Amuse Bouche

Baked In: What memories are we making with bibingka?
By: Margot Finn

As I type this, the mix of onion, celery, and carrot we call *mirepoix* is softening on my stovetop, and sitting at the ready is a bowl full of the golden liquid strained from the chicken bones and leek tops that simmered all last night, scraps of previous meals squirreled away in the freezer in anticipation of a day much like this one. "Summer left like it owed someone money," tweeted someone cleverer than I who must live in the same hemisphere on this year's sharp and seemingly irrevocable descent into winter. My toddler has been uncharacteristically irritable and listless today, picking at her lunch and falling asleep on the couch in the middle of yet another screening of *My Neighbor Totoro*. Her older brother has come home from first grade sniffling for most of the last two weeks. He keeps testing negative for Covid, but the friend who'd planned to host a gathering of my book club tonight was not so lucky. So we're all in need of a little comfort.

I don't remember if my mother ever made chicken noodle soup from scratch, although cans of Campbell's version were a staple of our cupboard as well as Cup o'Noodles with the spongey, freeze-dried cubes of carrot and corn that stayed chewy even after being rehydrated. She definitely didn't make bone broth. If her mother or my father's mother did, I never heard about it, let alone witnessed it. Although I now think of making bone broth as among my "farm wife" practices, like saving the grease rendered from bacon and clarifying it for biscuits and pastry crust and baking yeast breads with a sourdough starter I call Ezekiel, I didn't inherit any of these habits from the actual Nebraskan farm wives I am descended from.

One of them was an excellent cook known especially for her pies, but her crusts always began with the can of Crisco my mom also kept in her pantry. The other, actually a rural electrician's wife, was a reluctant and resentful home cook. The electrician infamously put grape jelly on everything she cooked to mask its original flavor. I suppose I did inherit from my grandmothers the tendencies that made me into the kind of person who acquires the habit of saving leftover chicken bones and leek tops and uses those to brew up liquid comfort for herself and others. Both of them married controlling men with bad tempers and were responsible for most of the domestic labor in their homes, including keeping the kids from making their father angry. But a tendency to tolerate, or perhaps seek, relationships with abusive and controlling men isn't quite the same as a recipe. Or is it?

Will my children save their leftover chicken bones and simmer them? Will they learn to do so from watching me, or will they cultivate the habit after leaving home, as I did, perhaps

having inherited a tendency to try to rescue the lonely? Will a can of Campbell's or Cup o'Noodles be sufficient to evoke the steaming bowls of broth and noodles that we'll eat together tonight? Will the memory of the three of us eating chicken noodle soup in the home I've tried to make for us, after absconding from my marriage to their father, be a comfort when they are older?

Inheritance and identity are complicated enough when it comes to comforts as ubiquitous as chicken noodle soup, the most ethnically unmarked American take on the warm, savory, and usually poultry-based broth used as antidote for everything from the common cold and flu to hangovers and heartache the world over. From Greek avgolemono to Vietnamese pho, Chinese congee to "Jewish penicillin," or in France, to the supposedly *restorative* broths that give the *restaurant* its name, this is how we try to feed people in need of comfort.

During the pandemic, I started making *bibingka* with my kids, a kind of cake composed primarily of egg, coconut milk and rice flour that's traditional to…I'm googling now, because my first impulse is to say Indonesia, but no, apparently, the Philippines. Clearly, although this has become a staple in our household, something my kids adore and which may be among the first things they can prepare on their own, I know nothing about the origins of this food. I do not know how it is typically enjoyed, nor how common or unusual it is in the Philippines, whether it's usually homemade or purchased and if the latter, whether from supermarkets or bakeries or street vendors or all of the above. I don't even remember where I stumbled on the recipe I first used, but I can tell you the precise day I made it for the first time because I posted the recipe on Facebook along with a picture of the dwarf tulips then blooming in the backyard: May 03, 2020, not yet two months into global awareness of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1: Original Facebook post by the author.

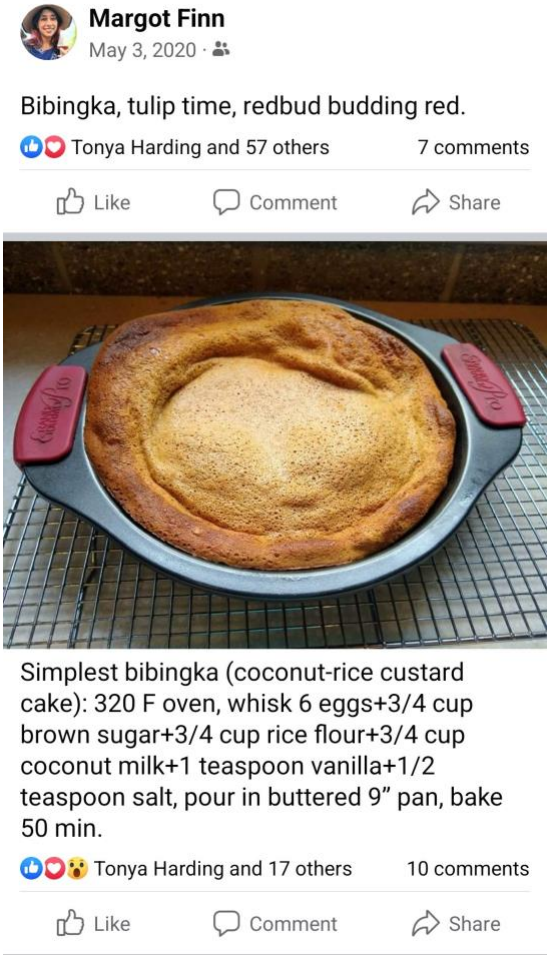

Figure 2: Facebook post with recipe by the author.

