



GROWING UP “MIX-MIX”

FILIPINO IDENTITY IN THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE

by Alexis Diao

The Diao family in the Philippines. The author's father is second from right.

GREGORIO ELEUTERIO Diao sat on the steps of the Denver, Colorado State Capitol, looking directly at the camera before him. As the shutter clicked, a nervous, thoughtful smile spread across his face. He was a long way from his childhood home in the Philippines. It was the mid-1960s. Denver was likely the farthest my grandfather had ever traveled from a body of water.

Sixty years later, that picture hangs in my bedroom. No matter how much I stare, I can't tell what my grandfather is thinking or feeling. That's what I like about the picture. I get to fill in the blanks.

Gregorio, or Lolo—an affectionate term for “grandfather”—was a Balikbayan. That means he left and then returned to the Philippines. When he migrated to the United States, where he eventually earned a master's

Photos courtesy of Alexis Diao

degree in agricultural engineering, he initially had to leave his wife and six children, including my father, at home.

Lolo's trip to America inspired my father, his youngest son, to make the same passage. After settling in the States, he earned a master's degree and then a doctorate in economics from Florida State University. He said he chose the Tallahassee school because he wanted to be near a beach. Unfortunately, Gulf of Mexico spots like Alligator Point, Shell Point, and Bald Point Park were more than thirty miles from his new home. Facing down that reality, my Dad, who never cried, bawled.

Soon, though, my father took to the American South. The unforgiving sun, humidity, and fecund soil were all familiar. Like native Southerners, Filipinos are open and hospitable. Whether you're in Birmingham or Boracay, strangers ask where you're from and what you're doing there. Nosy might be another way to put it. Filipinos and Southerners also share a deep sense of pride in their foods. Both cultures are pork-centric, dote on pickles, and value home gardens.

Filipino food is not easily comparable to Chinese or Japanese food. Because the Spanish colonized the Philippines, we share dishes with Latin cultures—adobo, menudo, flan. Rice, always white, is a hallmark. Pork dishes forever simmer on stoves. Fruit desserts follow most meals.

MY FATHER ARRIVED IN Florida in 1982. Then-President Ronald Reagan would refer to this time of new beginnings as “Morning in America.” For Clyde Diao, everything was new. He had never washed his own laundry, never driven a car, never cooked his own meals. In the Philippines, many middle-class families employed women known as *yayas*.

Depending on need and affluence, a family might employ more than one *yaya* to cook, clean, tend the garden, and mind the children. Most everyone in our family was raised by a live-in *yaya*, including my parents and my older siblings, who—unlike me—were born in the Philippines.

My father was part of a larger immigrant trend. Beginning in 1965, the U.S. government lowered entry barriers for engineers, doctors, nurses, academics, and other so-called “skilled workers” like my father. They were capable people, often at the top of their class. But they were not, for the most part, cooks.

My father's mother, a stout, strong-boned, iron-willed woman from Siquijor—known for its animistic religious beliefs and the tumultuous waters that gird the island—was serious about food. In family stories, she stood over the shoulder of a *yaya*, working with the maid to taste-test dishes, roast coffee in a wok, and bake chiffon cakes with edible pearl decorations.

But she did not teach her children to cook. Women were not



supposed to be cooks. My titas, or aunts, were expected to focus on school. They became medical professionals. Three of them moved to Atlanta and Tallahassee. Today, I imagine them as young women at work, expertly drawing blood samples or giving injections, coming home in the evening, throwing up their hands, and declaring that they didn't know how to cube a tomato or wash a dish.

WHEN MY FATHER MOVED TO Tallahassee, a mere handful of Filipino families lived there. Most were FSU students or professors. Before emigrating, Filipino students would write a letter of introduction to a stateside Filipino professor. My godparents, Mila and Manny Pescador, often served as an unofficial welcome committee, ferrying new arrivals around town and delivering welcome baskets of toilet paper, rice, and Spam (a Filipino favorite born of the American occupation of the islands that began in 1898 and ended in 1946).

Upon his arrival in 1982, my father moved into Alumni Village, a launching pad for FSU international students that my parents would later call "Slumni Village." My mother and brother joined a year later. In my mother's family, cooking was a point of pride. When my grandmother arrived for a party, I watched grown women panic, thinking she might disapprove of the dish they brought. Most nights, however,

Mom served ramen, elaborated with mushrooms, eggs, whatever was in the fridge. Or she made rice with eggs. Canned corned beef and ham were splurges.

Filipino ingredients were tough to source. To get the crabs she wanted, my mother would travel to a market a half-hour away. She was once so desperate to cook with coconut milk that she risked bloody knuckles to grate it herself. Back then, only two places in the Florida capital sold soy sauce. Lucy Ho's, open since the 1960s and the first Chinese restaurant in the city, sold soy sauce and rice on the side. Oriental Bazaar, the first local Asian market, opened in 1976. Owners Alex and Amy Cardona stocked Asian groceries and martial arts equipment.

