STORY BY **AARON GULLEY** PHOTOS BY **JEN JUDGE**

EATING UP THE PHILIPPINES

Kung pao, pad thai — sure, but how about adobong manok? The next big Asian food could be Filipino cuisine, with simple yet exotic ingredients from the land and culture of this island nation. Sit back and dig in.

Clockwise from opposite: Rice terraces; fired-up coconut husks; *adobong manok* and pork *adobo*; chef Claude Tayag; banana and jackfruit rolls.

THIS IS CHICKEN AS I'VE NEVER DREAMT IT. I ROLL AROUND A MOUTHFUL OF THE braised meat, scrutinizing the sauce's exotic blend of tastes. The Filipino chefs give me clues on their ingredients: home-brewed vinegar, crunchy plantains, violently green tendrils of chilies and freshly squeezed coconut cream. I scribble down "*adobong manok sa sinunog na niyog*" so as never to forget the name of my first dish here in the Philippines. Each bite of what seemed at first glance like a simple lunch — chicken on a bed of rice alongside a salad — sends a quiver through me.

As an American traveler with a voracious appetite for Asian food, I thought I knew Asian food. Who among us hasn't built a pagoda stack of red Chinese to-go boxes in our fridge? We order up Vietnamese *pho* with relish, pick apart crimson tandoori chicken with our fingers and pop *nigiri* sushi like fries. But this chicken is a revelation. My culinary hosts — cookbook author Pia Lim-Castillo and friend Beth Romualdez, who has been preparing this favorite recipe all morning — must be holding back something in Pia's seemingly vanilla Manila kitchen. Its obsidian counters, stainless-steel appliances and huge panes of engineered glass could be found in any modern restaurant anywhere in the world. Where's that authentic flavor coming from?

I ask to see the secrets, and the women pull back the curtain. We walk out into the large, lush backyard hidden in this South Forbes Park neighborhood of the city. I had noticed Pia and Beth occasionally slipping back here as they chopped and sliced. As I look around, I now take in the dish in its natural form: talinum greens that were tossed with a vinaigrette and fiery fuschia blooms called *katuray* that added color to the plate. And of course, there's the smoke. The tendrils that caressed the chicken still rise from the fire pit. Charred coconut shells from the cream smolder in the dirt. Pia dismisses the method of artificially adding smoke flavor in the kitchen. "Here," she says, "you make your own."

Beth seems more relaxed here in the yard as she shows me the source of the meal. She holds up one of the talinum leaves and looks at me. "In the provinces, they say these greens are good for lactating," she quips. But then Beth clucks like a concerned mother: "The challenge for Filipino cuisine is how to appeal to a modern taste and sensibility but still preserve the traditional ways."

That's especially true when, as I would soon discover beyond Manila, not all the authentic flavors

Pandan chicken with tumeric rice blends influences. Opposite: Warm welcomes and "waste nothing" recipes define how Filipinos eat in the northern town of Tuguegarao.

A blend of cultures, farms still tended to by hand and a tradition of hospitality are a sumptuous feast even before you see the menus.

come from beautiful gardens. A water buffalo's odds and ends, for example, may not seem appetizing at first glance. Maybe that's why the answer to, "Quick, name a Filipino restaurant," is usually a blank look. If our appetites depended on our knowledge of Filipino cuisine, we'd be famished. Many Americans' grasp of the country ends at Imelda Marcos and her shoes. But the Philippines has much to offer: wild mountainscapes, empty beaches, a blend of Spanish and indigenous cultures, bountiful farms still tended to by hand and a tradition of hospitality. It's a sumptuous feast even before you see the actual menus of vinegar-marinated meats called *adobo*, sour soups brimming with fresh seafood, an array of sweet steamed coconut-and-rice cakes, and celebratory dishes such as roast suckling pig. I'll happily try anything if it helps Filipino chefs earn their place at the world table. This is the unsung island food we should all dig into.

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I FINALLY TEAR MYSELF AWAY FROM PIA'S BACKYARD. WHILE I'D LOVE TO EAT MY WAY ACROSS THE country's 7,107 islands, I'm going to confine myself to only one: Luzon. About the size of Tennessee, the gateway to the Philippines is home to perhaps the broadest range of cooking styles, from Manila's hothouse food scene to a handful of renowned culinary traditions farther afield.

Very near Pia's kitchen in Manila's metropolis, I walk into the Makati Shangri-la, Manila hotel, itself running the gamut, with four restaurants serving Cantonese *lapu-lapu* in Japanese *honmaguro toro*, Mongolian noodles and foie gras. I meet Fernando Aracama, a 40-year-old chef with 10 Manila restaurants to his credit, including an American diner, a Thai restaurant and a steakhouse. We sit in the hotel's grandiose lobby lounge, sipping coffee and contemplating the bite-size rice cakes and sticks of grilled meat on offer for the Spanish-style afternoon snack known as *merienda*.

