

Food for thought: An Analysis of How Food Shapes our Memories

by

Haykuhi Gevorgyan

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Abstract

This capstone project aims to explore the multifaceted relationship between food and memory. Food is more than just nourishment—it's an important part of every aspect of our lives, from childhood to adulthood, and is intricately woven into our culture and identity. This paper uncovers the threads of food connecting us to our memories and looks at how food and mealtime traditions can be used in therapy. By examining extensive research in this field, the paper highlights how food has the ability to bring people together, to help them communicate with each other in a way they wouldn't without food in front of them. The author also recreates a dish from the past with the help of interviewees, not just focusing on the recipe and taste but also exploring the history and memories associated with it. The project concludes by emphasizing the multilayered nature of food, with its huge social, psychological, and cultural influence on our development as individuals and as a collective. Food gives us a rare glimpse into the past and future, connecting us with our ancestors and future generations, taking us back to our childhoods and offering a glimpse into our future too, making it an essential part of our lives.

Food for thought: An Analysis of How Food Shapes our Memories

Have you ever asked yourself “Do I eat to survive, or do I survive to eat? As surprising as it might be, the answer to this question is tricky. After all, what is food to us? When we think of food, do we think about the smells and tastes of our favorite dishes? Do we remember the taste of our grandmother's soup, the smell of our family's home cooking as a child? Do we remember the conversations we had around the people when grandma's soup was served or is it the event that reminds us of the taste we felt? One thing is indisputable, even if we don't realize it, food is more than just nourishment – it's an important part of every aspect of our lives, starting from our childhood to the way we behave as adults and all the way to learning where we came from.

While food has been crucial to preserving social groupings throughout human history, it has also been passed down from generation to generation, for the same mission of preserving what was given to us and passing on our culture. But the interesting thing about food is that it not only helps us remember who we are, what we are part of, but also shapes us into who we are yet to become.

So much of our lives we neglect the benefits that food traditions give us. In fact, we don't neglect them, rather we construct our lives around food. Including food in anything has become so natural we do not even notice how food is a part of the creation of almost every important memory. In this paper I am uncovering the threads of food connecting us to those memories.

Understanding people's relationships with one another, how they behave and interact within their own groups, and how they interpret their lives through food has been fascinating. Thanks to research done in this field therapists have realized that the ritual of a family meal includes the central themes they work through with families. The latter proves that food has the ability to bring people together, to help them communicate with each other in a way they

wouldn't without food in front of them. A good example of this is shown in various scholarly researches, particularly in a study by David Sutton (2008) where he explores how people treat mealtime traditions passed down to them from centuries ago.

Rather than treating food simply as nourishment this paper finds the ties of food to our identity and by the end of the project I hope the readers can find themselves reminiscing about the life they have lived so far, their major events, through the food that accompanied them.

To better understand the conducted extensive research, I will recreate dishes from the past with the help of my interviewees. I am not focusing on solely a recipe and the taste of a specific dish, but rather finding every memory this dish has helped create. I am uncovering what the dish is and what is different when we apply modern technology to the cooking process. Food is multilayered, with a huge social, psychological and cultural influence on our development as a collective, as nations and as individuals. Food, the process of eating, gives us a rare glimpse to the past and to the future – after all, what we are eating today will be eaten by our descendants, and this thread uniting us with our past and future shall go on for centuries, as we survive, in every way, because we eat.

Literature Review

Food memory has been crucial to the survival of social groupings; its activation is triggered by a variety of factors and is passed down from generation to generation. This research project is aimed at understanding the link between memory and food. It has long been examined that food items serve as crucial instruments for remembering and reconstructing the past in the present because their sensuous qualities cause memories of the past to be triggered through smell, taste, and sound. What is the role of food in the development of memories? How does anything connected to food shape or change our behavior? After all, is it food that we remember?

This research study answers these questions by looking at various scholarly articles where authors took different approaches to better understand the connection between food and memory.

