

# Filipino: The Five-Step Plan

I'VE ALWAYS HAD THIS sense that eating certain dishes made you more Filipino, that there was a ranking system in place.

It has five levels:

1. *Bagoong*, a fermented shrimp paste used as a condiment and spice
2. *Kare-kare*, an oxtail stew thickened with ground peanuts
3. *Sizzling sisig*, chopped, boiled, and grilled pig's ears and face
4. *Dinuguan*, a stew made with pig's blood
5. *Balut*, a half-developed duck embryo

Move past the first two levels and you win approving nods from relatives. Those who make it to the fifth level can call themselves authentically Filipino, even if they never stepped a foot outside of Cleveland.

But what does it mean to be authentic? Is it about where one comes from, how one behaves, or what one eats? The culinary historian Raymond Sokolov (1991: 219) once described it "as slippery a notion as happiness." As the daughter of a Filipino mother and an Italian-Hungarian father, as someone perceived as Asian but raised in Texas instead of the Philippines, I wonder how much authenticity I've let slip through my fork.

\*\*\*

My five-level scale is arbitrary; another Filipino-American kid might remove *bagoong* or *kare-kare* entirely. However you slice it, there's no question that certain Filipino dishes have become native-versus-American-born challenges. In the mother country, the natives can spot you based on what's on the end of your fork. "American," they'll snicker when they see someone like me hovering at Level 1 on the scale, *bagoong*. When I was younger I used to be offput by *bagoong*'s lumpy texture and lavender-pink color, a radioactive shade not found in most American refrigerators. As with any aged seafood, the smell is so pungent that there is no mistaking the moment a jar has been opened. While shrimp paste is

popular throughout Southeast Asia, to fry it up with Chinese cabbage is one thing, but to eat it straight from the jar is another. To savor *bagoong* raw is to embrace the glorious, unadorned funk of fermentation.

My older sister has visited the Philippines more recently than I have, and this gives her extra *bagoong* cred. When we ate at a Malaysian restaurant a few months back, my mother thrilled at my sister's second helping of *belacan* green beans (*belacan* is Malay shrimp paste) and likened it to her love of *bagoong*.

"You love the *bagoong*!" I could hear the pride of 7,000-plus Philippine islands in my mother's voice.

"I love the *bagoong*," my sister confirmed, piling more string beans onto her plate.

I cut in. "Yeah, whatever, man, so do I. So do we all."

"I didn't know you liked it too," my mother said, and shrugged. And then I was on my own, fighting an imagined contest over rotten shrimp.

On the five-step scale, most Fil-Am kids I knew made it at least as far as *kare-kare*, a stew of simmered oxtail and vegetables in a rich peanut sauce. I am embarrassed to say that I never tried, or at least don't remember trying, my grandmother Lola Lily's version when she was alive. The sauce sounds so delectable, so indulgent, but separating "oxtail" into two words told me all I needed to know: ox tail.

I have a deep, abiding fear of animal "parts." My little sister refers to Filipinos as the real originators of "nose to tail" eating; it's a culture that requires you to confront the whole animal and love it all the more. But I am a heavy meat eater who doesn't like to think about where it came from. Vegetarians recruit in the wrong places—PETA demonstrations, unrepentant jam-band nights—when they should really be at the grocery store, picking off shoppers like me who will only buy poultry as an amorphous chicken tender. I'll eat a steak, as long as I don't contemplate its provenance. I like a chicken wing, but I spend a lot of time debating how far I want to get in there: Pick at the lily white meat or start ripping away at the tendons?

Wings, knuckles—any animal appendage really—leave me conflicted. While I avoid certain parts of certain animals, there’s this other half of me that has never understood why these foods are taboo for myself and other Americans. This is not a new discussion; M.F.K. Fisher touched on it back when she wrote *How to Cook a Wolf* (1988: 104): “If you have these prejudices, ask yourself if they are not built on what you might have been taught when you were young and unthinking, and then if you can, teach yourself to enjoy some of the parts of an animal that are not commonly prepared.” Of course, she doesn’t tell you how to teach yourself, which might have been useful. She’s already moved on to sweetbreads and some winning recipe for calves’ brains she found in Barcelona.