I ask Fernando to distill the country's fare into a digestible portion, and he laughs. "Because of all the historical influences and regional differences, it's a concerted effort to decide what is Filipino cuisine," he says. But a few staples permeate the country's cooking such as rice, fish and coconuts, which grow almost everywhere and are the source of milk, meat, oil and even fuel for cooking. It's also safe to say that Filipinos like their food tart — vinegar and local fruits are used widely as souring agents. And they like it pungent — the potent fermented shrimp paste *bagoong* adds distinctive flavor. Beyond that, he says a variety of influences is on any one table. It's what you'd expect from a country of Malay, European and Chinese descendants sandwiched between the South China Sea and the open Pacific. These islands have had 16th-century Spanish galleons crisscrossing them with chilies and chocolates as Spaniards colonized. Then in the 20th century, Japan invaded and American soldiers liberated, bringing along canned-meat rations and the cheeseburger.

It's an overflowing cornucopia, and in Manila, it's everywhere. Fernando suggests to hone my search, I get out of the city for a literal taste of the countryside. A perfect place for that is Pampanga, a province two hours northwest of Manila that is revered for its culinary heritage. That's where I go, watching skyscrapers give way to prim, leafy neighborhoods, then dingy shantytowns and eventually grassy lowlands sown with rice. I go to the home of Claude Tayag, a cherubic celebrity chef known as the face of Pampangan cuisine. He welcomes me at his doorstep with the traditional local greeting, "*Mengan naka?*" ("Have you eaten?")

Quick to downplay his culinary qualifications — "everything I learned about cooking is from my mother" — Claude insists he was first a painter and sculptor, then a chef much later in life, which developed from a food-loving family. He shows me his home, a sweeping stilted creation he pieced together with reclaimed lumber. In one corner, he built a traditional open-air kitchen, complete with a wood-fired oven and stone-top stove. Dozens of wooden and terra-cotta cooking implements, cracked and blackened from time, hang above a counter. "This isn't just a house," he says. "It's a showcase of Filipino collectibles."

Claude lays out a spread of food seemingly much too expansive for any one meal. "Historically, Pampangos had first access to the imported foods transported through here," he says, pointing out that the region is located at the end of a principal inland river. "That changed the way we cook. So when a recipe calls for one tablespoon of butter, in Pampanga, you put two."

Claude has invented a richly sweet dish called *paradiso* — puddings of purple yam, *yema* (egg-yolk candy) and *macapuno* balls, on a bed of baked *pastillas* from the milk of the carabao, the hard-working Asian water buffalo that is the Philippines' national animal. But we all start this meal celebrating savory

Centuries-old Spanish churches are reminders of the mix of cultures. Opposite: In the Cordillera highlands, a broccoli farmer shoulders his harvest.

The terraced rice fields and hard-scrabble towns of Cordillera are home to austere cuisine.

Claude has invented a richly sweet dish called *paradiso*, but we all start this meal celebrating savory flavors: shrimp paste, mustard leaves and oxtail.

flavors: crackling, flash-fried catfish and dollops of fermented shrimp paste bundled into fresh mustard leaves, a Pampangan rendition of lettuce wraps. Then Claude serves *kare-kare*, a hearty peanut-laced stew of oxtail. I find myself full almost immediately but can't stop eating. The oxtail, which looks like some alien sea creature floating in the red-brown sauce, crunches like fresh celery at first but then melts away as I chew. If the rear end of a water buffalo can taste this good in the Philippines, I'm ready for anything. I slice off another bite of the tail, pop it in my mouth and turn to see what's next.

VENTURING AROUND THE LUZON COUNTRYSIDE IN SEARCH OF FILIPINO DELICACIES MIGHT sound like a brilliant plan — until you find yourself staring down a chef's special of sautéed beetles or a steaming bowl of pig innards. After Claude's, I fly north to the Cordillera highlands. Famous for the 2,000-year-old rice terraces of Banaue and isolated tribes who still nurse ritual animosity, this unforgiving land is to Manila what the Outback is to Sydney. "Your tour verges on the anthropological," Neal Oshima, a food photographer from Manila, had told me, adding, "The food in the north is honest, austere cuisine."

I wasn't sure what Neal was talking about. Now sitting in the town of Tuguegarao at the Pampangueña restaurant, I do. Owners Nene and Cecil Maño rattle my newfound infatuation with Filipino fare. The meal starts out innocuously, with a veggie stew of bright eggplant, chirpy squash and brat-size okra. Next comes *igado*, a stew of pork liver, intestines and earlobes. OK. Then I dip my spoon in *dinuguan*, pig's-blood stew. Ah, OK. By the time the Maños roll out the *papaitan*, I know well enough not to heap my bowl full. One bite tastes as bitter to me as battery acid. The secret to that searing flavor: goat's bile.

