

## Sisig and a Dive into Filipino Values

If you were to ask me how to make sisig, I'd probably tell you my mom's recipe: broiled or grilled pork belly sliced into squares, cubed red and green bell peppers, cubed onion, salt, pepper, some kalimanci (native Filipino citrus fruit) or lime, and a little bit on tabasco, and voila!- you have something that resembles a salad to the non-Filipino eye with a slightly sour taste. But, if you were to ask my dad how to make sisig, he'd replace the pork belly with pig ear and face, keep the onions, but replace the bell peppers with jalapeno, and voila!- you have a dish that seems different, but reasonably close to what I describe as sisig. However, in the same way that art revolutionizes itself by breaking rules, sisig seems to replace its own ingredients to the point where, in a way, the recipe is deconstructed. As I googled recipes for sisig I saw that it wasn't uncommon for pork belly to be replaced with pork ear, face, or neck, but some would replace pork as a protein altogether; chicken, fish, squid, tofu, and octopus would act as rare, exotic alternatives. Others scrap the bell peppers and onion and add chicharon and egg. I wondered, between my dad's and my variations, who's more authentic? What was the first version of sisig?

As a Filipino American (or, as Filipinos would call it, Fil-Am) I find it strange to describe sisig as a salad because of its lack of pasta and its use of pork which doesn't fit my American description of "salad," but I do so to make it an easier idea for an audience to visualize the dish. However, in the first recorded mention of sisig by Diego Bergaño's *Vocabulary of the Kapampangan Language in Spanish and Dictionary of the Spanish Language in Kapampangan*, Bergano, a Spanish priest from the 1700s, defines sisig as "[a] salad, including green papaya, or green guava eaten with a dressing of salt, pepper, garlic, and vinegar," a definition that is more

familiar to American salads rather than the Filipino dish I know. Note that Bergano's dictionary is focused on the Kapampangan language, meaning people from the province of Pampanga, and is not focused on Tagalog, or the Filipino language of the whole country of the Philippines, because sisig specifically originates in Pampanga. This first definition also explains a verb adjacent to sisig: "manysig" which is 'to snack on something sour' which also describes many other different dishes soaked in vinegar: "*Sisig Manibaland Kapaya* (half-ripe papayas dressed in sweet and spicy vinegar), *Sisig Pusung Sagin* (boiled banana heart dressed in garlic, vinegar, onions, and dried shrimps), and *Sisig Apalia* (raw bitter melon with shallots, fish sauce, pepper, and vinegar)" (Meangubie); Pre-1960, sisig was consumed by pregnant Kapampangan mothers who believed in a superstition that the sourness of the dish fought against morning sickness and nausea, which does not resemble anything I tend to call sisig, but does cement it itself as an old, local food from Pampanga.

However, according to Siuala ding Meangubie's article *History of Sisig: How Angeles City Kept Reinventing a Traditional Kapampangan Delicacy*, sisig was reinvented into its modern form through contributions of Bápang Cadóc, Lucing Cunanan, otherwise known as Aling (Ms.) Lucing, and Benedicto Pamintuan in Angeles City, Pampanga. These three major Kapampangan chefs changed sisig's main consumer from pregnant Kapampangan mothers to people in Angeles City and non-Kapampangans. Siuala ding Meangubie, a Kapampangan author born in Angeles City, Pampanga, and a person who studied at the prestigious University of San Carlos, entertainingly retells a piece of local oral history where a train collided with a passenger bus, causing a fire to raze much of an area now called the Angeles Railroad Crossing. In these remains, Bapang Cadoc became the owner of the first stall to serve sisig commercially. His regulars were from other provinces, not from Pampanga, and wished for a different dish: *kilawin*,

