

# Succulent

IN MID-MARCH, WHEN THE city of Los Angeles ordered restaurants to close their dining rooms, I worried that these places wouldn't survive. As a lifelong lover of restaurants who has devoted the past thirteen years of my writing life to them, I had to respond. So, I hatched a wide-ranging plan, from calling Congress to supporting beloved businesses.

The plan included my significant other and me getting as much takeout, every week, as we could. In the process, we also tried to save money and climate by not driving, and to minimize the number of exposures to the virus by ordering from just a few trusted places. We soon found a groove: picking up dinner from three restaurants, each once a week, the same ones, in the neighborhood, on foot.

This routine turned us into "regulars." I never wanted to be a regular. I enjoy the anonymity of urban experience, the superficial interaction with strangers so abundant in restaurants. Jane Jacobs, the brilliant and iconoclastic urban theorist, recognized that loose ties like those are vital to life in large cities. The friendly distance we keep with strangers provides some sociability and protection on the streets without encumbering us with social obligations or encroaching on our privacy. Big cities, she wrote, would be intolerable if those cordial street strangers became nosey neighbors, let alone friends.

*But under our new routine, my big city shrank to something like a small town.*

Today, I find myself in the unlikely position of Googling how to take care of a succulent plant. This week, Jazz Singanong, owner of the Thai restaurant Jitlada, gave the potted dependent to us as a gift. We were grateful and flattered, but the bundle did at first give us a twinge of concern. We have never taken care of a plant. Nevertheless, out of appreciation, we accepted the responsibility. As I write this, the young succulent stretches toward me, as if expectantly, from the little pot it will soon grow out of.

At the time of Jazz's gift, we had reached a milestone in our relationship with her. She didn't know us well enough to know that we don't garden or have outdoor space to cultivate a plant,

that giving us one meant a window in our apartment would have to do for its diet of light. What Jazz knew, however, was that we loved her food, we cared about her business, and we showed up. When Jazz gave us that plant, we had reached our eleventh consecutive week of takeout from Jitlada. Over that period, we made twelve visits, ordering two days of food each time.

In a small way, we invested in Jitlada, and Jitlada grew on us. Jazz and her staff deserved our returns, and not just because the *Los Angeles Times*, which perennially features Jitlada on its 101-best-restaurants list, says it's worthy. In this moment of crisis for her business, Jazz managed the near impossible, keeping her employees working and paid and her hundreds of menu items still available. We love it when she pops out of the small hot kitchen to tell us that she loves us. "We love you," she says. "Thank you for the support." "We appreciate you, Jazz," we say.

It seems that, after our seventh visit, we had grown on her, too. She started to add little gifts to our takeout bag, items above and beyond the Mango Sticky Rice she's thrown in *gratis* since week one. On the eighth week, she treated us to a jar of addictively rich, practically meaty, homemade hot sauce. Two weeks later, when we ran out of that, she gave us a cup of a different concoction, a nuclear concentration of chilies with a side of conversation and prep suggestions.

As the weeks progressed, the topics of conversation expanded. We talked family and her garden. We followed each other on Instagram. This is remarkable, because, before COVID-19, we rarely went to Jitlada. A darling of the food media, Jitlada always had too much of a wait to get in.

Now, we have a relationship to tend to, once a week or whenever the soil dries out. And now we also know and care about Jitlada and Jazz.

I ask myself if this experience changes my outlook on strangers and cities. The truth is, not entirely. So long as we have a variety of restaurants to visit, I will treasure that urban feeling of getting lost in the crowd. But, as COVID-19 has taught us in so many aspects of our lives, not everything can go back to the way it was.