



Rather than the overworked *adobo* (so often identified as the Philippine stew in foreign cookbooks), *sinigang* seems to me the dish most representative of Filipino taste. We like the lightly boiled, the slightly soured, the dish that includes fish (or shrimp or meal), vegetables and broth. It is adaptable to all tastes (if you don't like shrimp, then *bangus*, or pork), to all classes and budgets (even *ayungin*, in humble little piles, find their way into the pot), to seasons and availability (*walang talong*, *mahal ang gabi? kangkong na lang!*).

But why? Why does *sinigang* find its way to bare *dulang*, to formica-topped restaurant booth, to gleaming *ilustrado* table? Why does one like anything at all? How is a people's taste shaped?

## *The Island Landscape*

Because of the geography of the Philippines — islands of all sizes strung through teeming seas — one would suspect that the pre-Hispanic Filipino turned first to the sea (rather than to the forest) for his food. From this, perhaps, comes our liking for fish and seafood, and our wanting it absolutely fresh: *hito* thrashing in a pail, shrimp still jumping in the basket, crabs so actively alive that they nip thumbs and have to be chased all over the kitchen. Most of us live near enough to sea or river or rice paddy to be able to demand this freshness, and from this evolved our cooking methods.

The wisest and best way to handle food so fresh is to do as little as possible, not to mar its pristine quality, not to drown it in sauces and spices. Thus it may be eaten uncooked, like *kilawing hipon* or *kinilaw na tanguingue*. Thus too, the simplest of cooking methods: *halabos na hipon*, *paksiw na banak*, *inihaw na tulingan*, *sinigang na bangus*, *pasingaw*. Gat, the late cartoonist, used to tell of a restaurant in Tondo where only steamed (*pasingaw*) fish was served, with a secret-formula dipping sauce. (The *sawsawan* is obviously necessary to such simple

cooking.) To it, fishermen brought their catches, and in it fishermen-for-a-pastime rubbed elbows with fishermen-for-a-living, dock workers and journalists, all to have fish purely, perfectly steamed.

### Rice

But still, why soured? Aside from the fact that sour broths are cooling in hot weather, could it be perhaps because the dish is meant to be eaten against the mild background of rice? Easy to plant and harvest, and allowing of more than one crop a year, rice is ubiquitous on the landscape. One can picture our ancestors settling down beside their rivers and finally turning to the cultivation of fields, with rice as one of their first steady crops.

Rice to us is more than basic cereal, for as constant background, steady accompaniment, it is also the shaper of other foods, and of tastes. We not only sour, but salt (*daing*, *tuyo*, *bagoong*) because the blandness of rice suggests the desirability of sharp contrast. Rice can be ground into flour and thus the proliferation of *puto*: the mildly sweet *putong Polo*, the banana leaf-encased Manapla variety; *puto* filled with meat or flavored with *ube*; *puto* in cakes or wedges, white or brown, eaten with *dinuguan* or *salabat*.

From rice flour too, comes *bibingka*, and just as breads mark Christmas for the German, and puddings for the Englishman, so *puto* and *bibingka* mean Christmas to the Filipino. After the dawn chill of the *Misa de Gallo*, one looks forward to emerging into a church patio redolent with tempting smells of food cooking. At the makeshift *bibingka* stands, the flat soft cakes cook in fragrant banana leaves, sometimes sparked with a bit of native white cheese, or a sliver of salted egg. Or else there are the lavender-colored *puto bumbong* of *malagkit* and *pirurutong* rice, sprouting out of little bamboo tubes; or in Pampanga, the anise-flavored *putong lusong* to be eaten with piping hot *panara*; or the *potomaya* and *suman bodbod*, the *biko* and *putong sulot*.

Rice further lends itself to sweetening, and thus the *suman* of our fiestas — *sa latik*, *sa lihiya*, wrapped in coconut or banana leaf, in slabs, in cylinders, in pyramids — and such other *kakanin* as *tamales*, *maja blanca*, *sapin-sapin*, *espasol*, *kutsinta*.

Rice is also found in such other forms as *kiping*, the lovely edible decorations of the Quezon province fiesta in honor of San Isidro Labrador; *buro*, the relish of fermented rice mixed with fish and *angkak*; *pinipig*, which is toasted and served with chocolate or *halo-halo*, or made into such dishes as *ampaw-pinipig*, or the Ilongo Visayan *baye-baye*. We might add that rice washing, in traditional homes, is used as the broth for *sinigang*, and lovely broth it is too, slightly thick and *malinamnam*.

