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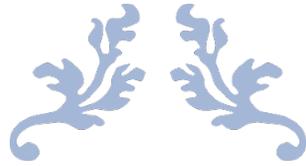
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BOBA BINDS YOU AND ME

an exploration of boba, Asian American identity, and community



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May 10th, 2020

Senior Project in Media Studies at Vassar College

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Section I. Situating Boba in the Asian American Consciousness

While “Asian American” is a term that was birthed as a political identity during the Third World Liberation Front, its nuance has shifted from one that is emblematic of Pan-Asian solidarity to a label that many Asian people don’t feel comfortable claiming as their own, because they do not see themselves in mainstream representations of this identity (especially considering how Asian American representation is already scarce). In a similar vein of change, boba has turned into a drink from Taiwan to an Asian American cultural staple, particularly in areas with high Asian populations, or in online spaces such as the Facebook group *Subtle Asian Traits*. As Asian American culture emerges, so does boba’s role in Asian American societal practices – the two are intertwined, and I am curious to discover what this means for Asian American communities and the way they engage with this cultural symbol.

Cuisine has often been hallmarked as an important realm with which to explore identity; for example, one frequent “moment” that is discussed in Asian American spaces is the “lunchbox moment”, which is an experience that a significant number of Asian Americans have cited having while growing up. What typically happens is that their parents will pack them a lunch consisting of Asian food to bring to school, and then their classmates who were not familiar with non-American cuisine would react in a manner that resulted in shame and embarrassment for the person who had brought the lunch. In one instance, a user on Reddit recounted that they were excited to share “bao” with their classmates and saved up to buy the food to bring, only to have their classmates refuse to eat the bao. He watched as they tore apart the dumpling, chanting “monkey brains” and effectively ostracizing him, his food, and his culture. This experience, and experiences like it, are so common that NBC Asian America released a video of Asian Americans being interviewed about their personal “lunchbox moments”. Lunchbox moments created shame around Asian American cuisine, and there is no shortage of stories about how

Asian Americans grew up shunning their cultural identity in order to assimilate to the American mainstream.

However, now, the cultural zeitgeist is shifting to one that favors Asian food. Various Asian foods have become “trendy” throughout the past few years, despite it being “other”-ed not too long ago. In an article by Khushbu Shah for *Thrillist*, she points out the problematic nature of “trendifying” ethnic cuisines. She lists a slew of people who wield power in the food world, all of whom at one point proclaimed something along the lines of “Filipino food will be the next big thing!” Shah then goes to point out that declaring an entire culture’s cuisine as trendy is “dismissive”, and that “doing that ignores and blows past the history of a cuisine. Filipino food, for example, is the main source of sustenance for more than 100 million people around the world today and has been eaten for centuries, even in the United States. Notable Filipino restaurants have been in the country for decades. Unlike, say, molecular gastronomy, Filipino food isn't a new, invented fad that suddenly captivated the restaurant world. So the very nature of tagging something as a trend also gives it a shelf life that is set to expire after its moment of popularity” (Shah). It is also important to note that Shah analyzes the way that claiming a culture’s cuisine is “trendy” does nothing to help the community; rather, what typically ends up happening is that white chefs will open restaurants serving the food, often in locations where the community in question is priced out of due to gentrification. Immigrant-run restaurants that have historically served the cuisine are not considered for shiny awards or medals for their cooking despite the increase in attention due to the “trend”, and the profits that arise as a result never end back up in the pockets of communities of color.

There is racism involved in the commodification of Asian cuisine. One salient example is last year’s opening of “Lucky Lee’s”, which was a Chinese restaurant opened by a white couple.

Arielle Haspel, the owner, quickly faced backlash for her decision to open the restaurant due to the way that she marketed it – she wanted to profit off of Chinese culture and cuisine, but asserted her cooking as superior to its predecessors. In an article by Serena Dai for Eater New York, it is pointed out that Arielle’s “social media posts and other publicity materials touted her version of Chinese food as more ‘clean’ and less ‘oily,’ ‘salty,’ and ‘icky’ than anything else available — feeding into racist stereotypes about Chinese food and Chinese-owned restaurants being dirty and unhealthy” (Dai).