Memory

To understand the relationship of memory with anything, we need to understand what memory is. Sutton (2008) argues that social memory plays a crucial normative role in the creation of social orders and identities. He traces this idea back to the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who posited that society is defined by its collective memory. Sutton argues that social memory is not a passive mechanism but rather an active one, which can be used to create new values and norms. The food then becomes part of a nation's traditions, and the traditions in turn are passed down to future generations. These traditions are a huge part of one's cultural identity. Along with understanding what memory is, we also need to understand why we need identity. (Sutton, 2008)

Identity

Hall and Gay (2012) claim that identity is all of the memories, encounters, connections, and values that go into shaping a person's sense of self. This sense of self is often determined by specific cultural aspects, like food. Shah builds upon the point, and mentions in his research that "Food choices tell stories of communities, tribes, families, the adaptation, resistance, changes over time, and personal as well as peer identity" (2008, p. 4). Shah continues his argument and claims that food is no longer just food. It is a cultural product that is part of a bigger social and cultural structure called food culture, which reflects the social and cultural broader dimensions of any particular society.

Food culture has become an important way of understanding how people relate to each other, how they act and interact within their own communities, and how they make sense of their

lives. Sutton (2008) proves this point through his case studies in the Greek island of Kalymnos where people use special containers for cooking specific dishes. The containers in question are rarely used these days for the sole reason of preserving these mementos from the past, to remind them and their offsprings of their roots. Sutton links this to a type of “prospective memory” which in simpler terms is the yearning of a specific taste, and trying to recreate it for future generations. Holtzman (2006) goes as far as to say that most of the time the creation of a national cuisine is one of the most significant components in the development of a nation. The latter can be linked to Possic’s idea that “Family ritual meals also serve as a vertical connection between past, present, and future generations” (2008, p. 11). Many studies consider the creation of a nation through the invention, standardization, or valorization of a national cuisine. This concept was first introduced by Alfred Crosby (2003) in his book *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. He believed that culinary traditions from one country could be transferred to another due to geographic proximity, which led to greater interdependence between cultures.

In addition to foodways being a key component for cultural exchange and codependency, it also played an important role in helping nations develop during colonial times. Armenians who fled the Genocide also have similar stories. Salmaner (2014) agrees that because of their sensual aspects, which lead memories of the past to be awakened through smell, taste, and sound, food items serve as essential tools for remembering and reconstructing the past in the present (Salmaner, 2014). In a particular case, an Armenian woman made the decision to create a cookbook-memoir. When questioned about why she didn't simply write a memoir focusing on her family's stories. She explained that food served as a trigger for recollecting her family's

narratives, and that certain stories required the inclusion of detailed food descriptions in order to provide context to the overall story (Salmaner, 2014).

Behavior

Various researchers talk about the importance of food traditions in the behavior of children. In the research study “The intergenerational transmission of family meal practices” (Loth, et al. 2019) the authors explore how different adults remember their childhood and act as adults based on their memories of family meals and cultural traditions around food. The authors claim that a meal ritual or a specific dish for a child usually results in positive memories as an adult. Those who grew up in families that had family dinners inconsistently discussed having fewer memories or less positive memories of eating. Another group of people who despite not having any family traditions related to food reported having mixed memories of their early meal experiences, with some participants describing occasional meals eaten together and others not having any strong childhood memories of eating with their family. All of the data covered in this particular study demonstrates just how important food is in shaping every aspect of our lives. In another study by Possic (2008), the author describes how food and family meals are used in therapy. Throughout the paper we see that the ritual of a family meal includes the central themes therapists work through with families, which leads to the discussions about how therapists utilize family meals to become an important part of family therapy. During therapy, the therapist often asks a patient to eat a meal with his or her family. The purpose of this is to help the patient open up about their feelings and thoughts without being judged or criticized by other members of their household. This helps the patient feel more comfortable sharing what they are going through with the therapist, who can then provide support and guidance (Possic, 2008).

