

Fed up with Pompous Culinary Posers

Muses Yip calls out the *#stayathomechefs* poisoning our social media feeds -
and our stomachs

We're all stuck inside these days ever since the outbreak of COVID-19. Trapped and bored at home with no more elaborate Instagram photo shoots to plan, how to pass the time? Suddenly, *#chefs* are popping up on social media, showing off their unbeatable recipes, filming the slicing, pickling and frying.

Stirrer is *ding ding* in a glass; ice is *ting ting* in a glass; milk is *gur gur* in a glass. And *voila* – here comes my dazzling dalgona coffee! And here comes the outbreak of a coronavirus social media craze.



The hottest trend on the Gram:
400 stirs dalgona coffee

Now, anyone with a smartphone can become Gordon Ramsay on their own web pages. My friends are apprentices of those online “Michelin chefs”, obsessed with random recipes which simply involve a lot of stirring – 400 or even 1000 times.

Frankly speaking, I'm fed up with all the *#400 dalgona coffee* or *#1000 soufflé omelet* Instagram feeds. I wonder whether the real Gordon Ramsay would yell to them, “My gran could do better! And she's dead!”

Not being mean to these *#chefs*, but we must admit that our grannies really do cook better than us. The Boomer generation has been trained to slice, stir, and fry since they were small, and they work their fingers to the bone so as to please all the preferences of their picky family. There's a great chef living under the same roof - her cooking skills and recipes are as firm as a vanilla butter cake. So why do people still choose an instructor from the other side of the earth?

Maybe it is because these *#chefs* are cooking for their cameras. They are proudly following these vain *#barista* YouTubers to whip up trophy-like clouds of milk with pillows of caramel-color whipped coffee cream on top. But do they know what they are making, exactly?

Actually, dalgona coffee originated in Macau. Hon Kee Café, located in the Lai Chi Yun Village, serves a special coffee mixed by hand 400 times. Then, a miracle happened when the young hunky Korean actor Jung Il-woo from the show “Stars' Top Recipe at Fun-Staurant” visited this small shop. After tasting the spongy cloud of coffee, he said it reminded him of dalgona, a popular honeycomb toffee snack from the 70's and 80's. Koreans then brought it back to their country and infused it with a nostalgic, retro meaning. After the pop idol posted

“Dalgona Coffee” instructions on his Instagram, the trend went viral, in Korea and beyond.

Indeed, few of those who have jumped on the dalgona coffee bandwagon truly appreciate its significance. Driven by social media, they cook for the camera rather than the gods of the stomach. While stuck at home in the kitchen, stirring up this instant coffee may be only way to prove themselves as hipsters.



Cooking for the stomach, or the camera?

The media paradise on our little screens is eroding the savor of cooking and food. Rather than an aged and full-bodied red wine, the 21st century is being served a bottle of grape juice. I bet you must have watched one or more video clips on ‘Tasty’. This well-known social media channel turns recipes into something to spend a minute of the eyeball on, with the punctuation of *oohs*- and *ahhs*-. But they are concealing the detailed culinary skills and knowledge behind a simplified cooking façade. You’ll never understand how pork jowl needs to be fried until it becomes crispy for carbonara, or how much energy is needed when rolling dough, from any of their digital content.

“Cooking is an art, but you eat it too.”

Marcella Hazan (1924-2013)

Perhaps the Internet influencer is too young. They define cooking as a ‘show’. They haven’t lived through a period when ‘cooking as an art’ was on everyone’s lips, back in the 20th century. In fact, cooking in Chinese culture has a different meaning altogether.

Traditional Chinese conceptualise cooking as *kung fu*, a discipline or skill achieved through hard work and practice. This martial art embodies the importance of the foundation in Chinese culture. Every solid footing of kung fu requires a lengthy time for martial artists to consolidate. This kung fu principle applies whether you are a martial artist, an artist, or a cook.

For a chef, time and effort are the key to honing your skills to perfection. The longer you delve into cooking, the better you will be at controlling the heat, adding the right spices and flavourings, and finessing a perfect delicacy. No thanks to the Internet, gastronomy has devolved into a cooking culture that’s superficial and tacky.

While my family’s not a fan of the Dreamworks film *Kung Fu Panda*, we really value the kung fu behind every dish we eat. It’s never enough to only satisfy our stomachs with food; it also must please our tongues. The same meal, cooked by different family members, pleases our palates with different levels of kung fu.

Take for example, 炒菜 (chao cai, or stir-fried vegetables): my mom cooks a mild dish with her light technique, whereas my uncle controls the heat well and the aroma is appetizing. Eating my mom’s veggies is like reading an academic essay. Meanwhile, my uncle opens up a chapter of an exciting novel every time he steps into the kitchen. To be honest, it was my granny who cooked the best meal in the house, because she practiced her kung fu every day.

Sustaining this kung fu day-by-day is number one on our grannies' to-do lists. Our old and strong ladies strive to fill every dish with the finest kung fu, fueling our desire for homecoming to devour the traditional food with the family.

So, instead of adding another viral cooking video onto a YouTube playlist, a recipe handed from our grannies should be first in our collection. A family recipe is more than just a piece of paper to inherit. It requires the active participation of the next generation.

In my family, 粽子(zongzi) would be a good example. When my grandmother died, not a single note was left to explain how to pack the sticky, soft rice into the earthy leaves. But her lifelong demonstrations of preparing this Dragon Boat Festival gift to her children makes it her valuable legacy. My mom was the lucky one to inherit this family treasure, because she alone accompanied her mother to practice preparing it every June. She is now the precious chef of our home, creating 粽子 informed by her past observations and experience. Learning hands-on from our mothers is only way to sustain this unique flavor, a flavor which reminds us of home.



粽子(zongzi): a family treasure

Cooking does more than just satisfy our cameras, more than satisfy our stomachs. To me, cooking has its roots in a deeper and more profound significance. Cooking is a call from home. Our grannies and moms are cooking with a longing for their children's return, hoping to serve them their favorite food, which is infused with their warmth and love.

But now, here you are, lying on the bed, having a virtual cooking experience with the '1000 times soufflé omelet' video uploaded by *Bon Appétit*. Please enjoy a virtual taste!

The Internet has pushed the pedal to the metal, fading out the uniqueness and story behind home foods and even traditional foods. If we no longer treasure the essence of cooking and our home-made meals, they may gradually fade out and be replaced by these ridiculous trends. In the worst-case scenario - a world dominated by manufactured foods - the taste of all traditional food may be lost. One day, we may only get a taste of freshness by saying 'Feed me' to an extraterrestrial.

Next time you're following a #nottrendy Instagram video to create some pseudo-fancy dish, remember – you're just a sheep following the herd. Why not be smart and explore the history and heritage of the food? Become more conscious of the story behind it. Learn how to cook those cherished family dishes with your masterful home chef.

Seize the moment and become a *real* hipster in the gastronomy field!