In both examples of Asian food becoming “trendy”, the popularity rests on the approval of white people. As such, there are racist elements to navigate when examining the popularity of cuisines. How, then, does boba fit into these categories? It’s no secret that this drink has been very popular for quite a while, in and outside of Asian America. I am interested in examining its status as an Asian American cultural symbol, and how its rise in popularity affects members of the community.

The popularity of boba is undeniable; in a 2019 article for *Business Today* titled “It’s Quali-tea: How Boba Became a Craze”, Grace Xu states that boba has been a quintessential part of many Asian Americans’ experiences growing up, particularly in Southern California. However, “Instead of fading out or just staying within the Taiwanese-American community (or even just Asian-American communities in general), however, the fad continued to spread across America. It’s now more popular than ever; indeed, the compound annual growth rate of the bubble tea market from 2017-2023 is estimated to be 7.3%” (Xu). It is difficult to separate the Asian American experience from boba – or so it would seem, based off how trendy it is.

In 2013, a duo of YouTubers called the Fung Brothers released a music video titled “Bobalife”. During the video, they tout their connection with boba and how it serves as a unifier

for themselves and their friends, enabling them to be proud of their Asian identity and roots. The video has over 2.3 million views, which means it resonates with a significant amount of people. However, given the glitz and glam of boba and how popular it is, it can be easy to forget that not every Asian American feels a strong link to this drink. Jenny G. Zhang writes in an article for Eater that “when it comes to bubble tea’s outsized presence among the iconography of Asian-American pop culture and identity, the answer is, as is so often the case when talking about Asian-American issues, colored by an East Asian-American — and Chinese-American, in particular — hegemony that can erase or overshadow the experiences of other Asian Americans. Blockbuster rom-com *Crazy Rich Asians*, presidential candidate Andrew Yang, the groups and gaps glossed over by the model minority myth: There’s a tendency, when celebrating the accomplishments and milestones of Asian Americans, to be selectively forgetful of who counts as ‘Asian’” (Zhang). Her article continues, interviewing someone whose father is Italian and mother is Lao and Vietnamese: the person surmises that “bubble tea is both a salve for and a reminder of how she frequently feels ‘invisible’ in Asian-American spaces, including her school’s student organizations. ‘Because I look a little more ambiguous, to prove my Asianness, I need to adopt the mainstream Asian culture that people know as Asian: drinking bubble tea, eating certain foods, using chopsticks’ [...] Those practices help her feel more Asian American, letting her take part in a larger experience and community through something like bubble tea” (Zhang). Class also plays a part in these conversations, as it dictates who has the capital to afford lounging at boba shops or other status markers of Asian-American-ness.

Clearly, there is something happening here: as boba jettisons its way to the top of mainstream culture and acts as a symbolizer for supposedly all Asian Americans, it simultaneously pushes narratives of those who do not feel a strong link to it to the side. Is it an

equalizing unifier of cultures, or is it divisive for those who can't relate? Such is one criticism of the "lunchbox moment" in Asian American circles – while it is harmful to have one's lunch jeered at while growing up, some say that the hyper-focus on these stories is ultimately detrimental when it comes to meaningful conversations about race and social justice, as there are other issues that don't get the same type of media coverage or attention. This is resonant with the cry for Asian American media representation, as well; after enduring years of bullying, it makes sense that Asian Americans would want to see themselves portrayed positively in Hollywood, popular cuisines, and other avenues of mainstream American representation. Boba could be a stepping stone to becoming accepted into the white American consciousness. However, WJ Fong writes that "media representation is the siren song of neoliberal capitalism. To see ourselves reflected in the upper echelons of society and to realize the 'American Dream' on screen may be empowering, but a reliance on the existing depictions of power still remains confined to the ideology of the dominant culture. Instead of challenging the underlying assumptions of the achievement society, it succumbs to the allure of its imagery. Representation, after all, is pure image; it is an image crafted within a particular cultural and political context that serves to promote a particular ideology. Ultimately, representation that takes place within the institutions of capital will be unable to adequately address the inherent inequalities perpetuated by the capitalist system" (Fong). Fong continues on, referencing Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* and surmising that "for Asian Americans, who in many ways are still at the 'margin of existence' in mainstream consciousness, the over-glorification of media representation reflects our desire for recognition within the cultural and political sphere. However, from who or what are we demanding this recognition? We are not demanding recognition from other people so much as we are demanding recognition from the spectacle itself; we desire the image of political and

cultural status rather than the actualization of true self-determination as a community. Media representation reveals its limitations when we realize that acceptance into the mainstream media landscape is not a recognition of the real struggles of our community, but is instead simply a recognition of Asian Americans as a potentially lucrative market demographic” (Fong).

