

Although most of my childhood memories are ones I want to forget, the fondest moments that have softened my soul and shaped my spirit are of helping my grandma cook. More specifically, helping her make kimchi.

She'd have to make batches large enough to feed four families that would (hopefully) last until her next visit. So to ease the load, she'd recruit her nine grandchildren for tedious tasks, like peeling cloves of garlic or scratching an itch for her, since her own children would be out busy working.

Before she stored the kimchi away to properly ferment, my grandma would never forget to feed each of us a compact kid-sized bite, going down the line - oldest to youngest. She'd ask us what we thought--as if our opinion really mattered--and every time, we'd hastily nod, declare perfection, and eagerly open our mouths for another bite.

Although all eight of us were born in the states, the kids grew up speaking Korean. Learning our mother tongue first, Korean was the language of comfort, and the only language spoken by the woman who left her home country to help take care of her children, by taking care of *their* children.

These were the memories that occupied my mind during my 14-hour flight to South Korea. I spent a month trying to brush up on my Korean, practicing out loud prepared responses to questions I knew she would ask. *Yes, I have been traveling alone...No, I'm*

*not homeless...Yes, I intend to marry, later, when I meet the right person...Yes, I'll still find a man despite my tattoos...*

Revisiting the past calmed my nerves as I braced myself for a mandatory two-week quarantine with my 80-year-old grandmother. Over the years, our relationship had been reduced to a single phone call once a month. She would ask me about my work and offer sage, irrelevant advice on marriage that I instinctively accepted to appease her conscience. I would stutter out awkward, embarrassing Korean and in turn, she pretended to understand me. The four-minute conversation would always end with me promising her that I'd call her more. I never did.

She had been waiting for me at the airport for three hours, patient yet anxious, which frustrated me. *Why would she venture out in public when she was most at-risk?* But the moment she saw me, she clutched my arm and immediately began to interrogate me on what I wanted to eat. I felt myself soften.

*"Anything you make, especially your kimchi,"* I said in Korean, " I squeezed her hand and winked.

*"Oh stop it,"* she said, shaking her head in disbelief. But I could see a smile through her face mask as her eyes crinkled with pleasure.

My grandma knew I was coming and had already made a batch of kimchi. Rather than taking the traditional route and using napa cabbage, she chose to use young radish stems, which is more suited for a hot summer.

Brined overnight, seasoned heavily, and fermented for days until peak perfection, the crisp green stems became a necessary component to any dish. We ate it every day during my quarantine and before long, we had emptied out all three jars.

*“This was supposed to last us months!”* she said. *“I guess it was that good, huh? I should have made more.”*

*“It was perfect. I don’t need more,”* I reassured her. I didn’t want her to go through any more trouble.

*“Don’t be silly,”* she said.

A week later, I returned to her apartment after working remotely from a nearby cafe, and was shocked to see my grandma on her knees with a pile of young radishes.

Amidst a global pandemic and a particularly spiteful monsoon season, certain crops were harder to find while prices spiked. Ignoring all of this, she was apparently adamant to make more for the little time I had left in Korea, and bought a bushel while I was out working in a cafe.

*“What kind of grandmother would I be if I let you go a day without my kimchi?”* She laughed and added, *“I have to keep feeding you so you’ll remember me.”*

My grandma is still wonderfully vibrant for her age, but her palate wasn’t what it used to be. So, decades later, I reprised the role of her helper and taste tester again. This time, I felt a little more pressure and paid a little more attention.

*“More salt?”* she asked.

I shook my head, paused, and tasted again.

*“A little more ginger,”* I said.

She beamed.

*“Adding raw potatoes helps the kimchi naturally ferment,”* she explained. *“It helps thicken the juices, too.”*

I nodded and reached in for another bite.

For the next three months, we spent ample time in the kitchen. From frying bean curd pancakes and pickling spicy cucumbers, to grilling fatty pork belly and simmering ox bone broth, my grandma taught me old recipes and new flavors. I have never felt so close to my grandma and felt at peace during those months, and later I realized it’s

because being with her, cooking Korean dishes, and speaking our mother tongue, represents the roots I didn't know I missed during my young adult life.

It's been decades since I've spent this much time with the woman who raised me. Reconnecting with her as an adult is something I had always longed for, but never deemed urgent. If this year has taught me anything, it's to constantly ask myself, "*If not now, when?*"

Today, we speak every week, sometimes more, and each conversation lasts nearly half an hour.

Although my Korean is far from perfect and her English non-existent, I'm grateful for the bond that was created early on through the language of food. That's how we understand each other.

That's our love language.