The Philippines' Luzon island shows its sweet side in Spanish-colonial towns and in dishes like *paradiso*, a pudding of purple yams, egg-yolk candy and carabao milk.

I survive and end up turning my attention to the bracing, but easier-to-digest sights. Rice terraces in this region cascade down peaks so sheer they would have given the Incas pause. Just as impressive are the roads that needle through the range. They're buried under avalanches of mud almost nightly as monsoon rains draw near. Locals negotiate these trails in jeepneys, a cross between a Jeep, a bus and a hearse. Technicolor and heavily chromed, each is one of a kind and splashed with worrisome names like "Iron Maiden" and slogans like "God Save Us." I book one to see more of the mountains. When the clouds let loose, however, the driver overcorrects through a turn and slides into an embankment. We wait for two hours through biblical rain until a front-end loader arrives to dig us out. Sitting on that mountain track, I understand what I've eaten here. Not only would these slopes support little agriculture — onions, garlic, rice, tobacco — but simply getting the food from place to place is a hardship. So people eat what they can get and make the best of it. That explains all the innards and secretions and parts. Nothing remotely nourishing should go to waste.

I witness the ultimate economy a few days later in Sagada, another Cordillera town. At a restaurant called Salt & Pepper Diner, owner Andrew Pekas demonstrates the traditional preparation of *pinikpikan*, which he refers to as "killing-me-softly chicken." The cooks first beat the outstretched wings of a live chicken with a wooden stick. Next they slaughter the fowl, singe off the feathers in an open fire, then make a soup from the meat and parts, which they flavor with ginger and salt-smoked ham. Though the whole production leaves me with not the calmest stomach, I slurp up the thin broth — full, smoky and delicious.

"Why do they beat the wings?" I ask Andrew. Apparently, the thrashing causes the blood to coagulate in the body, so every drop of nourishment can be consumed. Andrew further explains, "The sound of the chicken dying attracts the spirits. We share our food with them, and they give us blessings." In a place as rough-hewn as these highlands, spectral protection could be as important as the food on your plate.

IF AN EATING TOUR OF NORTH LUZON IS A RUGGED EXPEDITION, SAMPLING THE FLAVORS OF the southeast Bicol Peninsula is a sail through the South Pacific. It's a fertile lowland of rice paddies and coconut palms pocked by a rash of 22 volcanoes. My first taste is of *suman*, sweet rice-and-coconut cakes steamed in banana leaves that I get at a local market. I think of Beth Romualdez, who fired the coconuts back in Manila. She was from Bicol, and I can see the influence on her — and likely on chefs throughout the Philippines. The creamy coconuts that enliven Bicolano cuisine make mealtime feel like an indulgence.

Just as sweet is the welcome here. In the town of Buhi, I walk along a seven-square-mile lake with Salvador Espiritu, a little man who describes the diminutive sinarapan. A local delicacy, these fish grow no bigger than a penny. He takes me to where fishermen in outriggers work crab traps by the steamy tangle of

"We are frustrated that our food is still unknown," Glenda says. "In Thailand, there was a similar effort and now everyone loves Thai food."

acacia and coconut palms along the shore. One fellow demonstrates how to catch sinarapan, using a broad, fine, triangular net like a giant sieve to lift thousands of flittering fish out of the loamy, black water.

I soon get a chance to taste one as I discover that the Filipino reputation for hospitality is not overblown. We walk back into town, and Salvador introduces me to Socorro Cedaria, a matronly captain of the region, who insists we have lunch at her house. Nevermind that her daughter was married yesterday and the family had hosted a feast for 500 people. So we ease into plastic lawn chairs under a palm-roofed pavilion, wilting in the steamy heat as her family hurries out a meal. I sit with a scrum of men who, still carousing after the wedding, are three bottles deep in Tanduay, the local rum. Ignoring my protests — it is 11 a.m. on a Sunday morning, after all — they hand me the bottle and the communal glass, urging me to pour a shot, down it and pass the liquor to the right. Laughter and hilarity mount with the morning mugginess.

Then comes the food: a bowl of pork stew called *pochero*; a side of fresh pineapple and fermented shrimp; and the catch of sinarapan, sautéed with ginger, tomatoes and local greens. Socorro had no idea I was coming nor any incentive to lay out a spread of food. And yet here she is, encouraging me to refill my plate, relishing my satisfaction as much as I am enjoying the pork and pineapple. As sweat rolls off my forehead, I smile at her and reach for more sinarapan.