This ties in well with the laurels of the Model Minority Myth, which posits all Asian Americans as a monolith that seeks to assimilate to the “American Dream” by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps to gain white approval. While the days of the “Asian American Whiz Kids” Time magazine cover seem far away, its impact still churns in the underbelly of Asian American culture and politics. Perhaps, then, boba is merely the latest reincarnation of this trend; its acceptance to the mainstream not signifying true harmony in the Asian American community, but rather pushing other issues under the rug in the name of surface-level pseudo-progressive movements.

Section II. A Brief History of Boba

Boba’s roots stem from Taipei, Taiwan, dating back to the 1980s (Krishna). The practice of drinking tea has been common for much longer, as teahouses in Taiwan became more mainstream. According to the Arcgis site “The History of Bubble Milk Tea”, the popularization of tea houses and tea culture “emerged in the mid-1980s. The development of modern Taiwanese tea houses can be subdivided into two phases or streams. The first stream is also known as the ‘bubble tea craze,’ which emerged in the late 1980s. The concept started to be exported to other places including Hong Kong and mainland China in the early 1990s. The second stream is the combination tea and tea houses that emerged in the late 1990s. The main differentiation between the two streams is the ambience of the outlet and the style of the beverage. The service quality, the selection of tea wares and the consumption behaviors of the second stream are more

sophisticated than those of the bubble tea outlets. Compared to the traditional tea houses, the two modern streams can be regarded as completely different commodities for completely different markets.” The traditional tea houses that are mentioned were catered toward a specific demographic (typically elders) that focused on the taste of tea and the quality of tea leaves. These modern streams, however, reflect the boba shops that we are more familiar with nowadays – a café of sorts, aimed at connecting people to each other and to tasty beverages.

As the teahouses evolved, so did the drinks. According to “The History of Bubble Milk Tea”, the origin of boba comes from the “Chun Shui Tang Teahouse (春水堂) in Taichung. Liu Han-Chieh first came up with the idea of serving Chinese tea cold in the early 1980s after visiting Japan where he saw coffee served cold. This propelled his fledgling chain into Taiwanese teahouse folklore. Then, in 1988, his product development manager, Ms. Lin Hsiu Hui, was sitting in a staff meeting and had brought with her a typical Taiwanese dessert called fen yuan, a sweetened tapioca pudding. Just for fun she poured the tapioca balls into her Assam iced tea and drank it. Everyone at the meeting loved the drink and it quickly outsold all of the other iced teas within a couple of months.” After this fabled beginning, boba’s popularity skyrocketed in the country.

The arrival of boba in the United States brought with it racialized meaning. Shops were opened by Asian (mainly Chinese and Taiwanese) immigrants in regions such as New York and California, where the Asian American-identifying populations tended to be higher.

Boba specifically refers to the small tapioca pearls that appear in the drinks. They are also called “pearls” or “bubbles”; the language has evolved to encapsulate all of these terms as referring to the same thing. Boba often accompanies milk tea, and dons a chewy texture. It is

usually soaked in a simple syrup to give it sweetness, although honey or brown sugar can also be used.

Section III. Recipe Booklet

See booklet in pages below.

— BOBA —
binds you & me

a recipe booklet

heather phan nguyen
media studies 2020



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7. cà phê sữa đá (iced coffee)
8. matcha latte
9. rum & coke

————— fin —————

black milk tea

boba

ingredients:

- instant boba pearls, cooked
- honey
- hot water
- milk
- black tea
- ice (optional)

directions:

1. combine tea, water, honey, and milk. stir until mixed.
2. add boba.
3. add ice, if desired. enjoy.

this is the most basic recipe for milk tea I can think of, learned in my school's dining hall, where ingredients are readily found. It's not professional by any means, but has brought me much comfort during my undergrad years.

TARO MILK TEA BOBA

taro root gives this tasty beverage its purple hue. I'd run to get this at COCO JUICE & Tea whenever I took the metro north from Grand Central to Poughkeepsie. I'd drink it as the train moved, my mind at peace watching a vibrant NYC sun set as we zipped by.