The way we interact physically with the food during the cooking process has been researched and it was found that mere hand movements have a meaning (Bigot, 2020). These movements have a lot of cultural value in them. For example nowadays cooks use different equipment for mixing ground meat or kneading dough, but when cooking traditional dishes all of these things are done by hand, like our ancestors did before. There is a certain psychology in that it makes the cooking process even more intimate and brings us closer to the past. Bigot (2020) talks about “memory dishes”, which is what ties them to their culture. Another psychological factor for these types of dishes is that cooks do not use cookbooks for this. Traditional dishes get passed down to us, so we cook it differently than what is written in cookbooks. However, every household has their special twist to the same traditional dish. These special twists can range from using other spices to the method of cooking, and each carrier of the recipe cooks it as it was passed down to them – without a cookbook. One of Bigot’s interviewees mentioned, “To read a cookbook would suggest that she [the woman] has not retained what her mother taught her” (2020, p. 13). While this interview was conducted with a Barbadian woman, it is very relevant for other ethnic groups, such as Armenians. Just as Bigot noticed, people never follow a recipe in a cookbook, and prefer to do what their mom and grandma did, by watching them closely and mimicking every little thing they did. Preserving and embracing these differences is what helped Salmaner’s study participants keep their Armenian identity in Turkey (2014). This brings us back to Salmaner’s research (2014) where she acknowledges that food items serve as crucial instruments for remembering and reconstructing the past in the present, because their sensuous qualities cause memories of the past to be triggered through smell, taste, and sound. Similar to the other authors whose works I included in this literature review, Bigot also points out that the places where the women [in her study] create food, such as the kitchen, dining room, and

courtyards, are where the past is recalled, articulated, cooked, and reinvented. These areas also promote harmony between ethnic and cultural identities (Bigot, 2020).

To conclude, food is much more than nutrition for the body. Food, the taste of it and how we cook it is a mirror, reflecting the past, paving the way for the future. Cooking and eating are some of the most intimate ways we are linked to our ancestors, and preserving our culture through these means is the thread that goes through us and our future generations. All of our similarities and differences are reflected in the smallest movements and in the seemingly insignificant spices. Additionally, traditions revolving around food have been proven to be beneficial in family therapies. Food brings us closer, and the preparation we make as a family before sitting around a table and eating is something psychologists have come to acknowledge as therapeutic.

Research Question

The main research question is: How is food connected to memory and identity? Secondary research questions include: What role does food play in our development as people, and human beings in general? How is the preparation of food significant on its own and has the preparation of food changed over the years? I also explore how food connects people across generations, how cuisine, and everything involving food is the crossroad where the past and the future meet. How can food also serve as a way to bring back a sense of lost homeland. To answer these questions I delve into how people who have been displaced from their hometowns stay connected to their homeland through their cuisines.

Methodology

The methodology for this research project is based on the framework of oral history. Oral history is the practice of collecting and preserving people's stories and experiences through

spoken accounts. It involves conducting interviews with individuals who have lived through significant events or periods of history and recording their memories, reflections, and perspectives. Oral history provides a valuable way to learn about history from the perspective of those who lived it and can offer insights and details that may not be found in written records. Oral history can provide a more intimate and emotional understanding of people's relationships with food and how it connects to their cultural identity (Byrne, 2020). By allowing the interviewees to share their personal stories and memories associated with food, the research can capture not only the sensory experience of food, but also the emotional and cultural significance it holds for individuals. Hence, this method allowed me to collect first-hand accounts of people's memories and experiences related to food and cultural identity. Through oral history, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of how food and tradition connect people to their ancestry and how these memories are passed down from generation to generation.

The research design for this project includes individual interviews with two participants who have roots in different parts of the world and now live in Armenia, as well as a self-study. The participants were chosen based on their memories of certain foods that are now hard to find in Armenia. The interviewees belong to different generations and associate their choice of food with different things and experiences. One of the interviewees is my grandma, a 70-year-old Assyrian woman living in Armenia, who lost touch with her Assyrian village around 40 years ago. The second interviewee is a 22-year-old student, who was born and raised in Russia but has been living in Armenia for more than a decade. The interview guidelines were designed in a way that helped the interviewees to tell their life-story and then connect those memories to the food they eat. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted around half an hour each. The interview questions focused on the participants' memories of the food they ate, including the ingredients,

techniques used to make the dish, and the cultural significance of the food. I also asked the participants to try to remember what went into the dish and what similar tasting foods, if any, they were able to find in Armenia.

I chose to include a research creation component in this project because I wanted to recreate the dishes my interviewees told me about. Through this creative project, I aimed to connect with the interviewees' memories and experiences. I conducted individual research on the food itself, but since the same dish is usually cooked with some alterations in every household, I took into account what the interviewees told me to make the food taste like what they remember.

As an oral history-based project, my creative component was designed to complement the interviews I conducted. Drawing on the memories and stories my interviewees shared with me, I wrote short biographies that reflected their experiences with food and family traditions. These biographies were an opportunity to delve deeper into the personal histories of my interviewees and to connect their memories of food to broader cultural and historical contexts. To further showcase the stories of my interviewees, I also created short videos that captured the process of recreating their special dishes. These videos aimed to depict the relationships between food, culture, and identity, and to highlight the diverse ways in which food can connect us to our pasts.

