PURPLE PATCH:

My Home away from Home

I went looking for a neighborhood spot to call my own. I found a taste of my family's history.

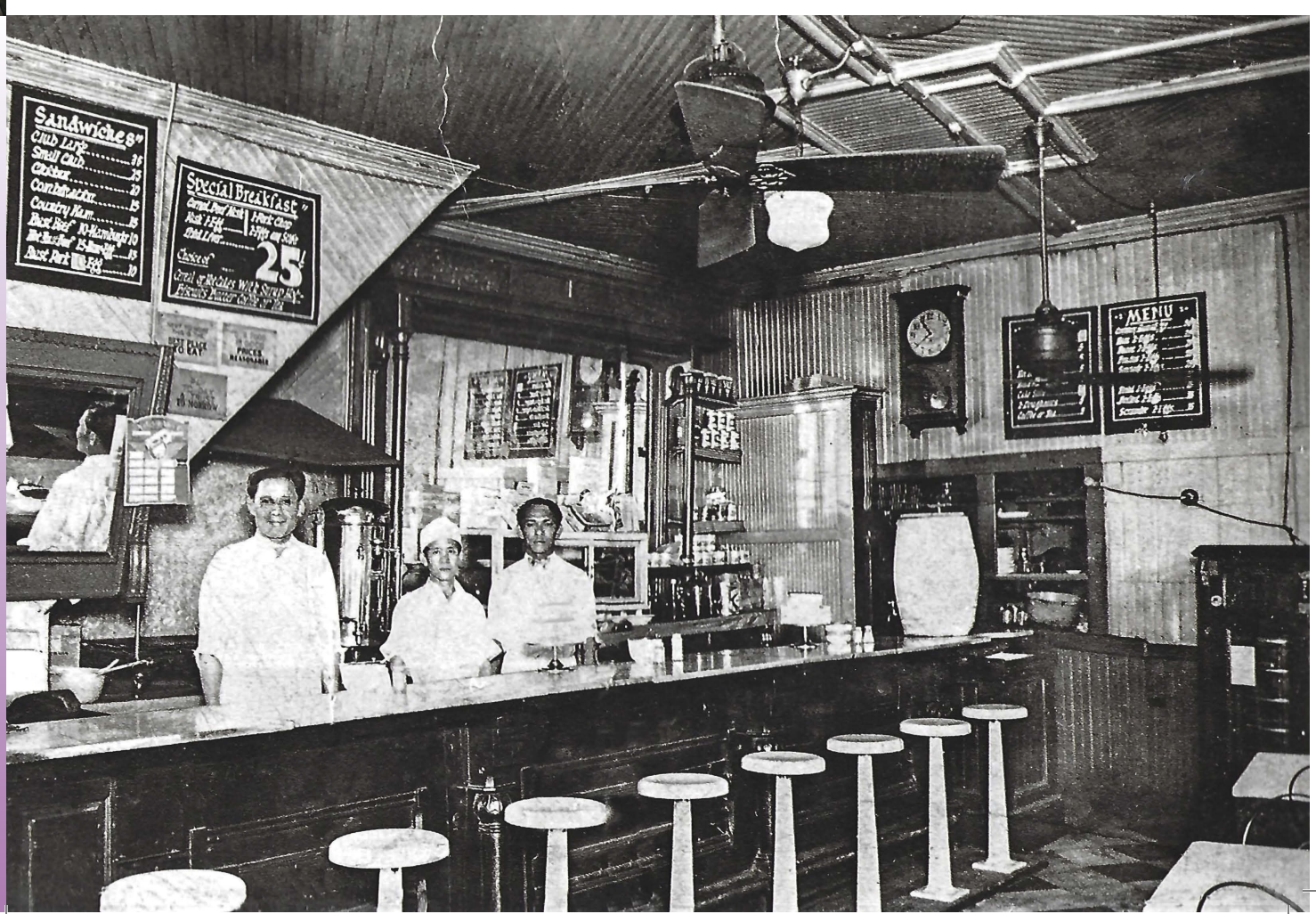
by LINDA GOLDEN *Photos by Susana Raab*

My husband and I moved to Washington, DC, in June 2015 and settled in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood in July. As we explored our new home, we looked for a restaurant where we could be regulars, chasing a dream of our own Cheers, where everybody knew our names. In October, *Washington Post* food critic Tom Sietsema included the Filipino American restaurant Purple Patch in his fall dining guide. We visited, then returned again and again, until Purple Patch became our go-to, a second home, the place we took all our friends and visitors, our Friday night happy hour that turned into dinner.