INGREDIENTS

- some green tea
- a bunch of taro powder
- boba pearls, cooked
- hot water
- milk - ice



to - do:

1. put taro powder in hot water & mix.
2. add green tea.
3. add milk. Stir all.
4. add boba. ice, too.

enjoy

SINH TỎ BỜ:

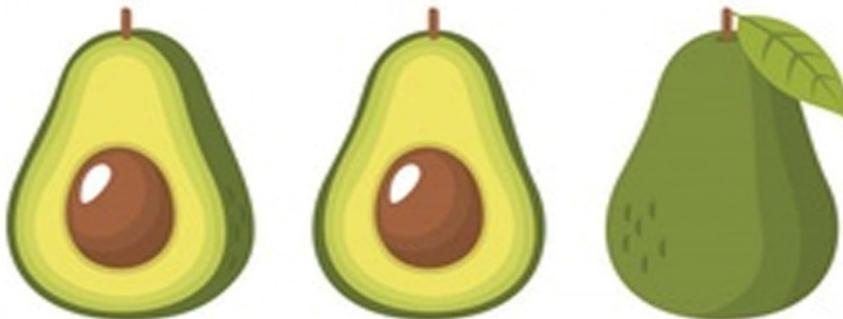
an avocado shake

ingredients:

- 1 avocado
- 1/2 c ice
- 1/3 c milk
- 1/4 c condensed milk
↳ sweet!

to make,
blend everything
until smooth
& enjoy.

for many in the U.S., avocados may remind them of Millennials eating it on toast - a savory dish. Maybe guac with chips come to mind. for me, avocados have always been sweet - a shake at the end of a family dinner, a special dessert, a reminder of youth and joy.



Strawberry — milk ↴

Ingredients:

- 1lb strawberries
- 3/4c sugar
- milk

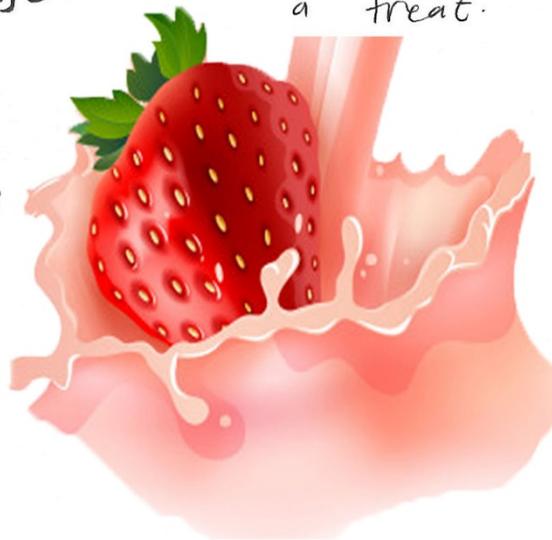
directions:

- dice strawberries & mash until puree'd.
- bring strawberries & sugar to boil on medium heat; this is your syrup!
- chill in fridge 1hr.
- scoop syrup into cup. add milk.
- STIR & ENJOY!



Since being quarantined, I've found comfort in crafting drinks. Who knew you could make strawberry milk from scratch?

Add lots of whip cream for a treat.



dalgona coffee

Also known as "whipped coffee"; this drink's fluffy aesthetic has become a viral trend. In a time where things are stressful, sometimes it's nice to just watch yourself whisk something & r e l a x

INGREDIENTS:

- instant coffee
- sugar
- hot water
- milk

equal parts!



TO DO :

- whisk coffee/sugar/milk until fluffy!
- pour over milk & enjoy!

NƯỚC CHANH!

fresh lime acid drink ★★

- 2 tbs simple syrup
 - 1/2 lime
 - ice
 - 1 can club soda
- ingredients



directions

- put syrup in glass
- squeeze in lime juice ★
- add ice cubes
- pour soda in
- STIR & enjoy

My mom would make this for us on hot summer days. "Hydrate! keep cool!" she'd say.



Cà Phê Sữa Đá

To make:

- mix 1 packet of instant coffee in hot water.
- add ice + sweet condensed milk.
- chug!



Vietnamese coffee is typically made using a dripper, but this is my lazy shortcut version, as a college student. It gets the job done.

I wonder what my barista friends would think of my method....



