

Finding Memories of a Distant Home Through Milo Toast

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Growing up in Singapore, school sports days under the blazing sun were sweaty affairs, and nothing was more blissful on those humid afternoons than cold, chocolatey Milo. We'd all line up beside the unmistakable green van that dispensed it, patiently waiting our turn. It was served in a paper cup already disintegrating in our sweaty hands, delicious and cold. Some savored it, sip by sip, trying to make it last. Others—me included—gulped it down in one go.

Even more satisfying was to eat the dark, sweet powder that the drink was made from, straight from its tin. Every household had a Milo tin. The lid was tricky for a young child; it couldn't be opened just with your hands, but required wedging a spoon under the metal edge just so, to pop it out. I didn't master it till I was maybe six or seven, but once I did, I would sneak spoonfuls of Milo powder whenever my mother wasn't looking.

The snug lid was meant to keep the air out and the powder pristine, but it was no match for Singaporean humidity. So the powder would clump together, developing a thin, sticky crust from the moisture in the air alone. This made it chewy, like a crunchy nugget of chocolate powder. (Indeed, that may very well have been the inspiration for actual Milo nuggets, chocolate covered Milo chunks sold in packets and just one of many spin-off products.)

Best of all, though, was my mother's version of Milo toast, a common Singaporean breakfast traditionally found in kopitiam, made upscale these days by cafes in air-conditioned malls. Typically it is made with a thick slice of lightly toasted white bread, slathered with condensed milk and a generous layer of Milo powder.

I never tried this version. I don't know why; likely, my mother thought condensed milk too sweet in addition to an already sweet snack. Her version used cream crackers instead of bread, margarine instead of condensed milk, the Milo powder lightly dusted on top instead of thickly layered.

It was, quite literally, the most delicious thing I'd ever tasted. I asked for it morning and night, as breakfast and tea time snack, post-dinner dessert, and everything in between.

My first impression of America was brash and bewildering, a whirlwind of choice and wants and opinions.

When I left Singapore to come to the US for college, much of my single suitcase was dedicated to food ("supplies" as I thought of it): pineapple tarts, ba kwa, sauce packets to make curry and chicken rice, and of course, a tin of Milo. I found out when I got here that Milo could be found in the occasional Asian supermarket, but it tasted different. Sweeter somehow, or less malty, or something. I resolved to always bring it from home.

But there were other problems. I'd thought cream crackers were universal, but they were nowhere to be found in New York, not even at the Asian supermarket. Margarine had a different consistency in cold weather. And the Milo itself—carefully tucked away in my exploding suitcase crammed with clothes, books, toiletries—didn't get sticky or clumpy in the same way in the dry, cold climate.

So my attempts at making my mother's Milo toast in this new place were few and far between. I settled for eating spoonfuls straight out of the tin, like I was a child again. And continents away from home, I felt like I was one. My first impression of America was brash and bewildering, a whirlwind of choice and wants and opinions. People seemed so confident of who they were, what they believed.

Like many a newcomer I was shocked by the sheer varieties of toothpaste available at the pharmacy, the number of combinations possible for a sandwich at the deli. My freshman year roommate—a literal cheerleader, who wore pink polos and pearls—was kind, but seemed from a different planet altogether. Indeed, her white, preppy, New England family looked at me as though I was from a different planet altogether.

Imagine my joy, then, upon discovering that my Mauritian friend knew what Milo was. I don't remember how I found out—perhaps we were at Nonya, the Malaysian restaurant downtown that I often dragged friends to for familiar food—but I do remember the shock of recognition after feeling adrift and alien for so long.

Over the years, after I graduated, moved to London, then to Austin, Texas, this happened again and again. A South African colleague, an Indian acquaintance, a Malaysian-American writer. I saw it in grocery stores in Kenya, when visiting a friend who lived there.

Milo, after all, was something of a colonial product. Invented by a Nestle chemist in Australia during the Great Depression, the chocolate-malt powder product was originally conceived of as a cheap fortified drink that would ensure malnourished children received necessary vitamins and minerals. As historian Stephanie Wong writes:

Competing global powers sought to exercise control over the masses of the global South in the chaotic post-[WWII] periods—and how better to influence a country’s political and cultural landscape than to offer a solution to widespread starvation?....By the mid-20th century, global food conglomerates like Nestlé, Unilever, Conagra Brands, and Novartis began to peddle chocolate milk powder as a fortifying tonic in South Asia, Europe, and Latin America.

I knew none of this at the time. Milo was simply an inextricable part of my childhood, and whenever I met someone else who had grown up with it in some other part of the world, we’d swap notes on how we consumed it: hot, cold, beverage, powdered, on toast, cereal, crackers, et cetera. To this day I have not found anyone who prepares it the way my mother does.

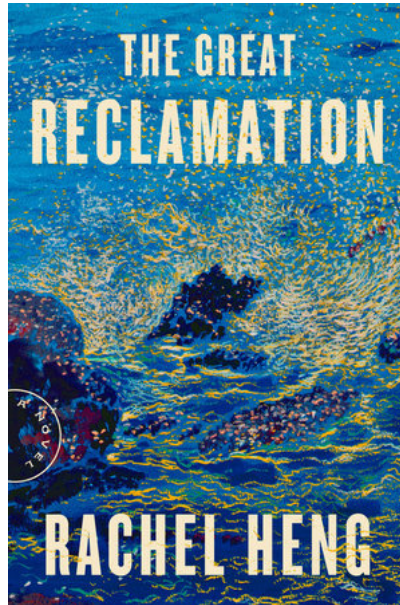
Such was the bittersweet joy to be found in the legacy of food in a world shaped by colonial forces.

Nevertheless, each time I came across someone who knew and loved Milo, it was always a delightful surprise, as warming a comfort as the drink itself, a shot of familiarity in an unfamiliar place. Never mind that the reason we had grown up with it in such different places was the ubiquity of empire. Such was the bittersweet joy to be found in the legacy of food in a world shaped by colonial forces.

These days, I no longer bring tins of Milo from home. I don’t remember when I stopped. It happens gradually, the relinquishing of one’s past, and something that once felt so potent, one day simply stops being as important.

Or perhaps it is that things are different in New York these days, with Singaporean food suddenly prominent in the wake of *Crazy Rich Asians*. Milo is no longer something I have to pack carefully in my luggage, but can be obtained—cold, delicious, perfectly made—from the drinks stall at Urban Hawker, the enormous shiny Singaporean food hall in Midtown Manhattan.

It is never the same drinking it in cold New York, as I discovered when I tried to replicate my mother’s Milo toast in college so many years ago, a mere echo of the deep sense-memory of childhood. But just sometimes, as malty, chocolatey liquid slips down my throat, just for a moment, I am that young girl again, sweaty and ponytailed, standing with my friends beside the bright green van, under the fierce gaze of the blazing sun.



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