

It Just Was not the Same

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From first glance, anyone can see that I am Asian. Specifically, I am Vietnamese. Growing up people always assumed that I was Cambodian or Filipino because of my darker skin. It bothered me a lot because they would laugh when I told them I was Vietnamese and accuse me of lying or being adopted. This then resulted in me shying away from my culture because of the way others spoke to me. It was easy for me to do this – a little bit too easy. I grew up in a nondiverse community and moved to an even more nondiverse community around the age of fifteen. I was around so many white people that I tried my hardest to blend in with them and act as if I was not different at all. I believe it worked and I truly tried my hardest to not engage with my cultural roots. This continued until probably the tenth grade when I realized that I come from a different background than my white friends and started to recognize my cultural identity.

I love Vietnamese food. I always have and I always will. Growing up, I ate a lot of it, but I never brought it to school or asked my friends to come over to try it because as I have stated, I shielded my culture. For special occasions, my family and I would always go to this amazing restaurant in Minneapolis called Pho 79. They served great and authentic Vietnamese cuisine. I loved it a lot because there were many people from different backgrounds there all the time. It made me feel safe, included, and not afraid to enjoy Vietnamese food because there was no judgment from other people.

We went to the restaurant last summer and it was very different from what it was the year before. We decided to go eat at that restaurant because it was my dad's birthday, and we always do something special for birthdays. When we got there, a sign was posted up on the door, "Masks required at all times unless eating. Maximum capacity: 20 people." This surprised me because before the pandemic, there would be approximately 60-70 people in there and it would be so lively. When I walked in, it was a ghost town. There was one other family seated with their masks on in the corner of the restaurant waiting for their food in silence. We were seated on the other side of the room, furthest away from the other family. Many tables were empty and it looked like the staff had closed off a section of the restaurant

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because of the lack of business. Every ten minutes, I would see a food delivery person come in and grab food that was packaged on the counter. That was it though; it was my family, the other family, and the workers.

The beef pho I had tasted the same, but it was not the same because the environment was so empty and to me, it was unfulfilling. I was so conditioned to the place being full of different people enjoying Vietnamese food with me, but in this case, there was not anybody near us. The quietness ached and while it is good to enjoy quietness sometimes, in this restaurant, it was not the dynamic I was used to. My family and I had finished our meals in about forty-five minutes which was surprising because, in the past, we would spend up to two hours chatting away among ourselves and with strangers in the restaurant. It just was not the same.

COVID-19 has changed our lives forever, especially in the food industry. Pho 79 was a restaurant many people tried if they were interested in Vietnamese cuisine and environment but because of the fear of the pandemic, people do not go out as much. This concerns me because this may lead to people not being as interested in trying new foods from different cultures and food is a very important aspect of one's culture. Sitting in a packed restaurant filled with talkative strangers is not something we experience anymore. For me, Pho 79 reflected my culture because of the food, environment, people, and memories created.

Vietnamese food is something that I have enjoyed my entire life, and it is one of the many reasons why I have come to accept myself for who I am. This year, I am a sophomore in college, and I want to be able to take my roommates, who come from a background different from mine, to a restaurant that has my cultural identity embedded into it. I want to show my roommates a part of who I am. It is difficult now though, and the pandemic has changed the way we eat. We often do not go out to eat because of the risks of the pandemic. Most of the time, we are eating fast and easy meals at our apartment or grabbing fast food when we decide that it is time to treat ourselves.

This experience has caused me to reflect on several questions. How will people know how to socialize from now on? How will we be able to share our love for food with strangers in restaurants? How will people understand someone's culture without trying their food? Will people ever get the opportunity to try new cuisines? How will one experience an authentic restaurant and setting? How will I be able to show my roommates my cultural identity that I have grown to accept and appreciate? For myself, I plan to take a step deeper into my culture and learn how to cook great Vietnamese food to share aspects of my culture with others.