Part of the draw was proximity. The restaurant sits midway down Mount Pleasant Street, the neighborhood's main street, a short walk from our apartment. A happy hour that lasted until eight, an hour later than many places, helped. We'd sit at the bar, crowding in with other patrons—young, old, Filipino, Black, white, Latino, folks on first dates, friends catching up—as larger parties and families filled the tables in the back half of the restaurant. We'd order beers, adobo wings, five crispy lumpia, the golden wrappers flaking as we bit through the spring rolls to the pork and beef inside. Sometimes we split the sizzling sisig, the cast-iron platter of chopped pork shoulder and belly arriving in a cloud of chile-infused smoke.

Patrice Cleary, Purple Patch's owner and chef, often circulated, checking in with her staff, visiting tables to greet guests, asking about their meals. She listened as, over their halo-halo dessert, an older Filipino woman and her friend told her

LEFT: Patrice Cleary, owner of Purple Patch in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, DC. She holds a bowl of her signature Pancit Mahal, a noodle dish. BELOW: The author's great-grandfather Generoso Siapno with employees at his diner in Norfolk, VA, ca. 1930s. (Photo courtesy of Linda Golden)



When we visited Purple Patch with my parents and my cousins, there was the knowledge that up our family tree, someone cooked like this.

about driving in from Virginia to try the food. She thanked people for coming. A United States Marine Corps veteran, Cleary, now forty-eight, opened Purple Patch after years in the service industry, bartending and catering. Her presence—along with the food, and the bartenders who did indeed ask our names (even if, unlike Sam Malone of Cheers, they forgot them between visits)—made Purple Patch an easy favorite.

Purple Patch's take on Filipino cuisine spoke to my own family history. My Filipino great-grandfather, Generoso Siapno, was born in Dagupan in 1889. Thirteen years later, the United States established a naval base at Subic Bay and began recruiting Filipinos as guides and mess attendants. The base operated until 1992 and was one of the Philippines' largest employers. Generoso joined as a steward at age twenty. He ended up in New Orleans and married Lithia Russell, a Louisianan woman whose own grandfather was Filipino. In the 1930s and 40s, they raised my grandma, great-aunt, and great-uncles in Norfolk, Virginia, home to the world's largest naval base. When he left the Navy, Generoso studied to be an electrician. But he ended up running a diner, the Manila Cafe, in Norfolk for close to a decade. Our family has one photograph of Generoso at his café. In it, he stands behind the counter with two friends who worked with him. We know them only by their first names, Padja and Casheano. Menu signs on the wall above them advertise sandwiches: large club, small club, country ham. A 25-cent special breakfast comes with a choice of corned beef hash, hash and egg, fried liver, one pork chop, or two eggs. Only the men cooking and serving the food are Filipino.

Our Siapno family cookbook includes one recipe for "bean thread (sotanghon)." It's not a dish I recall from my Texas childhood. My dad, raised by a Norfolk Siapno and an Illinois Golden who served as missionaries, grew up all over Africa. His cooking trended more Virginian and West African—black beans and sausage, collards with kippered herring, okra and beef cubes, and rice, always rice. My Swiss mother made ratatouille, spaghetti, and a macaroni-and-cheese casserole with frozen vegetable medley and hot dogs. When we ate out, we went to Mexican, Chinese, Belgian, and Brazilian restaurants around Dallas and Houston. We attended extended family gatherings infrequently; the last one I recall was in 1989 in Virginia Beach. At five years old, my interests included playing with cousins and avoiding jellyfish. The Siapno siblings gathering around a bushel of blue crabs—that's the culinary picture I conjure for that part of the family.