The more courageous of my Fil-Am friends chomped their way past *kare-kare* and sizzling *sisig* to Level 4, *dinuguan*—pig’s blood stew. *Dinuguan* was the triple-dog dare of our little world, something we’d whisper about at parties: “Sure you like *bagoong*, but have you tried... *dinuguan*?” Every once in a while I would spy a bowl of it hovering in a far corner of the buffet table—the opaque, blackish-gray stew sitting there like some dark metaphorical abyss, the Heart of Darkness trapped between paper napkins and the rice cooker.

During a recent visit to a Filipino lunch counter in Seattle, I tried to give *dinuguan* another shot but wimped out at the last minute. The stakes are too high in these Filipino restaurants where the employees remind you of your aunts from the Philippines, your *titas*, and as they piled other customers’ dishes with enough *pancit* and *adobo* to feed five, I knew I was going to be bullied into finishing whatever I ordered. There is no guilt like the guilt from a Filipino *tita*, no such thing as “just a taste.”

This last failure is just another example of how I never get it right as a Filipino, although it might appear to an outsider that I am a decent-enough appreciator of the cuisine. Drop me by a Filipino potluck and watch me run to the table of rice cakes before the first two-liter of Coke is opened. Take me to one of those contemporary Filipino restaurants with pan-Asian flair, the ones that push *inihaw na baboy*, the crack-like barbecue pork skewers sold as street food in Manila. I will be first in line. This would imply that if I am not Filipino food’s biggest fan, I’m at least a big-enough fan. But there have been events.

Several years ago when I was still living in New York, I took a food-critic friend to a Filipino restaurant in the East Village. Elvie’s Turo Turo was based on the cafeteria-style restaurant in the Philippines called a *turo turo*, which means “point point” in Tagalog, for at a *turo turo* you point to the food you want from a steam table. I pointed out to my friend my staples: *pancit*, *inihaw na baboy*. These suggestions

usually work for the layman, but get one food-critic friend in there who has devoted essays to the glories of ear meat and you’re screwed. My friend was dying to get her tendon on. Trailing behind me, she asked about the other dishes, which I had suspected might contain a chunk of intestine here, a bit of cow tongue there. I dunno, I wanted to say back to her, they’re the dishes fake Filipinos like me avoid?

“I’m not 100 percent sure,” I whispered under my breath. “I’ve had a lot of them before, but I forget what they’re called. They’re, you know, the *other* dishes.”

It was not the most illuminating introduction, but she was supposed to go with my suggestions like all my other friends had. During this brief tutorial, she and I had an audience of Elvie’s employees, quietly waiting to dish out our food. After my lackluster performance, I watched as their mouths curled up into bemused smiles, the faint beginnings of Cheshire cat grins. Mild-mannered Asians, my ass—this was the Tribunal with serving spoons.

Hovering near the cash register, I was ready to beat a quick exit to the farthest table and eat my *pancit* in half-whitey shame. Lying between the Philippines and me was not so much the Pacific Ocean as an unloved pig intestine.

I left half my culture behind a sneeze guard.

\*\*\*

I’ve been comforted lately by an essay I read called “Beyond Authenticity,” in which the anthropologist Martin F. Manalansan IV (2103: 294) talks about how eating can “confound, distort, and/or unsettle your sense of identity and belonging”; that not every experience with immigrant foods offers an “easy or direct emotional link with national identity and belonging, warm nostalgic returns, or clear mappings of authenticity.” Instead Manalansan looks upon these events as an opportunity to reflect on the diaspora.

Something has been lost there, in my family’s diaspora. My Filipino mother learned how to eat from her Filipino mother. Lola Lily was a regal woman with a penchant for high-heeled mules, monogrammed Dior purses, and chicken butts. There is always someone in your Filipino family fighting over the ass of a chicken. White chicken breast is for suckers.