### The Coconut

Filipino memories are full of coconut-dreams: waving fancily-woven coconut fronds on a Palm Sunday morning; weaving balls and hats out of the dark-green leaves; lazily stripping the leaf midrib just for fun, or to make *walis tingting*; husking a nut, grating the meat, squeezing out *gata*; drinking *buko* water on a hot day and scraping out the translucent flesh; scrubbing a wide-planked floor to a gleam with coconut husk in a graceful, slipping-sliding motion; biting on a piece of sweet, crunchy *ubud* that just an hour before had been the heart of a tree; waking on a provincial morning to see out of the window the leaves of a whole grove languid in the breeze; listening to the *tuba*-gatherer tapping away on a swaying treetop.

The coconut we have in common with other Asian lands and areas around the Pacific, and it has been called “the Southwest Pacific’s one dietary constant.” In the Philippines, it finds use from birth to death, one might say. From the sap, one gets *tuba*, which is drunk young and mild (recommended to nursing mothers), or fermented and strong. The young nut, of course, is *buko* — the water drunk, the flesh nibbled, or scraped and put into drink, dessert or main dish. The Quezon *pinais* is a succulent combination of leaf-wrapped river shrimp and *buko* strips, simmered in *buko* water; the Visayan *binakol* has chicken, ginger and *buko* strips simmered in the nut itself; *pancit buko* has noodles of coconut.

The mature nut yields the fresh grated meat indispensable to *bibingka*, *puto bumbong*, *kutsinta*. Squeezed, it yields *gata*, and here, as in the rest of Southeast Asia, we make distinctions between the cream (the first thick *kakang gata*) and the “second” milk, because they are used differently in *ginataang gulay* (e.g. *langka*, *kalabasa*) *adobo sa*

*gata*, *hipon sa gata*, *pinangat* (that spicy Bicol dish with *gabi* and hot peppers), *suman*, etc. *Macapuno*, that deviant nut, is of course candied, cooked in syrup, mixed into *halo-halo* or sherbet.

At “death” — for taking its heart means killing the tree — the coconut yields *ubud* for *lumpia* or salad, or what the Visayans call *ensalada*: a cooling drink of *buko* water, *kalamansi* juice, crunchy bits of *ubud*, and fruit, the traditional partner to *lumpiang ubud*. The coconut’s availability and versatility have helped shape many Filipino tastes and dishes.

### *The Greenery*

The landscape also offers the vines, shrubs, fields, forests and trees, from which comes the galaxy of *gulay* with which we are blest all year round. “Back home,” an American friend commented, “all we use from day to day are peas, carrots, potatoes, lettuce, cabbage and very few others.”

The dietarily uninhibited Filipino, on the other hand, recognizes the succulence of roots (*gabi*, *ube*, *kamote*); the delicacy and flavor of leaves (*pechay*, *dahong bawang*, *kinchay*, *pako*, *malunggay*) and tendrils (*talbos ng ampalaya*, *kalabasa*, *sayote*); the bounty of fruits (not only *upo* and *kalabasa*, *talong* and *ampalaya*, but even dessert fruits like *nangka* and banana, which double as vegetables); and the excitement of flowers like *katuray* and *kalabasa*. A lowly weed like *kulitis* or *saluyot*, or a swamp growth like *kangkong*, comes into use, its flavor evoked by steaming, boiling, salting, combining. Nor is any part wasted. *Kangkong* leaves and young stalks, for example, go into *sinigang*, but the tougher stalks are made by Visayans into *apan-apan*, literally “mock locust.”

The same imagination is applied to the souring ingredients used in *sinigang*. The cook who sours with *kalamansi* or vinegar suffers, in the folk view, from “abysmal poverty of mind,” for these are to be used only in extreme necessity, being too obvious. Instead, one uses mashed *sampalok* or *kamias*; guavas or green pineapple; *alibangbang* leaves or the tenderly green sampaloc leaves and flowers; *batuan* or tomatoes; or combinations of these and other sour fruits that different regions know and prefer. This bounty becomes habit, then taste.

### *Land and the Man*

The Filipino's appreciation for the bounty of sea and land quite clearly grows out of his peasant closeness to the land. The farmer, the fisherman, the carabao tender, each is from birth attuned to the season and to the weather, knowing when *ulang* abound in the rivers; when it is right to plant *kamote* or to go out with lamp and fishnet; where wild *pako* (fern) are likely to be found; which bananas are good to boil, which to eat from the bunch. Perhaps it is this same folk wisdom that made him salt fish and *alamang* into *tuyo*, *daing* and *bagoong* for these, aside from preserving the fish and making rice go a long way, also help retain body fluid, an important consideration in our hot weather.

