

THE CAPIZENO COOKBOOK

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(exception: cover photo by Dead Eyes Staff)

Many things changed in me in Capiz, a rural region of the Philippines where I spent one summer volunteering with an NGO. Too many things to list here, not all of them the kind of thing you'd mention in a grant application or a college essay. Here's one: now, I eat ampalaya.

My mom is Filipino, born in a region no less rural than Capiz, and even she won't eat ampalaya — bitter melon in English. When it showed up in the soups and stir-fries of family gatherings we'd both pick around the green bumpy slices and leave them in the serving bowls.

I'd only ever seen cooked bitter melon, so I didn't recognize it when a plate of ensaladang ampa-



laya appeared on a lunch table in Capiz, heaped with slices of yellow tomatoes and red onions like a Filipino pico de gallo. By the time I realized what was on my plate it was too late.

The first bite — spicy and sweet — was like the kind of first kiss that will lead to more, whether you expected it to or not. I wouldn't shut up about how much I liked ensaladang ampalaya and so it appeared on the table again and again.

"I'll show you how to make the dressing," said Ma'am Annalise, on the day before I left. "Then you can put some in a bottle to bring home for pasalubong."

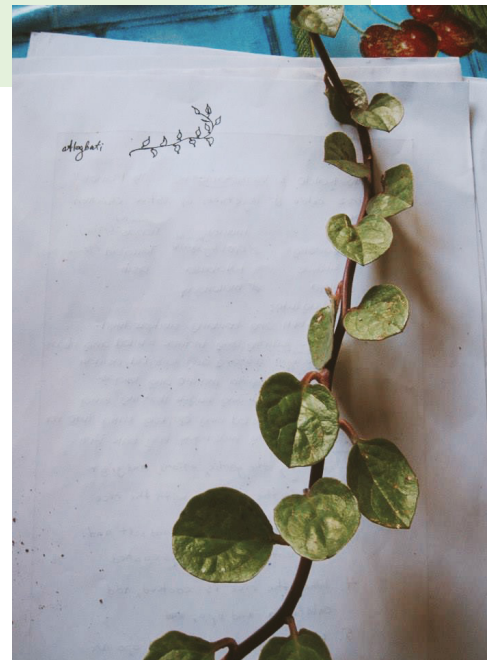
"When things are bitter,
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of sugar...
That's how to stay
happy, right?"

-Ma'am Annalise



In the kitchen I helped her crush the garlic and slice the onions and the tomatoes. I wondered if it was the acid in the tomatoes or the cytosol in the garlic that neutralized the bitterness. Then Ma'am showed me the true secret to conquering a bitter melon: into one cup of vinegar, she poured one heaping cup of sugar.

"When things are bitter, you need to add a lot of sugar," she said. "That's how to stay happy, right?"



Ensaladang ampalaya — Bitter melon salad

Ingredients:

- 1 bitter melon, pith and seeds removed, cut into slices
- 4 shallots, sliced into rounds
- 4 roma tomatoes, sliced into rounds
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup coconut vinegar or apple cider vinegar
- 1 cup sugar

Method:

1. Combine bitter melon, shallots, and tomatoes in a bowl. Sprinkle with salt.
2. Stir together vinegar, sugar, and garlic until sugar is dissolved. Pour over vegetables and stir to combine. Serve chilled.

If You're Going To Eat A Turtle

The NGO assigned me to write a cookbook about Capizeño food that they could bring to fundraisers and galas, the kinds where rich people in gowns bid thousands of dollars on teddy bears and children's drawings to pass the time. Instead of a children's drawing, they'd auction my cookbook, an equally amateur effort. So I asked the cafeteria ladies at the NGO's partner schools what they liked to cook, how they used all the things that grew and crept and burrowed in the forgotten patches between the rice paddies.

This was done in a mix of English and my slobbering, terrible Ilonggo, a Filipino dialect that I could use as well as a vestigial organ, like a third eyelid or an appendix.

At some point in one of these halting conversations, a cook said *baon* — a packed meal for school or work. I thought she said *bao* — turtle. I drew a picture of it on my notebook: a craggy shell, a poking head. She called over everyone within earshot to laugh.

“But if you are going to eat a turtle,” she said, “you should make *adobo*.” Everyone agreed.

Adobong bao — Turtle adobo

Ingredients:

Meat of 1 large turtle or 1 small chicken, cut into pieces

Salt and pepper

1 cup soy sauce

5 cloves garlic, crushed

2 bay leaves

2 tablespoons oil

1/4 cup coconut vinegar or rice vinegar

2 tablespoons brown sugar

Water or chicken broth

1 tablespoon cornstarch

Method:

1. Salt and pepper the meat.

Place in a bowl and add with soy sauce, garlic, and 1 bay leaf. Cover bowl and refrigerate at least 1 hour or overnight.

2. Heat oil in a large pot. Remove meat from marinade and pat dry. Place meat in pan and brown on both sides.

3. Add 1/4 cup of the marinade to the pan, followed by second bay leaf, vinegar, sugar and enough water or broth to cover. Bring to a simmer and cook 1 hour, or until meat is tender.

4. Place meat in a bowl. Bring liquid to a boil. Dissolve cornstarch in 1 tablespoon of the liquid, then whisk into the pot. Cook until thickened.

5. Season sauce to taste with salt and pepper. Pour over meat and serve with rice.



Remember Capiz

In Capiz, I stayed with Sir Romy, the school head, and his wife Ma’am Evelyn. Every morning I walked to school with Ma’am Ev, and as we passed each plant she would tell me its name. Not only the day-glo flowers along the paths or the fruit-heavy trees, but also the scrubby weeds and the grasses. Bulabog, bay-ag-usa, pandakaki, milli-pilli. Everything had a name, the round Ilonggo syllables rolling like marbles in the mouth.

We were almost at the school gate one day when we met two little girls holding hands. They looked about seven and nine years old, but could have been older and stunted. Each had a plastic bag hanging from her wrist, full as a balloon with something green and leafy.

“Wild ampalaya leaves,” said Ma’am Ev. “They grow everywhere. If you stir them too much they are very bitter, but if you are hungry you can make them taste good. You can make anything taste good if you are hungry enough.”

“What do you have there?” asked Ma’am. The older one opened her bag to show us the curly tendrils inside.

“Wild ampalaya leaves,” said Ma’am Ev. “They grow everywhere. If you stir them too much they are very bitter, but if you are hungry you can make them taste good. You can make anything taste good if you are hungry enough.”

After Capiz, when I ended up in Manila alone, trying to write,

I remembered this.

Talbos ng ampalaya at tinapa – Bitter melon leaves and smoked fish

Ingredients:

*1 small bunch bitter melon leaves (about 1 cup)
1 tablespoon oil
1 onion, diced
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 large tomato, diced
4 pieces smoked scad (tinapa) or mackerel, flaked
About 1/2 cup water or broth
salt and pepper*

Method:

*1. Wash bitter melon leaves and remove the leaves and soft stems from the tough stalks. Discard the stalks. Dry and set aside.
2. Heat oil in a wok or skillet with a lid. Fry the onion until translucent. Add the garlic and cook until aromatic.
3. Add tomatoes and about 1/4 teaspoon salt. Cook until tomato renders its juice.
4. Add fish, followed by enough water or broth to cover. Cook until liquid reduces by half.
5. Add leaves and cover. Cook 1-2 minutes, or until leaves are wilted. Season to taste and serve with rice.*

“Many things changed . . . me in Capiz...”