My mother actually told me when she was a child she only used to eat the breast. When I asked her what changed, she replied, “I just outgrew it, I suppose.” My mother now eats locusts and loves fried pig brains, but stops at dog and snake. As a native Filipino, she glides through to the end of the scale: Level 5, *balut*, the half-developed duck embryo.

I watched one summer as she and her siblings ate *balut* in Lola Lily’s kitchen. After cracking a hole in the top of the egg,

my uncle lifted it to his mouth and tilted his head back, sucking the liquid inside. At some point I stopped staring, but from the crunching noises, and the oohs, ahhs, and repeated declarations of “*sarap*” (“delicious”), it was clear they had hit pay dirt and were gnawing their way through tiny duck bodies.

Jasmine, a Fil-Am friend of mine from Queens, tried *balut* once but didn’t follow the golden rule: “I made the mistake of looking down,” she confessed. “I saw a beak, some feathers, and threw up right after.”

“Of course,” my mother said when I told her what happened with Jasmine. “That’s when it’s the best!”

What had their country taught them to value, and what had mine? I was envious of my mother and her siblings’ ability to embrace new foods and cultures in the States while still yearning for what they left back home. For the children of immigrants, it doesn’t work as well in reverse.

\*\*\*

Though I see *balut* as the ultimate level on the scale, I feel guilty focusing on it to the extent that I have thus far. This ranking system does Filipino food a gross injustice as it doesn’t even begin to touch on the cuisine’s breadth. Judging Filipino food by a delicacy like *balut* would be like reducing all of Chinese cuisine down to a century egg.

Since Filipino food hasn’t achieved the popularity of other Asian cuisines in the States, you have to start at the beginning when describing it, and that’s never easy. There is an oft-quoted line from the Filipino author Monina Mercado (Woods 2006: 225) that provides a good summary of the cuisine’s evolution: “Drawing origins from various cultures but displaying regional characteristics, Filipino food was prepared by Malay settlers, spiced with commercial relations with Chinese traders, stewed in 300 years of Spanish rule, and hamburgered by American influence in the Philippine way of life.”

The Filipino food critic Doreen Fernandez also breaks down the food by the original indigenous cuisine of Malay settlers, the influence of Chinese immigrants, and the impact of Spanish and American colonial rule. In her book *Sarap*, she describes how the precolonial indigenous cuisine features native ingredients such as fish, shellfish, and vegetables prepared with simple cooking methods like lightly steaming, roasting, or marinating in vinegar. Chinese traders introduced native Filipinos to soy sauce, noodles (*pancit*), spring rolls (*lumpia*), dumplings (*siopao*, *siomai*); Spanish colonization brought to the islands the cooking preparation of sautéing in oil and rich meaty, stews like *kaldereta*. The Spanish influence



FIGURE 1: Adobo, often hailed as the signature dish of the Philippines. “CHICKEN ADOBO” BY DBGG1979 ON FLICKR IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 2.0.

can be seen in special occasion dishes like chicken *rellenos* or the paella-like *bringhe*, a rice dish made with coconut milk. Filipinos adapted foreign dishes to local ingredients and tastes to create a new, distinctly Filipino cuisine (Fernandez 1988: 7, 11–13).

Some Filipino dishes, like *adobo*, are Spanish in name only. A dish of pork and/or chicken that’s been stewed in vinegar, garlic, peppercorns, and often Chinese soy sauce, *adobo* received its name from the Spanish verb *adobar*, to marinate, but it does not include the Spanish addition of wine or the Mexican inclusion of chilies; instead it is prepared using the indigenous Filipino cooking method of stewing in vinegar (Sokolov 1991: 53). The acidic vinegar mixes with the meat juices and spices to produce a tangy, garlicky sauce to be drizzled over the meat and rice.

“*Adobo* is a balance between the sourness of the vinegar and the salt,” the restaurateur Amy Besa explains to me. Besa co-owns the Filipino restaurant Purple Yam in Brooklyn with her husband and chef, Romy Dorotan. I had talked to her a few years back for an article I was writing on *lambanog*, the deliciously sweet, potent Filipino liquor made from the harvested sap of the coconut tree. I called her up to ask more questions about the cuisine.

