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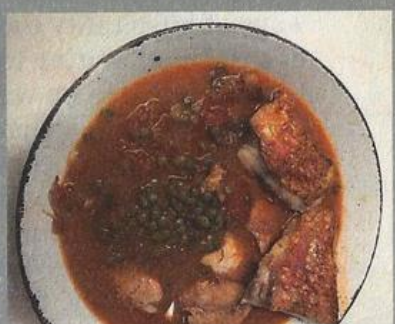
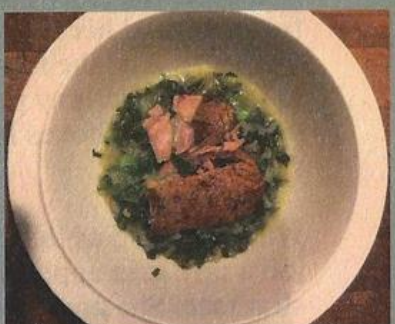
Coco Kwok

Coco used to be very skinny and afraid of the cold, we were always the first group of people in London to put on long Johns. But her first job after graduation was to help at a fishmonger near her home. The sun comes late in winter, so she had to go to work early in the dark. To keep the fish fresh they were all kept in the ice, the floor and the air were freezing, and her hands were always red because of the freeze. It is hard to imagine a skinny person like her moving heavy boxes loaded with seafood.

When she told us that she got this job a rare grin appeared on her slim face. She graduated from Central Saint Martins majoring in Textile Design in winter 2016. But she only wanted to be a cook. Without any background in the catering industry, she was content to just stay where she feels most comfortable – she started a supper club named New Gate Studio at her own place. Even a single customer willing to come would bring her enormous excitement. Many of the ways of hospitality today existed of that time: writing today's menu with a black pen on warm-coloured newspaper, with some drawings of fruits, vegetables, cups, and plates, occasionally there will be a figure in a large robe, sitting alone or smoking. These are her illustrations, slim, even clumsy, from which the neat brushwork needed for design can be found, just like that of Cy Twombly. These pictures turned warm because of the kitchen and food.

I was not a foodie before I met Coco. Boarded from high school to university, I never got tired of the cafeteria. After moving to London, I normally ate noodles and frozen dumplings. Because of my occasional hypoglycemia, I often rush into one shop and just gobble some chocolate and bread. Food for me is and only is a life necessity. Once on my way home after class, I was going to pass by Coco's. I messaged her two or three hours ahead to ask if we could meet up and have a meal at her place – by which I was thinking maybe bring some noodles or a sandwich. But Coco was annoyed, she said there would be no time for her to prepare, I should tell her in advance because she will never treat a friend to such a simple dish in her kitchen. Then I realized how Coco values her food as her work, no, even more cherished than that because good ingredients are difficult to find and are short-lived. Cooking for her is not something as perfunctory as it is for me; eating is not just a necessity – for Coco, cooking is about one's mind and spirit.

I once met Coco when she and her mother Wu Jie came to see my art project. She was at ease while her mother and I were talking fervently. Coco took us to St. John Bread and Wine in East London after we went to the exhibition in CASS Sculpture Park together. Coco, who usually doesn't talk very much, suddenly became the protagonist of that dinner. She told us how this restaurant with a lying pig as their



logo can use a pig from its nose to its tail as their ingredients. This kind of unprejudiced way of cherishing food is very rare. We chewed some sliced bread served with olive oil and sea salt. A sweetness grew in our mouth as we waited for other dishes. That was the first time I ate roasted beef marrow - which I have since learned to cook myself - with a pinch of parsley, the smoothness of animal fat and the crispness of the parsley melted with each other, producing a rich aroma. For the dessert we had a vodka poured on sorbet, awakening us with its spicy and icy taste when we were dizzy from too much food. For the first time, I felt that British cuisine is not just about fish and chips. Surely, the most impressive thing is that Coco said she would not introduce everyone to this place. Another thing is how Wu Jie was worried that Coco would never put on weight.

Coco's sincerity and respect for food result in her being picky and stubborn about cooking. St. John is the only London restaurant that she would return to repeatedly. She rarely buys instant food and is unwilling to pay for those trendy restaurants on social-media. She would rather buy a coffee and jump on the bus home to cook when she feels hungry. During her time at Central Saint Martins she was only willing to have a pot of yoghurt for lunch and went home as soon as she was off work. Perhaps because of this pickiness, she was too skinny for a person who aspires to become a chef. Also an international student, I was extremely indiscriminate and

was never picky on food compared to Coco - as long as I have something to eat - so I often eat at her place. At the very beginning, I was forbidden to talk at the dining table because Coco was always appalled by my astonishing comments, and she would roll her eyes around a lot. While another friend, Mr Jin, was always able to distinguish the condiments and ingredients used and was always appreciated. Then I realised that I actually lacked even the common knowledge of food and cooking, so it was hard for me to detect the chef's ingenuity. Now that I think about it, it was actually quite rare for us to develop this lasting friendship considering the disparity in our knowledge about food.

