

Where are the *rươi*¹?

Perhaps it's the same in any family: when the head of a household has a favorite dish, everyone else tends to pick up the habit—and the taste.

I don't know from which generation, but in our Nguyễn clan certain foods have been handed down from long ago to my father's time, and then to ours.

Every year the family must make *mắm tôm chua*² and *mắm rươi*³.

"Sour, spicy, salty, astringent, with pork belly" pretty much sums up the prep for *mắm tôm chua*.

But *mắm rươi* is indescribable. Not to mention the making of the paste itself— you first have to buy the *rươi* in season: "the twentieth of the ninth month, the fifth of the tenth" on the lunar calendar each year. Nor are we even talking yet about eating it raw as relish, or steamed into a custard— and if you steam it, you must do it right. Just the fresh-herb platter alone already runs to many kinds: cabbage, mustard greens, celery, chrysanthemum greens⁴, aromatic herbs, mandarin peel, slivered scallion, and ginger. Of course, you still need pork belly. Skip any of these and the flavor falls short.

From before the August Revolution⁵ my father had already loved these two kinds of *mắm*. At ordinary meals he didn't drink, but whenever there was *mắm*, he insisted on a few cups of rice liquor.

On *mắm* days the family lingered at the table longer than usual, yet we always finished before my father. He took his time, and at the very end he would inevitably haul out the whole lot of colonial officials—French and Vietnamese—and give them a thorough scolding to conclude the meal. By that sequence we could always tell whether his *mắm* meal was nearing its end.

Still, perhaps because the family didn't drink, it felt almost like eating alone; so he never seemed as happy as when close friends came to share the *mắm*.

Of course, with friends present there could be no end-of-meal tirade against the officials.

After 1954, now and then he would invite literary friends— Tú Mỗ, Nguyễn Hồng, Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Hoàng Trung Thông, and others—to the house to drink and eat *mắm*. Once, after the meal, they all lay down for a nap, woke refreshed, then said their goodbyes, each heading home. Truly, those were cheerful meals and drinks together.

* * *

Back in Nam Định, around 1937, one afternoon my father told my mother: a friend from faraway Sài Gòn had just arrived and would join us for dinner. Asked if he could eat *mắm rươi*, the friend said yes; so serving our family's traditional dish would be just the thing.

With the late notice, my mother hurried to Rộng Market to buy provisions—assorted herbs and pork belly— so the *mắm rươi* could be ready in time to welcome the guest.

By dusk my father's Saigon friend arrived. They ate and drank for a little over an hour— the meal nearly done, it seemed.

Suddenly the whole house heard the Saigon friend call out loudly: "Where are the *rươi*?"

Everyone burst into smiles, though no one dared laugh aloud.

¹*Rươi*: seasonal tidal ragworms used as a Northern Vietnamese delicacy.

²*Mắm tôm chua*: a Huế-style fermented shrimp relish, pleasantly sour, spicy, and aromatic.

³*Mắm rươi*: a fermented paste made from *rươi*.

⁴*Rau cải cúc* (also called *tần ô* or garland chrysanthemum/shungiku).

⁵The 1945 August Revolution in Vietnam.

Because the *mắm rươi* was already on the tray. My father's friend from Sài Gòn had followed every step just as my father did: adding the condiments and *mắm rươi* properly to his bowl; and he had enjoyed the *mắm rươi* from start to finish.

And yet here he was asking, "Where are the *rươi*?"

It turned out he had thought *mắm rươi* meant there was still another dish yet to be served!

A hearty laugh was had by all.

Hà Nội, August 22, 1996