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MY TURN

■ Dmae Roberts



Holiday fusion

Similar to many people, Christmas has been a secular holiday for me that mainly centers on giving gifts. One of my earliest photos is of my brother and I tearing up wrapping paper with delight, with miles of the stuff strewn about the floor, while our parents looked on with slightly concerned expressions. Our family had just arrived in America after living in Japan for several years. We were visiting my grandparents in Oklahoma and I ate American food for the first time. After we settled in Oregon, my mom tried to mix Asian dishes with what was considered traditional American fare. During the holidays, my mom always made turkey and stuffing, but we also had rice and stir-fried vegetables. My dad would bake a pie and she'd prepare red mung bean soup with mochi balls.

Many Asian and Pacific Islander families blend different cuisines and cultural traditions for holiday gatherings. I recently asked some friends and colleagues about their experiences fusing holiday traditions; below are a few of the comments and stories I received.

Simon Tam, founder of the Portland-based Asian dance-rock band The Slants, said about his early memories of holiday fusion: "We always had Chinese food, but we also watched the original *Star Wars* trilogy throughout the day. We often had Kung Pao Turkey, but our most consistent meal was hot pot, which was definitely created as a slow meal meant to be shared. I haven't spent the holidays with my family/parents in about 15 years, though. Maybe one day, we will again. Perhaps we'll go watch *The Force Awakens!*"

Sarika Mehta, who hosts the Intersections show on KBOO radio, said she is often taken aback when assumptions are made about the way her family celebrates the holidays. Some people are surprised that her family celebrates Christmas at all, Mehta said, adding that when it happens, she gently reminds them that she and her family are American. "Once, in high school, a friend gave Christmas cards to everyone in our group except me," she explained. "She thought she might offend me by giving me one. She didn't know we celebrate Christmas, and I was more offended to *not* receive one."

"As a kid, Christmas was depressing because we barely had anything. As an adult, I find more joy in buying stuff for my family," said Chanly Bob, a Unix/Linux systems administrator for Portland General Electric. As a refugee, he and his family struggled when they came to Portland. "We come from a country with strong Buddhist influence, but yet we happily celebrate Thanksgiving and Christmas because it brings families together. It

makes us forget about ourselves and think about others. Giving back and paying it forward is very important for us. The food is a combination of authentic Khmer cuisine (such as samlow majoo, a Khmer hot and sour soup). Our mom, grandma, and aunties usually cook dishes you would not find at restaurants, along with ones you would find on American tables."

My sister-in-law, Peggy Cai, learned to fuse holiday traditions as a white American when she married her first-generation Chinese-American husband Zhihong. She said that on Christmas Eve, her husband wants to eat "stir-fried crab," one of his favorite Chinese dishes. "This started quite by accident," she explained. "One year we were unable to get to my parent's house for Christmas due to an ice storm. All Safeway had was Dungeness crab and from that year on, we have made that our tradition, adding a little bit of Chinese culture into our holiday." Cai also mentioned that once the interracial couple had kids, they continued to fuse more traditions: At Christmas, the children receive red envelopes in their Christmas stockings, and for New Year, they eat spaghetti, following the Chinese tradition of long noodles symbolizing long life.

Luann Algozo, a community engagement manager at the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon, said her family's Christmas dinners were always blended with American and Filipino dishes. "My family celebrates on Christmas Eve with a Noche Buena," said Algozo. "So we have a big meal of Filipino dishes ranging from lumpia and pancit to lechon. American dishes include items such as fruit salad and ham, but it's funny, because rarely anyone ever eats those dishes. I feel bad for my mom and aunts who would bring those items year after year, I think because they appeared to make the dinner more American."

My husband and I have created our own traditions. He bakes vegetarian Christmas lasagna and Tofurky. For dessert, he makes rum-ball cookies (which he made on one of our first dates) and figgy pudding (like his mother made for him). I make an antipasto salad and insist on champagne.

This year, I think I'd like to add eggrolls to the meal. I used to stir-fry vegetables, but it feels like everyday food to me. Heck, maybe I should learn to make red bean soup with mochi balls!

Though our holiday meal is more of a neutral blending of borrowed traditions, we have made it our own. Perhaps all families have a choice now to combine or create new traditions as America becomes more and more culturally blended. Here's wishing you a happy time with your holiday fusion!