In 2015, when my husband and I arrived in DC, the remaining Siapno siblings were in decline. Within a year, my great-aunt Marjorie, the oldest of Generoso's five children, died. My grandmother Clara, Marjorie's sister, passed soon after. My aunt ordered trays of lumpia and pancit (noodles) for my grandmother's funeral reception. It is the only time I remember eating Filipino food with my extended family.

I have questions for my grandmother and great-aunt. What was it like growing up as Filipino American women in segregated Virginia? Apart from that one dish in the family cookbook, what

ABOVE: The intersection of Lamont and Mt. Pleasant streets near Purple Patch, February 2022. The area has been home to thriving immigrant communities and immigrant-owned businesses since the 1970s.
OPPOSITE: Purple Patch Filipino Restaurant on Mt. Pleasant St NW. In the foreground is the outdoor dining space, erected in the early months of the COVID pandemic and still in use.

Filipino food did they eat growing up? Yet by the time I became curious, it was too late.

As that first year of funerals, memorials, and home-clearings faded, Purple Patch, my neighborhood Filipino restaurant, became a link of sorts to that part of the family. When we visited the restaurant with my parents and my cousins, there was the knowledge that up our family tree, someone cooked like this. Someone taught the Siapno kids to make sotanghon.

When she opened Purple Patch, Patrice Cleary intended to foster this very sense of shared Filipino identity among a segment of her clientele. "The reason why I do what I do is because the memories that you have will just be memories if there weren't people like me and other pioneers in this industry for Filipino food," she told me. We sat at a table outside her restaurant one afternoon last fall. A cloth face mask hung from a chain around her neck, and her long, highlighted black hair fell around her shoulders. Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the restaurant, once housed in the basement and first floor of a DC rowhouse, has spilled onto Mount Pleasant Street. A wooden shelter topped with plastic corrugated roofing corralled the outdoor seating. The makeshift patio stretched beyond Purple Patch's entrance toward its neighbors on either side: the unisex hair salon, a jewelry store, a nail salon, the Salvadoran chicken place. Artificial ivy and pink roses snaked around the shelter's rafters and up support pillars, between which hung baskets of live petunias and begonias. Gauzy curtains blocked the late-afternoon sun. A server stopped by our table to offer us frozen calamansi juice, made from the sweet-sour Filipino citrus fruit that appears both on the drink and dinner menus.

I told Cleary that I have no memories of my great-grandfather, nor of eating Filipino food in my childhood. "You have Filipino lineage," she replied. "And so even though you don't have that

memory, now I'm helping you create it."

"There's so many memories I have from my mom making food when I was a child, and there was never a recipe that she passed on to me," Cleary continued. "It was always just, 'Oh, it's a little bit of this, a lot of that, and a little bit of this,'" her words echoing those of so many cooks trying to replicate family dishes with direction from a tablespoon-averse elder. Cleary converted her memories into measurements and created recipes when she opened Purple Patch.

"I didn't have this growing up," Cleary said, gesturing at her restaurant. "My mom built a little piece of it at home, but whenever I asked my mom to open up a restaurant, she shied away from it."

Cleary doesn't recall Olangapo, her birthplace in the Philippines. Her own memories start in Westwood, Massachusetts, her American father's hometown, where the family moved when she was young. Cleary remembers her mother Alice's efforts to share Filipino food with Americans. She focused on dishes friendly to the American palate, like chicken adobo, lumpia, fried rice, and pancit.

"Those four dishes I remember my mom making for every party, every festivity, because she knew that anybody would love this food," Cleary said in an oral history recorded for the DC public library.

Cleary's father's military career took the family around the world. They lived in Japan, Korea, the Azores, and all over the United States. Alice catered for restaurants on the bases. She also set up a stand in the airplane hangars where her husband worked as an aviation electronics technician. She sold plates of pancit, lumpia, barbecued meat, and white rice. She enlisted her children's help, and Cleary remembers assembling lumpia with her two siblings.

It would be a while before Cleary made lumpia alone. When she was seventeen, her father died. At eighteen, she enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. She spent eight years in the Marines, then worked for a venture capital firm in DC, then in New York. She quit and returned to Washington in 2001.