MATCHA LATTE



Ingredients:

- 1 tsp matcha powder
- 2 tsp sugar
- 3 tsp hot water
- MILK!

a great way
to wake up.
emblematic of
health & provides
focus.



Directions —

- ♥ whisk matcha powder, sugar, & water until it is a paste-y consistency with no lumps!
- ♥ add milk — stir & enjoy!



RUM & COKE!

Ingredients:

- rum
- coke

Directions:

- ask your friend to get you a rum & coke.



I miss socializing.
I miss my friends.
I miss hugging,
being close,
catching up on
campus. My semester
was cut short & I
think of my community
& pray for their health
& well-being. I think
of the next time we
can laugh together
once more.

end ♥

Section IV. Project Reflection

When I was originally planning my senior project, I had very lofty ideas in mind. In a previously submitted proposal, I wrote that “for my project, I want to create an installation that will act as a pop-up boba shop. [...] What I am envisioning is a “classic” boba shop. On my to-do list will be to define boba shop. What makes a boba shop, a boba shop? For example, there are restaurants that serve boba, but are not considered boba shops. In the Fung Bros’ “Bobalife”, boba shops are depicted as spaces for bonding and community-building through drinking beverages as a social activity. There are often board games, accompaniment snacks, music, a TV with pop music videos playing, and so on... this type of space is what I hope to create. As I plan this, then, I will also have to consider logistical details of the space. Do I want my shop to cater to the night crowd? Should it open during the day, when the Old Bookstore is overflowing with natural light? I am not quite sure yet.

It is my hope that my installation will be interactive in more ways than one. First and foremost will be that people will be able to drink boba alongside their peers and savor that certain experiential factor. However, I also want people to consider their own relationship with boba, regardless of their background. As such, I was thinking about creating some sort of map of boba places in the area where people could “post” their memories associated with the space. I know there are digital versions of this where people can post “pins” by spots they’ve had boba. I believe it would be interesting to see what people connote with a certain space, and how spaces (like boba cafes) can carry these various realities and experiences across space and time and community.

Additionally, I want people to have something to watch as they stroll around and experience the space. Earlier, I mentioned that some boba shops have videos playing in the

background; perhaps I could create a YouTube playlist of classic videos to play for ambiance in the background of the boba shop, and cut it with quick clips of interviewees or of Asian American historical moments. My intention is to supplement the boba experience with a constant reminder that this drink does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is a part of the process of cultural identity formation, and to do so in a way that is poignant yet subtle.

Then, it seems as though my project is split into two aspects: the first being boba itself as a cultural object, and the second being the Asian American community and how it maneuvers these cultural objects, with specific regards to boba as a symbol. With the boba archive, I hope to analyze how boba currently functions and what narratives are tied to it; what story does it tell, and who gets to lay a claim toward that story? The interview and portraits are aimed to expand the narrative of what it means to be Asian American, beyond boba and “boba liberalism”. I am intrigued by the lived experiences of people whose Asian American identities orbit these cultural symbols, and my goal is to gather an array of different perspectives to share and build community over through common themes and feelings.”

As I worked to make these ideas a reality, I began to brainstorm and plan out what the rest of my work for the semester would look like. I met with the appropriate people to book the space for my pop-up boba shop, and wrote the proposal for my project again when I figured out how to narrow down the scope of it. Unfortunately, by mid-February, I felt as though I was falling behind – senior year was going by quickly, and I was dealing with a lot of personal stressors that prevented me from being able to do much productive work in any facet of my life. To mitigate these issues, I communicated with my advisors, and met with the Dean of Studies Office to seek academic relief for the weeks where I was overwhelmed. I told myself that I

would regroup and refine my focus over spring break, and would bang out the brunt of my senior project then.

However, by the time spring break rolled around, life as I knew it became severely disrupted due to COVID-19. I found it incredibly difficult to focus on any schoolwork, let alone my senior project. As I haphazardly packed up my room and said goodbye to my best friends in the entire world, leaving behind forever the campus I'd called a home for the past few years, I mourned. I mourned the hardships and the loss that comes with the onslaught of a global pandemic, I worried for the safety of myself and my communities, I hurt and I agonized over the loss of my senior spring and all that was to come with it – thesis, included.