Artist statement

Food is like a tiny capsule that saves fogged memories from fading away forever; it has the power to transport us back in time and evoke memories that are deeply emotional and personal. For my capstone project, I set out to explore the connection between food and memory, interviewing a diverse group of people and delving into my own personal experiences with food. Through my research and interviews, I discovered that food is often the thread that binds our

memories together. The flavors, smells, and textures of food can bring us back to specific moments in time, triggering intense emotions and vivid recollections. As I listened to my interviewees recount their memories, I was struck by the raw emotion and nostalgia that food can evoke. To bring these memories to life, I decided to cook the dishes that my interviewees told me about – the ones they grew up eating in their respective communities and now miss. Each recipe was a labor of love, representing a piece of their past and a connection to their cultural identity. As my interviewees walked through their lives and helped me cook and film these recipes, I found myself transported back to those moments, feeling the same joy and comfort that my interviewees did when they first experienced them. Through my videos and stories, I aim to showcase the unique and meaningful role that food plays in our lives, both individually and as a collective community. Food is a way to connect with our past, present, and each other. It has the ability to cross cultural boundaries, bringing people together and fostering a sense of shared experience. By recognizing the emotional power of food, we can deepen our appreciation for the role it plays in our lives and the memories we hold dear. My hope is that those who come across this project will be inspired to explore their own relationship with food, and recognize the richness and complexity of the memories that it holds.

Reflections on process

I used oral history for the research component of my capstone project. From the start, I knew that I wanted to explore the topic of food and memory in a way that felt personal and meaningful. I also wanted to ensure that my work was grounded in solid research and supported by credible sources. To accomplish this, I started by conducting interviews with individuals who had experienced significant events or periods of history. These interviews provided me with rich, personal stories and insights that helped me understand the complex relationship between food

and memory. Though I had conducted interviews before, I was not prepared for the unexpected responses I received. For example, my grandmother's response that food wasn't important to her was initially challenging to reconcile with my project's focus. I visited the place my interviewee talked about a lot and was able to uncover a food memory thus connecting her experiences to my topic. In addition to the interviews, I also conducted research to support my work. I spent a considerable amount of time reviewing sources and rereading material from classes I had taken before. I also incorporated some of these sources into my project to provide additional context and credibility. One of my main goals for this project was to make it engaging and accessible to readers. I didn't want it to feel like a dry academic paper. To achieve this, I wrote stories based on my interviews and included videos to help readers connect with my research on a personal level.

I put a lot of effort into crafting these stories, and I am proud of the final product. Overall, the process of conducting interviews was challenging, but it was also rewarding. I feel that I have gained a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between food and memory. I am also proud of the final product and believe that it effectively communicates the importance of personal stories and perspectives in academic work.

The Taste of Yesterday

Lilit's story

As I begin to pen down Lilit's oral history, I am transported back to our conversations, and the memories flood my mind...

Lilit's passion for her story is palpable, and the nostalgia in her eyes takes me on a journey through her childhood. Lilit's upbringing in an Armenian household in Russia is a beautiful tale to hear.

Lilit, a fun and witty girl, was born in Russia to a traditional Armenian family. She traces back her roots to Goris, where her parents were born. Her parents made a big move to the capital Yerevan, and then an even bigger move to Russia when they got married. Lilit spent the first decade of her life in Saint Petersburg, surrounded by her Armenian relatives, but still, knowing she was different, or rather she was made to know that she was.

“There was even a [Russian] guy who told me to go back to Armenia,” Lilit recalls with a smirk. Still, she doesn't call it bullying.

Even without unnecessary mean exclamations, Lilit, being a smart child, could see the differences between her and her peers. She had big brown eyes and dark hair, as opposed to the other kids. Still, she doesn't have negative connotations with this experience of her little self. Throughout our conversation stories about her Armenian identity as a child living in Russia have emerged quite a number of times. Lilit kept mentioning that she kept her Armenianness because she had her Armenian family there, she spoke the language at least to some degree with her relatives, and had the luxury of having Armenian homemade meals.

