

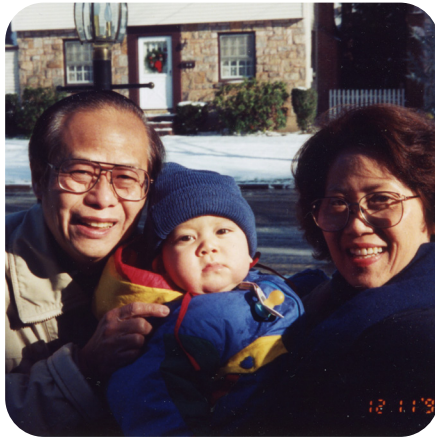
# Food as Care

*Eight Recipes from Bangkok to Brooklyn*



A Cookbook by  
**Daniel Pravit Fethke**

*For Ta & Yai-Yai*



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# Introduction:

## Food As Care Across Generations

I am a child of immigrants who grew up thinking I was white. I was raised in the commuter-driven exurbs of New York's Hudson Valley, always within orbit of the Big City. My mother from Bangkok, my father from France/Germany-by-way-of-Ohio, our family lived sheltered within a majority-white hamlet whose biggest cultural attraction to this day remains an outlet mall the size of an airport. I went to church every Sunday, played street hockey in the driveway with my white neighbors, and devoted myself to scholastic success in French language studies—the closest thing that I felt growing up connected me to any kind of ethnic heritage. Like many Mixed Race Asian Americans, I connected more with the non-Asian side of my identity because my default context from the beginning was white America. It was only after I left the bubble of the 'burbs' that I realized what I had been missing all along: a lineage of incredible food histories that laid the foundation for this humble cookbook, the gastronomical narrative of my upbringing.

Food was always the one thing that set our family apart from the rest of our neighbors Upstate. As soon as I was born, my *Yai-Yai* (*Yai* means maternal grandmother, the doubling a remnant of childhood naming ceremonies) and *Ta* (maternal grandfather) would deliver care packages of delicious Thai food to our childhood home. Sometimes, they would drive up from The City to deliver lovingly crafted steamed pork dumplings and fresh *ba mii* (Hong Kong-style wonton noodles) tossed in Maggi sauce—food that my childhood friends would gawk at while simultaneously helping themselves to seconds. Other times, my brother and I would be driven down to their apartment off East 25th Street, where we would watch Cartoon Network and gorge ourselves on chicken drumsticks and lovingly sliced sweet mangos. Food was (and still is) one of the many ways *Yai-Yai* and *Ta* expressed their love for their family, a practice that was transmitted across generations to nourish who I am today. Quietly, determinedly, intuitively, my family taught me that food is care: through the hand-written notes left on Pyrex care-packages; through the endless amounts of snacks and small plates that warm up a family gathering; through the love of

asking “have you eaten yet?” as soon as I walk in the door. I am eternally indebted to my family for teaching me about these processes of care, and I seek to memorialize this legacy with the art that I make today, starting with this cookbook.

*A family portrait  
feat. my mom's side  
of the family plus  
my dad (c. 2001)*



Structurally, this cookbook contains recipes that relate (with varying degrees of emotionality, metaphor, and poetry) to different phases of my personal creative development. In a literal sense, each recipe directly corresponds to a chronology of food that has shaped—both gastronomically as well as philosophically—who I am today. In a poetic sense, these recipes are my best attempt at a self-portrait that I have ever undertaken, for they represent the sum of my experiences as a Mixed-Race child of multiple diasporas living in precarious times. Some of them are adapted from experiences cooking alongside family and friends, while others are the results of my own trials and travails with the messiness of cooking. Many of these dishes were fine-tuned during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic while I was sheltering at home in Brooklyn. Cooking was a way for us to pass the time together, and I discovered an inherent narrativity in the food that I make that transcends the confines of my apartment’s kitchen. They are all working recipes, and I invite you dear reader not only to cook with them but moreover to think of your own recipes that define the contours of your gastronomical self-portrait.

***Daniel Pravit Fethke, April 2023***

## A Note on Romanized Thai

Throughout the text, I will use romanized Thai words in *italics*, followed by the English translation in parentheses. As a non-Thai speaker, I do my best to use the Royal Thai General System of Transcription (RTGST)—a system used by the Royal Institute of Thailand. The method is flawed from the outset, as there is no standardized way to denote any of Thai's five tones into the limited roman alphabet. A discussion of the soft-power colonial politics of Thailand's modernization movement, with which the RTGST is undoubtedly entangled, is beyond the scope of this small text. Nonetheless, this acknowledgment represents a small protest against the inherent elisions implicit in the process of romanization.

I do this not only to foreground the Thai-ness of much of the ingredients and methodologies of the food that I grew up eating, but also to (at least semantically) relegate the English language to the realm of the parenthetical—a move that, however stubborn, represents my attempt to push back at the linguistic hierarchies that resulted in my being unable to speak Thai in the first place. Also a child of immigrants, my mother spoke English at home in New York City, so much so that she temporarily lost her own ability to speak Thai. The reasons for why my family decided to overshadow their home language are entangled in politics of American immigration, Western exceptionalism, and the weight placed on families in the diaspora to assimilate. The realities of this linguistic erasure are frustrating at best, and have affected my own sense of self when I am placed in a Thai context. However, I hope that my messy, imperfect use of romanized Thai words can serve as a consistent reminder of the power that language holds over us, in speech and in text.