



Growing up in the mountains of China left **KELLY ENG's** father with some colourful culinary memories

guavas, lotus root or sugar cane. Other times they would put sweet potatoes on a small open fire, then bury them with dirt until they were piping hot and fleshy. "Delicious," my Dad says wistfully.

After working all day, everyone had worked up a huge appetite. Dinner was a varied affair, but rice was always on the menu. Twice a year, when they ploughed the rice fields, millions of crickets would come hopping out of the soil. Dad chased after them, hoping to catch that elusive entree. If he was successful, Grandmother would grill the crickets on a hot plate till they were "as crisp as chips!"

One main dish Dad enjoyed was worms. He liked them steamed, then folded into an omelette. He enjoyed frogs all year round, but snails only came out in winter. Dad would run his hands along the banks of the ponds, feeling for their soft bodies. Then Grandmother would boil them and they would suck the juicy flesh out of the shells.

Birthdays were always a special occasion. Dad would receive a small amount of pocket money in a bright red

chinese whispers

My father (pictured above left) grew up in a southern Chinese village that is bordered by mountains, a river and miles of luscious green rice paddies. He rode water buffalo, had deadly cobras enter the house and once heard a tiger padding softly outside his window. Although it has been 47 years since he left, his Chinese spirit is kept alive by his passion for fresh food, cooking and storytelling.

At 6am, after eating a bowl of steaming hot *jook* (savoury rice porridge), everyone would start work in the fields. My Dad's and his sisters' jobs were to feed the chickens, pick fruit and go fishing for catfish in the river. They would stand knee-deep in the river, waiting for the flick of a muddy-brown fin. Or, if that failed, they would stir up the river waters, hoping to scare the fish into their nets. Once my Dad spied a plump-looking catfish, who escaped his clutches by swimming into a small hole. Dad plunged his hand in after it and, to his surprise, a water snake slithered across the length of his arm and off into the river. My Dad and his sister bolted out of the water – there was definitely no catfish for dinner that night!

Lunch consisted of whatever the land on which they were working offered. Sometimes they ate strawberry

packet. While children in Australia would spend their money on licorice ropes or raspberry drops, Dad would buy pickled ginger, salted plums and mandarin peel.

Before the invention of rice cookers, rice was cooked in clay pots over an open fire. The rice closest to the flame was toasty and crunchy, while the rice at the top was fluffy. Dad would roll the crunchy rice into balls with ginger, drizzle them with oil and eat them while he played.

Forty-seven years on and a few countries away, guava and star fruit do not seem to be as sweet as they were in my father's childhood memories. Worms and crickets are not on the menu and chicken is no longer an occasional special treat. However, my Dad still has a love of fresh fruit and vegetables. When my brother and I were young, Dad would bellow down the hallway "fruity fruit time," or encourage us to eat "more greens, more greens!"

Today, Dad grows silver beet, snow peas, guava, tomatoes and herbs in our back garden. When I was younger, we even kept pet ducks right in the middle of suburbia. And while he complains that today's ovens do not provide the same heat distribution as an open fire, he still makes the meanest crispy-skin lemon roast chicken, just like Grandmother did all those years ago. **at**