“Superficially, Filipino food is quite simple if you compare it to the curries and difficult processes that other cuisines go through. But what makes it very difficult to cook is that it requires you to have a good palate. It’s all about balance and harmony.”

According to my mother that sense of balance is called *tancha*, which means an estimate, a guess. “It’s an innate sense of knowing how much it takes,” my mother says.



FIGURE 2: “Aggressive in size, bold in taste, *sinigang* is the opposite of a precious French puree of shallots, broth, and cream. In a fight, it could club *vichyssoise*’s ass.”

“SINIGANG NA BABOY” BY USER ??? ??? IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 2.0.

Some Filipinos, like Doreen Fernandez (1988: 2), argue that the signature dish of the Philippines is actually *sinigang*, a sour soup flavored with unripe fruits and packed with local vegetables and fish, shrimp, or pork: “Rather than the over-worked *adobo* (so often identified as the Philippine stew in foreign cookbooks), *sinigang* seems to me the most representative of Filipino taste. We like the lightly boiled, the slightly soured, the dish that includes fish (or shrimp or meat), vegetables and broth. It is adaptable to all tastes (if you don’t like shrimp, then *bangus*, or pork), to all classes and budgets . . . to seasons and availability.”

In some ways I appreciate *sinigang* more than *adobo*. Nothing tastes quite like it. I’m more familiar with the sweetness of ripe tamarind, used in other Southeast Asian dishes like *pad thai* and beef *rendang*, than I am the unripe version that gives *sinigang* its signature sour taste. I would liken the sourness to the acidity of a tomato more than to the tartness of a lemon.

*Sinigang* is the caveman of soups. Not because it’s barbaric in preparation—it’s just not demure in presentation. Aggressive in size, bold in taste, *sinigang* is the opposite of a precious French puree of shallots, broth, and cream. In a fight, it could club *vichyssoise*’s ass. No delicate tureen can contain a *sinigang*, nothing under a several-gallon pot will do. When people cook it, it’s like they’re prepping wartime rations for a family of ten. Into her pot of clear broth, my mother would drown whole turnips, full stalks of leafy greens like bok choy or water spinach, and hunks—never petite cubes—of pork.

Recently I watched cooks in Seattle prepare salmon *sinigang*. No delicate mincing up of salmon belly here; they just

tossed the entire fish collar in the broth with He-Man-like stalks of greens. It was the classic *sinigang* I had grown up with, upgraded with local, buttery salmon from the Pacific Northwest. I felt like Barney Rubble eating it, after a long day powering my car by foot.

\*\*\*

With no time to spend all day cooking, my mother made the quicker Filipino dishes more often, like *adobo* or a shortcut version of *sinigang* with packaged seasoning powder (purists claim this is sacrilege, but many stateside Filipinos use powders religiously). When Mom did prepare more labor-intensive dishes like *pancit molo*, the Filipino version of Chinese wonton soup, we all pitched in to help. You would not believe how difficult it is to roll a delicate, transparently thin wonton wrapper over a wad of ground pork so it doesn’t unravel in a pot of boiling broth. Fingers that are wet with water, but not too wet. A dab of cornstarch mixed with water to seal the wrapper shut—but not too little or it won’t stick, and not too much or it won’t stick either. I wish I was unaware of the assembly line of little brown hands it takes to assemble wontons, or roll up enough *lumpia*—the Filipino spring roll—to make a dish’s worth. Bringing *lumpia* to a party? Expect to sit around with your mother and sisters rolling it up all afternoon, your fingers caked in a cornstarch glue. It’s always worth it though later, from that first bite of fried egg crepe that gives way to a soft pillow of bean sprouts if it is *lumpia togue*, or a denser filling of ground pork if it is *lumpia Shanghai*. The dipping sauce for *lumpia Shanghai* is Chinese sweet and sour sauce, but the one for *lumpia togue* is native to the Philippines, a lightly sweet palm vinegar (*suka*) with crushed garlic. The acidity of the vinegar and the bite of fresh garlic boosts the mild flavor of the sprouts and cuts the heaviness of the fried crepe.

