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Filet-O-Comfort

My immigrant family made an American fast-food staple their own.

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During most summers of my childhood, my family took road trip vacations from Houston to other cities in Texas. The long trips stuffed into a car with my family were something I suffered through for one reason: the simple reward of eating at McDonald's. Along the miles of highway, I'd look forward to that beacon of American fast food, those Golden Arches. Eating there was a rare outing for an immigrant family like mine, and I savored it.

When we stopped at McDonald's for lunch, my mom ordered the same thing for each of us: the Filet-O-Fish. She would purchase precisely three value meals and two additional sandwiches (a calculation meant to maximize savings): three Filet-O-Fish meals, plus two Filet-O-Fish sandwiches. Sitting in those plastic booths, my parents, two siblings, and I shared the drinks and fries.

By the time I hit my teenage years, I found this road trip tradition terribly embarrassing. When you're one of the few of your kind in a place, the burden of representation weighs heavily — at least it did for me. Cashiers and other customers never gave me any reason to believe they were judging us, but still, the optics of a whole family of Asians eating the exact same thing bothered me. I

took to asking my mom to order something different for me, like the Quarter Pounder with Cheese, but secretly I preferred the Filet-O-Fish.

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The Filet-O-Fish was developed by Lou Groen, a struggling Ohio franchise owner who opened the first McDonald's in the Cincinnati area in 1959. His restaurant was located in a heavily Catholic neighborhood and business was tough, particularly on Fridays during Lent when Catholics abstained from meat. Noticing that a competitor offered a fish sandwich,

Groen took the hint and got to work creating his own.

In 1961, he brought his fish sandwich idea — a patty of battered halibut with a slice of cheese between two buns — to corporate, but McDonald's founder Ray Kroc was not impressed. He didn't want his restaurants to stink of fish. Besides, he had his own meatless concoction: a sandwich with a slice of grilled pineapple and cheese that he named the Hula Burger. But Kroc was open to compromise. So, on Good Friday 1962, the two restaurateurs engaged in a sales battle at select locations. Groen won by a landslide (350 to 6) and in 1963, the Filet-O-Fish made its official debut on the menu.

While it's probably safe to say that Groen didn't have Asian immigrants in mind when he developed his fish sandwich, its fishiness appealed to my parents, who hail from China's coastal provinces. Eating meat was a luxury in my parents' youth. To the Cantonese palate rich in seafood, the Filet-O-Fish was familiar in substance, though American in form. My mom regarded hamburgers with suspicion, but she trusted fish.

"I don't know what's inside the ground beef," my mom explains now. "They can put skin, bones, all kinds of stuff. But the fish filet, they cannot be fake. They have to be a whole piece of fish." Indeed, today's Filet-O-Fish is made from Atlantic-Pollock.

My parents ate the food that they knew, but as the American-born eldest child of an immigrant family, I didn't want to eat Chinese food every day. I was much more interested in Tex-Mex, Italian, Indian — anything so long as it wasn't Chinese. And so to me, the McFish, as I like to call it, is a marvel: a boneless, perfectly square patty of fish that my entire family could enjoy. I was used to — and fearful of — fish prepared the Cantonese way: steamed whole with ginger and scallions, eyes turned to cloudy white stones, and laced with tiny fish bones which I dreaded. Whenever my mom prepared fish at home I was always the last one left eating at the dinner table, where I would methodically chew each bite into

cud, afraid of choking to death on the one fish bone that might slip through the cracks.

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The McFish's consistency causes me no such anxiety. When I open the cardboard box and see the plush bun and melted cheese corners, I am comforted. This sanitized square-shaped slab of breaded fish meat is the same every time. The steamed bun is always perfectly round. At 380

calories, it comes with a generous dab of tartar sauce, pickled relish, and a half slice of processed American cheese. (Only recently did I realize that the cheese portion is only a half slice. I felt simultaneously conned and impressed that McDonald's had gotten away with this illusion of maximal cheese coverage for so long.)

Lunch at grade school was another refuge from the Cantonese cuisine of my childhood; and the Filet-O-Fish fills me with nostalgia for the fish we were served on Fridays. The school lunch included a carton of milk and cost 95 cents. I remember giving the cashier a dollar and getting a nickel back. The fish came in fried rectangle form. Inside, magically, it also had no bones. Instead, there was cheese, and I loved cheese. There's no cheese in Chinese food.

By the time I was in high school, my family's palate had expanded. The analogy of America as a melting pot doesn't seem quite right to me, but it is a buffet of sorts with cultures side by side. The longer my parents lived in America, the more they tried other foods. They embraced the steakhouse with a salad bar and soft serve ice cream from a machine. At home we started to have taco nights and quesadillas, which mom called "chile tortillas." On Fridays, dad cooked spaghetti and I covered my serving with a hefty pile of grated Parmesan cheese from the can. Sometimes, on weekends, we even ordered pizza for pick up. Over time, the Filet-O-Fish, though still a treat reserved for road trips, became just one of the things our family liked to eat.

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I enjoyed my most recent Filet-O-Fish last month at a McDonald's near a university. It had touch screen kiosks that took your order, electrical outlets at every table, and employees in hip black uniforms. The printed wall décor was a faux mural that spelled out "LOVE" in letters made out of drawings of food. It was

much fancier than any McDonald's of my youth, but the food was unchanged. I ordered one Filet-O-Fish meal and one extra sandwich from the kiosk for my partner and me.

We shared the drink and fries.

Melissa Hung is a writer and journalist. Her essays and reported stories have appeared in NPR, Vogue, and Catapult. A native Texan, she lives in California. Find her on Twitter: @fluffysharp

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