

Wives' Tales of Gai Lan

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When I was in Pre-K, my mother would tuck a fresh green scallion, curled up in a clear plastic bag, into the front pocket of my blue backpack. I remember the embarrassment that hit me as I unzipped my little bag in class. "I'll bet nobody else carries a vegetable with their pencils." I also remember her saying "this scallion (yerng chong) will make you smart (chong ming) because they sound similar.

I grew up in southern Brooklyn with my lower middle-class Chinese parents and younger brother, two houses from my elementary school. Our neighbors were either Pakistani, Russian, Orthodox Jewish, Spanish, or Italian. Before dinnertime, the living room phone would ring at 5 p.m. and my father's stern croaky voice on the other end

would request needed groceries. When I relayed my mother's "Mai di choi la (just buy some vegetables)," he would always come home with a wrinkled red bag of slender green gai lan (chinese broccoli) an hour later.

At the heart of my mom's gai lan was a salty, savory dressing. Though other families use oyster sauce and sesame oil, we mix soy sauce and vegetable oil - staples in every Chinese kitchen cabinet. Mother fried finely minced garlic and chopped scallions in oil first for one minute, then grimaced at crackling fireworks of dark brown soy sauce as the liquid cascaded from her extended arm into the sizzling steel saucepan. Next, she'd drizzle the glistening bubbling goo over a stack of blanched gai lan, with deep rich green stems cooked tender-crisp, that I'd snipped into quarters with a pair of long scissors with cerulean handles - the same pair which she'd cut out Chinese newspaper clippings.

While my mother and I stood in the kitchen, she blamed herself for not eating enough milk and eggs when she was pregnant with me, so I could have a lighter complexion like her own. Instead, she noshed soy sauce and potatoes, thus making my skin caramel colored with tiny beige spots people often mistaken for goosebumps.

Once the gai lan was ready, she'd yell "Sik fahn lah! (eat dinner!)," as she lay the pool of leafy stalks on a 2-foot-tall fold-up table covered with a square red cloth. We got it for free for her family day care and she cleaned it every night. At my house, gai lan was often accompanied by Cantonese-style steamed fish with sliced ginger, or stir-fried wood ears and homegrown fuzzy melons, alongside white rice and soup. Soups typically included goji berries, Chinese dates, ginger, Shiitake mushrooms, lotus root, pork, chicken stock, white cloud ears, polygonatum odoratum, longan, and dried lotus seeds, lily flowers, scallops or Chinese yam.

It was exactly the same every time we ate gailan. If I close my eyes, I can see my baby chopsticks pinch out garlic pieces from my bowl and dropped off on my mother's mound

of white rice. She'd scold me "garlic is good for your guts," and munch her way into stinky breathland. I can feel my tongue glide the soy sauce-flavored porcelain bowl to salvage any rice grains still clinging to the blue-floral-embellished concave, out of superstition my husband would have a pimpled face.

Sadly, I've been too busy to sit down for a family meal since I started working in college. Meals nowadays meant one to two apples and a peanut butter sandwich for breakfast before 8 a.m. practice, while everyone was still snoozing. On my own, I'd be snacking on trail mix throughout the day, and eating leftovers at 11 p.m. from my single bowl after everyone has gone to bed.

Thankfully for the few holiday breaks or big snowstorms, my family would have the whole day to clean and eat together at our fold-up table. Those are the days I'd unpack my digital camera and capture such fleeting moments of wooden chopsticks clinking against four porcelain bowls atop a square red cloth.

Gai Lan with Soy Sauce

Serves 4 · 15 minutes

1 bunch gai lan (Chinese broccoli)

1 scallion, chopped finely

3 garlic cloves, minced finely

1 tbsp oil

1 tbsp soy sauce

Step 1 Wash and drain gai lan. Blanch in boiling water for 3 minutes.

Step 2 Combine oil, garlic, scallions, soy sauce in a small saucepan.

Step 3 Arrange gai lan on plate and drizzle sauce. Enjoy!