

A is for Afghanistan, which inspired me to make coriander seed lemonade. A is for Algeria, for which I rolled out thin dough to make veggie-filled flat bread called “Mahjouba.” A is also for Armenia, which entailed filling hundreds of tiny “Manti” with ground beef and parsley.

B is for the burdens I carried during quarantine as I was forced to text “sending hugs” instead of giving real ones to my struggling friends. B is for the bitterness of being unable to visit my neighborhood “grandmas,” or travel to see my own. B is also for my bickering thoughts that never seemed to stop.

C is for Carmalized--the pandemic project my younger sister and I embarked on to fight the “B’s” of our lives. The melding of our names, Carly and Macy, along with the reference to good “Carma,” was the inspiration for our project name. It’s pronounced “caramelized” in honor of the technique used to make strong foods, like onions, sweet and golden. On one of our daily walks around the block, we listed ways we could break the cycle of doing the same thing every single day.

“What if we made a dish from every country in the world?”

Ever since I could hold a spatula, I have loved cooking and baking. Some of my favorite childhood memories include rolling out cinnamon rolls with my grandma, giggling while punching down bread dough with my dad, and carefully wrapping homemade caramels to bring Christmas caroling to our neighbors.

But as I grew up and piled my “plate” high with activities, classes, and work, the space that once held cooking slowly diminished until it was a single crumb. Once the coronavirus lockdown forced some of my “food groups” to disappear, the mashed potatoes of activities slid off my plate, the peas of babysitting rolled off along with the rice of commuting, leaving a gaping empty spot on my plate. This empty spot made it so that the Jell-O of family, the buttered roll of religion, and the carrots of school work were lonely and unbalanced, leaving me yearning for another food group.

So when Macy agreed to embark on the Carmalized challenge, we ran home and got right to work researching, visions already forming in our minds. We connected with friends from around the world, Germany- where my family had lived, New Zealand, Cameroon, and China. With each new recipe organized in my huge spreadsheet of 196 countries, my excitement grew. Though the connections were virtual, they allowed me and my friends to grow closer as we shared important parts of our culture. Over a video call, my friend Yiran taught me how to make traditional 饺子, potstickers from China pronounced *jiǎozi*.

I started looking forward to the afternoons where I could research, plan, and cook with Macy. We made lists of ingredients we had never heard of and ventured to new foreign grocery stores to find ingredients like pomegranate syrup, Thai bananas, and cardamom. With each dish, our relationship carmalized further as we learned to love the time we spent together.

After a taste test and carefully plating each dish, I photograph and caption each dish for our Instagram, including a description and a word from the language spoken in the country mentioned. I helped my grandma set up an Instagram account, so that even though she was unable to come and visit, she could see what I was cooking at the moment.

Z is for Zimbabwe, the last country, which we made Malva Pudding for, a creamy cake celebrating that we had gone all the way around the world from the comfort of our own home. In Zimbabwe, one of the official languages is Shona, where you would say, “pemberero” to mean “celebrate!”

Although quarantining orders have come to a close, our cookbook remains open, as we embark to the fifty US states, still hungry for more.