“It was another aspect that again, helped me realize my identity, helped me see how different it is. I would say that we had an extra amount of food on our tables, like a typical Armenian table

with three types of dishes, two types of salads, of course. Alcohol or wine or, um, vodka, “ said Lilit trying to not judge the humble food traditions of her Russian neighbors, but in the end didn’t shy away from mentioning that Russians don’t roast the vermicelli like we Armenians do.

This response took us on a compelling voyage through food. Food played an instrumental role in shaping her cultural identity and held an irreplaceable place in her heart. It became clear to me that for Lilit, food is not simply sustenance, but rather an integral part of her life. She associates different foods with distinct periods in her life, and her memories are intertwined with culinary experiences. She observed that her Armenian heritage was evident in her food, which is why even though she cannot recollect her kindergarten's details, such as the faces of the teachers and the appearance of the place, she can vividly remember what she ate there. This is because the culinary experience awaiting her at home was vastly distinct., Lilit has a profound recollection of recognizing and comprehending the contrast of the two cultures she grew up in, and this is likely a pivotal childhood memory.

“I remember that let's say I ate something at kindergarten, And then I would come home and my mother would have a typical խաշլամա [khashlama], or other things that are not common for Russia.”

Lilit adjusted to life in Russia out of necessity, as it was the only existence she knew. However, her family eventually made the decision to relocate to their ancestral homeland of Armenia. The transition was not without its challenges, particularly for Lilit, who was entering her preteen years and had just adapted to life in Russia, where she had spent her entire life. As a result, she found herself feeling like an outsider in Armenia. She struggled with the language and cultural references, forcing her to start from scratch once again. To ease the transition, she was enrolled in a specialized Russian school. Slowly but surely, Lilit acclimated to life in Armenia.

As she recounted her move to Armenia at the tender age of ten, Lilit revealed how she was able to fully immerse herself in the Armenian culture that had always been an integral part of her identity. The traditional dishes and flavors passed down through generations brought her solace and a sense of belonging. As our conversation continued, she shared a poignant anecdote about her grandparents, who always prepared special dishes for her whenever she visited them, knowing that she did not eat pork, a common ingredient in many Armenian dishes.

“...My grandmother knows that I don't eat pork. She knows that I have a particular type of salad that I really, really love. And she always makes it during the holidays. And she always points out, you know, Lilit, I know that you don't eat pork. So we also ordered, uh, chicken meat for you, or I made this salad that you love.”

As Lilit shared her experience with me, my mind immediately translated her story into two powerful words: love language. It wasn't just about the taste, but the thought, effort and care that went into making her feel loved and special, and this created a sense of closeness that can't be replicated any other way. Still, nothing would erase the first years of her life in Russia, and there was one thing from her childhood there that she couldn't find anywhere else...

During our interview, Lilit spoke excitedly about the oxygen cocktail, a frothy and sweet drink that was a staple of her time in the kindergarten. As she described the special device that blended different flavored syrups and a dose of oxygen to create the perfect drink, I felt myself transported back to her kindergarten years. It was as if I could taste the refreshing drink myself! In fact I was reminded of a drink famous in the Soviet period that my mom used to tell me about, which was made with a base of practically any liquid and a special equipment carbonated it. But for Lilit, the oxygen cocktail was more than just a drink. It was a time machine that took her back to her carefree childhood days. She recalled playing with friends on sun-drenched

playgrounds, queueing for the refreshing drink and feeling a sense of joy that she hadn't experienced in years.

As Lilit grew older, she discovered that food had a way of making her feel better when everything else seemed overwhelming. She found herself turning to sweet treats as a source of comfort during times of stress and anxiety. It was almost as if they had a magical power to ease her worries and soothe her soul...“Or at least that’s what I persuaded myself,” Lilit added. Later we came to the conclusion that she did not persuade herself, but that specific foods were actually calming her nerves down.

Food wasn’t solely a means of coping for Lilit. Equally important, it served as a medium through which she could connect with the individuals who hold a special place in her heart. Now, as a young adult, she loves café hopping with friends, trying new restaurants, and experimenting with different dishes. It's an exciting and enjoyable experience that they look forward to every time. Sushi and khash, a rather uncommon choice, have become dishes that Lilit associates with her young adult life, reminding her of these happy moments spent with her friends and family. “As a huge fan of Asian culture and cuisine, I really love [sushi]. And even my friends, whenever they ask me, oh, what should we eat now, I always just say sushi.” This reminded me that one of our favorite things to do with Lilit is watching Japanese animated movies in theaters. Every single time, without fail, Lilit gets Japanese food after the movie. Even this interest of hers is reflected in her choice of food.

