

FEATURE

THE ART OF NOURISHING

FOOD IS MORE THAN NUTRITIONAL SUSTENANCE OR A SOURCE OF ENERGY FOR THE HUMAN BODY, IT ALSO HAS A STRONG AND INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR EMOTIONS AND SOCIAL CONNECTIONS.



Text: Chow Ee-Tan Images Courtesy of iStockphoto/Respective Interviewees/FreePik

We may not be aware of it, but food can impact us in many ways, with connections between nutrition, our thoughts and emotions as well as social interactions. Our emotions and feelings are an extremely strong trigger for food choices.

From a young age, food becomes connected to a variety of emotions and social interactions, and it can bring back memories of happiness and celebration, or, on the other hand, sadness and loneliness. These emotions and circumstances can start well before we are even in control of our own diet, influenced by our parents' choices for us.

"Food is the medium to bring friends, family or even strangers together. It creates a sense of community, and certain dishes or cuisines are integral to a social or cultural group's heritage," says Wendy Wong, a dietician at Salad Atelier.

She says preparing and sharing traditional foods can reinforce cultural bonds and preserve a sense of heritage. For instance, sharing a meal with a loved one can be a symbol of intimacy and affection, creating a special bond between partners.

"The way people perceive, experience and express emotions related to food is heavily influenced by their cultural upbringing, traditions and beliefs. Preparing and consuming dishes from one's cultural background can trigger positive emotions, as they serve as a connection to one's heritage," she says.

NUTRIENTS AND HORMONES

Food can impact our emotions positively or negatively, depending

"A balanced diet with adequate antioxidants and healthy fats, particularly omega-3 fatty acids, can support brain health and cognitive function, potentially promoting positive moods and emotional wellbeing."

Wendy Wong, dietician at Salad Atelier



on the types of food we consume.

"We have heard of 'happy food' or 'relax food', i.e., food that you eat when you are stressed or emotional. The scientific reason

behind food and emotion is an interesting study to understand food ingredients on a deeper level," says Wendy.

She says certain nutrients in food can affect the production and release of neurotransmitters and hormones in the brain. For example, foods rich in tryptophan, such as salmon, nuts and bananas, can increase serotonin levels, which are associated with feelings of happiness and wellbeing.

Having a high sugar and high carbohydrate diet can cause a rapid spike in blood sugar levels, leading to a short-lived burst of energy and mood elevation. However, this is often followed by a crash, which can result in feelings of irritability and fatigue.

"On the other hand, a balanced diet with adequate antioxidants and healthy fats, particularly omega-3 fatty acids, can support brain health and cognitive function, potentially promoting positive moods and emotional wellbeing," she says.



LOVE LANGUAGE

Food is the love language in freelance writer Alexandra Wong's family and will always elicit emotions of nostalgia and gratitude.

"Food is always a big deal in my family. Thinking back, I realise food is how Asian parents show love for their children and would go out of their way to make something special for them," says Alexandra, the only child in the family.

Alexandra had always thought her parents were just making sure she was properly fed, but later on in life, when she was living away from home, food became the bond between her and her parents.

"If I go home and say, 'Oh, I feel like having this or that', immediately my mom will make it for me, even though the recipe



Alexandra Wong, freelance writer

"Food is always a big deal in my family. Thinking back, I realise food is how Asian parents show love for their children and would go out of their way to make something special for them."

can be very complicated. Mom is a perfectionist, so she will not settle for anything except the best ingredients. That drives me crazy because she would go all out just to buy a particular ingredient. But I know this is the way she conveys her love," she says.

Meanwhile, certain dishes always remind her of her father, who is a good cook of Hakka dishes. One of his signature dishes is steamed fish.

"Growing up, I've eaten steamed fish cooked by my dad. I may be biased, but I think it is the best way to prepare steamed fish. So, when people suggest preparing steamed fish in a different manner, I find myself a little resistant because it is not the way my father does it. To me, both of my parents are the best at their own dishes," she says.

Food also brings back fond memories of her maternal grandmother, whose pickled turmeric fish was a dish that

Alexandra would remember for life.

"Only later, when I read the recipe, was I startled by the amount of work that is needed to make the dish," she says. When meeting up with her cousins, they always reminisce about their childhoods, and the food that they shared was so tied to their childhood memories.

"My mother comes from a family of 10 siblings. They don't express their love with words, but they come together during Chinese New Year to cook together and that's how they bond together.

To Alexandra, it is always a pleasure and joyous occasion to share eating experiences with family and friends.

"Recently, my Italian friend visited me, and she was very curious about Malaysian food. I find that eating with another person who also enjoys food with you really enhances the mood. It was a real joy taking her out and eating with her," she says.

“During my childhood, my mom used to cook up a feast for my birthdays, and there were certain dishes that were a staple, such as fried meehoon that was prepared together with dried prawns, pai tee and curry puffs.”

Cecilia Alphonsus,
group communications manager



A young Celia with her mom Sheila Hendrick and her dad Alphonsus Lyon.

the Sinhalese New Year,” she says.

Food unique to your cultural heritage gives you a sense of belonging, says Celia. No matter where she is, she will always experience a sense of home and family when she sits around a table that is bursting with the food of her childhood.

The dishes cooked by her maternal grandmother and mother always evoke fond memories and feelings of nostalgia.

“During my childhood, my mom used to cook up a feast for my

birthdays, and there were certain dishes that were a staple, such as fried meehoon that was prepared together with dried prawns, pai tee and curry puffs. Whenever I have these, my mind always drifts to those days.

“Sambal haebee is also one that evokes a sense of comfort. We like to eat it slathered on cold, buttered bread, topped with slivers of ice-cold cucumbers. This was a dish handed down from grandmother to mother and then to me,” she says.

