

## **“Perfectly Pan-Fried Tofu” by Charis June Lee**

*age 16, West Springfield High School, Springfield, Virginia*

The familiar smell of garlic, soy sauce, and onion permeated through the air as I opened my lunch bag to see what my mom had packed for me. On any other occasion, I would have been delighted to eat my mom’s braised pan-fried tofu: a Korean dish that I often ate for dinner. But not today, the day a nice girl had invited me, the new girl at school, to sit with her friends during lunch.

“Charis, over here!” My new friend was waving her arms, trying to get my attention.

As I prepared to walk over to the table, memories of elementary and middle school lunch times resurfaced. (1) I remembered my embarrassment as my friends would hold their noses, or not-so-subtly scoot away from me when I brought homemade Korean food. I remembered how my embarrassment shifted to anger when I complained about the smell to my mom.

I had argued with my mom that I wanted “normal” food for lunch. I remembered the look on my mom’s face, a mix between disappointment and confusion. But I was adamant and she relented because she worried about my making new friends every time we moved. So for the remainder of middle school, my mom packed odorless, non-Korean fare like ham and cheese sandwiches. However, that day, she was in a rush to get to her new job and packed me leftovers from dinner.

As soon as I got to my new lunch table, I tried to sneak my bright lunch bag down under my seat before anyone noticed the strong smell. I looked up to see the other girls at the table, opening their normal American lunches. I sat meekly, trying not to be noticed when Katrina, a new acquaintance, asked where my food was.

“I’m not really hungry,” I replied in an insecure voice.

But Katrina had already seen me carry my lunch so she spurted out, “Then, I’ll eat it!” The other girls laughed — apparently Katrina was known to be the lunch scavenger.

I didn’t want to be rude to a potentially new friend, so I reluctantly dragged out my lunch bag and unzipped it. The moment I partially lifted the lid, I could practically taste the garlic and soy sauce. The girls, piqued by the smell wafting through the air, all curiously peered at the oval-shaped Pyrex container. I expected an “Ew” or a “What is that?” (2)

I expected them to turn away — and turn me away. What I did not expect was for Katrina to instantly grab a small piece of tofu and eat it ravenously. And I most certainly did not expect for her to encourage the rest of the table to try my lunch.

It took me a second to recognize that my foreign, Korean food was not being rejected; in fact, it had become a source of personal pride. My new friends were going on about how lucky I was that my mom took the time to prepare a cooked meal for me. They were enchanted by the fact that tofu could actually taste good. While I didn’t get to eat any of my mom’s pan-fried tofu, I was full — of pride and gratitude. (3)

When I arrived home, my mom asked how my day went. Answering with a simple “Good,” I pulled out my Pyrex container from my lunch bag.

"I'm sorry. I didn't have time to buy bread or ham yesterday." But when she noticed that the container was empty, she hesitated before asking, "How was the food?"

I paused a moment before I replied, "Perfect."

Word Count: 597

Summarizing, Paraphrasing, Thoughts, Reactions, Questions, Predictions

#### Annotations

1. I predict that these are bad memories of people making fun of the author for her unique lunches.
2. Did she expect this reaction because of her past experiences in middle school?
3. The author's new friends were more open to and accepting of the author's Korean food and that caused the author to feel more proud of her mom's pan-fried tofu.

Your Name: Theodore Bong

Title of Work: Perfectly Pan-Fried Tofu

Author: Charis June Lee

1. Provide a summary of the text.
  - a. The author wrote about a personal experience she had that helped her become more proud. Before she had this experience, she didn't bring Korean food to school because she felt embarrassed by it. However, her new friend group was more accepting of her Korean food and did not mind the smell. She felt a sense of pride in the Korean food since her new friends actually liked it.
2. What did you like best about this text?
  - a. I liked that the text detailed an experience that helped the author become more proud and discover people who were willing to try new things. The text was very detailed and the story was a very unique personal experience.
3. Share a favorite quote from the text - why did this quote stand out to you?
  - a. My favorite quote is, "What I did not expect was for Katrina to instantly grab a small piece of tofu and eat it ravenously. And I most certainly did not expect for her to encourage the rest of the table to try my lunch." This is my favorite quote because it shows that the author learned that some people are more willing to try things and that she should take pride in her cultural food.
4. What feelings did this text evoke for you?

- a. This text evoked feelings of happiness and joy. I was joyful and happy because the author was finally able to feel prideful about her food without being embarrassed. It was a very happy story about how the author realized that there are many people willing to appreciate unique foods.
- 5. If you got the chance to ask the author of this text one question, what would it be?
  - a. My question to the author would be, after this event, did you continue to bring Korean dishes? If so, what were the dishes and how did the friends react to them?
- 6. What idea(s) was the author trying to get across OR what do you feel was the author's purpose in writing this text?
  - a. I feel like the author was trying to get across the idea that you don't have to be embarrassed about the food that your parents pack you. There are plenty of people at school who are willing to help you embrace your cultural food.
- 7. What aspect of this text did you most relate to?
  - a. I most related to the part where the author wanted her mom to pack american lunches such as ham and cheese sandwiches. I too have asked my mom to pack ham and cheese sandwiches for lunch at school before.
- 8. What feedback would you give the author?
  - a. I would tell the author that they wrote a great personal narrative story with lots of backstory. I think that she could've added more detail on what happened after the event. Things such as whether or not she kept bringing Korean dishes to school.