

Cooking evokes special family memories

Online class gives families and friends chance to relish the joys of Lunar New Year celebrations

JOANNE LEE-YOUNG

Chef Yuyina Zhang is sharing a cold poached-chicken dish that isn't a traditional Lunar New Year one.

She chose it because it reminds her of cooking with her grandmother as a child and the thrill of travelling.

"When I was little, I remember my family would drive a few hours and cross the border into Myanmar for fun," said Zhang, who grew up in China's southwestern province of Yunnan, which is also next to Laos and Vietnam.

"To me, this is actually a summer dish, not a new year one. But, all the unique flavours, it's a big part in my heart."

As she chats to participants in an online cooking class before the holiday, which starts Tuesday, she's pounding garlic, ginger, chili, cilantro and squeezing green kumquats.

Zhang chops lemon grass and recalls later being a young adult living in Beijing and how she would spend many Lunar New Year holidays hopping on a plane to escape the bitter cold weather with a sunny vacation.

"This smells like Thailand," she says with a big inhale.

It's the second year families and friends in Metro Vancouver are looking for different ways to relish the joy of cooking, gathering and feasting together that is associated with celebrating a new year.

Despite COVID-19, there are some live festivities, but mostly online events this week and over the weekend, such as those at the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden in Chinatown.

LunarFest Vancouver is featuring various events and lantern displays around the city



Event MC Manica Ng, from left, chef Yuyina Zhang and organizer Helen Yu display dishes that Zhang prepared during a Zoom cooking class in Richmond on Saturday. Zhang made Yunnan Ghost Chicken Salad and Golden Chestnut Pastry for her Zoom audience. — JEFF VINNICK FILES

to welcome the year of the tiger.

Last year, this online class featured steamed turnip cakes that many in the group had grown up eating.

The idea this year was to find something that evokes the importance of family tradition and reunion, but also has a sense of discovery.

"People miss travelling, and doing more things," said Helen Yu, a marketing executive, who started EverythingGoesVirtual.com and organized the charity event.

Zhang hasn't been to her hometown in Yunnan for three years. She spent the first three months of the pandemic in solo quarantine.

"I would cook for myself five or eight times a day; I didn't have anyone to talk to," she said. "Other people had family here. It was really tough."

That's when she started reinterpreting her grandmother's Yunnan Ghost Chicken Salad dish, which has won local and national awards with its pickled papaya and fresh mango.

"It's not the dish itself; it's really the time you spend with your family," said Zhang.

One of the best parts of the online session, she said, was that "through the cooking, we got to talk about, what's your

family's tradition? And what's your plan for the new year? What will you serve?"

There are many different answers, said participant Susan Chow, who recently led a discussion about Lunar New Year "food across generations" for alumni at the University of B.C. Her family left Asia in the 1940s and '50s and while her maternal side spent three generations in Mexico, her father's side was in Trinidad before landing in Canada in the '60s.

"My family uses a tortilla press" to flatten the dough for making dumplings, said Chow. "My grandfather said, 'Why not squish it in one go?'"

The other side of the family in Trinidad, meanwhile, puréed a locally available sweet potato and mixed it into the dumpling dough.

"They adapted," Chow said. "They were so far away from home."

This concept of being open to modifying the way things are done and accepting shifts in traditions is something Vancouver lawyer Jim Wu thought about when he was thinking of what dish he wanted to feature.

This weekend, he's hosting an online Lunar New Year event for the Federation of Asian Canadian Lawyers where he'll be showing other

lawyers, law students and their friends and family how to make Hainanese chicken with three dipping sauces. It's a dish that was created by migrants from China to places such as Singapore and it represents being open to new methods of cooking, said Wu.

"When you're done the chicken, you actually put it in a bowl of cold water and if there's anything about (traditional) Chinese cooking, it's that you don't use ice and cold water," he said. "So, there are these important methods and a global component and it speaks to evolving culture."

jlee-young@postmedia.com



Canada's premium source for cannabis news & culture

Grow your knowledge. From food, money and culture to health, fitness and beauty, The GrowthOp covers it all.

FOLLOW US @TheGrowthOp [f](#) [t](#) [i](#)

THE GrowthOp
TheGrowthOp.com