

Food - like life

Petra Gimbad, originally published 11 August 2006 in [The Sun](#)

A person's eating habits say a lot about his or her principles and personality.

Food never was an issue until I started university and had to fend for myself. Away from home, I missed and appreciated mum's simple and heartfelt meals.

Topped with inspired seasonings and garnish, her dishes reflected her philosophy: it is no waste to give extra love to your family. We were not in the habit of buying each other gifts or given to loud proclamations of love and care; I know now that the care mum put into her cooking was not just an exercise in culinary skills.

When you cook for people you care about, you put yourself into the food you produce. Why slave in the kitchen otherwise?

In serving a meal, my pedantic personality hangs onto my guests' every expression and word until I am finally convinced that the fruit of my labour is indeed worthy. "Are you sure?" I would harass my close friend Edward, long after everyone had left.

"Are you sure the lamb was alright? Not too much spice?"

"It was a good meal," he would say patiently, "you have to remember most students don't cook, let alone put in the sort of effort into their food like you do."

"They don't?" I was surprised. Then I realised that peers both Asian and non-Asian alike bought frozen food and takeaways a lot more frequently than they could be bothered to cook. Friends who, when I visited and offered to cook, would say, "Pour in the rest of the vegetables. Cook more so that I will have something to eat for the next few days."

Like the sub-par Mother Teresa I was bent on becoming, I always obliged.

I have just noticed that most of my Malaysian friends who attended Malaysian colleges do not cook. They enjoy what I used to take for granted: cheap mamak food, 24 hours a day.

Mamak food that I used to crave, but no longer - cooking has taught me how strong flavours can mask rotting vegetables and bad meat, that a "cheap" roti was cheaper if I used flour and water to make my own.

I think this says something about how materialism has taken over. We value convenience so much we fail to ask, "What are we saving time for?"

Whether you drive a Mercedes-Benz or take the bus, the average KL-ite spends more time in traffic than he or she would like to.

A friend works in the office till 7pm to avoid the jam. An aunt was driven into retirement when the bus routes changed recently - three buses to work each way was more than she could bear. (At least she had the financial option to quit. Think about those who have no choice but to plod on.)

Everyone enjoys home-cooked food, but few are willing to put in the effort. Many 20-somethings meet decked out in their new outfits at the mamak for quick and cheap food, and proceed to dance the night away in clubs that charge cover and sell pricey cocktails.

I have no memories of cooking with friends. Some of my food memories unfortunately also involve bold requests from my mother's peers to tumpang her cooking: "Eh, when are you going to make that dish again? Better call me so I can tumpang."

Books on feminism, spirituality and Gandhi have recently influenced how I eat. I am not a saint, but I have decided that much suffering can be avoided if I cut down on my meat consumption.

My imagination has convinced me that staring into the blade of a knife is a terrifying way to spend one's last few seconds. I am also trying to support fair trade coffee when I can.

Influenced by my grandparents, who were farmers, I cannot exploit someone's poverty by paying them less than they deserve when I can afford to pay slightly more. Our lives depend on farmers, yet we pay them unfairly.

Neither change was easy to implement. I got sick of eating bland greens and tofu, necessary for protein, calcium and iron. Fair trade coffee is pricier and it can be a quest to find brands that suit your taste.

Since then, I have learnt to appreciate fresh vegetables and cook tofu tastefully. Cutting down on meat has unexpectedly improved my health. I drink less coffee but enjoy it more. I still eat meat, and I have the occasional cup of Nescafe. I am not perfect, but I try. How we eat, reflects how we live.

Petra likes feminism, social justice, and working on the online magazine, Vox. She is a law student in her spare time. Comments: feedback@thesundaily.com