

Food and Family: Cultivating Kinship through Cooking in Times of Uncertainty

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Attending university abroad can be a transformative experience for students. It can open social, cultural, and educational opportunities for students and allow them to discover new places, people, and ways of life. However, it can also be a challenging experience; students can feel isolated and adrift as ‘foreigners’ in a new country without friends or family nearby. In Europe, for so-called ‘third country nationals’ and non-European students, this experience can be particularly unsettling (Smith & Khawaj 2011). COVID-19 and the associated restrictions on socializing and travel made it even more prominent. Distanced from existing kin connections and unable to return home or meet classmates in person, many international students experienced deep feelings of disconnect and loneliness during this period (Hawley et al., 2021).

However, for some international students at the University of Luxembourg, coming together around food became a powerful way to give and receive care and create new belongings. In October 2021, I¹ was an MA student at the University of Luxembourg, looking for a topic for my MA thesis. I was interested in food and identity and asked Samu², a friend and fellow student, if we could cook together; seeing how others cook and talk about cooking, I thought, might offer a starting point for my research.

This request became the foundation for a series of group meals and cooking sessions among international students at the University of Luxembourg. I extended invitations to 16 students living in the student residences across different programs, identities, and backgrounds, hoping to get a sense of diverse student experiences. All the invitees agreed to participate, and we embarked on a culinary journey of 12 cooking sessions from October 2021 to February 2022. During each session, at least one student suggested a dish to prepare, walked me and the others through the preparation, and then ate together. Most sessions involved multiple students preparing multiple dishes, sometimes, the participants and I went grocery shopping together before cooking, and on some occasions, we had the opportunity to cook for fellow students who were ill. Throughout these sessions, I maintained detailed field notes, took photographs, and audio-recorded my participants’ narratives whenever possible.

As an ‘insider’ – a fellow international student living in the student residences – I had much in common with my interlocutors, which provided a solid ground to build trust relations (O’Reilly,

2009). Over time, as we shared time and food practices, we became close, and the relationships I describe in this paper involved not only my interlocutors but also myself. At the same time, as an ethnographer, I sought to learn from my interlocutors (Miller, 2017), maintain a critical eye and look at the field and my field notes with an ethnographic orientation (Madden, 2010). My discussions ‘out of the field’ with Anastasia (my thesis supervisor and second author of this article) further helped me critically reflect on and theorize the deeply relational cooking process together. Thus, drawing on my short-term ethnographic fieldwork (Pink & Morgan 2013), in this article, I explore the ways a group of international students cultivated non-biocentric kinship relations through the shared substance and sensory experience of cooking and eating.

In what follows, I take kinship as a process of distinguishing those for whom we care and who care for us (Edwards & Strathern 2000), a collective making and caring for each other rather than a biological inheritance (Haraway 2016), and a being through feeling collectively (Ahmed 2004). Feminist theorists, new materialists, and others have convincingly undone the ties between reproduction and kinship (c.f. Barad 2007, Weston 1994), overturning earlier biocentric understandings of kin relations that rested on biogenetic linkages. Other anthropologists have also begun highlighting how non-bodily substances support kin-making beyond certain substances, like blood and breastmilk, which are often mobilized to represent biologized linkages (c.f. Wright 2020). Inspired by these ways of thinking about kinship and kin-making, I argue that the process of cooking, sensing, caring, and eating together enabled the emergence of kin relations amongst my student interlocutors, including myself.

Learning to Cook

One evening, Julee invited me and another student, Mar, to bake cookies in her room in the student residences. As she prepared the dough, she explained:

When I was small, my sister and I made them [Christmas cookies] with my grandpa, so this is my grandpa’s recipe...he probably made them better than me because when we made them together, he made the cookie dough, and my sister and I did the shapes.

This culinary practice was framed as something done with family, and as heritage, something passed down by family. At that moment, Julee took on her grandfather’s role by showing Mar and me, positioned as novices and inheritors of this *savoir-faire*, how to prepare the dough and involved us in cutting the shapes, just as her grandfather did when she was a child.

