

# Mushroom Adobo

*How Filipino cuisine helped me reconnect with (and lose) my sense of home*

By Luigi Leonardo

The Filipino dish is one of the most ambiguous cuisines in the world. Composed of more than 7,000 islands, the country has dozens of provinces with their own dialects, cultures, and regional delicacies. Every individual province has a different idea of what Filipino cuisine truly consists of. The debate has listed so many contenders like *sisig* (a sizzling plate of minced pork from a pig's head), *sinigang* (a sour tamarind stew of meat and vegetables), and the infamous *balut* (a boiled duck embryo). However, for the wide variety of options, a simpler dish stands at the forefront of a Filipino's mind, especially those who chose to migrate to another country -- adobo.

First and foremost, the Filipino adobo is different from the Western concept of adobo. While the original Spanish variant uses a vast selection of seasonings, the Filipino variant uses only a few key ingredients: vinegar, soy sauce, black peppercorns, and bay leaf. Cooking a standard adobo dish is relatively easy. You just marinate and simmer a chosen meat (usually chicken) in a savory blend of soy sauce and vinegar. However, despite its simplicity, no one can agree how to best prepare the dish.

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"Use sugar," my dad said.

"Don't use sugar," my mom said.

As the quarantine rolled on, my parents taught me several Filipino recipes through Viber and Facebook Messenger. The sheer abundance of recipes ensured (and silently enforced) my continued lockdown at home. I didn't mind. The extra concern was a welcome care package from back home. Besides, I learned how to truly cook, rather than just frying random foodstuffs on a skillet. More importantly, the authentically Filipino food was a taste of home I desperately needed at the time.

Compared to those from America, a foreign student's experience during the New York quarantine vastly differed in intensity. In mid-March, New York universities decided to evict all the students living in their respective dormitories, forcing them to either move back home or into a solitary living space of their choosing whilst in the midst of a global pandemic. Our so-called second homes wanted to force us out into the streets for logistical reasons.

What's worse, the Philippines was descending deeper into the abyss of political inaction against stopping the pandemic. Every day, as the Philippine government did nothing, the infection and death rates grew and grew. Even my real home stopped feeling like an actual home. It was risky to go back. Likewise, it was risky to stay.

Still, I longed for that sense of home again: to eat my mom's cooking, to feed some to my cat, to chat with my family. When home was needed the most, it was lost on two counts. If anything, my parents' recipes, highlighted by that all-too ubiquitous adobo, were the only things keeping me sane.

But, as expected, neither of them could agree on the best adobo recipe.

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"You should have marinated it for a few hours," my girlfriend said. I didn't.

"No, cooking it immediately is fine," her mom said.

I stood behind the kitchen counter, facing bottles of soy sauce and vinegar. Instead of the traditional chicken, I bought a one-serving batch of sliced white mushrooms as a meat substitute. The mushroom's spongy nature soaks up a lot more of the sauce's tangy flavor. It's a lot easier to cook than meat, too. To get them ready, I sautéed them in a medium skillet with garlic and oil for two minutes.

Contrary to what my girlfriend wanted, I prepared and used the marinade in the same cooking session. The sauce itself is just three tablespoons of soy sauce and three tablespoons of vinegar. After mixing, pour the blend into the skillet. Drop in some black peppercorns and a single bay leaf. Allow to simmer for ten minutes. After ten minutes, mix in a teaspoon of sugar -- my mom's archenemy -- and simmer for two more minutes. Serve afterwards.

Normally, I don't like eating adobo. Sometimes, the dish is too sour. Sometimes, too salty. Sometimes, the sugar hits me differently. Traditionally, the Filipino taste profile hovers more towards sour, having found many, many different ways to use vinegar. That said, despite liking vinegar myself, I often find adobo too flavorful for my own individual taste.

Thankfully (and at the risk of patting myself on the back), the mushroom adobo came out perfectly. It wasn't too sour, salty, or sweet. Realistically, the water inside the mushrooms likely provided the necessary dilution and volume for the too-flavorful sauce. But emotionally, the dish had a lot more things going for it: the joy of cooking for myself; the creativity of tailoring a recipe; and, most importantly, the nostalgia for the taste of home cooking.

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"Why did you use mushrooms," my sister asked.

Eventually, I adopted mushroom adobo into my usual quarantine repertoire. I cooked the dish more times than I probably should have. Inevitably, I began to tire of it. It was still a good dish, but it didn't evoke the same wave of nostalgia anymore.

I asked myself, why. Like my sister, I even asked why I chose mushrooms in the first place. Did I tire of the flavor, the texture? Surely, using different types of meats would have prevented burnout, wouldn't it?

As the quarantine rolled on in both my home countries, I stopped clawing for a sense of nostalgia for the world that once was. No one could agree on the perfect recipe for adobo. No one knew what that taste of home is. Or, rather, they knew all-too well in all their equally valid ideas of home.

Amidst the difference, I forged my own recipe with my own ingredients and my own method and my own home in this so-called "new normal." Eventually, I got tired of it. Maybe, I cooked too much of a good thing and got tired of the flavor. Maybe, I depended too much on its nostalgia, ignoring it for what it was: my own personal taste of home.

Or, maybe, it was because I used sugar.