Other childhood favourites are tau eu bak and sweet and sour pork or fish that her mother used to feed her just before the school bus picked her up for her afternoon session of primary school.

Celia confesses to being a foodie and is also surrounded by people who love food.

“Different types of food call to me at different times. One of

CULTURE AND HERITAGE

To Cecilia Alphonsus, food is a strong bond and a way of celebrating the people she loves. She says there is no more intimate act of love than cooking for your loved ones.

Celia, as she is known, is a group communications manager in the oil palm industry and comes from a mixed background (her father is Indian while her mother is Thai, Sinhalese and Chinese). She relates more to her mother’s side.

“This is probably because I grew up with my mom’s cooking. Food from her family impacts me more, including dishes from her Sinhalese side like *kiribat* and *seeni sambol*, which we eat once a year during



FEATURE

my favourite foods that always gives me pleasure is nibbling on a charcuterie board. When cravings hit, it's usually cheese or chocolate-related desserts.

Celia notices that when she is feeling low or tired, she tends to pick her childhood favourites to eat. She usually prefers to eat food in small portions, such as dim sum and tapas.

MINDFUL EATING

In different stages of life, our understanding and feelings towards food tend to change.

Alexandra says that her feelings towards food have evolved over the years, especially since she started cooking. As she experiments with different recipes, she has become more aware of the nutritional value of what she consumes. And that awareness has changed the way she eats.

"I am very conscious about not wasting food. I don't overcook and would finish and enjoy every meal that I prepared. I attempt to balance taste with health in my cooking and eating. It was only a few years ago that I started developing a preference for more healthy food compared to the indulgence that I used to go for," she says.

Alexandra does not let her emotions determine what to eat. Although she is a food lover, she has realised the importance of maintaining a balanced diet that keeps her healthy and nourished. She is also exercising regularly these days.

She is now happiest eating foods that are healthy and fresh.



Having said that, there are certain foods that always pick her up. One of them is the Thai dish *Pad Kra Pao* (Thai basil stir fry), which is flavourful and simple to make, and it always gives Alexandra an appetite.

Meanwhile, Celia has successfully lost 11kg since last December without depriving herself of the food she enjoys. She was eating in a way that left her full yet not craving anything.

She says she has learned not to demonise food.

"Some people seem to think that just because you enjoy eating, you

are a glutton. I have learned how you eat is largely more important than what you eat.

"I believe in eating and enjoying everything in moderation. We should eat mindfully and with intent. We can practise mindful eating while choosing menu in a restaurant, doing grocery shopping or even during celebrations," she says.

She says one should refrain from categorising foods as 'good' or 'bad' and allow flexibility in food choices. Savouring the pleasure of eating can enhance your overall emotional connection with food, she says. Rather than binge eating, activities such as exercising, meditation or small talk with friends and family could lift our emotions.

To Wendy, the first step of mindful eating is to eat without distractions, therefore, we should not be attached to our gadgets during meals. Only then can we engage our senses in the food, take our time chewing, appreciate the colours, smells and textures of our food.

"If we cook, extend mindfulness to the process of cooking and meal preparation. Engage in cooking mindfully, appreciating

"Therapeutic cooking involves using the process of preparing and cooking food to address and reflect our emotional and psychological challenges."

Wendy Wong, dietician at Salad Atelier

the ingredients and the act of nourishing ourselves.

“When we eat, pay attention to our body’s hunger and fullness cues. Eat when we are physically hungry and stop when we are comfortably satisfied, not overly full,” she says.

CULINARY THERAPY

Cooking, says Wendy, can provide a channel for individuals to express emotions and feelings through the creative act of preparing food. In the process, we address our own concerns, let out our emotions and complete a delicious meal, which can foster a sense of achievement and boost self-esteem.

“Therefore, therapeutic cooking is a form of therapy that uses cooking to support emotional, mental and overall physical wellbeing. It involves using the process of preparing and cooking food as a therapeutic tool to address and reflect our emotional and psychological challenges.

“Besides getting advice from dietitians, we can also seek help from professional therapists or counsellors to initiate a culinary therapy programme at home. If we ever share home-cooked meal with friends and family, social connections and a sense of community can be fostered,” she says.

Wendy says that culinary therapy can also include education on nutrition and healthy cooking practices, empowering individuals to make healthier food choices. 📌

FOOD & EMOTIONS

Foods that would cause anxiety or exacerbate anxiety symptoms are:

- ☕ **Caffeine**
- 🍺 **Alcohol**
- 🍔 **Highly processed foods** (with refined sugar and unhealthy fats)
- 🍬 **Artificial sweeteners** (study shows that aspartame, a type of artificial sweetener, might lead to mood fluctuations and irritation)
- 🍗 **High-sodium food** (increasing blood pressure, which might cause mood swings)

Foods that would help us feel relaxed and happy are:

- 🐟 **Fatty fish and healthy fats** (salmon, mackerel, avocado)
- 🍫 **Dark chocolate** (stimulates the release of endorphins, a feel good hormone in the body)
- 🍓 **Berries** (blueberry, strawberry and raspberry)
- 🥬 **Dark leafy vegetables** (high in magnesium, which supports relaxation)
- 🥜 **Nuts and seeds** (high in magnesium)
- 🍵 **Camomile, lavender and peppermint tea** (promote sleep)

Certain feelings, such as stress, anxiety, sadness and boredom, can significantly influence us to opt for unhealthy eating habits.



When we are stressed or have anxiety:

High carbohydrate and sugary foods provide temporary emotion relief.

Example: ice cream, potato chips, pasta or cookies

When we are sad or emotional:

Comfort food, or specifically, our favourite dish to find solace. **Example:** pizza, pasta, poke bowl or desserts

When we are feeling bored:

Consume food out of habit or to fill time rather than out of actual hunger.