Filipino food favors a duel of flavors—salty/sweet, sour/salty, savory/sweet—and the varieties of dipping sauces, *sawsawan*, usher in this contrast. Eating a Filipino dish without its sister *sawsawan* is like leaving the house without shoes: you’re only half done. The Filipino chef, Fernandez (1988: 14) writes, “fully expects his cooking to be embellished and enhanced, adjusted and adapted to individual tastes by means of the *sawsawan* or dipping sauce . . . the consumer has a part in the creation of the dish, just as he has.” Over the years I have come to appreciate the addictive commingling of flavors that happens when a garlicky, vinegary *adobo* meets the briny complement of *bagoong*. Or when the intensity of *longanisa*, a sweet and savory pork sausage, is cut at breakfast with fresh garlic and a few drops of *suka*. It’s like discovering the importance of tart malt vinegar to fish and chips.



FIGURE 3: “Bringing lumpia to a party? Expect to sit around with your mother and sisters rolling it up all afternoon, your fingers caked in a cornstarch glue. It’s always worth it though.”

“GIRL WITH SHANGHAI ROLLS” BY D. SHARON FRUITT IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 2.0.

I remember the lazy Susan in my grandparents’ house in Manila, laid out for breakfast with cured meats, tiny fried fish my mother’s side would scoop onto their plate and eat whole, and Filipino mangoes and papayas, without question the finest fruits I have ever eaten—the juiciest, the sweetest, the fleshiest, the apple Eve should have handed Adam. Other fruits I wouldn’t see again after we returned to the States, like rambutan, red and covered with surprisingly soft, pliable spines. How odd to break through this intimidating layer and reach the tender, pale pink flesh inside that tasted and looked like soft lychee. There were also breads like *pan de sal* (“bread of salt”), a salt-sprinkled roll that we slathered with butter, and if we were lucky there were a few *ensaimadas*—yeasty, buttery sweet brioches topped with sugar and grated cheddar cheese. Smaller, sweeter, and denser than the airy Spanish original, the Filipino *ensaimada* is made with butter instead of lard or shortening.



FIGURE 4: My favorite Filipino dessert: leche flan.

“LECHE FLAN FILIPINAS” BY JEANNE TIONG IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 2.0.

I enjoy Filipino sweets more than any other part of the meal, whether it’s the *ensaimadas* for breakfast, the assorted coconut-flavored rice cakes for *merienda*, or the shaved-ice treat called *halo halo* for dessert. At Filipino potlucks I run over to the dessert table first to survey the *biko*, a dense rice pudding covered with a molasses-like topping of caramelized sugar and cooked coconut cream. No disrespect to coconut cream pie, but to me the choice for greatest coconut-flavored dessert has always been clear.

If I had to pick a favorite Filipino sweet, however, it would be my Lola Lily’s *leche flan*. In classic Filipino style, the recipe echoes the country’s history: a Spanish flan made richer by the Filipino tweak of more eggs and imported American condensed milk. Lola’s flan was creamy and smooth enough for your spoon to slide straight through, but dense enough for it to linger there a bit, and the caramel syrup was never watery or overly sugary—both classic flan pitfalls. I can still see her straining the egg mixture through the superfine cheesecloth, caramelizing the granulated sugar over the stove without the aid of a candy thermometer, and then meticulously, proudly caramel-coating the inside of her old tins, until not an inch was left untouched.

Other than frying up some *turon* (banana *lumpia*), my mother never really made many Filipino sweets at home. Meals at our house in Texas were never strictly Filipino. When my mother married into my father’s Italian and Hungarian family, she married into the recipes too: Hungarian stuffed cabbage, sausage and peppers, clam spaghetti. She rotated these with Filipino food and American diner classics that she’d enjoyed since moving to the States: liver and onions, pot roast.

Either because of lack of ingredients or fear we wouldn’t eat it, my mother never prepared the more challenging



FIGURE 5: "I pictured a bitter melon, which already resembles a wart-ridden cucumber, wrung out and dried like a sweater."