For Lilit, food has been intimately tied to specific periods of her life. From the refreshing oxygen cocktail, to the 3-layer chocolate cake to delicious, aromatic Armenian dishes at home, each dish has a story to tell. For Lilit, these stories are a window into her own life, a way to remember the people and experiences that have shaped her into the person I met in my freshman

year and was fascinated by immediately. And now I am creating memories with her, with sushi being our main prop.

In a world that can often feel overwhelming and chaotic, it's comforting to know that there are things that can ground us and remind us of who we are. For Lilit, food is one such thing – a reminder.

Liza's story

There is a place that holds a special meaning to my family – Dimitrov, an Assyrian village not too far from Yerevan. My grandmother, Liza, always speaks fondly of it whenever I ask her to share a story from her childhood. Her stories are a treasure trove of memories that bring life into any space. I've had the privilege of interviewing her on several occasions for different projects, but her stories about Dimitrov always take center stage.

Liza was born in Yerevan in 1953 to Assyrian parents and is the oldest of four sisters. She considers her family to be the simplest, and is grateful that they were not affected by the harsh realities of the Soviet regime. In her own words, she felt that her life was unremarkable and not worth documenting which is why it was only recently that I discovered her Assyrian heritage. It dawned upon me when I discovered that my grandmother's surname, Sgradova, was not of Armenian origin. It led me to the astonishing revelation that she is, in fact, of full Assyrian descent. This is when I knew I had to explore this side of my family.

The interview was initially supposed to be about her favorite dishes when suddenly my grandma said “For me, and in general in our family, food was not a cult. We [didn't rely on food] in order to communicate or be sure to sit down, eat, [food] was just a need.”

It struck me then that my grandma did not have the luxury of “enjoying” food and treating it as entertainment like I do now.

My grandmother had been urging me to accompany her to our ancestral village to see all her favorite places, including the site of the collapsed family church of the Sagradov's, promising that it would provide me with a deeper comprehension of our familial roots. She spoke with a heartfelt conviction about Dimitrov, which I could sense was deeply intertwined with her own personal history. When the moment presented itself to embark on this adventure and fully embrace the village's essence, we started our journey. Through the tireless efforts of my grandmother's younger sister, the cherished family church of the Sagradovs had been meticulously reconstructed and joyously reopened. The radiance of my grandmother's enthusiasm was apparent, as she and her sisters revealed in the indescribable joy of this long-awaited reunion. The church, constructed by our ancestors in the 19th century, had served as a sacred gathering place for generations, until its unfortunate destruction. Before our visit my grandma informed everyone that her granddaughter was visiting, so when we finally reached there, she introduced me to everyone present, one by one. This is when my visit turned into an anthropological study. Whenever they got together, the family started speaking Assyrian fluently. My grandma too was equally skilled in the language. I was shocked because she always said that she forgot the language, but there she was, keeping up with everyone.

As we journeyed through the village, guided by my grandmother, her sisters, and the friendly villagers, I was transported to a bygone era. We passed by the fields my grandma told me about. The memories of running through the fields with other children, collecting herbs in the spring, and helping her family prepare for the changing seasons bring a twinkle to her eye and a smile to her face. But it's the memories of the *tonir*, the traditional Armenian clay oven, that truly

excited her. As we reached the gathering place, the villagers all remembered and made me almost smell the mouth-watering aroma of the freshly baked lavash and roasted corn and peppers.

"Around the *tonir*, we would gather," my grandma said "One of the women would open the lid, while the other would put the lavash in, and they would bake together in groups of three or four. There was such a delicious smell." My young grandma with her peers would be there, their feet pounding the soft earth as she and her friends run through the fields, laughing and joking as they gather vegetables to cook in the *tonir*. In their words, when the cooking was done, they would dip their feet into the warm clay oven, feeling the heat seep into their bones, and revel in the warmth. But it's not just the memories of the *tonir* that tugged at my heartstrings. As she recounts the rituals of the village, the joy and warmth in her voice became contagious. She described the taste of the sweet wine that her family extracted from the grapes, and the smell of the vodka that was distilled with neighbors.

