

Tamango Boro's: The Taste of Nostalgia

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Small flags tied on rope fluttered violently not letting me look away; reds, greens, blues, whites, and more swirled around. Entire civilizations strung up in the sky. I looked for my mother's country flag but there were so many nation's flags strung up that it was hard to spot a simple white flag with a red circle in the middle. Japan. The flags stood guard outside, Saraga International grocery store, waving at incoming and departing customers. Today was a special day, not only was the grocery store available for customers to shop in (per usual) but today there were vendors from all over the Indianapolis community in the parking lot of Saraga. This international foods festival that was hosted a couple times a year, that I would overtime become a frequent visitor to, was the main attraction for my visit. The smells of various barbeques wafted through the air as I slammed my friend's car door shut, eager to see all that was being offered. The tops of the food trucks peaked over the busy parking lot. I waited at the back of the car as my new college friend Sheila, who is always kind enough to drive me around, got out and locked their car. Beep beep.

As a fellow lover of trying new foods, Sheila was always sending flyers of local events that were selling foods from different communities of people. Sheila's visits to Saraga were as frequent as mine were to the local Kroger in my small hometown north of Indianapolis. Saraga was not foreign to her as it was to me, it carries a wide variety of ingredients used in Mexican households, making Saraga a key destination in her household. Hearing about this, I thought of my mother and how she would have loved having Saraga close to home, how it may have brought her some comfort. I believe that we can feel home in many different ways and food is one of those sources.

Sheila and I ventured into the aroma of sizzling meat that masked any other smells that might have been present. In the center there were tables lined up advertising some products that are sold in the grocery store. Laid out were small cups of samples.

I suppressed a yippe as my friend and I sped walked to the tables, determined to get any free treats we could manage to get our hands on. After satisfying our craving for free samples, and making sure it would amount to the amount we would spend later, we bought some birria tacos. We sat down in the shade, on a patch of grass outside of the commotion of the market, taking a deep breath and inhaling the tacos. They were gone in minutes and I wiped my mouth of grease, hiding my face from my friends. I looked over my shoulder looking at the entrance of Saraga. Sheila looks at my line of sight. “Want to go inside?”

“Yes!” I hurriedly got up to throw away my trash before we went into the store.

Saraga was famous, at least famous to me. My friends had mentioned it to me many times before, but me not being from the area, it seemed like a made up wonderland. We skipped over the shopping carts, not knowing we would soon need it. This would be a lesson that we would not learn right away as we always would think that as college students we would save money and not buy enough to need a cart. When it came to Saraga, we were always wrong. The foods and drinks we would find in there would be irresistible. Many not only because of their catchy branding but also because of the memories they held of meals cooked during my childhood.

The store opened up into a bakery, a very fancy looking place that contrasted the exterior of the building. Other food shops flanked the sides but the majority of people migrated to the bakery. My mouth gaped as I saw all the cute breads in the glass display cases. I wanted to take them all. A stack of trays and tongs sat neatly on a side table. It brought back memories of bakeries I had visited in Japan as a child. At the register was another brightly lit display case with a line of cakes. Oh my mom would love this, I thought. These were the cakes she described from her childhood. Just the right amount of sweetness she would say, not like the American cakes that made her sick from being too sweet. They glistened behind the glass, each cake looking as good as its neighbor. Laced with fluffy cream and bright fruits placed delicately on top, the cakes had me standing in the bakery section for an eternity.

We moved on into the main part of the grocery store, where vegetables and fruits, all colors of the rainbow lay stocked on shelves. Bright light illuminated each row of fruits and vegetables, many laying out bare, not covered in plastic or netting. No extra layers to reach the fresh produce. This section would later become a favorite of mine, but for my first visit it was overlooked.

The grocery store was no escape from the onslaught of people outdoors. Trapped inside, the chatters of families around the store were amplified. Faces of people from all around the world passed around me. I felt free, knowing there was not a single person here who I knew. I think most of these people were here to get a taste of home, whether that be food from their home country or in my case being a second generation immigrant, a taste of what food my mother introduced me to. And others perhaps, here to try something new. Or a combination of both.

The aisles then appeared, stretching out to the far end of the store. Looking down the aisles I could see swinging signs that were labeled. We were in America, literally, but also the aisle of American foods or at least the ones we see in the United States. I glided through this aisle with ease, nothing catching my attention. I was looking for something outside of my regular day to day diet. We traveled through the Mediterranean, Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. If my friends and I ever got separated, we could always text what country we happened to be in. I walked ahead of Sheila, my eyes pulled my feet forward. Japan's aisle was nestled between the other countries of Asia. I stepped into the territory a little hesitant that I would not find what I was looking for. What was I looking for? I didn't have an answer at the time. My head whipped all around as I scanned the aisle, pacing back and forth to make sure I didn't miss anything. I was mesmerized by how much one aisle could hold. I thought of my mom, I thought of my siblings, and I thought of my trips to Japan. Memories that were starting to muddle with time. The dried squid, maze kake rice flavoring, and other niche snacks specific to my childhood were at every corner. Many of them I had forgotten about until this moment. I really didn't want to use too much money but it's hard not to go out on a shopping spree in Saraga. I am the type of person that once I decide to buy one thing it makes it easier for me to buy the

second thing and then the third thing. I knew I had to limit myself and have this day be a window shopping day. I decided to buy a little treat, something I could take back for my mom. Sheila followed me around listening to my little gasps as memories returned to me in the aisle of Japan.

“What are you looking for?”

I had asked myself the same question. “I’m not sure” I replied to Sheila. Sheila then points at a section of packaged snacks, “these are cute.” I see it then, the clear packaging with brightly colored cartoon animal graphics, a little different from my memories but still unmistakable. They were snacks for babies, but everyone ate them. The cute animal graphics on the front grinned back up at me and the packaging crinkled loudly under my fingers as I spun around to show my prize. Tamago boro, a cracker sort of snack, that was sweet and melted in your mouth. The main ingredient, egg, and the shape of it, round, made up the name “tamago boro.” It was nothing fancy but a sudden rush of memories came flooding in. I felt warm despite the heavy air conditioning in the building. Memories of stopping at the checkout line, and my mom despite not allowing many snacks in the cart, pulling a string of tamago boro packets off the checkout counter display. Me plopping them into my mouth, being made to pass the bag around to share with my siblings, and feeling content and satisfied until we would arrive at my grandmother’s home to eat a real dinner. It wasn’t the tamago boro necessarily that made the trip to Saraga so memorable. It was nostalgia packaged ready to dissolve in my mouth as quickly as my time as a child felt. The reminder that I can find a sense of home no matter where I am. No it is not the same but it will make me smile, it will spark joy, and it will be another reminder to call my mom.

Later at the end of my sophomore year of college I would bring my mother to explore Saraga. She made the same gasps I made when seeing foods she had not gotten to eat in many many years. Times had changed and many grocery stores now carried international foods but for my small hometown it was just now being introduced. I am glad I could bring some home away from home to her.

As for what I was looking for in Saraga?

Apparently tamago boro, and the gentle reminder that I can find home anywhere if I look hard enough.