or raw goat or fish in spicy vinegar. Born from the complaints of characteristically stubborn Filipinos, he served *Sisig Babi* (pork) made with chopped grilled pig ears, calamansi juice, chopped shallots, and chili. Bapang Cadoc's non-Kapampangan customer's stubborn complaints gave him new ideas and a larger customer size, showing the benefits of diversity. However, local sentiments reflected Filipino attitudes against other provinces as Kapampangans would label outsiders as "boisterous [non-Kapampangans]" (Meangubie). According to Meangubie, Bapang Cadoc, near his death, entrusted his stall, recipe, and clientele to Aling Lucing, who used pig face rather than ear, swapped shallots for milder white onion, kept Bapan Cadoc's preference for calamansi rather than vinegar for a source of sourness, and added chopped chicken and liver into her recipe. Ading Lucing's combination of proteins was revolutionary and famous. In fact, she even claimed that pig face was abundant because American military bases would use the pork belly of the pig and discard the heads, unused. The change to pig cheek allowed her bigger and bouncier-looking dishes, but also meant that fats would solidify when the dish cooled down. Another Kapampangan chef, Benedict Pamntuan, came up with the solution to serve sisig on a sizzling plate. All of these solidified sisig as the sour Kapampangan pork ear dish, a dish that parallels my dad's recipe, save for the use of jalapeno instead of Filipino chili. This newer version of sisig cements itself as Kapampangan. But, neither of my parents are from Pampanga, rather they're from the province of Zambales and some Kapampangans may call versions different from my dad and mine's sisig sacrilege. What do other provinces think of sisig from Gerry's Grill which has no egg, no kalimanci, no spice but has *chicharon*, lemon, and egg?

The history of sisig in Kapampangan is a local history that Kapampangans take pride in, but the Kapampangan sisig is definitely not the only version to exist. Sizzling sisig was brought to Manila, the biggest metropolitan city and capital of the Philippines which led to sisig being

spread all over the Philippines as well. Although I speak about Pampanga heavily, the Philippines is a country special not because of its division of 18 regions, but more so for their 82 provinces which Filipinos seem to resonate with strongly and pridefully. It's a rite of passage as a Filipino to ask other Filipinos "Where's your family from?" and getting answers like Pangasinan, Zambales, Davao, Iloilo— all of which are provinces, not regions. These provinces have their own languages, dish variants, and accents, and are usually filled to the brim with a Filipino's relatives, (my province literally has ~200 relatives in it) creating an incredibly strong local identity. With the large quantity of provinces in the Philippines and the strong local identities that come with it, there comes a large variety of sisig: sisig with mayo and egg are versions that Kapampangans say "[is] a total disrespect because perfecting the sisig... is something you learn from experience and acknowledging the history of how sisig evolved from Kapampangan sensibilities as a heirloom history" (Edward Lusung). Diversity, even within the confines of the Philippines, struggles with questions of authenticity and the local pride that drives Filipinos to have rivalries with other provinces and cities. The complication of the diversity of sisig and the Filipino people is made more difficult when considering Filipino Americans. Now what of the sisig that I consume which removes pork ear, liver, and chicken entirely and adds bell pepper? There are many instances in America where altering or changing ingredients to cuisine can be seen as inauthentic or as a weird attempt at hybrid cuisine. I'm used to hearing stories where some Italians may complain about Italian-American foods, claiming that it's inauthentic, but, even without bringing up how overseas Filipino immigrants alter foods, Filipino foods seem to struggle to be defined within the Philippine borders. The local diversity in sisig, other Filipino foods, and dialects in the Philippines seems to be more of a cause for conflict, beef, and a way to separate rather than a point of pride.

Sisig, like nearly all of Filipino cuisine, is created from an incredible amalgamation of different cultures. Corina Zappia's article "Filipino: The Five-Step Plan" describes the history of Filipino cuisine and relates her experience as a Filipino-American: "the original indigenous cuisine of Malay settlers, the influence of Chinese immigrants, and the impact of Spanish and American colonial rule... pre colonial 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 sauteing in oil..." (p. 3). Pre-colonial cuisine is seen in sisig through the marination of sisig in vinegar, but also seen through the steaming of many, many Filipino desserts like *puto* (steamed rice cake). *Adobo* is a national dish that is Spanish in name, but not in the way it's cooked, also keeping the signature vinegar ingredient of indigenous people, differentiating itself from Spanish culture and reinventing the dish as seriously Filipino. Culinary influences from other cultures in the U.S. is something wildly celebrated; America's melting pot is something that people embrace and appreciate in the country. I cannot imagine living in a world where I only consume Filipino and American food, as I appreciate tacos (Mexican), boba (Taiwanese), pho (Vietnamese), ka thiew (Cambodian), or pupusas (Salvadorian), and I am prideful of the fact that I welcome and want many different cuisines.

