

Tasting Soy Sauce, Teaching Culture

A Case for Experiential Learning

By Willa Zhen

Imagine teaching a lively class where even the quietest student gets involved. When students sample soy sauces from all over Asia and even the heart of Kentucky, comments like “I didn’t know soy sauce had such flavor” and “I didn’t know we made soy sauce in America” pour out of students’ mouths. Tasting soy sauce is an interactive way of engaging students with Asian cultures and history.

My discussion here concerns a course called China: Food and Cultures at the Culinary Institute of America. This course is an elective offered to juniors and seniors enrolled in one of three bachelor’s degree majors (Applied Food Studies, Business Management, or Culinary Science). Most of my students will have taken a culinary course called the Cuisines of Asia, a survey of regional cooking and cuisine in Asia. Some have taken or are concurrently taking History and Cultures of Asia, a survey course on Asian history. When I first began teaching this course on Chinese foodways and culture, I found that my students enjoyed the readings and class discussions, but were having trouble connecting with the material. To many of my students, China remained a monolith in their eyes: a country of over a billion people all seemingly the same, who eat the same food (rice) seasoned with the same condiment (soy sauce).

Using these culinary generalizations as a starting point, I developed a series of activities that involve tasting and experiencing soy sauce as a way of connecting students with Chinese foodways, history, and culture. What tasting and experiencing soy sauce allows is a tangible, interactive approach to engage the diversity of landscapes, regionality, and cuisines of China as a country, as well as its diaspora of peoples and diffusion of inventions and ideas across the globe. Tasting allows students to chip away at misconceptions about the “sameness” of Chinese society. My explanations here focus primarily on mainland China and the United States, but this activity can be easily adapted to cover the broader Asian continent or expanded to consider other Asian diasporas. This model can be applied to other Asian countries or can be adapted toward a transregional focus. Comparisons of products from what anthropologist Tan Chee-Beng calls the “core tofu cultures” of China, Japan, Korea, and Việt Nam can highlight the immense differences between these countries and cultures.¹

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SOY

Soybeans (*Glycine max*) are legumes native to eastern Asia. Soybeans are believed to be descended from the wild soybean (*Glycine soja*). Their domestication was likely to have occurred first in northeastern China. Soybeans were already under cultivation during the early Western Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE–771 BCE). Soybeans were among the staple grains of ancient China, alongside millet, rice, barley, and wheat. Soybeans are advantaged in that they can be dried and stored for long periods of time. Nutritionally, soy serves as a complement to a favored grain: rice. When paired together, soybeans and rice create a complementary nutritional chain, increasing the nutritional value of a meal. In animal protein-poor diets, this is a welcome blessing, as it ensures a consistent protein source year-round.

Broadly speaking, soy-based foodstuffs can be identified as fermented and nonfermented. Fresh immature soybeans (*edamame*), soymilk, soy-

bean sprouts, and fresh tofu are some examples of non-fermented foods. Soybeans—Japanese edamame aside—are not particularly palatable in their original state. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz reminds us that soybeans are “the legume most improved as human food by fermentation.”² Thus, fermented products like preserved soybeans, soy pastes, *miso*, and soy sauce tend to feature more prominently in cooking. In the past, many families made their fermented soy products or bought them from local producers. Nowadays, many fermented soy products, especially soy sauces, are mass-produced.

Soy sauce was likely invented during the Han dynasty around the same time soybeans were domesticated. The earliest references to *jiang you* (soy sauce) date to the Song dynasty. Soy sauce, in its most basic form, is made by cooking soybeans and mixing with wheat flour to create a paste. This paste is incubated and fermented over time; the liquid released by fermentation is drawn and filtered for use as soy sauce. Of course, each producer has its own methods, and many commercial producers forgo long fermentations, relying primarily on hydrolyzed protein for flavoring. Soy sauce has been named “the most important flavorer of Chinese food.”³ Soy sauce is essential to many Asian cuisines and identities, and forms part of what Elisabeth Rozin and Paul Rozin call the “flavor principles”—seasoning combinations that “impart a clear and characteristic identity to the foods of any group.”⁴

Despite its associations with Asia, the world’s largest producer of soybeans is the United States, accounting for approximately 35 percent of the world’s production by volume. The two largest Asian producers, China and India, account for merely 6 and 4 percent of the world’s production volume, respectively. Nowadays, soy is as much a part of American culture as it is Asian culture.

EXPERIENCING SOY SAUCE

After having students complete readings and conducting a lecture on soy’s importance to Chinese civilization and the global Chinese diaspora, I engage students in a guided tasting of a variety of soy sauces. Before launching into the tasting, I have students start by reflecting on what they know about soy sauce through class discussion. Students are certainly familiar with soy sauce. After all, Chinese food is Americans’ favorite type of ethnic food, and Japanese and Thai—other cuisines that also utilize soy sauce—also feature in the top ten.⁵ Often, their first thoughts are positive memories, recalling packets of soy sauce that come with takeout at their favorite neighborhood joint back home or using soy sauce in their own culinary experiments.

