There is a Taiwanese word that I have come to incorporate into my daily vocabulary, both English and Chinese, and that word is Q. Like so many other Taiwanese colloquialisms, this word is expressed on paper with a single capitalized roman letter. Usually doubled up when used in regular conversation, QQ is a unique oral sensation that cannot be mistaken for any other. When you put something in your mouth—cold or warm, salty or sweet, dry or wet, it doesn’t matter—if the substance first pushes back as you seize it with your teeth, then firms up for just a moment before yielding magnanimously to part, with surprising ease and goodwill, from the cleaving corners of your mandibles—that is Q. It is light but not insubstantial, flexible, supple, resistant, yet ultimately compliant. The word Q fits this experience perfectly. Like the foodstuffs it so aptly describes, it permeates the mouth, softly pillowing up against the palate, no sharp edges or hard stops, as easy to pronounce as it is to digest.

Anything can be Q as long as you can put it in your mouth. Memory foam mattresses are not Q, but a live sea cucumber scooped up from its temporary home in a water-filled blue bucket for your inspection can—no, should—be QQ. “Delicate flavor,” the wind-wizened vendor tells you, “very Q!”

Americans do not like their meats Q. Meat, whether fowl, fish, or beast, may be firm or tender, tough, stringy, weak, or chewy, but it must always feel like meat, never anything else. And Q, inherently democratic or else curiously ambiguous, belongs to no one food group. Q, while not squishy, is softer than it is springy and several degrees removed from chewy. For some reason, visiting foreigners routinely connect it with slimy. For Westerners slimy is definitely not good. Slimy is viscous, like spit, and wet, like swamp water. Slimy conjures any number of things the average Westerner most definitely does not want to put in her mouth: earthworms, mucous, mold. For anyone who is already a little dubious of the exotic extremes to which Chinese people will occasionally take their cooking, Q only serves as one more thing to avoid. Indeed, the Taiwanese are no less bold or quirky in their tastes than their mainland counterparts, but even though Taiwanese cuisine doesn’t shy away from slimy, Q can stand alone. A particular favorite of mine are the slimeless, powdery pastel cubes of sugary agar agar that wobble between your fingertips without leaving them sticky.

“I can’t handle Q-y things in my drink, it’s like swallowing somebody else’s phlegm,” one friend explains to me when I ask her how she has managed to spend almost two years of her life on this island without developing at least a passing enthusiasm for the myriad bubble beverages that every other foreigner seems addicted to. In fact, the infamous preservative-loaded pearl milk tea, along with other chunk-filled drinks, is often the non-Taiwanese’s first real exposure to the concept of Q. While I have had floaty bits in my drinks in other parts of the world, pearl milk tea, with its stunningly simple mixture of poor-quality red tea, powdered milk, and “pearls” made from sweet-potato starch soaked in syrup, has turned me into a lifelong champion of Q.

Even if many outsiders can’t stomach it, for the Taiwanese Q is essential. If there is a dominant flavor here, it is that of fish, and not necessarily the kind that comes in prepackaged white or red slabs in the freezers of North America’s
supermarkets. A popular dish here is a gelatinous concoction of eggs, cornstarch, Thousand Island dressing, and oysters that is both Q-y and drippy. Fish heads and eggs, shark fins, snails, dried scallops, even goat and goose meat all possess a prized “fishy” scent. For the Taiwanese fish doesn’t stink; it’s fragrant, and having fish breath is no more an antisocial act than exhaling the odor of garlic or coffee. Much of the bounty that the oceans offer for consumption turns to Q when boiled, steamed, jellied, sautéed, or baked: seaweed, the tongues of sea urchins, clam flesh, and eels. So I suspect Q is a natural and welcome sensation for anyone who enjoys all the flavors of the sea.

But it pops up everywhere, besides in fish. It can be found in the form of sugared apple chunks embedded in popsicles. QQ tofu bobs at the top of crowded hotpots, and Q-y balls of spiced steamed pumpkin crowned with tiny red berries greet the first customers to dine at the neighborhood vegetarian buffet. As new food trends take root here like the sprouted progeny of wind-borne seeds from abroad, Q seems to transform them one by one. I can remember the overwhelming disgust I felt when I once purchased what I had thought was an ordinary, rather convincing version of a Western-style multigrain roll at a bakery in downtown Taipei. The crust was generally unassuming, darkening to promising shades of brown at the ends. Here and there, small miscellaneous shapes like crumbled-up grains or nuts poked through the crust invitingly. Lying in wait, however, was a nasty surprise. I expected my first bite to be filled with dry corners, crisp crust, and a soft, fluffy inside, but what I got instead was a mouthful of QQ taro filling, which felt at first like uncooked dough, or else maybe snot. I instantly spit it out and threw the rest away.

On another, more pleasant occasion, a revolting, slightly wobbly dish, lying somewhere on the scale between soup and food that can be eaten with a pair of chopsticks, was brought to my bedside as I lay recovering from a weeklong bout of stomach flu. A slab of chalky, scarlet red preserved meat was suspended in a bubble of clear solidified cornstarch swimming in a pool of treacly pink sludge. The requisite topping of powdered peanuts and minced cilantro added a nice contrast to the Pepto-Bismol theme but seemed to me to fall woefully short of making this an edible meal. The mix of sweet and savory, fresh and spicy, Q and crunchy, however, stirred up my long-dormant taste buds and proved to be the perfect cure for a weak stomach.

In spite of all our words for the textures of food, we often seem oblivious to how the feeling of something in our mouths, against teeth and around tongue, shapes our experience of eating. It isn’t until we sink our teeth into a substance whose shape, thickness, temperature, moisture, or other tangible quality goes against our expectations of what food feels like that we suddenly become all too aware of the important role texture plays in consumption. A QQ piece of sea cucumber or the little clear balls of Q in my coconut drink don’t do much for my taste buds, yet they are amazingly stimulating. In the right context—a mixture of flavor, temperature, and emotional agents that is different for everyone—Q can be a playful surprise, a tiny wake-up call that reminds us that eating is a sensual, physical act.

As with any experience, there is much to be gained through eating with an open mind and active senses. A tiny sliver of aged cuttlefish proffered by a grinning stranger more completely ties me into the life and spirit of the morning market behind the subway station near my apartment than does an hour of bargaining, vegetable groping, and manhandling of chickens. Dusted an unearthly yellow by weeks spent soaking in a medicinal concoction of herbs, alkalines, and sugars, yet retaining a pure white center, it doesn’t look like anything I want to put in my mouth, but the woman is insistent, and when she plops it into a thick brown sauce and forces it into my hands, I obediently raise the morsel to my mouth, sliding it off the toothpick with my lips. It tastes like old shoes, garlic, soy sauce, and the sea and, yes, bounces nicely when I push it against my molars before sliding smoothly apart as I ease my jaws together: the perfect Q experience.

Oyster Omelet (Taiwanese street food)

SERVES 1

3 tablespoons cornstarch, dissolved in 4 ounces of cold water
3 large eggs, beaten
salt and pepper to taste
½ cup raw oysters
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil

Mix all the ingredients together in a bowl, then pour into a hot frying pan coated with oil and cook until bubbles appear, about three to five minutes. Flip and cook an additional three minutes. Serve with lots of Thousand Island dressing and a little Thai chili sauce.