Obviously, my pop-up boba shop was going to be impossible to carry out. One, I was not on campus. Two, even if I did manage to find a place to do it, social distancing mandates meant that I could not create an atmosphere of laughter and community bonding and socializing, as I once dreamt. I found my dreams hard to realize, now – to shift gears and rethink my project is something that I truly wished I had been able to carry out with more effort and time, but as it is, I have been struggling to come up with an adequate response to all of this. I hear my peers and their cries for a no-fail policy, and I wonder how one is to create meaningful academic output during a time like this. I sit in my living room, on my mattress on the floor, where I eat and sleep and do all my work; the once heavily-regimented segments of my life all bleeding together into one indistinguishable puddle. I dodge emails and lay in bed wondering when it will be safe to go outside again, feeling grateful for my health and safety and still sad about the state of the world. And, once in a while, I get up – walk two feet to my kitchen – and make myself a beverage.

It seems the Media Studies Department has heard my pleas and redesigned the senior project requirements for those of us whose original plans would be unable to come to fruition.

After reading the email, I felt myself breathe for the first time in a while, and began to think how I could transform my pop-up boba shop into something that could be configured remotely, and digitally.

The most significant challenge to my project was undoubtedly time and capacity. I was overwhelmed by the world events, and recreating the pop-up shop as I once imagined it felt impossible. Perhaps in an ideal world, I would be able to pick up some coding skills and recreate some sort of virtual shop, an amalgamation of video and photos and a chat box for people to visit. However, as the days passed, I felt myself centering in on one specific aspect of the boba shop that I wanted to keep: comfort.

A boba shop represents a comfortable place where one can sit and mingle; for Asian Americans, this can take on new meaning when considering the positive impact of community and being together in a nation where being a Person of Color can mean being othered. Coupled with friendship and a tasty drink in hand, one can let loose and relax...

I was also intrigued by the idea of community cookbooks, and old recipes that have been passed down generation through generation. In a way, that's what boba is – an idea that has adapted throughout decades in order to serve and provide what the people want. How could I adapt this to my project? I wanted my creation to feel informal and accessible, and so I settled on creating a recipe booklet, compiled of recipes for drinks that I had made myself. It is a very personal project, and the recipes are often not exact – they are forgiving of measurements, and nearly everything is “to taste”.

I gathered and tested these recipes over the past few weeks, thinking about what each one could offer. Deciding what should be included in the booklet was easy; I didn't overthink it, and

added each one as they came to mind. Some were easy to decide on, like the milk tea boba recipes, because I drank them so often.

Others, like DALGONA COFFEE, came from viral internet trends – a quick search on any platform will show an array of chefs and ordinary people boasting their whipped coffee drinks. It was dubbed a popular thing to do in quarantine, as the ingredients were extremely basic, and took little effort to create a drink that looked dreamy and appetizing. One of my friends described making dalgona coffee as something that he looked forward to every day, as it was six minutes of mindless whisking in a world where one might be prone to overthink into doomsday thoughts.

Which brought me to my next reason for settling on a recipe booklet: I wanted a record of this time in world history, and explore ways to cope with all of the transition I've been experiencing. These times are unprecedented, and I know that my final project would look extremely different if I were able to be on Vassar's campus right now, typing in the beloved library as opposed to the small living room in my childhood home. This booklet is how I have been coping.

These drinks are aimed to provide comfort; many of them have distinct Asian roots, such as the ones that I grew up with in my Vietnamese household. In addition to ingredients and directions, I've also included on each page of the recipe booklet a small vignette about how I've experienced the beverage, and what it's given me – they are field notes for how to navigate these drinks and to explore how something as universal as a beverage that many have enjoyed can mean something intimate to the individual.

This recipe booklet is the beginning of an aim to explore Asian American identity and culture, as the vignettes provide perspective and experiences that I have carried with me

throughout my life, and hold on to now, more than ever. It is something that is aimed to be passed around, to seek collaboration, as recipes are something that people can try themselves and adjust to preference and share and drink together. In this way, I believe that I have captured the essence of what I wanted from my pop-up boba shop: a means of understanding certain aspects of Asian American culture, and how to experience a shared identity in personal ways.

Boba is such a significant part of many peoples' lives, and it is my hope that my booklet gives an insight as to how it can also operate as a means of comfort during difficult periods.

Thank you.

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To my mom.

To my best friends, for always reminding me what endless love looks like, and for encouraging me to put it into practice with each and every day.

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