I usually have students taste between six and eight soy sauces. Ideally, these are purchased from a local Asian grocer, where there are often dozens of varieties of soy sauce from different countries and made in different styles. Those who live in areas with a more limited Asian population can still acquire a variety of soy sauces quite readily. Many mainstream American supermarkets feature half a dozen types of soy sauces nowadays, among them Kikkoman, Lee Kum Kee, and La Choy products. Online retailers like Amazon and Asian Food Grocer also sell a variety of imported soy sauces from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other countries.



Just a small sample of the many soy sauce brands that can be found online. Source: Willa Davis.

My students are often surprised to find one of my (and their) favorite soy sauces is Bluegrass Soy Sauce, a small-batch microbrewed soy sauce made with non-genetically modified soybeans grown in Kentucky, which is fermented and aged in bourbon barrels. Bluegrass Soy Sauce in particular provides a solid example for highlighting how foods, ideas, and inventions adapt and localize. What was originally a Chinese invention is adapted to the local environment, using Kentucky-based products and aged in bourbon barrels, bourbon being one of the iconic products from the state of Kentucky.

At each seat, I lay out the following: disposable cups numbered to correspond to the different bottles of soy sauce, several coffee stirrers or plastic spoons for tasting, and some plain crackers or bread. Water is also provided. The class tastes each soy sauce as a group: once plain and again with either crackers or bread. Together, we speak about what we experience in terms of the five tastes (bitter, salty, sour, sweet, and *umami* [savory]), and flavors (e.g., nutty, caramel, fishy). Those unaccustomed to tastings are often worried about not having enough knowledge or expertise to make a sensorial judgment, but there are simply no wrong answers. After, I pass around the bottles and have students look at the ingredients on each label and identify the place of origin. I stimulate discussion by asking the following questions:

- Where is this soy sauce produced? Consider the country, province or state, and city.
- How might the geography and environment impact the product?
- Where is soy in the order of ingredients?
- Describe the color, texture, aroma, tastes, and flavors. How do these change depending on the soy content and production method?
- How is this soy sauce produced? Is it naturally brewed and fermented? How might production conditions relate to the food systems and economy of the area in which it is made?
- Who might be the buyer of this product? Is this sold for Chinese consumers or for export? How might the consumer base impact the quality or recipe of this product?

I also have students look up the locations of the different producers and map them. By doing this, students are able to see just how many places produce soy sauce, and they are able to add another dimension to the diversity of Chinese culture and foodways. At the next class, I follow up with another activity where I have students visit a local Asian supermarket and note the number, types, and descriptions of the soy sauces available, in addition to their countries of production. I encourage them to take

pictures of the different bottles and note the prices. A variation of this activity can be completed online by having students visit online retailers and look at their product descriptions. Once again, this reinforces the complexities and depth of Chinese history, culture, and foodways.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This article has presented an interactive and engaging activity for the classroom that can be adapted for different age groups and audiences, and modified to fit different classroom environments. This activity does not require access to a kitchen, although kitchen access helps with setup

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and cleanup. Those unfamiliar with the complexity of Chinese regional cooking, and immense richness of Asian cuisines and foodways, might be quick to dismiss this activity. Tasting soy sauces from within the same country or ethnic-cultural group allows students to experience firsthand the differences within a society and how the evolution of a condiment like soy sauce can tell the stories of so much more. It is also easy to essentialize cultures, particularly those that are not our own native cultures. Using food as a gateway to approach other societies makes others real. By inviting them to taste different soy sauces, I am encouraging them to consider soy sauce's importance to Chinese (and more broadly, Asian) history and culture, and its role in agriculture, trade, migration, and diaspora, among other issues, through firsthand experience.

The curriculum at the Culinary Institute of America is heavily based on the applied aspects of learning, and my students are accustomed to "hands-on" work. My colleagues and I who teach more traditional academic subjects do not believe that the "doing" should disappear when students trade in their toques and knives for books and pens. It gives students a place from which to approach and understand another group of people. "Taste is the embodied experience that permits the most appropriate knowledge of the other, the perceptual ability that allows a true contact with things, exactly because it does not only touch the matter, but merges with it."⁶ For students and instructors who learn in more traditional classroom environments, tasting is not frivolous. Tasting helps transform the theoretical into the tangible. ■

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NOTES

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5. "Top 10 Ethnic Cuisines Americans Crave Most," *Parade*, last modified May 15, 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/y6vyjpsb>.
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