Substitutions

Balsamic, for Zhenjiang vinegar.
Letters, for the family gathered.

A Cuisinart, for many hands.
Petty burglars, for warring bands.

A baby’s room, for tight quarters.
Passing cars, for neighbors.

Lawn-mower buzzing, for bicycle bells.
Cod fillets, for carp head-to-tail.

Children who overhear the language,
for children who speak the language.

Virginia ham, for Jinhua ham,
and nothing, for the noodle man,

calling as he bears his pole
down alley and street, its baskets full

of pickled mustard, scallions, spice,
minced pork, and a stove he lights

where the customer happens to be,
the balance of hot, sour, salty, sweet,

which decades later you still crave,
a formula he’ll take to the grave.
Ginger

We’ll affirm its arrival
when it’s not in the titles
of recipes in which it figures
quietly, as moderate slivers.

When it’s always available,
not lumped with root vegetables
nor flecked with blue mold.

When everyone knows
not to bite the large pieces.

When everyone preaches
the best means of peeling
(knife, spoon, or not-peeling)
and disagrees, without violence.

When its unexpected absence
causes fundamental hunger
but it’s like running out of sugar:
you can ask any neighbor.

When the nation remembers
how it treated as barbaric
the eaters of garlic
as they fled persecution

and sees its reflection
in black-and-white photos
of mobs against risotto.
Cured ham,
rice wine, wine rice,
gefilte fish, Dole fruit cocktail,
thousand-year eggs, chrysanthemum
tea, rice.
Serve Immediately

The techniques evolved, reasonably, out of cooking-fuel scarcity,

but if one more recipe ends with the phrase, I'm throwing out the book. Already the days overflow with imperatives. If I weren’t so hungry, I’d be reading, sleeping, or burning energy at the gym, where exertion is meant to result in replenishment.

My appetite is less for calories than for forms that live in obscurity most of the year, assembled in albums my grandfather made—thousands of restaurant tables—before documenting meals became fashionable. In the moment, we sometimes grumbled. How many fish needed to be immortalized, glistening on platters, one eye admiring the chandelier, one side adorned with scallions and ginger?

Now I go in search of the not-yet-filleted. The authors demand that I shop each day, quizzing the fish man, seeking out chickens still warm from the kill, and simulate kitchens teeming with servants, aunts, grandmothers. The original second-person narrators,
they preach the ancient urgency
of staying ahead of rot, thus the pantry:
salted, pickled, fermented, dried,
able to withstand neglect and survive
the months until I finally come back
from tetrazzini and chili mac,
embracing the tyranny of generations
who have departed, but left instructions.
Lychee Express

What would the lovely Yang Guifei, concubine to the emperor, a Helen of China, have made of our gleaming grocery stores, always awash in berries, melons, tangerines? Her passion for lychees, rushed north by a chain of horsemen, laid waste to a dynasty.

She must have understood, at least upon the deadly finale, the cost of transporting food so fragile over so many li

for pleasure, not necessity, while the kingdom faltered. History wants a great beauty to undermine a ruler through human weakness. And who with highest power would deny his most-loved mistress her longing for a flavor available briefly, far away? There’s something classical about her appetite, about the chain of sweating couriers, thirsty, fearful of bruising the delicate fruit. It proves how far we’ve come, those tiny stickers with PLUs and far-flung nations of origin

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so common, we decry the waste.
The good peasants of antiquity
always ate locally, if at the cost
of variety, and under tyranny.

Neither they nor we would refuse
a bunch of ripe lychees in December.
Neither they nor we get to choose
who would eat humbly, who like an emperor.