The meagerness of his means makes him inventive, able to make a meal of *kamote* tops from his backyard; to put together a small fish, a few tendrils and tomatoes to make *sinigang*. It also makes him improvise easily. No strict formulae for him (ever hear of a recipe, or of measuring ingredients for *sinigang*?) since one cooked what or how much was available.

The simplicity of these meals makes the Filipino sensitive to flavors — the bitter, the succulent, the aromatic, the sour — unmasked by sauce or spice. The stark quality of his lifestyle makes him waste nothing, not the *gabi* stalk (it is stripped into strings to tie the leaf-bundles in *pinangat*) or the coconut husk, or the fishhead. This, too, taught him to salt or smoke fish to keep; to dry food in the sun; to make *paksiw* and *sinigang* which keep without refrigeration.

This then, I would say, is the native cuisine: one born out of the land and the landscape, the weather and the seasons, as well as out of the means and lifestyles of people in an agricultural society.

### *Foreign Influences*

But of course, as in all aspects of culture, foreign influences come to bear and create changes. The two major influences on Filipino cuisine would be the Chinese and the Spanish. To the Chinese we owe the “noodle explosion”: all the *pancit* using *miki*, *bihon*, *sotanghon*, etc., and combinations, and which were indigenized and varied by the regions in which they developed. Thus the fishing town of Malabon developed *pancit Malabon*, with its oysters and seafood; modest Lucban developed *pancit habhab*, “poor town’s fare” of *miki*, cooked in the

marketplace and eaten off squares of banana leaf; while other regions use *chicharron*, *tinapa*, pork, shrimp, Chinese sausages, even *chorizo de Bilbao*. From here too developed the *pancit na may sabaw*, noodles in broth like *lomi* and *mami*, with pork, shrimp, meatballs, toasted garlic, etc. To the Chinese, too, we owe staples of contemporary Filipino meriendas, such as *lumpia*, *kekiam*, *siopao* and *siomai*.

The legacy from Spanish cuisine is quite different from the above, and from the native, since its chief characteristic is richness. From the Spaniards we learned the *guisado*, with oil and tomato sauce; our rich stews like *cocido* and *puchero* which would have been way beyond the native lifestyle, with their reckless combination of pork, chicken, beef, vegetables, *chorizos*, *jamon China*, *morcilla*. Also Spanish are the different rice-meat dishes that are derivations of *paella* (*arroz a la Valenciana*, *bringhe*); the *galantinas* and *rellenos* (an Ermita friend recalls that their *relleno* was fat capon stuffed with *foie gras*, truffles, ground pork, olives, pork sausages and *chorizos*); and the rich desserts that require such time, labor, and money to make — *brazos*, *tortas imperiales*, *castillos*, *borrachos*, *suspiros*.

While the Chinese food that was absorbed into our cuisine was, on the whole, relatively inexpensive, and therefore found its way into lower and middle class cuisine, quite obviously the Spanish influence was principally on the *ilustrado*, the elite, and therefore evolved into fiesta fare.

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 fastfood.

All foreign influences were not adopted outright, but adapted, adjusted to the native taste and lifestyle, just as they were transformed in other areas of the culture — in clothing, literature, drama, music and art.

Filipino tastes in food, therefore, were shaped by the landscape — the land and the water and the life they bear; by rice as staple and accompaniment; by the versatility of the coconut; by influences from foreign cuisines, especially those of the Chinese traders, and the Spanish and American colonizers.

Filipino cuisine is an authentic facet of Philippine culture that invites methodical inquiry. On our tables, rich or poor, are mute — albeit aromatic — testimony to the blending of history and our landscape. These dishes, especially the humbler ones, show the Filipino's understanding of the potential of his surroundings, his imaginative exploration into nature, his instinctive sensitivity to nuances of combination, contrast and accompaniment. His lifestyle is limned by the simplicity and flexibility of his dishes, there being no hard-and-fast, inviolable combinations or proportions, but a knowledgeable making-do, an ease of improvisation also seen in his drama and dance.

Why *sinigang*? Why all the other things? The full exploration of the shaping of a people's taste is a rewarding and pleasurable voyage towards the definition of identity. 