"FVFAMPALAYA, GALASSR1410 07" BY JUDGEFLORO IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 3.0.



FIGURE 6: In addition to bitter melon, eggplant, and tomato, the vegetable dish *pinakbet* usually includes okra and string beans.

"PINAKBET3" BY THEPACIFICCONNOISSEUR IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 3.0.

Filipino dishes like *dinuguan*. Nevertheless, her waste-not-want-not philosophy, her belief that all parts of the animal were fair game, extended over into her unique takes on Americana staples. You could smell the fear in the air on turkey tetrazzini or chicken soup night. Who knew what lay in the depths of that tetrazzini, in the murky waters of that soup? As I plucked a piece of cartilage or fat nugget from my mouth, I yearned for the gristle-free originals featured in *Family Circle* magazine.

Other than a stir-fry of mung beans or bok choy, my mother never made much in the way of Filipino vegetable dishes either. Actually, when I think of Filipino food, vegetable dishes don't come to mind beyond *pinakbet*, a sauté of bitter melon, eggplant, tomato, and a few other vegetables with *bagoong*. My mother never made it because of the preparation involved.

"The work, Corina. My God, the work," she said to me once. "You have to squeeze out the bitter from the vegetable. And then dry it. And then squeeze it out again. And then dry it again." I pictured a bitter melon, which already resembles a wart-ridden cucumber, wrung out and dried like a sweater.

At Filipino gatherings, I recall just one lonely bowl of *pinakbet* for every five meat platters, but my mother claims Filipino vegetable dishes abound. And yet by day four of eating at Filipino relatives' houses I'm dying, it's like I'm in the middle of a desert, except the desert is lined with animal carcasses. I see a single broccoli stem off in the distance, like an oasis I can never reach.

"That's the Spanish influence," Amy Besa says, when I tell her about the meat-heavy meals. "I grew up with lots of beautiful vegetable dishes," she replies, and brings up the Ilocos region on the northwest coast of Luzon, which is where

*pinakbet* comes from and which I didn't realize was known for its green leafy vegetables.

My mother grew up in Manila, the daughter of a mining engineer and a physician, and half her siblings studied in American universities. If meals at my relatives' houses were especially meaty, it was probably a sign of the family's prosperity more than an indication of how most inhabitants of this developing country eat. That's part of a larger question: How does one define how a whole country eats, particularly a country spread out over 7,000 islands? And how can I decide if I like the cuisine, when what I have known is only a small percentage of the offerings? Without a strict definition of Filipino food, can any real measure of authenticity exist?

\*\*\*

I wonder how much my own food preferences are influenced by trends. My fear is that I will be one of those traitor Fil-Ams who embraces Filipino cuisine only when the larger population has embraced it, when a French-trained celebrity chef has laid hands on it, when we have the Filipino equivalent of Zak Pelaccio charging \$40 for one measly Malaysian chili crab.

"Korea is not a third world country, and that has a lot of bearing on how their cuisine is perceived here," Besa says. "Japan, China, Korea, Vietnam. They are economic powers that you have to deal with. I feel like the moment people feel you are a force to reckon with, then they pay attention to your culture, and eventually your food."

"Change comes slowly," she adds, mentioning how the Japanese were once seen as savages for eating raw fish. "It

wasn't too long ago when lots of people thought kimchi was absolutely disgusting," my half-Korean friend Karen says to me as well, when I tell her about my essay. In a Slate.com article written by Gish Jen, "A Short History of the Chinese Restaurant" (2005), the author details Chinese restaurateurs' long fight to rid Americans of Chinese cuisine's negative connotations, for in the nineteenth century "[the Chinese] were scorned as rat eaters; nothing could have been more revolting than eating what they ate."

"We were taught that our food was inferior," Besa says, "and therefore there is a shyness toward presenting it. When we were under the Americans, via mass media and through cookbooks, the general message was that American food would be better than ours. And that's been our consciousness. When they gave us our independence, they didn't let go of the economic connection. It got even worse during the last two or three decades: Shakey's Pizza, McDonald's."