En route to our destination, we had the opportunity to venture into the sacred sanctuaries that had been the topic of many conversations. Amongst these holy abodes, we were privy to St. Kirill - the site of numerous religious celebrations - and Mart Mariam, which held a special place in my grandmother's heart, evoking a sense of familiarity and warmth. Our visit to the latter, however, was imbued with a bittersweet undertone, as we learned of the ongoing struggle of the Assyrian community to attain recognition of their ancestral church.

Soon we stopped at a garden where my grandma's family would gather around. This was her grandmother's impressive 1200-meter garden and the whole family helped the elder of the family tend it. "We closed the vineyards in preparation for spring and harvested grapes in

autumn," she recalled, "My father and I would extract wine from the grapes, and we would collect and distill vodka with our neighbors. Each family had a designated day to distill vodka."

I went to the village solely to visit the places that my grandma was missing so much and had so many memories in, completely ditching my research about food, but I got convinced once again, that memory is always accompanied by food...

Although my grandma said food was never important enough for her family to attach memories to, I caught her talking about a dish called Mrtukha with one of the villagers. This is a dish that is meant to be cooked during a religious festival held on June 14th. During my interview prior to going to the village, my grandma did mention this dish and she said that the impetus to celebrate the festival this year in the village was the dish. It is similar to our Halva, without its sweetness. Made with oil, flour, and fried to perfection, it was distributed to everyone in a roll-like fashion, bringing a sense of community and togetherness.

"I remember very well, and even look forward to, the church holiday beginning on June 14th, when there is the festival. I really love this dish, it's very delicious. And every year, we gather to acquire it when we buy it in the village on that day."

Everyone was conversing, when suddenly, my grandmother's countenance, which had until then been serene and composed, underwent a rather unexpected transformation. Her face lit up with a radiant smile, illuminating her features with an adulterated joy that I had never before witnessed.

"Do you perhaps remember this...?" she asked the others, her voice quivering with a mix of nostalgia and anticipation. She was referring to the long-lost recipe of her grandmother – a dish that held deep personal significance for her, but which had been lost to the vagaries of time

and distance. During our interview she went through the hazy mists of her mind to extract more information about the food, but she stopped and said:

“I remember a dish my grandmother used to make. When I was little, she cooked some kind of dish with vermicelli. I remember it being very delicious and it really appealed to my taste buds. I remember the taste of this dish so vividly that I once tried to make it. Even though she was no longer around, I craved it so much, I needed it.”

Despite the fact that this dish was not prepared for any specific occasion or festival, my grandmother spoke about it with an almost reverential tone. This was just a snack my grandma’s grandma made for the kids while they were running around the fields. The kids would queue for this snack, and continue their games. It was the one dish that she truly needed – something so simple, a dish that held a special place in her heart. A true reminder of her childhood.

My grandma described what she remembered about the dish and a woman, an Assyrian language teacher in the village heard her and approached her. She just asked my grandma a simple question. She asked where her ancestors came to Armenia from. When my grandma said “from Urmia,” the woman had a content look on her face and said “Then, it’s made with milk!” This was further proof to me of how food is so tightly linked to our past. The woman said that the dish my grandma has such fond memories of is made in different ways in different regions. Some use yogurt instead of milk, Armenians swap vermicelli with rice, some omit the sugar, but Assyrians from Urmia have always used milk, vermicelli and sugar. She also said that Assyrians in Krasnodar, Russia eat that dish just like my grandma remembers, because most Assyrians from Urmia went to Krasnodar.

For my grandmother, the search for that lost recipe was more than just a culinary quest – it was a journey of rediscovery, a means of reconnecting with her roots and preserving the

memories of those who had come before her. Not only for my grandma, but for the whole Assyrian community of Dimitrov, the village by itself is a tangible connection to the past. As my grandma reluctantly bid farewell to her village, a deep sense of gratitude and reverence filled her heart. She carries with herself the memories of the destroyed churches, the now found recipe and the villagers she grew up with.

