

TamaleDumpling

Composer's Note

Stephanie Chou, November 4, 2023

What is a “tamaledumpling”? Is it a tamale stuffed inside a dumpling? A dumpling wrapped inside a tamale? Some blend of the two? I don't know - it's something I came up with just for this show, but have never attempted to cook in real life – yet! It's a new dish that celebrates the blending of cultures through food.

Writing rhythmic songs about food has long been part of my existing style, and anyone who knows me personally knows how much I love to eat. Writing *TamaleDumpling* was such a joy, and a chance to celebrate my family's holiday traditions and the family traditions of my partner Roy's family. Food has always been the center of our family gatherings. Our Chou Family Thanksgiving tradition involves an East-meets-West homemade meal and 30+ people. The food has evolved to include traditional American Thanksgiving items (turkey, pumpkin pie), traditional Chinese items (pork belly roast, various vegetables), unique blends of the two (sticky rice stuffing for turkey; turkey rice porridge), Peking Duck, scallion pancakes, and as other cultures join the family, things like latkes and more have entered. The day-after-Thanksgiving assembly-line style dumplings wrapping tradition is something I always look forward to. While my other grandparents in Taiwan don't celebrate Thanksgiving perse, we have enjoyed many Thanksgiving Peking Ducks here in the US when they came to visit.

The first time I made a tamale - or even ate one that was authentic - was about 7 years ago, when Roy's Dad taught me how to make it from scratch - rolling out the masa paste, adding chili to the pork, wrapping the corn husks, steaming. His family loved to cook and took great pride in New Mexican cuisine, often shipping us frozen tamales from NM to NY. It was a lovely way for me to bond with his family, and I cherish those experiences, especially now that Roy's parents have passed.

These holiday gatherings celebrate the blending of cultures, generations, traditions, religions, and families. Yet they can often be filled with conflict and bring out differences in views: traditional/modern, East/West, old/new, elder/young, safety/risk... In *TamaleDumpling*, sharing food has a way of bringing people together and overcoming their differences. Food has a central role in helping people find common ground, no matter how stuck in their ways they might be. It wasn't until I started working on this piece that I noticed the similarity between the process of making dumplings and tamales, and how all cultures have foods that are like that.

TamaleDumpling is my first opera, first time writing a narrative work for other singers (not for me/not for my band), and first time arranging for a trio of violin, cello, and piano. A lot of firsts! This project was all about trying new things, and I'm grateful to have had this opportunity to grow as an artist through it. I'm so happy that Cerise from WSP asked me to write this piece for *Let's Celebrate* and could not be more thrilled that such a fantastic company will be putting on the premiere! The 20-minute format is long enough to tell a complete story, while still being

contained and manageable for a first-time opera composer. It's been amazing to see the other dramatic elements aside from the music bring the piece to life.

A favorite phrase of my grandfather's in his later years: "It is not the food, it is the company."

Hope your holidays are filled with good food, good company, creative energy, and that you find your own *tamaledumpling* in your life!

-Steph

Dedicated to my grandparents: WaiPo, WaiGong, YeYe and NaiNai; and Roy's family in New Mexico: Ray and Mabel Hendrickson, and Kathleen Quinn

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