"I realized I did not want to inbox anymore, and I said, 'I want to become a bartender.'"

BELOW: Lumpia stuffed with pork and beef are served with banana ketchup and spicy vinegar dipping sauces.
RIGHT: Purple Patch's cocktail offerings include a nonalcoholic strawberry spritzer and rum-spiked spiced cider.

Cleary made flashcards, studied them, and helped at a friend's bar until he offered her a paid shift on Thanksgiving. This was the start of her service-industry career. After giving birth to her first son, she stayed at home but began selling savory hand pies and lumpia on the side.

"It wasn't really about making money. It was more so about just keeping my brain active," she said.

In 2014, Cleary returned to Mount Pleasant with her then-husband to open Purple Patch in the space previously occupied by Tonic, a restaurant she'd helped friends start years earlier. When Purple Patch opened in March 2015, it was the first new Filipino restaurant in the capital in years. Despite a slew of early challenges, she refused to give up: not when the restaurant flooded a month in; not when she fired her first chef after three months because he did not understand her vision; not when, after only six months, both her husband and their accountant told her the restaurant would never make money and that she should quit.

"I said, 'You've got to give me time...but six months just isn't enough time.'"

Six years, a divorce, and a pandemic later, Cleary has shown herself—and everyone else—that she could do it, overcoming logistical challenges and self-doubt. When she opened Purple Patch, Cleary had no connections to the local Filipino community and worried about criticisms of not being authentic.

"Am I Filipino enough? The only person that can make me Filipino enough is me. And it's taken me opening a restaurant to believe in that and see that I am Filipino enough for me."

If you've heard about Filipino food in DC, it's likely by way of Bad Saint, Purple Patch's nationally recognized Columbia Heights neighbor. But Filipino restaurants existed around the capital before these two restaurants, serving the more than 97,000 Filipinos in the DC metropolitan area. There were smaller, turo turo spots (literally, "point-point": restaurants with steam tables where you point at the food you want), bakeries, counters

in grocery stores, and buffets in strip malls.

A similar scene developed in Norfolk, my Filipino family's home.

"There were a couple of Filipino grocery stores, you know, turo turo style, point-point, but I don't remember any standalone restaurants," said Gem Daus of the Filipino food scene in Norfolk in the 1970s and 80s. Daus, who teaches part-time at the University of Maryland and William and Mary's Asian American Studies programs, was born in the Philippines and moved to Norfolk in 1972 when the Navy posted his father there. He said the current Filipino restaurants are a product of the generation that grew up in the United States.

"They've adopted this profession, maybe, after doing the profession their parents wanted them to do," he said. Daus also pointed out that because many Filipinos had jobs in the Navy or medical fields, restaurant work was an avoidable profession. Now, the children of immigrants are opening restaurants to showcase the food they grew up with at home.

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Rita Cacas, coauthor of *Filipinos in Washington, D.C.* and creator of the University of Maryland's Filipino American Community Archives collection, wondered why Filipino food, which she'd been eating all her life, was suddenly so popular. One reason it was slow to gain recognition, Cacas thought, was the fault of her mother's generation.

"Everyone said, 'I don't like this food. My pancit's better.' Nobody wanted to support their community, so things failed," Cacas said of the attitude when she was growing up.

Of the recent rise of Filipino restaurants, Daus said, "We stopped asking for authenticity and just started asking, 'Is it good?'"