A drive to a Filipino grocery store was the closest thing to flying home to the Philippines. We would visit every Asian grocery in the city, stocking up on coconut vinegar and rice noodles. Most everyone in the Filipino community drove the two hours to Jacksonville or four hours to Atlanta to buy staples like Mama Sita spice mixes and Filipino sausage. My mother loved candies. Pastillas de leche, soft milk sweets coated in sugar, were childhood favorites. So was sam-palok, a tamarind candy that stuck to the top of her mouth.

We returned home with the ingredients for sinigang, a tamarind-based soup with vegetables and pork or fish; dinuguan, a pork stew thickened with fresh pork



LEFT: The author's father, Clyde Diao. RIGHT: The author's mother, Carmel Wooten.

blood; and halo-halo—"mix-mix"—a coconut and condensed milk dessert of shaved ice, jellied fruits, and jelly beans. We bought shrimp-flavored crackers, too, and ube ice cream custard, made from purple potatoes. No matter the destination, no matter what we scribbled on our grocery list, my family always returned home from these trips with a twenty-pound bag of rice.

Back then, I was more concerned with what I was wearing and which CD I had just popped in my Walkman. Think sparkle jeans, colored eyeliner, and back-seat Destiny's Child-inspired dance moves. I didn't see these trips as chances for my mother to reconnect with her life in the Philippines, to show my brother and me what home tasted like.

BY THE TIME I WAS A KID IN the 1990s, the Tallahassee Filipino community had grown considerably. Our identity revolved around food. I came to associate

Filipino identity with laughter, extended families, the smell of garlic, and the chatter of old friends in Tagalog or Visaya. My parents and the parents of my friends hosted feasts where we ate chicken adobo, a vinegar and soy sauce dish served on rice. We devoured platters of lumpia Shanghai, a fried eggroll with sweet sauce. And halo-halo, too. Sometimes we tramped from house to house to eat and then eat again. Each summer, twenty or so families would gather on St. George Island to eat crabs and celebrate birthdays with plateful after plateful of good luck noodles, pan de sal, adobo, and menudo.

Southern and American foods came later. The lunch ladies at my elementary-school cafeteria introduced me to collard greens, cornbread, and fried chicken. They served spaghetti tossed with meatballs instead of hot dogs (in the Filipino style). At home, we kept a Filipino kitchen. While other kids sat down to weekend



The author with her daughter.



pancakes drenched in Aunt Jemima syrup, we ate rice, eggs, and fried Spam.

I straddled two worlds. My parents tried to bring me up Filipino-ish. Meanwhile, I adopted the American South, telling myself that I am the daughter of immigrants and I am also a daughter of the South. The latter identity wasn't always clear. I looked different. I ate different food at home. Those differences made me a target of everyday racism.

Along with other Filipinos, I endured ignorant questions. No, I told both kids and adults, I can't read the Asian characters on the tag of your T-shirt or that Chinese symbol tattoo. No, it's not cool to call me a "Chink." It's not even

accurate. No, my parents don't own a nail salon or a Kwik-E Mart. We don't eat dog. Yes, I can see as well as you can, even though my eyes are shaped "squinty." To be fair, people often asked these questions in earnest. Along with being legitimately racist, they were legitimately curious.

Today, people ask how I can call myself a Southerner when I am Asian. Why claim the South, a place historically riddled by racism? I answer by talking about things I love. And I start with food and agriculture. I make a mean shrimp and grits, working a recipe from Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill. I know the smell of Florida tea olive. I pour a healthy dose of vinegar in my collards. I hold a

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learned opinion about whether cornbread should be sweet. The sight of Spanish moss makes my heart swell.

I take great pride in my Filipino-Southern identity. I carry the South in my heart. But I'm not sure how to explain that identity to my daughter. I don't live in Tallahassee. I live, instead, in Washington, D.C., a place that Southerners call the North and Northerners call the South.

Driving to dinner with friends, my daughter asks me point-blank: "What's Filipino?"

After careful consideration I say, "That's where Mama is from."

Ethnically and culturally true, I tell myself. Good enough for a four-year-old to understand, I hope.

"But I thought you were from Florida," she says.

This might take longer than a car ride, I realize.

Somehow, I now wear my parents' shoes. Far from where I grew up, culturally at a loss, I try hard to explain to my daughter

and myself how I can be a Filipino-Southerner when I don't live in the Philippines or the South. I'm not alone. As my generation begins to tell its own story about what it's like to be a stateside Filipino, we don't talk about how to assimilate. We talk about changing and expanding the definition of Southern or American culture.

My dark skin and black hair are Southern. The slant in my eyes is Southern. So is my short stature. I am the girl next door. Southerners have long made space at the table for new arrivals. It's time to make a place for me. For us. Alongside the collard greens and cornbread, it's time to lay out a feast of pig-blood stew, jasmine rice, and pickled papaya. Let's set the welcome table with a breakfast of rice and eggs. We can make white bread tomato sandwiches for lunch. Come dinner, we'll eat fried oyster po-boys and a cobbler of picked papayas and peaches, capped with purple potato ice cream. 🍷

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