

TASTE BECOMING TREND

A look into cultural appropriation and gentrification

By: Everest Tran, Reporter

Opening up my lunchbox was never an easy task. Sitting in the bustling lunchroom with my Hello Kitty bag, knowing that inside the threat was almost more dangerous than a ticking time bomb. All around me, rows of PB&Js and Lunchables were torn into, Kool-Aid that made the tables sticky, and Goldfish that scattered the floor. Inside my box, dumplings bursting with umami flavor, gingery spices foreign to the ham and cheese beside me. My lunches as a little girl became a point to pick on, tiny microaggressions that I heard from classmates. I learned to hide the cultural dishes my mom packed, to throw them into the trash before anyone noticed. Some days, I chose an empty stomach over being the target again.

As I grow older, I continue to hear the same ideas about race and who belongs where. What feels even more unsettling than open ignorance is the way beautiful pieces of different cultures are borrowed, displayed, and praised while the people behind them are ignored or mocked.

This is where gentrification appears, not just in housing or neighborhoods but in everyday culture. It is more than trying something from another background. It changes identities, smooths out history, and pretends the new version is the original. The dumplings I was once embarrassed by now show up in sleek restaurants like Din Tai Fung, advertised as trendy or exotic. Even though the dishes are embraced, they often drift far from their roots. The cultural meaning slips away. Although it can be seen as a unique take on Asian cuisine, it serves dishes that stray far from how they are traditionally made, erasing their history. Recently, micro-influencer and foodie Joelle Uzyel was called out for her mocking of a Chinese accent while dining at Din Tai Fung, who had seen an opportunity for a “joke” in which she deemed appropriate in the setting. A reminder that what’s borrowed is rarely respected.

When culture enters mainstream media, it almost always gets dressed up to fit the Western media;

it becomes renamed, reused, and rebranded. Matcha becomes a “clean girl” drink instead of a ceremonial tradition. Congee becomes “Brothy rice.” Chai becomes a Starbucks seasonal flavor or an Instagram post, Pico de Gallo becomes “cowboy caviar”. The cultural roots get erased and replaced with words like high-protein, aesthetic, cozy, or trendy.

Here in Omaha, a city where most people look the same and many grew up with only one idea of “normal,” I’ve noticed a pattern that feels both familiar and frustrating. The city is quick to celebrate the foods, styles, and traditions from other cultures, yet so much slower to embrace the people attached. It’s a loud contradiction, one where dumplings, matcha, or chai are praised, while the communities that have always loved them are still alienated. This gap reveals how diversity can be celebrated on the surface without the deeper work of respect and inclusion. It shows how easily culture can be welcomed once it’s been smoothed out to fit local comfort, and how hard it is for real understanding to catch up. Recognizing this pattern is the first step toward change that makes waves, a way to learn without othering.

In the end, what stands out the most isn’t just that pieces of culture are renamed, rebuilt, and repackaged, but how different cultures are only acceptable when it’s no longer attached to the people it came from. When I was that little girl sitting in the cafeteria, I learned to shrink myself, to tuck away the smells and sounds of home so I wouldn’t stand out. As I get older, I’m still learning to quell that instinct to hide away. Gentrification isn’t just about food or fashion or trends; it’s about the quiet message that culture is only valuable after someone else decides it is, the continued hate that takes the beauty of things and only leaves behind what is deemed too different. Growing up in a world that constantly repackages identities, it teaches us that culture was never something to be embarrassed about. It may be rebranded, redone, or watered down - but the roots of where something comes from will never disappear. Learning to share those roots clearly and confidently, without apology, is honoring what makes us human.