Haykuhi's story

Never in my life have I imagined that I would base my final project to graduate on why I love food, but here we are. While I was chopping a fresh salad, the thought of writing about myself for a significant project crossed my mind. At first, I wasn't entirely sure why this particular project resonated with me, but as I continued to chop, I began to realize the significance of my connection to it. My childhood memories hold a special place in my heart, and I've discovered that the best way for me to revisit those moments is through food. To me, every dish and recipe serves as a tiny time capsule, preserving memories that might have otherwise been lost over time. The role that food played in my upbringing was instrumental in shaping who I am today. Holidays and special occasions were celebrated with an abundance of delicious treats that still make my mouth water when I think of them. And to this day, when I taste a particular dish, I am instantly transported back to those moments in time. Through my love of food, I have learned the value of tradition and preserving the past for future generations, but I need to explore this more.

Growing up in Yerevan, Armenia, I was surrounded by a rich culinary culture. My family instilled in me a love for food that has stayed with me throughout my life. As the oldest of three siblings, I always felt a sense of responsibility to help my parents in the kitchen. Whether it was chopping vegetables or stirring pots, I was always eager to lend a hand. But my love for food

goes beyond just cooking and eating. It's about the memories and emotions that are attached to it. Food has always been my go-to when facing obstacles in life. It's been a source of comfort, joy, and even a way to express my creativity. I can't count the number of times I've turned to a favorite dish when I was feeling down or stressed. And the beauty of it all is that the connection between food and memory is so strong that one bite of a certain dish can transport me back to a specific moment in time.

As I embarked on my capstone project, I knew that I wanted to explore this connection between food and memory in a more structured way. I wanted to understand why food had such a strong hold on me and how it impacted my life. So, I started by delving into my childhood memories and how food played a role in shaping them. My mom was always able to gauge my mood based on the food I wanted to eat. If I was feeling down, she would make Borsh, my favorite dish, and suddenly everything felt a little bit better. Even now, as an adult, I find myself using food as a ritual. I never eat just to satisfy my hunger; instead, I enjoy the process of gathering around the table, sharing stories, and savoring every bite. But it's not just about the taste or the comfort.

Food is a form of expression for me. My mom may not be the most openly affectionate person, but her love language is cooking. I could always feel her love through the meals she prepared for me and my little brother. Cooking has allowed my family and me to forge a bond that transcends the boundaries of mere acquaintanceship. It has become a symbol of our love for each other, a way to stay connected on a deeper level. Every time I prepare one of my mother's recipes, I feel as though I am carrying on a tradition that has been passed down to me through generations, and expressing my love for her in my own way. Certain dishes hold a special place in my heart, as they are imbued with memories and emotions that go beyond the mere flavor.

Take, for instance, the rich and satisfying borscht, a soup made from tender beef, sweet beets, and a medley of fresh vegetables. While it may not be a dish steeped in my family's cultural heritage, it has become a comfort food that brings me great joy. In fact, my family has made a tradition out of surprising me with a pot of piping hot borscht whenever they want to put a smile on my face.

There is also my grandmother's famous bear cake, a seemingly simple sponge cake in the shape of a bear. My grandma would fill it with whipped cream and decorate it with pomegranates, and I would eagerly wait for her to bring it out. Even now, as an adult, I can still vividly remember the taste and the feeling of joy that came with it. Though it may sound frivolous, this delightful treat was always a source of unbridled happiness for me as a child, and continues to be a beloved symbol of my family's love and affection.

The roots of my love for food and the power of its traditions run deep, nurtured not only by my mother but also by my father. Despite the busy and demanding nature of our modern lives, my dad remains steadfast in his commitment to ensure that we gather together around the table for at least one meal a day. Regardless of the challenges we may be facing, whether it be an argument or simply not feeling our best, we know that this shared time will bring us closer together and help us to work through our difficulties. The importance of this tradition cannot be overstated, for it has become a treasured and vital aspect of our family life, connecting us in a way that only food can.

I can't help but feel grateful for the role it has played in my life. From bringing my family closer together to providing comfort in times of stress, food has been a constant source of joy and love. And now, as I cook for my family myself, I hope to pass on that same sense of love and connection through every dish I make.

These stories are not about food, but rather about the human experience. In every bite, there exists a piece of our history—a connection to our roots and the generations that came before us. The taste of yesterday, with all its nuances and familiar comforts, becomes a tangible link to our heritage, bridging the gap between distant memories and the present moment.

See the short video on the Oxygen cocktail [here](#).

Watch the short video on Katnov [here](#).

Watch the short video on Borsh [here](#), and the video on the Bear cake [here](#).

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