Bibingka is (are? I go back and forth over whether the collective form should take an "s") kin to the puffy oven pancakes I learned to make in high school after first encountering them under the name "Dutch baby" at a restaurant specializing in weekend brunch. I discovered a recipe in the battered copy of Betty Crocker that served as the ultimate cooking authority in our house. Especially if there were occasion for a friend to sleep over, I delighted in introducing them to the phenomenon also familiar to home bakers of popovers or Yorkshire puddings, wherein a batter with a substantial portion of egg put into a pan generously greased with butter or fatty drippings from roasted meat expands rapidly in a cup-like shape when placed in a hot oven. They emerge, poofed up over the edges of the baking tin, with edges deeply brown and the center still pale and custardy. Unlike the Dutch baby, whose batter is typically not sweetened itself but either stuffed with apples and cinnamon or piled with powdered sugar and drizzled with lemon juice after coming out of the oven, the recipe I used called for as much palm sugar, by volume, as rice flour. I've always just used brown.

Figure 3. Ingredients for bibingka. Photo by the author.

Figure 4. Browned butter. Photo by the author.

Like all oven pancakes or batter puddings or whatever you want to call this genre of baked object, bibingka deflate quickly after being removed from the oven. The brunch restaurant made a point of rushing Dutch babies out to the table while piping hot, so the diner might get to see it in its most impressive form. Just so, I always beckon my children to the oven to see our bibingka emerge. We pause *The Last Unicorn* or *The Muppet Movie* and gather to genuflect to the mysteries of eggs and chemistry and heat. The first pieces, we eat as soon

as they're cool enough to lift from the pan. The last ones we'll have for dessert that evening, or sometimes a leftover wedge or two will make their way into Monday's lunch boxes.

Figure 5. In the oven, before baking. Photo by the author.

Figure 6. After baking. Photo by the author.

I wonder sometimes what the teachers at my toddler's school make of the name she gives this item, if she ever has cause to say it. Would they dismiss the unusual word, evocative more of games like *plinko* and *tiddlywinks* than something as prosaic as a pancake, as just so much toddler pidgin, or might anyone at the school by chance recognize the name and know to associate it with a baked sweet from the Philippines? If either of my children retain sufficient delight at the way *bibingka* poof up in the oven and wish to share them with future sleepover guests or sweethearts, will anyone ask about or merely infer a false ethnic heritage, perhaps bolstered by the ambiguously ethnic features I inherited from my

third-generation Japanese-American mother? Or does the cosmopolitan array of children who attend her bilingual preschool in this university town and the multifarious backgrounds of their potential future breakfast partners render such things moot, everyone's food and features and family compositions so unpredictable a hodgepodge that they flummox any attempt to ascertain origins and identities by culinary cues?

Figure 7: Sliced bibingka . Photo by the author.

I wonder, too, what the emotional tenor of the memories the aroma of *bibingka* may conjure up for them will be. For me, it is indelibly associated with the two of them and the mornings we've spent together, just the three of us, especially since I moved out of the only home any of us had known since their births. The smell of the butter browning as the oven preheats and I jab a whisk at any stubborn clumps of brown sugar still refusing to dissolve into the batter is the bridge between the early days of pandemic, when a fracturing marriage with two young children got compressed into the space between four cinderblock walls, and the refuge I eventually sought in rented rooms painted white, with coin laundry in the basement. In the face of realizing that nothing is ever going to turn out how you hoped or planned, it's something more than mere *comfort* how reliable it is that if you crack six eggs into a bowl and whisk in ¾ cup each of coconut milk, brown sugar, and rice flour, add a glug of vanilla and generous pinch of salt, and bake it for 50 minutes at 320F in a well buttered pie pan, you will get something delicious that you and your children love to eat any time of day.

Figure 8. Eating bibingka. Photo by the author.

Perhaps for them, the mere word *bibingka* will someday evoke crisis and trauma. Far from being a sweet reminder of peaceful mornings with me, maybe it will automatically recall the conflict and sadness and fissure between their parents that defined the years when the Filipino sweet became a part of our regular weekend baking repertoire. Probably it is easier to worry about their future relationship with bibingka than it is to admit that these are obviously just worries about their future relationship with me, their understanding of their childhood and how it shaped them. How will they come to see these years of pandemic and whatever comes after, if there is an "after" to pandemic? How will they see my decision to divorce their father? What meaning will they attribute to its funny name and Filipino origin, whose lack of connection to their personal heritage is its own form of personal heritage? I beckon them to the oven. We inhale the aroma of browning butter, vanilla, and coconut. Someday that smell may be a kind of time machine, and I can only hope this kitchen remains a place that they might want to visit.

Figure 9: Author's children eating bibingka.