It was in the process of returning to her supper club continually, of being inspired and influenced by friends that I finally rediscovered Coco's dishes. I still remember the first meal I had at her place. She likes to cook meat dishes, but instead of braised pork or stewed chicken soup she made grilled quails and steamed a pink fish that I had never seen before, as well as small plates of pickled radish and cucumbers. In her cooking, there is a yearning for her hometown Guangdong and her grandparents, and the solace she was able to find in the UK after her adolescence, but ultimately, it is combined with her understanding of food for here and now, just like what was once written on her Instagram page - Cantonese Root, British Leaves. As time went by me and other friends could always get to

try Coco's latest experiments - her handmade sausages that were later snuffled by a fox, or homemade salted duck eggs. Gradually, she developed her own style - humble dishes with rich tastes made by resonant ingredients while not losing their original taste. They are subtle, warm, and comfy, letting people listen, feel, and appreciate. I remember once I had squash soup with black sesame paste, fresh sashimi with chopped peanuts, as well as steamed leeks with dried shrimps. As a native of Shandong, I tried with surprise and found it particularly luscious.

Maybe I shouldn't talk too much about food because I will flub. There must be some mistakes in my recollections of the dishes I mentioned above, but these were the exact moments when an unprofessional diner's body was lightened by food. And by writing them down I hope to introduce you to the first chef I encountered in my life. The memories of sharing meals with Coco always feel homey even though her house was not well-heated during winter. Seeing Coco stewing food on a small stove always reminds me of an old Japanese craftsman or a granny who has been cooking throughout her life - always smoking calmly while her mind was constantly tied to the food. This kind of mature feeling beyond her age makes people believe in her works. In the past two years, she started to work as an assistant chef at St. John, went to the cooking school and was admired by more diners. Perhaps

it is because she started cooking in other people's kitchens, perhaps she met more like minded friends, or she started becoming more active on Instagram. A while ago I went to Café Meletius where she undertook her residency during the weekend. I saw her wearing a headscarf and apron, unfolding her knife bag on the workbench, with her cheeks slightly chubbier than before. After she finished cooking, she went outside smoking and watched us eat. Her eyes filled with satisfaction and imperiousness, reminding me of Kimura Takuya in *Grand Mansion Tokyo*. After these five years, she finally stood firmly in front of everyone and proudly declared 'I am the chef'. As for why she was willing to cook for me from the beginning, maybe it is for the same reason why I am willing to write this piece for her, we are both looking after each other in our own ways. As I ate more and more of her food, I thought maybe I got to understand them a little bit better.

7th September 2021
In London

Coco从前骨瘦如柴，怕冷，和我总是伦敦最早穿上秋裤的那帮人。可是就这样，Coco毕业之后的第一份工作去家附近的鱼摊 (fish monger) 帮忙。冬天太阳升得晚，她很早摸黑去上班。为了保鲜，鱼都摊在冰里，地面和空气湿冷，她的手也冻得通红。很难想象个头不高的她是怎么搬动成箱的水产的，但她告诉我们自己得到这份工作时眉飞色舞，干瘦的脸上难得地绽出大笑，兴奋地讲个不停。2016年冬天她从圣马丁的服装面料毕业，不想进时尚行业，只想做个厨子，可她在伦敦的餐饮业是毫无背景的一张白纸。所以能呆在自己喜欢的地方她就很知足了。她就开始尝试在家做私厨 (supper club)，取名 NewGate Studio，有人愿意来吃饭她就高兴到不得了。许多现在待客的仪式那时就有：在暖色的新闻纸上用黑色水笔写下今日的菜单，画上些果蔬杯盘，偶尔有个衣袍宽大的人形，正独自坐着或者抽着烟。这是她的插画，线条萧索，带些笨拙，偶尔又见得到可能是从前设计衣服时利落的笔法，像 Cy Twombly。因为有关厨房和食物，这些画面变得温热。

认识Coco之前我并不太会吃东西，从高中到大学一直寄宿，从未厌恶食堂，来了伦敦大多数时候是在煮挂面和速冻水饺。因为偶尔低血糖，常常冲进超市买巧克力和面包狼吞虎咽下去。食物是我的生命必需品，似乎也只是必需品。有次我下课时要路过Coco家，便提前两三个小时发了信息问能不能过去见个面，顺便在她那里吃点东西——我想的就是煮碗面或者买个三明治带去她家吃。但Coco很生气，说这怎么会有时间准备呢，要提前说，这不是买一个三明治或者煮碗面的事，在她的厨房里这不可能发生。我当时意识到，对于Coco来说食物是作品，不，甚至比作品更需要被珍重，因为食材难遇且不等人。烹调于她，不是我的应付；吃饭当然也不是我的果腹即可。对她来说，烹煮饮食是件见心见性的事。