I remember how on vacation in the Philippines fifteen or so years ago, my family would drive past tiny rice villages with McDonald's franchises, all serving a dish called McAdobo. That's what they called it, McAdobo, even though the shake is never a McShake, or the fries McFries. Though we never tried it, my little sister felt the need to pipe up from the back seat as we drove through every town: "Can we eat the McAdobo this time? They got that McAdobo?"

As Fernandez (1988: 7) explains: "American food came in with colonization through the educational system, the media, the magazines, the movies, and as part of the American lifestyle so eagerly absorbed. Convenience was its chief legacy—sandwiches and salads, pressure cookers and freezers, pre-cooking and instant cooking, supermarkets and fast food." The Filipino historian René Alexander Orquiza Jr. (2013: 178–80) describes how during colonization, children were taught in class that imported condensed milk was more nutritious than local *carabao* (buffalo) milk, and ads claimed that American goods like Hershey's cocoa were better because they met US government inspection standards.

There is a certain adulation of American culture, reflected in Filipinos' views of canned goods. "They are not only canned (*de lata*), they are American, therefore modern, also rarer and more expensive than native provender" (Fernandez 2002: 278).

In her cookbook *Memories of Philippine Kitchens*, Besa (2006: 104) describes as a teenager eating a "deliciously steamed pompano" in a poor family's hut in northern Luzon. Still, the family apologized to her for not having any canned goods to serve that evening. Fernandez (2002: 240) also remarks on this phenomenon: "Many have experienced visiting a provincial home and being offered the best the family has: the sole chicken in the yard, sacrificed to make *adobo* or



FIGURE 7: Bangus for breakfast: I denied it as a child, but love it as an adult.

"DAING NA BANGUS" BY BINGBING ON FLICKR IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 2.0.

*tinola*; but more especially, canned corned beef or Spam, *de lata* (canned goods) being a luxury worth serving as the coin of hospitality."

Spam is beloved in the Philippines; they fry it up and savor it in the morning with rice and eggs, a dish known as *SPAM-silog*. It came to the country much like it came to Hawaii, via American GIs stationed abroad during World War II, who used to eat this "ham that didn't pass its physical" to supplement their protein-deficient diets (Smith 2007: 559). One country's joke is another country's breakfast.

Though Spam never repulsed me as a child, it was never my favorite canned meat—that honor went to the pleasingly squat Vienna sausage, also popular in the Philippines. There is something so satisfying about how Vienna sausages are packaged: vertically, straight up in that itty-bitty four-ounce can, like runty sausage soldiers standing at attention. As a child, square- or cylindrical-shaped meat were oddly pleasing to me; recognizable shapes were what I was after, from the perfect circles of Spaghetti-Os to the mashed potato that could be molded into a volcano with gravy lava. That Spam, Vienna sausages, and hot dogs were already familiar American foods made them far more acceptable breakfast options than the intimidating *bangus*, the fried milkfish that also took up space on my Lola's lazy Susan. (I had never seen a fish prepared like that: butterflied, split down the middle and flattened. I thought it was run over by a truck.) But in the Philippines, to decline a helping of *bangus* is to again encounter the insult: "Ahh... American, eh?"

There is nothing worse as an American abroad than being called "American" abroad, with that telltale note of disdain. I hate hearing the word when visiting other countries for all it's

meant to imply: boorish, uneducated, spoiled, self-important, jingoistic. With Europeans, I am just tempted to frustratedly step on their toes or grow overly ingratiating to compensate for every American who ever wronged them. But the word carries even greater weight in a third world country like the Philippines that was colonized by the United States. There is nothing you can do that hasn't already been done, no punishment or apology that can alter history.

How strange to be in a country that continues to feel America's military presence from halfway around the world, via US bases that only closed in the early 1990s. How strange, after dinner, to sit between my grandmother and grandfather as a child and watch TV in Manila in the '80s, with broadcasts of Filipinos burning the American flag in protest of Ferdinand Marcos's US-backed regime. How strange when you are Filipino-American, even half Filipino-American, to know that you may look like a native, but have forgotten your culture or never fully knew it to begin with.

