

My cheeks were flushed as I biked home from Yiran's house. Not only were they red from the excitement of having a new friend, but also from the spicy chicken feet that I had just eaten. I could not wait to tell my sister, Macy, what I had just tried.

I met Yiran my freshman year in English class when I volunteered to help her with a project because she was still practicing her English. As we were working at her dining room table, her dad shouted something from the kitchen in Chinese. She translated, "Would you like to stay for dinner?" I hesitated when I heard what was being served, but I decided to give spicy chicken feet a shot.

Yiran and I began biking home from school together, and we grew closer as we discussed our homework, religion, dilemmas, and concerns. The next year, however, our schedules no longer aligned and we could not bike home together anymore. I thought I was busy, but if I was busy, she was swamped. Her parents signed her up for so many activities, classes and "opportunities" that we rarely got to hang out with each other anymore.

Ironically, when the COVID lockdown was implemented, even though I was no longer able to see my friends in person, my friendship with Yiran was unexpectedly strengthened, and so was my relationship with my sister, Macy.

While on a walk one day, Macy and I brainstormed ways we could stay productive and motivate ourselves because each day of virtual learning was starting to feel the same.

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

After finding out that there were 196 countries, we knew we had to get right to work. We researched, shopped for, made, photographed, and posted each dish with a small blurb and word from that country. Melding of our names, and referencing "Good Karma," Macy and I named our project, "Carmalized." It's pronounced Caramelized, in honor of the cooking technique used to make strong foods, like onions, sweet. Trying those chicken feet years ago gave me the confidence to try different things like rose water date bites, ginger-lime tofu, and cornmeal fufu.

When it was time to make a dish for China, I called Yiran on Zoom and she taught me how to make 饺子, pronounced *Jiaozi*, a type of traditional Chinese dumplings. As we chatted and pinched dough, our friendship was not only renewed, but improved. COVID restrictions released her from many obligations, her schedule opened up, and we were able to spend more time conversing and discussing ideas virtually.

Together, with another friend, we founded a student-led cooking club. The goal of the club was to bring the joy of culture and cooking to students during the pandemic. Knowing for myself the impactful trying new recipes and cooking can make, I poured hours into planning, advertising, and leading our club meetings on Zoom. We collaborated with other clubs, had guest speakers, and taught each other our favorite family recipes. My sister, Macy, would come

to the meetings as well. It was rewarding to see our meetings come together as people from many different backgrounds joined and shared what was important to their cultures. These relationships I formed and strengthened through the club gave me the motivation I needed to get through quarantine.

Now that we are back in school, we are still holding cooking club meetings and bringing people together. Since officially finishing the 196 countries, I am now working on completing a dish from the 50 states. Now, when I'm at a friend's house or at a restaurant, I jump at the idea of being able to try something new—even if it's spicy chicken feet.