American, my only experience with the peppercorn was *mapo tofu*, a dish served on a bed of white rice with ground pork (or beef), scallions, and cubes of silken tofu.

China is a huge country; Sichuan dishes that feature this peppercorn make up only a minority of what could be considered authentic Chinese food, and it can be overwhelming to know where to start. Bold and spicy Sichuan dishes are some of the most widely served in China, but many other provinces are just as well-known for their food. Cantonese dishes primarily utilize dried or preserved ingredients, such as the popular century egg, and are often lighter with more of an umami profile. Hunan cuisine is usually where hot and sour dishes get their namesake (similarly as spicy as Sichuan food but without the added numbness). Southeast China's Jiangsu province is widely known as a fertile land of fish and rice, so dishes often utilize fresh ingredients like seafood, river fish, water chestnuts, or bamboo shoots. But the immense variety in Chinese cuisine does not mean that Americans have an excuse not to explore their options. It's along the same lines as someone refusing to try Cajun food because they don't enjoy Tex-Mex. In her essay "Chinese American Food Is Its Own Great Cuisine," Deanna Ting writes:

"The more we value Chinese American food as its own cuisine, the more easily we'll understand the regional differences among all the other Chinese cuisines. One day, we'll all be able to distinguish the differences between Fujianese ban mian and a Cantonese wonton mein as easily as Americans now rattle off different Italian pasta shapes...It won't be easy, but we'll get there. "

I knew I was overdue to pursue the path to real Chinese food, to get a taste of at least one of these regional delicacies. I did not fear spice, and I especially did not fear MSG. All it took were a few brief internet rabbit holes, and I was ready to master the art of mapo tofu.

From my research, the Sichuan peppercorn was not optional. Sichuan peppercorns can be tricky to acquire in America, as they were subject to a temporary ban on Chinese citrus in order to prevent the spread of a bacterial disease called citrus canker disease. Although the ban was lifted in 2005, some exporters were still required to heat-treat the peppercorns to kill bacteria, damaging the potency of the ingredient. Higher quality peppercorns can be purchased online; I got lucky with a good batch at my local Asian grocery store. The key to determining the quality of the peppercorn is an initial smell test. A strong citrusy aroma should be emanating from the bag.

After I purchased my vacuum-sealed pack of the little, dried mouth bombs, I ground them up into a powder in my small blender at home. I then proceeded to cobble together my own bastardized version of mapo tofu. The foundation was the same as many dishes: onions, garlic, and ginger, which I sauteed in premade chili oil. Dried red chilies were chopped and added into the pan for extra heat. I did not have the other essential, non-optional ingredient, *doubanjiang*, or spicy bean sauce. At that point, I had to cross into Korean territory and substitute *gochujang*, a spicy fermented chili paste. Although this went against my quest for authenticity, the smell was already heavenly. The spicy, sweet gochujang

melded into the pork, turning it a deep scarlet color. The aromatics popped in the oil, the sound like rain hitting a roof. And the ground Sichuan peppercorn, while it let off its floral note, remained humble and unassuming, quietly aware of its importance in the dish and what was yet to come.

After adding in chicken bouillon, soy sauce, and yes, a sprinkle of that controversial MSG, I mixed together a cornstarch slurry and used it to thicken the sauce, watching it bubble. The wiggly cubes of tofu came next, carefully tossed in the sauce so as to not crumble the delicate texture. Sesame oil and a pinch of sugar gave the dish a sweet finality, and once the green onions were just wilted, the dish was ready to be topped with a last sprinkle of peppercorn powder.

> "It was everything I love in food."

It was everything I love in food: fiery hot from the chilies, savory from the pork, sweet from the gochujang and sugar, and all balanced beautifully with bites of mild white rice. The rice is not optional. It was a comforting blanket, a respite from the spice, a chance to catch your breath between mouthfuls. The tofu, soft but soaked with the sauce, provided a similar feeling. The peppercorn added an entirely new dimension to it all. My mouth buzzed and hummed with electricity on top of all the flavors. It isn't that the numbing feeling steals away your taste buds; it merely enables you to keep going, to enjoy the medley without being overwhelmed.