While I can denounce others for not including the Philippines in their tours of Southeast Asia, it's not next on my list either. I have talked with my sisters about returning for a longer, more memorable trip, one of those roots-discovering journeys. But the Philippines comes after places that we have never been to and that hold greater interest: South America, Oaxaca, Tokyo, Thailand, Burma, Vietnam, and Indonesia. I can blame it on having fallen prey to the molding hands of marketing trends, that I have visited the Philippines already, that it's like a second homeland and already too familiar—but is it?

\*\*\*

This discussion brings me back to Ray Sokolov and his questioning of authenticity. When Sokolov says authenticity is as slippery a notion as happiness, he is referring to authenticity as it relates to cuisine—"We have all grown up believing in the principle of cultural authenticity and tradition as an axiom of human civilization, but the norm around the world has been change, innovation" (1991: 11). This pertains even to French haute cuisine, according to Sokolov, which I always envisioned as a food whose rules were written in stone, or béchamel sauce, as it were: "A continuous record [of French cooking] recipes going back to the Middle Ages shows a dynamic, evolving process—not immutable granite traditions" (ibid.: 95).

I had forgotten that food, just like language or culture, is not static. Filipino cuisine has shown itself to be nothing if not ever changing, shaped by the original Malay settlers, Chinese traders, and Spanish and American colonists; it is

not just "pristine localized practices and institutions. . . . It is also formed by multiple culinary convergences, attempted adaptations, and 'outside' influences. . . . This is the messy reality of any cuisine, whether it is called fusion, diffusion, or confusion" (Manalansan 2013: 298).

As Filipino food grows more popular in the United States, will it not evolve further into its own unique cuisine, much the way Italian-American or American-Chinese has? We could call this a fusion or a streamlining, but then every cuisine from the beginning of time is essentially a fusion, and if it were to cross into another continent and alter even slightly, a streamlining.

"Consumption can lead to satiation," Manalansan (2013: 299) writes at the end of "Beyond Authenticity," "but it can also lead to more hunger, more queries, and lingering discomforts. Why should we expect. . . only contented emotional destinations?" Maybe I should not enter a Filipino restaurant and expect to be instantly transported back to the motherland, or view what I order as proof of my cultural identity. The history of a food is more complicated than that.

I may never move past my inhibitions with organ meat, may never be able to enjoy other animal meats as much as I do beef, pork, or chicken. But then perhaps Filipino is not a five-step plan, with *balut* waiting for me at the end. ☹

#### REFERENCES

- Besa, Amy, and Romy Dorotan. 2006. *Memories of Philippine Kitchens*. New York: Stewart, Tabori, & Chang.
- Fernandez, Doreen, and Edilberto Alegre. 1988. *Sarap: Essays on Philippine Food*. Manila: Mr. & Mrs. Publishing.
- Fernandez, Doreen. 2002. "Food and War." In *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899–1999*, ed. Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia, 237–46. New York: New York University Press.
- Fisher, M.F.K. 1988. *How to Cook a Wolf*. San Francisco: North Point Press.
- Jen, Gish. 2005. "A Short History of the Chinese Restaurant." *Slate.com*. April 27. [www.slate.com/articles/life/food/2005/04/a\\_short\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_chinese\\_restaurant.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/food/2005/04/a_short_history_of_the_chinese_restaurant.html)
- Manalansan IV, Martin F. 2013. "Beyond Authenticity: Rerouting the Filipino Cultural Diaspora." In *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, ed. Robert Ji. Song Kum, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur, 288–300. New York: New York University Press.
- Orquiza Jr., René Alexander. 2013. "Lechon with Heinz, Lea and Perrins with Adobo: The American Relationship with Filipino Food, 1898–1946." In *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, ed. Robert Ji. Song Kum, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur, 177–85. New York: New York University Press.
- Smith, Andrew, ed. 2007. *The Oxford Companion to American Food and Drink*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sokolov, Raymond. 1991. *Why We Eat What We Eat*. New York: Touchstone.
- Woods, Damon. 2006. *The Philippines: A Global Studies Handbook*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Inc.