Participants often discussed and enacted cooking as a learning process and specific dishes as family heritage. As I joined my peers in the kitchen, many described the process of learning to prepare dishes from expert family members in childhood. These experiences were not only

explanatory but participatory; as student Carlos explained, “there was not a time when my mom said to me, do it like this...It was more like I learned the dish by helping my mom”.

By teaching each other such dishes, we shared life stories and assumed the role of knowledge carriers responsible for passing on heritage. In doing so, we transferred past family dynamics to the present, cultivating a sense of and enfolding each other into family traditions and relations. Cooking was thus both a social activity that took place amongst loved ones and a space of social (re)production.

Getting Close

As we shopped, cooked, learned from each other, and ate, my interlocutors and I were brought into close bodily and emotional proximity. Shopping for ingredients and cooking together required collective thinking, negotiation, and cooperation. Creating dishes like Mat’s Vietnamese summer rolls or Felipe’s *pollo tika* required multiple hands working to roll, chop, or stir. Multiple sensory apparatuses look, taste, and smell the food, culminating in multiple bodies consuming these collectively prepared meals. And around small kitchen tables, we served each other from shared platters and sat close together. We ate what each other had prepared, ingesting food substances with long familial histories.

While cooking, we shared our experiences. For my participants and I, it seemed that the process of working together and with the materials of the kitchen opened up space for and evoked talk about our childhood memories, parents, grandparents, and siblings, our home countries, our worries related to COVID-19, our preferences, and desires.

Many found these exchanges particularly impactful during the isolating experience of the COVID-19 lockdown. Some even noted that our cooking sessions were the first time since the pandemic started that they shared the table with more than one person, making these experiences very meaningful. Through such intimate matter(s), we built new bonds, attachments, and meanings by coming closer together and through our experiences as students from different lands. Meals became moments in which to share stories, physical space, and substances.

Taking Care

Finally, we experienced cooking and sharing food as acts of care. Many of us recalled how our families, especially mothers or grandparents, prepared food for relatives and us as children as expressions of love. Inviting family over to eat, putting significant effort into cooking, preparing a great variety or quantity of food, or offering dishes with specific properties when a loved one was unwell were all discussed as acts of familial care that students recalled from childhood, which they then recreated in Luxembourg.

We cooked in abundance and set beautiful dining-scapes with candles and music, composing an inviting atmosphere. We sent each other home with leftovers, which many described as a maternal and loving act. Selected dishes were prepared, such as: Mar's *guǒ rén bō cài*, a favorite dish of his mother's that he often ate as a child but had not prepared since moving to Luxembourg; or Andres' *arroz con pollo guisado*, a dish his grandmother made for family gatherings, and which represented comfort for him. When fellow students felt ill, we cooked dishes we remembered our mothers making when we were sick as children.

Such foods and food practices were central acts of kin-making my interlocutors and I recalled from our childhoods and then reproduced in Luxembourg, cultivating new relations of reciprocal care and responsibility. Serving someone a meal was not merely a gift but "a way of showing that I care about them...that I love them and when someone cooks for me, I feel this, more than a gift," as student Mara explained.

Conclusion

When studying abroad during university, far from family, in a new place where nothing seems familiar, international students can feel lost. For many students studying during COVID-19, these challenges were only amplified. But for this group of international students at the University of Luxembourg, a culinary journey enabled us to (re)create kinship connections through food's material, sensory, and bodily experience.

We became familiar with each other in cooking and eating together (Yates-Doerr 2015: 314), and relations of care, responsibility, and affection emerged. We connected across national origins, ethnic identities, and linguistic repertoires. Where the aspirations associated with transnational education and migration motivated my interlocutors and me to leave behind childhood homes and kin, food and cooking were a means to transport and (re)produce these in a new space and time.

As anthropologists begin to attend to non-bodily kinship substances and non-biocentric kin, food, as a powerful means to cultivate kin relations across differences, deserves more significant focus. We further suggest that this has implications for the possibilities of food and cooking to open spaces for new conversations and relations amongst social actors in migration contexts.

Notes

¹ The 'I' here represents Stephania, the first author of this article. Please note that the entire text is written in the first person from Stephania's perspective. Any references to the second author will use her name (Anastasia), or the third person.

² All participant names are pseudonyms.

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