Most importantly, mapo tofu was unlike any meal I'd had from a Chinese restaurant in America. Despite the fact that tofu is an essential part of most authentic Chinese dishes due to its versatility, it's hard to find on many Chinese American menus; I know that my mom would have loved to order something other than veggie lo mein in the early aughts. With my own experience growing up eating tofu, I was no stranger to cooking it, but only in the way Americans often prepare it—firmly pressing out the water, cutting it into thin strips, and frying it along with some sort of peanut sauce or barbecue. Tofu gets its poor reputation in America partially because it is viewed as a meat substitute, and in our minds, nothing made out of soy will be able to replace fried chicken. In the case of mapo tofu, and many other Chinese, Japanese, and Korean dishes, tofu is accompanied alongside a source of meat and is a flavor and texture enhancer, rather than a starring protein.

Another reason mapo tofu stood out so drastically to me from Chinese American dishes was the flavor itself. Mapo tofu is complex. The meat is savory, the sauce is sweet, the peppers are spicy, and on top of it all, the Sichuan peppercorn reigns supreme in its unique mouthfeel. And even still, despite the complexity, it manages to taste comforting and familiar, reminiscent of what a family might eat on a rainy evening together. Consider the alternative you find on stereotypical local Chinese American menus: orange chicken, beef and broccoli, crab rangoons. While admittedly delicious options—I am not above any of these dishes, and Deanna Ting argues in "Chinese American Food Is Its Own Great Cuisine" that we should still embrace and respect these Westernized creations—they are a bit one-note. Meats are crispy and fried; sauces are tangy, sweet, and ideal for a picky child's palate; veggies are doused in a thick glaze of soy or teriyaki sauce. There is little to no spice. The cream cheese that oozes out of a crab rangoon is an ingredient unheard of in authentic Chinese groceries. In fact, the crab rangoon isn't remotely Chinese; it gets its roots from America's obsession with Tiki culture, running parallel with Orientalism in the 1940s and '50s.

Above all else, I was proud of the mapo tofu I made, even if it wasn't completely authentic. It represented everything I'd ever wanted in a meal: comforting tofu and rice that reminded me of my childhood, daring and forbidden components like MSG and red meat, and of course, the completely new experience of the peppercorn. I regularly make it at home now. I've played around with the ingredients, sometimes adding more or less, leaning more into the sweetness or more into the savoriness. Ground beef can be substituted, but I still prefer pork. My original recipe forgoes adding onion at the beginning since the scallions are added at the end; however, I am of the strong belief that you can tell when that foundational onion is missing in a dish.

Since I started this journey I have only had real authentic mapo tofu once, from a beloved Chinese restaurant in Little Rock called Mr. Chen's Authentic Chinese Cooking, which sadly closed in December of 2024. The experience gave me the confidence to keep tweaking my own recipe to perfection. The dish was far spicier than mine, due to the house-made chili oil that came from fresh peppers, and as a result, the sauce was a bright acidic red-orange, the color not unlike the aforementioned luminescent Chinese American meals, but less due to the grease and fructose and more due to the daring spice that not every consumer would be willing to take on.

The Sichuan peppercorn is the one ingredient with which I will never tamper. It should not be underestimated. Adding more can be too distracting to the dish; cooking it for too long can turn it bitter. Both are betrayals to the peppercorn that I have mistakenly made. Get it right and it will not only give you an entirely new culinary experience, but also provide insight into what Chinese cuisine can truly do for you. True, a piece of my heart will always belong to creamy crab rangoons and lovely battered sesame chicken, and the efforts that went into such delicious culinary fusion are not unrecognized. Even more notably, culture and food are always prone to change; after all, without the chili pepper making its way from South America to China between the Ming and Qing dynasties, Sichuan cuisine would not be what it is today. But the symbiotic relationship that authentic Sichuan food can provide for you—a spice to challenge your comfort zone, a numbness to guide you through the process, a harmony of flavors with a warm balance of plain rice—that's the kind of meal I could never give up.

Sierra Tribbett-Collins

Sierra Tribbett-Collins is a graduate student pursuing a Masters in Professional and Technical Writing at University of Arkansas Little Rock. She currently works as a graduate assistant in the University Writing Center and has always loved writing about a variety of topics including travel, food, media, and music. Born and raised in Jonesboro, Arkansas, Sierra now lives in Little Rock with her partner and two cats.