认识Coco和是因为她和她的妈妈吴洁来看我的艺术项目，当时我和吴洁聊得热络，Coco偶尔说句话，自在寡言。没多久，我们一起去了CASS雕塑公园看展览，回到伦敦Coco带我们去了东伦敦的一家餐厅 St. John Bread and Wine。平常不太讲话的Coco

突然变作主角，说起这家以一头趴着的猪为标志的餐厅可以把一头猪从猪鼻子到猪尾巴全部入菜，难得对食材珍惜而无偏见。我们蘸着加了海盐粒的橄榄油嚼着切片面包，等菜时嘴巴里慢慢就生出了一些甘甜。我第一次吃到了烤牛骨髓（后来学会了从 Waitrose 买来自己烤），配一小撮欧芹菜，动物油脂的滑腻被植物的清脆中和，留下一阵馥郁香气。甜品里有一道伏特加酒浇在水果冰沙 (Sorbet) 上，吃到饭晕时被这一勺辛辣冰凉浇醒过来。我头一回觉得（混了法式的）英国菜不是炸鱼薯条那么简单，当然，印象最深的，是Coco说一般人我可不会带出来到这儿吃饭。而另一个印象深刻的，是吴洁担心Coco吃不胖。

Coco对食物诚恳、尊重，副作用是挑剔而固执，St. John是我印象中她在伦敦唯一一家会再三回返的餐厅，平常她几乎不会买临时的吃食，也不愿意为了网红餐厅买单，饿了顶多在外面买杯咖啡就坐上公交车回家做饭。她在圣马丁读书的时候，中午顶多吃一小杯酸奶，一放工就立刻回家。或许因为这挑剔，作为一个立志成为厨师的人，她居然瘦到让人担心。都是留学生，相形之下，我来者不拒、从不挑食，要务是喂饱自己，因此常常去她家蹭饭。其实最早我在她的餐桌上被“禁止发言”，因为常会语出惊人，四下白眼翻飞，而另一位朋友金老师则总能尝出烹调里的佐料和食材而被倍加宠爱。我才发现自己其实缺乏对食物和烹调的知识，甚至常识，因而也无从体会厨师的巧思妙想。这样想来，我们能在对食物的认知水平如此悬殊的情况下生出一段友谊，实属难得。

可以说我是在朋友们的启发和熏陶之中，在不断回到她的餐厅的过程里，重新发现了Coco的食物。我记得在她家吃的第一顿饭，她喜欢做肉菜，但不是红烧肉或者炖鸡汤这样的菜式，而是烤鹌鹑，蒸一种我没见过的粉红色的鱼，几盘小碟腌菜里有小萝卜 (radish) 和黄瓜。她的菜里有对故乡广东和祖父母的思念，也有少年之后在英国寻得的慰藉，但最后是她对此时此地的食物的理解，像她从前的 Instagram 的签名，“Cantonese Root, British Leaves”。到后来，我和朋友们总能吃到她最近的

试验——或许是她自己灌的香肠（结果被狐狸叼走了），再是自己腌的咸鸭蛋，慢慢可以观察到她在菜式上越来越有自己的风格。她的菜里带着食材的本味，依靠搭配制造出丰富的口感，并不会浓酱重彩，也并不震慑或惊艳，但微妙、暖和、惬意又自在，会让人想聆听、体味、给予时间。我记得有配了黑芝麻糊的南瓜汤，新鲜的鱼生和花生碎，还有一道清蒸大葱 (Leek, 不辣且可以当菜吃的葱) 和海米。作为山东人，我吃惊的尝了尝，结果发现特别清甜。

还是别说太多食物了，说多了我会露馅。以上提及的食材搭配一定有些错漏，但这都是我一个不专业的食客记忆里心舌胃被食物点醒的时刻，聊以记录，以便诸位能认识一下我人生中第一个认识的大厨。印象里和Coco在一起的饮食时光总是很踏实，即便她家冬天暖气欠奉，看到Coco在小小的灶台上炖煮着食物，会想起日本的老匠工或者掌了一辈子勺的老奶奶，她气定神闲地抽着烟，但心思还全然系在食物上。这种超出自身年龄的气场能让人相信她的食物。这两年Coco开始去St. John帮厨，去读了厨师学校，也被更多食客慕名寻来。或许是因为走进了别人的厨房，或许是碰到了更多的同道与同好，她在Instagram上明显话多了。前一阵子去她周末驻留的咖啡馆 Meletius，我看到她裹着头巾、戴着围裙，在餐台上展开自己的刀具包，尤其两颊还多了些肉。做完饭她到门口抽着烟看着我们吃东西，眼里带着欣慰和桀骜，着实像《东京大饭店》里的木村拓哉。感觉五年走来，她终于站到了大家眼前，用自己的身形大声宣告“我是一个厨师”。至于从一开始，为什么她愿意做饭给我吃，或许就像我愿意写一篇文章给她，我们都是用自己的方式去照看一个身边的人。而我吃着吃着，觉得或许我懂了一点她的食物。

2021年9月7日
伦敦

