

Hishaan Rajwani

Professor Alison Oses

UWP 001

9 June 2025

Literacy Narrative

When I first moved to Davis, the only thing stronger than my excitement of coming to the US was my belief that I would never have to cook. I looked at the Dining Commons and was left in awe. The place had everything I had ever asked for. Bowls of fries, trays of burgers and dispensers filled with cereal that clattered every time someone entered. I would float between the stations, plate above plate wobbling under the weight of a random combination I had picked that day. Two slices of pizza, an orange and a piece of brownie? Why not! Most of the days, I rotated between two of my favorites: the black bean burger stacked with every sauce I could reach and the Mongolian noodles that took forever to get. I didn't mind standing in the long line that curled around the corner if I knew it was for some of the best noodles I've ever had. Watching the chef toss the noodles like they were part of a MasterChef episode made the wait feel worth it.

Initially, I thought I had figured everything out. Freedom, food and not a single spatula in sight. I felt relaxed. However, after a few weeks, I could feel the magic fading away. The black bean burger wasn't exciting anymore and the Mongolian noodles felt repetitive. Even my off campus go-to, Raising Cane's, felt like a hassle to eat. It was then that I realized, "Maybe I should try cooking!"

My finest culinary accomplishment prior to college was not burning toast and even that wasn't always successful. I once prepared instant noodles for my brother and left them on the stove, forgetting they were cooking. Twenty minutes later, the water had evaporated and

somehow the noodles were still uncooked. Another time, I sneezed and spilled an entire jar of red chili into boiling curry. It was a nightmare. So, when I decided to give it another try, my subconscious was embracing the risk of potentially causing a small fire. The monotony of the dining food became unbearable. One night, I ended up scrolling through numerous videos titled “easy meals even you can’t mess up”. I took the plunge. At first, it was too chaotic. I’d stare at my laptop and watch people make basic pasta look like rocket science. They'd throw garlic into a pan with a nonchalant flair, saying something like, "Just until it's fragrant," and I'd sit there wondering if fragrant was before or after it looked like little black rocks. After multiple rounds of rewinding, I began taking notes and it started making sense. I realized that I had procrastinated for long enough. I mustered up some courage and grabbed a crumpled bag from my drawer. Few minutes later, I was standing at the entrance of Trader Joe’s with just a blurry mental list of ingredients. No recipe. No measurements. I had way too much pride for someone who once burned instant noodles.

Starting off with the basics, I grabbed spaghetti, garlic that was so pungent I could still smell it making my way down the aisle, a bushel of basil, olive oil and Italian seasoning. I almost forgot the parmesan cheese. At the checkout, my gaze shifted to this red jar of pomodoro sauce. It looked so appetizing that I couldn’t help but buy it, hoping to somehow integrate it into the recipe. I headed back to the kitchen in my dorm. I laid all the ingredients on the counter. For a moment, I was doubting my decision. I was going to store all of it in the fridge but I realized that messing up would at least get me a funny story out of this. So, I filled the pan with water and added a pinch of salt. It was likely too much but it seemed alright. I drizzled some olive oil and added the spaghetti. After stirring aggressively, I chopped a few cloves of garlic and I only had a few close calls with the knife. I moved on to the star ingredient. I thoroughly washed the basil

leaves and added it to the blender. This was probably the first time I had ever seen measuring cups. Surprisingly, I measured the parmesan cheese and olive oil without making a mess on the counter. Adding those to the blender, I also grabbed a clove of garlic. The videos emphasized that it would give the dish a nice kick, so I threw it in too. Blending resulted in a green sludge. I added some oil and whispered words of encouragement at it. Finally, it turned into this smooth sauce, the aroma of which filled the entire kitchen. My mouth was watering before I could even taste it. It tasted a little weird but I thought salt would be the right fix. Then, I heated the olive oil and threw in the chopped garlic. I folded the perfectly boiled spaghetti into the creamy sauce, tossing it all together with style. I topped it off with some Italian seasoning and extra parmesan cheese. It was time. I twirled some of the pasta onto my fork and took a bite.

It was not what I had expected.

The pesto was so salty and loaded with garlic that it left a pungent aftertaste. The pasta itself was slightly undercooked, with a stiffness that stuck to my teeth. I sat down quietly in the kitchen, convincing myself that it wasn't as bad. It was not a total disaster. It felt like a child's very first drawing proudly stuck on the fridge signifying effort more than beauty. I was happy that it didn't turn out as bad as the first time but not of the outcome. Though I tried to gulp the pasta, I knew I had to let it go. I was ready to return to the Dining Commons the next morning like nothing had happened. It seemed easier to pretend that I didn't waste two hours of my day. However, my mind refused to believe that. I decided to fix it piece by piece. I realized that I wasn't ready to cook something as complex as Pesto pasta straight away.

So, I started off simple. Instant noodles. I boiled some water in a pan and added the noodles. Once the noodles were cooked, I added the seasoning packet carefully. They were ready shortly after. I had kept no expectations this time though. To my relief, it was warm and soupy,

like comfort in a bowl. I was off to a good start. Then, I moved on to fried rice. I selected all my favorite vegetables and learnt how to cut juliennes. This allowed me to master my chopping skills. I seasoned them before adding them to a pan. The fried rice tasted even better than the noodles. It turned out to be so flavorful. I watched YouTube videos too, trying to learn even when I didn't have time to cook. It was finally time to make the dish I wanted to master.

This time I was mindful of how much salt I was adding. I did a "taste test" at every step. Next, I played around with texture. Cashews made the sauce creamier, so I decided to incorporate that. I chopped the garlic in half, instead of adding the whole clove. I even reserved some of the pasta water and added it to the blender. Slowly, I started realizing exactly where I had gone wrong the first time. Now, the pesto smelled fresh. It hit every single note, lighting up every corner of my palate. At that moment, I was simply glad I had started at all. The two hours I had spent chopping, washing, and cleaning were totally worth it. In just a few minutes, I wiped my plate clean. As I was taking the last bite, I remembered the last time I made the same dish and the first time I had tried to make instant noodles. I had come such a long way and developed. The kitchen was no more a war zone but had become a harbor for my growing love for cooking.

These days, stepping into the kitchen is less of a struggle and feels like returning to a familiar rhythm. I've learned to appreciate how just chopping vegetables can feel grounding after a long day. I feel comforted by the sizzling of garlic in oil and the warm aroma lingering in the air. What once seemed intimidating developed into a language I've slowly begun to understand. In hindsight, it was never solely about food. It was about learning to take action in the absence of comfort and to find joy not just in the result, but in the process. Cooking has become my way of reclaiming agency in a new environment where I initially felt overwhelmed. I started feeling a sense of belonging, not only in the kitchen but also in Davis. Today, I don't define literacy as just

reading and writing. It's about learning new skills, finding meaning in them, and allowing them to shape the way we see ourselves. The journey taught me much more than how to prepare a meal. I acquired a good sense of when something smells just right. I also mix flavors I like and it ends up tasting better than expected. Instead of worrying about the dish being perfect, I focus more on the effort I put in. With a dash of confidence and a spoonful of excitement, I have developed a growing hunger to keep learning, far beyond the kitchen.