Modernity is coming to island traditions, from rice-god artifacts in a new Cordillera museum gallery (above) to the efforts of chef Glenda Rosales Barretto (opposite) to coordinate and promote the best of Filipino cuisine.

THIS TRIP REALLY STARTED WHEN I STEPPED INTO PIA'S BACKYARD. NOW I FEEL LIKE I'M BACK on my side of the curtain. One day and many miles away from Bicol, I've returned to Manila. But I'm not done eating — if I can figure out how to approach this dish that's now in front of me.

Here at the city hot spot of Bistro Filipino, the plate looks more like a miniature Miró sculpture than my dinner. Fist-size prawns balance in geometric opposition atop *laing* (taro leaves) and tempura cake with coconut dijon cream. The entree is taller than it is wide, and I'm not quite sure how and where to breach the stunning creation.

In Manila's burgeoning indigenous restaurant scene, young trained chefs like Laudico Bistro Filipino's Rolando Laudico are pushing the *(continued on p. 106)*

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boundaries of the country's fare. "After training at the Culinary Institute of America and working in France and Australia, I thought, 'Why can't our food be as recognized as other cuisines?'" he says. "I want to make Filipino food that is rooted in tradition but beyond common."

Still, no one chef — whether in metro Manila or the Cordillera mountains — can write the definitive book on Filipino cuisine. Together, maybe. That's what Glenda Rosales Barretto, widely considered the doyenne of food in the Philippines, worked on in *Kulinarya*, the just-completed cookbook project she wrote in conjunction with other all-star chefs. Glenda's interest in cultivating her country's cuisine winds back to none other than Imelda Marcos, who challenged the then-rising chef to revamp traditional dishes with modern presentations for state dinners in the 1980s. *Kulinarya* presents the most quintessential Filipino dishes with a standardized way of cooking them. "We are frustrated that so many of our chefs work around the world, and yet our food is still unknown," Glenda says. "In Thailand, there was a similar effort some years ago, and now everyone loves Thai food."

Glenda invites me to her Manila restaurant, Via Mare, for a private dinner prepared by and shared with the chefs of *Kulinarya*. With Glenda at the head of a long table in a sleek dining room, we sit for hours as waiters parade out plate after plate of deconstructed, reimagined Filipino classics. Slabs of snowy mackerel and giant flaming prawns swim in a clear, sour tamarind broth called *sinigang*. Shredded crab and coconut comes packed into tablespoon-size crab shells and swaddled in steamed banana leaves. And the *lechon*, a spit-roasted whole suckling pig with crackling skin redolent of lemongrass, rests like a prince on its centerpiece throne.

Two hours into the meal, I'm satiated, and not only from the banquet. By distilling the country's vast and delicious menu into a digestible and appealing package, these chefs are helping me see the Philippines' culinary future.

Glenda sees my smile. "We love our food," she says, leaning toward me, "and we believe others will love it too." Then she flicks her hand, and the waiters stride in with food as I've never dreamt it. ✢

PLAN YOUR TRIP: Philippines

FLY direct from Los Angeles (LAX) to Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport (MNL) aboard Philippine Airlines. The carrier also has service to Tuguegarao and Laoag in the north and Naga and Legaspi in Bicol. *philippineairlines.com*

STAY at the impressive Makati Shangri-La, Manila with its unbelievable service and its location near restaurants. *shangri-la.com* In Baguio, the gateway to Cordillera, PNKY Home is an atmospheric old mansion stuffed with Spanish and indigenous antiques. *pnkyhome.com* In Bicol, Naga's Avenue Plaza Hotel is a boutique joint with marble everywhere and an appealing pool. *theavenueplazahotel.com*

EAT *sinigang* and *puto bumbong* prepared by the doyenne of Filipino cuisine, Glenda Rosales Barretto, at Via Mare in Manila. *viamare.com.ph* In the north, Salt & Pepper Diner in Sagada specializes in Cordillera delicacies. Don't miss the *sinanglay*, tilapia braised in coconut cream, ginger and garlic, at Clementine's Bakeshop in Naga.

COMMUNE with spirits on a trek through Sagada's Echo Canyon, where the dead are buried in coffins strung from limestone cliffs. *sagadagenuineguides.blogspot.com*

ACQUAINT yourself with one of the Philippines' freshest artists, Benedicto "BenCab" Reyes Cabrera, whose bold prints and sculptures sit alongside a host of Pinoy masters at Baguio's recently opened BenCab Museum. *bencabmuseum.org*

RIDE in a horse-drawn *calesa* in Vigan, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of the best-preserved Spanish-colonial cities in the Philippines. *vigancity.gov.ph*

LEARN more at *islands.com/philippines*