

Futures

Your soul in a pot

A taste of things to come? By Megan Chee



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

It's not easy to open a successful hotpot restaurant in Space Station Singapore. Competition's tough. Collagen soup, lab-grown Wagyu beef, organic hydroponic-farm-to-table vegetables ... every variation of hotpot imaginable already exists. If you want to stand out, you've got to think outside the box.

There were tonnes of legal loopholes to jump through before my idea could come to fruition. It wasn't enough to get the worms certified as safe for human consumption by the Interspecies Food Safety Commission; I also had to apply for a special permit from the Ministry of Health. All in all, it took almost a year before my first shipment of Xeggarian psychic brain worms arrived.

"New Hotpot Restaurant Wants You to Eat Your Own Brain!"

That was one of the sillier headlines that popped up in the tabloids the day after the grand opening of Your Soul in a Pot. Let me make this clear, there is *no actual brain matter*

in the soup. OK? You are *not* eating your own brain. That would be disgusting!

It's a common misconception that Xeggarian psychic brain worms eat brains. They eat brainwaves, not *brains*. They co-exist peacefully with their hosts. They could live in your brain for decades without causing any ill effects. They've actually been shown to help with some mental-health issues.

So here's how it works.

Twenty-four hours before your reservation, a worm will be delivered to you in a cylindrical container, along with a single pill. You ingest the worm (I recommend swallowing it, although they can be inserted through any orifice). Just before your reservation at Your Soul in a Pot, you take the pill. The pill kills the worm and causes it to exit through your left ear. You put the worm back in the container it came in, and commute to the restaurant immediately. The carcass will start to decompose and turn toxic after two hours, so, well, punctuality is key.

As long as you follow our instructions, this process is completely safe and painless. I really cannot stress that enough. The health and safety of my customers is my top priority. After all, business would really take a hit if diners started to die off.

When your party arrives at Your Soul in a Pot, our friendly staff will take your worms and escort you to a table. Each place has a personal pot embedded into the table. Diners can choose from a range of gourmet ingredients to cook in their soup. The star ingredient, of course, is the worm, which our staff will dehydrate and grind into a fine powder.

You see, after spending 24 hours in your brain, that worm knows you intimately. It is an imprint of your soul. It contains everything that's ever happened to you, every word of your internal monologue, every facet of your personality. Consuming the worm brings back half-faded memories and emotions with such vivid intensity that it's normal to see diners sobbing over their bowls. And if someone else

Futures

drinks your soup, then for a few moments, that person will know exactly what it's like to be you.

I have this regular, a high-flying tech executive who comes at least once a month with a different date. Once, after her latest date had run out of the restaurant in tears, I brought her a free drink and asked her why she kept doing this. I know, I know – it's none of my business. But I couldn't resist.

"I'm a busy woman," she said. "Don't you realize how time-consuming the whole dating process is? You meet people, you ask them out, you go on dates. Each date is *at least* three hours long. It really adds up. Even if it goes well, you've still gotta be together for a few years before you're sure they're the one. That's – an *excessive* amount of time to spend looking for love. An unacceptable amount of time." She gestured down at her still-bubbling pot of soup. "This could be the ultimate shortcut."

I raised my eyebrows. "A shortcut? You've been bringing dates here for *years*, never the same one twice."

"Yeah, I know! But it only has to happen once. Eventually I'm going to bring the right person here, and once we drink each other's soup it's going to be like a light bulb turning on. We'll look at each other and we'll just *know*, you know? We'll get married and start a family straight away. Because we'll have seen so far into each other's souls that there'll be no doubt. Tell you what, I'll invite you to the wedding."

I thought that was a pretty insane approach to dating. But you know what? One day, she brought this gorgeous guy to the restaurant and they stayed for hours, enjoying their soup, talking and laughing until closing time. I got the wedding invitation the next day. It was a destination wedding on a pleasure resort planet three systems away – all expenses

covered. Best vacation ever.

They're still happily married, to the best of my knowledge. Absolutely crazy how things work out, sometimes.

Damn, I've been going on and on, haven't I? Sorry. I'm new to this whole Virtual Match-maker thing. To be honest, this is my first holovideo date.

You know, your planet's only a couple of light years away from Space Station Singapore. Within teleportation range, if I'm not mistaken. Maybe you could pop over sometime and try Your Soul in a Pot. I'll send you a worm. My treat.

Megan Chee has lived in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States, and is currently based in Singapore. Her work has appeared in *Fantasy Magazine* and *Athena's Daughters: Volume II*.