

Just About Anything...

TO DELIGHT THE CURIOUS READER

a blog by Mona McHaney

January 16, 2024 Blog #53

A Melting Pot or a Potluck?

I consider myself a good ole American mutt. For Christmas one year, my husband gave me an Ancestry.com kit. After submitting a saliva sample, I learned that I am 54% German, 20% Irish and Scottish, 16% English, 4% Scandinavian, 3% Southern European, 2% Spanish and Portuguese, and 1% North African. I'd love to hear the story behind that last 1%.

In 1908, a Jew from England named Israel Zangwill wrote a play called "The Melting Pot." Its story line has long since been forgotten; its title has not. During the great wave of immigration in the early 20th Century, our national imagination held out the promise that "all immigrants can be transformed into Americans, a new alloy forged in a crucible of democracy, freedom and civic responsibility" (William Booth, "One Nation, Indivisible: Is It History?"). That sounds good, right? But as with most things, there is the *ideal* on one side, and the *reality* on the other; in between the two, you hoe your row.

Historians, sociologists, and folks far wiser than I, can debate the efficacy and merits of "the American Melting Pot." But the idea persists. While teaching English to locals in West Africa, I was surprised to find an activity about this subject in our language textbook. Immigrants to the U.S. were asked to describe what they missed most about their homeland. Their answers varied. Most missed family and friends whom they had left behind. But many also missed the things that made their culture distinctive: its food, celebrations, traditions, language, clothing, landscape, and general way of life.

I get it. Some days, I would love to lose my head covering, hop in my own car, drive downtown on a street that acknowledged traffic rules, and drive through a fast-food restaurant for an order of tasty Tex-Mex tacos and a large iced tea, half-sweet, half-unsweet. I think I had to leave America to understand the little things that made me "American."

This past summer, while visiting family and friends in California, my husband and I joined our friends Mark and Kim for a day trip to San Francisco. While researching the *Atlas Obscura* website to find



Mona visits the Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Company in San Francisco, California.



quirky tourist spots, I discovered the Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Company located on Ross Alley in the heart of Chinatown. I share details about this place now to illustrate some examples of "Americana."

The Golden Gate Fortune Cookie Company was started by Chinese immigrants, the Changs, in 1962. It has remained a family-owned and operated business ever since. Part of the "American Dream" is that if you work hard enough you can prosper and give your children a better life than the one you came from. (Even my white-bread Southwest Virginian parents subscribed to the same theory.)

The Chang family business makes up to 10,000 fortune cookies a day with only three staff members. The cookies are handmade and baked on an antique, cast-iron rotating griddle that dates back to the 1950s. The family matriarch developed the cookie recipe, which remains a secret to this day. Larger companies now use automated systems to produce as many as 4 million fortune cookies a day. But the Chang family prides itself on making a superior product. (This is another characteristic passed down to me by "The Greatest Generation": work hard and take pride in your work.)



A worker at the company makes fortune cookies by hand and bakes them on an antique, cast-iron rotating griddle.

So, this Chinese family, one could say, has achieved the American dream. And yet, their livelihood remains in the heart of Chinatown. The employees speak Chinese to one another, and everywhere you walk in that part of town you hear it spoken. The streets bustle with Chinese restaurants, Chinese dress shops, and Chinese markets. I see strange animal parts for sale in grocery store windows. Most of the residents here are probably native-born Americans or naturalized citizens, and yet they maintain strong and distinctive elements of Chinese culture. I don't think this is a bad thing. But one could argue that this community has not completely assimilated into the American Melting Pot. It has largely remained separate and distinct. It looks less like a blended soup and more like a buffet.



My culinary curiosity has led me down more than one rabbit trail. With a little research, I discovered that Chinese fortune cookies aren't Chinese after all. People in China don't eat them. They were invented in San Francisco in the early 1900s and are derived from the Japanese "tsujura senbei" or "fortune cracker." Restaurant owners wanted to please their customers, who craved something sweet after a meal. The cookies, while just a regional specialty, were called "fortune tea cakes." How very American to borrow an idea from another country and run with it!

The fortune cookies come in flavors besides the traditional vanilla. I tried the chocolate, strawberry, and green tea flavors and liked the last one best.



The fortune cookie's popularity spread nationwide during World War II. Military personnel, on the way back from the Pacific Theater, tried them in California while out-processing. When these veterans returned to their homes—scattered across the United States—they asked their local Chinese restaurants why they didn't serve fortune cookies like they did in San Francisco. The American spirit of capitalism soon remedied that situation.

But why, you may be wondering, was the fortune cookie trade coopted by the Chinese instead of the Japanese with whom the idea originated? One answer to that question also dates back to the World War II era. When America entered the war, many Japanese Americans in California were rounded up by the authorities and put in concentration camps. Ironically, the sons of these prisoners were faithfully serving in the United States Armed Forces on the side of the Allies! Sadly, fear has a way of dividing people who could stand stronger if united. American history is littered with tragic examples. But that's a topic for another day.

I am still 100% American while living in a foreign country and serving on an international team. Navigating these waters is not always smooth sailing, but my life is so much richer for having ventured beyond my home port. I love my local neighbors, and I love my team. Together they have taught me much about other world cultures while helping me to better understand my own.

My Korean teammates introduced me to *kimche*, the South Africans tempt me with *rusks*, and our newest Taiwanese member has shown me a whole new way to prepare ramen. I, in turn, like to serve these friends my all-American tried-and-true comfort food: meatloaf. Like the fortune cookie, meatloaf gained popularity during World War II. It was a good way to stretch meat when many foods were rationed on the home front.

So which do we resemble more: a melting pot or a potluck? When the temperatures soar during the summer months, it feels like we are in a melting pot. Ha! But joking aside, I think I like the potluck analogy better. I enjoy sampling the best each culture has to offer—especially that little cookie at the end.

P.S. Please don't forget our English Center's "Graduation" Party on Monday, January 22. Our theme is snowflakes, which my West African students have never seen.

Have a delightful day! 



Our team kids—E1, E2, and E3—dress up to celebrate the Korean New Year.

Please encourage your friends and family to subscribe at: justaboutanything.life

Please encourage Mona at: encouragemona@gmail.com