

# Food for Thought

By CATHERINE HONG

A FRESHLY BUTCHERED pig's tail cooked over coals. Liverwurst and cream cheese sandwiches. Cold meat pie with hard-boiled eggs buried inside like treasures. If you grew up reading classic middle-grade novels you probably know exactly where these foods made an appearance. ("Little House in the Big Woods"; "A Wrinkle in Time"; Roald Dahl's "Danny the Champion of the World" — my personal favorite.) Whether they struck you as mouthwateringly delicious or borderline gross, these meals have practically become shorthand for the books themselves.

The food in books seemed particularly exotic to me as a kid because it was so

## MEASURING UP

Written by Lily LaMotte  
Illustrated by Ann Xu

208 pp. Harper Alley. \$22.99.  
(Ages 8 to 12)

## A PLACE AT THE TABLE

By Saadia Faruqi and Laura Shovan

336 pp. Clarion/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.  
\$16.99.  
(Ages 10 to 12)

## AMERICAN AS PANEER PIE

By Supriya Kelkar

320 pp. Aladdin/Simon & Schuster. \$17.99.  
(Ages 8 to 12)

## THE SURPRISING POWER OF A GOOD DUMPLING

By Wai Chim

336 pp. Scholastic. \$18.99.  
(Ages 14 and up)

deeply American and British. The meals families ate in those books were worlds apart from the Korean soups and stews we had at home. These foreign foodstuffs felt like clues to Anglo-American culture, and I dug in with an appetite.

In this era of junior chef competitions and Instagram food influencers, it's no surprise that middle grade and young adult books are more food-focused than ever. But what's refreshing is that the food isn't as exclusively Anglo-American as it used to be.

Four new books featuring Taiwanese, Pakistani, Indian and Chinese families

CATHERINE HONG, a freelance writer and editor, co-hosts *K-Pod*, a podcast about Korean-Americans in arts and culture.

might spark the curiosity of kids who've grown up eating plain old "regular" American food. And for immigrant kids grappling with the weird lunches their moms pack, they just might inspire a bit of pride.

The graphic novel "Measuring Up," by Lily LaMotte and Ann Xu, tells the story of 12-year-old Cici, who's just moved to Seattle from Taiwan. Although Cici has been quick to make new friends she's still figuring out the social customs (what is a "sleepover"?) and she deeply misses her grandmother, who taught her how to cook. Against her father's wishes, Cici secretly enters a "Top Chef Junior"-style culinary competition in the hopes of winning the money to send her Ama a plane ticket.

The increasingly suspenseful elimination rounds of the contest give this funny, fast-paced narrative its dramatic arc. And the graphic novel format, featuring Xu's big-eyed characters, clean lines and simple, playful aesthetic, is a perfect vehicle, allowing readers to see for themselves what Cici's creative rice dishes look like. The story is also chock-full of eye-opening cultural observations. Cici is constantly having to remind people she's Taiwanese (not Chinese!). And we witness how even seemingly sophisticated foodies don't give Asian food respect (a chef of a fancy local restaurant dismisses Cici's cuisine as "Chinese takeout"). The happy ending, meanwhile, is as satisfying as a juicy dumpling.

A culinary competition is also the central plot device of "A Place at the Table," by Saadia Faruqi and Laura Shovan. The novel follows two sixth graders, Sara and Elizabeth, who meet in an after-school cooking club taught by Sara's mother. Sara, who is Pakistani-American, recently transferred from an Islamic school and resents being dragged to the class by her mother. Elizabeth is there because she's sick of the instant mashed potatoes and Hot Pockets that pass for dinner in her Jewish-British household. The two girls become cooking partners and enter a recipe contest.

The story is told in alternating chapters that remind readers there's always an unseen side to someone else's story. Elizabeth, shouldering the burden of her mother's depression, is also being sidelined by a best friend; Sara's prickliness comes from the anti-Muslim attitudes she's been subject to all her life. But for all the novel's sober themes, there's a lightness and brightness to the story borne out by the girls' spunky quest to win the contest. And Elizabeth's delight at the scent of popping cumin seeds and the taste of aloo tikkis "sizzling with the aroma of cilantro and olive oil" will tempt the palates of even die-hard chicken



From "Measuring Up."

nugget loyalists.

Ambivalence about one's immigrant heritage — that confusing stew of embarrassment and comfort — is sensitively explored in "American as Paneer Pie," by Supriya Kelkar. Indian-American Lekha, who's 11, feels as if she has two versions of herself: "Home Lekha," who loves eating poli and paneer, and "School Lekha," who just wants to fit in. When an Indian girl named Avanti moves in across the street, Lekha is at first resentful, deeming the newcomer a "fob." But before long, Lekha starts to realize that there's plenty to admire about her "twindian," who, unlike Lekha, won't tolerate slurs like "Dot." When her family becomes the victim of a hate crime, Lekha has to decide if she should stand up for herself.

Though Kelkar's novel has ambitious scope, there is fat to be trimmed from the broad cast of characters and the obvious lesson-learning. But Lekha is an appealingly imperfect protagonist, and Kelkar draws a rich portrait of Marathi customs. Not incidentally, the food descriptions here are mouthwatering, from the "crunchy burnt bits" of batata bhaji that Lekha's mom makes for Diwali to the "tangy, sweet, chinha chutney" Lekha loves best.

Young adult readers who are ready for a more heart-wrenching story can pick up "The Surprising Power of a Good Dumpling," by Wai Chim. Like "A Place at the Table," it's about a girl who loves cooking and whose mother suffers from depression, but here the problems are more serious. Anna, the eldest daughter of a Cantonese immigrant family in Australia, has never been a top student; she's preoccupied with caring for her siblings and managing her mother's frightening behavior. When Anna begins working in the family's Chinese restaurant she discovers a new sense of purpose and meets a boy, Rory, who becomes her first love. But as her mother's delusions intensify, she realizes she can't solve her family's problems alone.

The novel provides an insightful look at the powerful role food plays in our emotional lives. Cooking is Anna's connection to her restaurateur father and her expression of love for her siblings. She bonds with Rory over their shared passion for xiao long bao and pork buns. But most of all, the meditative *tuk tuk tuk tuk* of chopping ingredients and the process of combining them into meals is, she says, like a "cool salve to the burning soul." □