However, for the Philippines, the melting pot that muddies the definition of authenticity similarly to the U.S. seems to not be a point of pride, but a point of bigotry. As an American in Long Beach, a wildly diverse and liberal city, I naturally learnt to embrace cuisines that may seem different or exotic— an attitude different from this may seem racist or overtly-traditional. But, as the daughter to my traditional-Philippines-raised and born father, I realized the contrast in

attitude about other cultures when I noticed his disdain for any food that isn't Filipino. Sometimes he'll eat a burger if I'm at In-N-Out and he's hungry and he doesn't want to cook, but Mexican and other Asian cuisines are a no-go. Other cuisines like Mediterranean I haven't even had the exposure or knowledge about to even suggest to my parents. Obviously, I don't expect everyone in the world to be open about every food, but my dad, like many Filipinos, can be bigoted, likely because his ideas reflect that of Filipino values. In modern times, as tensions between China and the Philippines rise over territorial disputes, and as I'd watch the news about Chinese spies with my parents, my dad would speak with disdain in his tone, 'ayy, the China; the China.' Although his words were never blatantly racist, his attitude was not unlike the U.S. during the Cold War. He wouldn't claim anyone to be a "Communist," but he would say "Why would I learn to use chopsticks? I'm not Chinese," when we were in a Japanese restaurant. Eating at a Korean barbeque, he wouldn't even dare to try kimchi or soybean soup. This unopened attitude is something I've shared with many Fil-Am friends who cringe at their parents' lack of understanding for diversity in America. Despite Chinese influence in the form of *siopao*, *lumpia*, and soy sauce, Filipino society is against China; and despite America's harm and colonization of the Philippines, Filipinos have a positive attitude towards the U.S. Despite our last names: Flores, Santos, Reyes, Cruz, Bautista, and Lim and our dishes coming straight out of Spanish and Chinese etymology, reflecting cultures merging, Filipino society does not embrace diversity – rather they embrace America.

Although Ading Lucing's claim of using leftover US military base pig face has not been proven to be true due to the military base employees refuting her claim, Ading Lucing's story is believable because of the Filipino perception of America's superiority. Ading Lucing's parallels Corina Zappina's perception of the Philippines' relationship with America. In Zappina's article

*Filipino: The Five-Step Plan* she explicitly details her experience with canned food. These canned foods differ from native Filipino foods which are often not preferred by Fil-Ams like Zappina and me; It's more difficult for me to stomach *bangus* (milkfish) and *tilapia* and understand that my non-Filipino friends may not prefer to eat the eyeball of a fish in *sinigang* or may not want to know that "chocolate meat," or *dinuguan*, is made out of pig blood. For Zappina, Spam, Vienna Sausage, and corned beef were a "safe food" that she consumed while in the Philippines— safer than bangus and tilapia which were familiar to her tastes. Unfortunately, Zappina points out that what Filipinos deem as a safe food to feed to their foreign children, is the same trash that the US laughs at. In the modern day, all I hear about is how Spam is unhealthy and very salty, but this remark was made evidently true when America colonized the Philippines and put its military bases in it. From the military bases came canned food which Americans saw as an imposter of real, authentic meat. Zappina writes "that one country's joke is another country's treasure." In the Philippines, an American food seems to have, not a sense of luxury, but an alluring foreignness, reflecting both the alienation Zappina felt as a Filipino-American who couldn't stomach "authentic" Filipino food, but also the special way Filipinos view America as a land of better food, of more opportunity, of more wealth, and of an abundance pork belly rather than pig ear.

In researching what the Chinese-Filipino conflict is right now, I came across a Reddit post that asked why Filipinos were indifferent to Spanish and US colonization, but attitudes in Filipino media and politics seem incredibly aggressive towards China when in comparison to their neutrality about Filipino occupation in history. This Redditor's question aligned with my beliefs from observing my family's interactions with the media and aligned with a research paper called "How Do Filipinos Remember Their History? A Descriptive Account of Filipino

Historical Memory” by Dean Dulay, Allen Hicken, Anil Menon, Ronald Holmes. As a Fil-Am raised with values more aligned with America rather than the Philippines I associate colonization throughout history with ‘harm’ and ‘oppression’ – I’m sure you can ask any American how they feel about colonization of African countries, India, and even America, and anyone whose not bigoted will realize how colonization can be exploitative and recognize the negative perception in American minds. However, Filipinos view their own colonization by Spain as neither positive or negative: “a significant, and largest, share (48.46 per cent) of participants could not say whether they had positive or negative feelings towards Spanish colonialism” (Dulay, Hicken, Menon, Holmes). This attitude continues to be applicable towards US colonization of the Philippines and martial law under Ferdinand Marcos: “respondents were much more likely to view martial law as positive versus negative: 23.17 percent of respondents had a negative feeling about martial law versus 34.46 percent who had a positive feeling. 35.25 could not say if their feelings were negative or positive” (Dulay, Hicken, Menon, Holmes). Even more shockingly, neither of these feelings towards both Spanish colonialism and martial law under Ferdinand Marcos were affected by the education of the people they polled. Filipinos seem to pit heads against each other over regional differences and hate China (something that the Filipino government and media seems to exaggerate to align with their US allies’), but seem content with Spanish and US colonization and the US-backed-dictator Ferdinand Marcos, highlighting how Filipino values subconsciously align with America’s in a way that benefits the US.

This idea of wealth is the one that pushed my parents to leave the Philippines, despite my perspective being one that believes that immigrants in America struggle. I am raised to be aware of the inherent difficulties, disadvantages, of immigrant families in America. I ask my parents, who miss their homeland deeply, “Do you regret coming to America?” and the answer I get



always surprises me: “No.” My parents understand that, in the Philippines, a career or degree in anything that isn't teaching, the medical field, or corrupt politics does not give success and that the American dollar is stronger. My mom often comments that if they move back to the Philippines, they'd be rich, hosting big parties full of food in their own home— contrasting our rented home in America that we struggle to pay for without doing overtime every month. Perspective is important. For my parents, the sacrifice of leaving their homeland and struggling as immigrants is worth it; but this is a concept that is more difficult for me to grasp. As a Filipino-American my view is complex: I'm against America because of its colonization, but also understanding this overtly positive perception that Filipinos have of America because it provides an escape from poverty. I have relatives who haven't immigrated to America, but have OFW (Overseas Filipino Workers) as parents who send money back home. This wealthy perception of America is the lasting consequences of colonization, the Philippine government models their government after America's and remains allied with the US. However, this combined with the values of the Filipino peoples who are prideful and uneducated (because of said corrupt government) have led to the election of “BongBong” Marcos, son of Ferdinand Marcos in 2022.

Ligaya Mishan's analysis in “Monster Within” remains true when applied to negative Kapampangan perception of newer versions of sisig branching from their version and the overall perception of American canned foods and America as a whole are seen in a completely different light than Filipino foods. Mishan's article points out that Western minds often pose Eastern standards for foods as “disgusting” because Westerners struggle to eat what they aren't exposed to and don't recognize as fitting the Western standard. This proves true with Zappina's statement “that one country's joke is another country's treasure” and for Mishan's example of kimchi being

eaten casually in Korea but seen as disgusting in America. America's influence on Philippine government, politics, cuisine, and values is so prominent. American leftovers of trashy spam and unused pig heads exist because Americans in military bases in the Philippines were unfamiliar and disgusted by these ingredients, but became hit stars as sisig and as comforting, breakfast items in the Philippines. My Filipino father's bigotry against other cultures is a seed that seems to be planted from Filipino society and its values, but the roots of anti-Chinese sentiment may come from US bigotry.

To me, the incredibly vast amount of sisig recipes and alterations is a beautiful reflection of cuisine transforming as foods interact with different provinces and regions, like most other Filipino foods and the many overseas Filipinos. But, the intermingling of cuisine also reflects how diversity can be harmful and cause tensions, and how Filipino society's negative perception of cultures interacting with us and our foods reflects a society that is so traditional that Filipino society has elected the son of a dictator, once again.

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