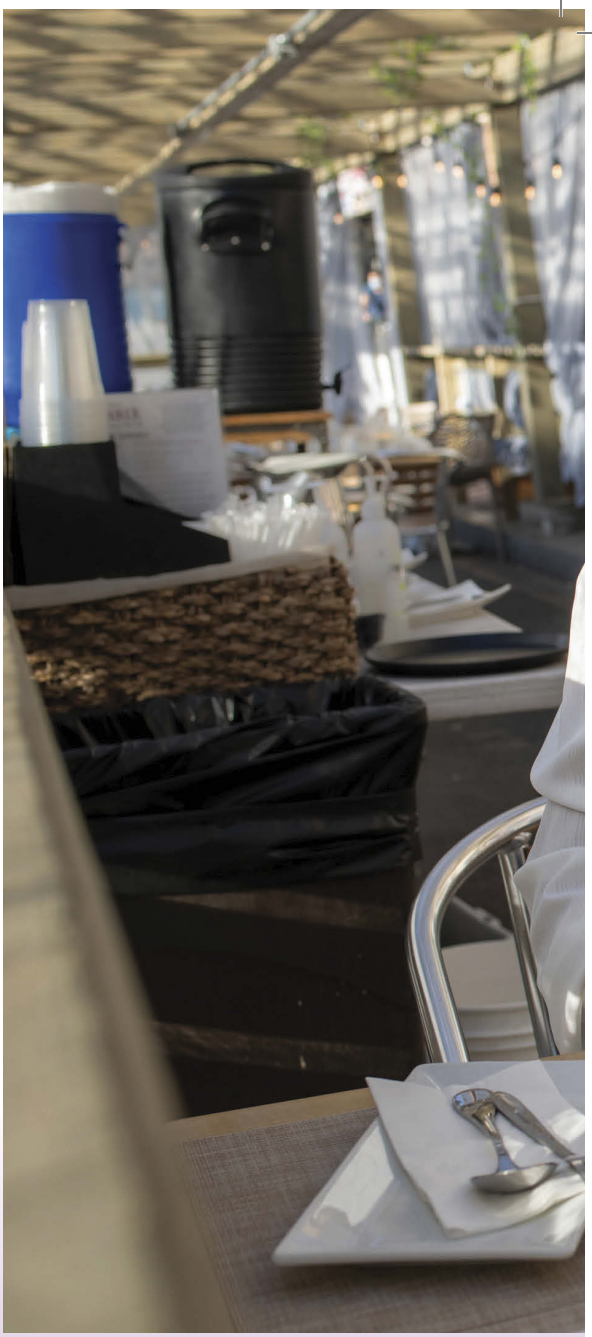
At Purple Patch, the menu has always been Filipino American. The beef section features coconut-braised short rib adobo, a cheeseburger, and a ribeye steak. The sizzling pork sisig also comes in burrito form. Cleary's attention to her customers goes beyond the food and the restaurant walls. When the pandemic hit, Cleary shut down Purple Patch for a day and quickly charted a new course. She and her staff converted the upstairs dining room into a pick-up area for takeout orders and a market selling Filipino snacks and desserts. She cooked trays of food for healthcare workers and offered free lunch for neighborhood children.

"The program still exists," she said. "We don't really have anybody coming in any more for it, but we've done well over 6,000 meals."

She continues to donate breakfast to an outdoor Saturday morning concert series for children in the neighborhood.

Of the growing list of Filipino restaurants in the area, Cleary said, "I have nothing but love for my fellow chefs and my fellow restaurateurs. So much so that all of us, we tend to cook together a lot now."

For the last few Octobers, Filipino American month, Cleary and other chefs, including Paolo Dungca and Tom Cunanan of Pogiboy (formerly of Kaliwa and Bad Saint, respectively), Javier Fernandez of Kuya Ja's, have collaborated on a Taste of



LEFT: Purple Patch bar patrons, February 2022. ABOVE: Patrice Cleary with (l to r) Pancit Mahal, fried spicy adobo wings, and lumpia—three of her most popular dishes.

the Philippines dinner, each contributing a dish to a tasting box.

Through Purple Patch, Cleary found community. "I have developed this new family that has been brought together by food," she said. "And it was a part of me that was missing for so long that I never realized it. I never realized how good your own people make you feel."

Now, she aims to share that feeling. "I want to have a place of comfort and familiarity when Filipinos come here, because this isn't just a restaurant for the neighborhood," she told me. "I want families to come here and be able to have celebrations and to order food that brings them fond memories of their childhood."

Filipino food isn't part of my childhood memories, and I will never get to eat my great-grandfather's cooking. Patrice Cleary and Purple Patch gave me a place to make memories: of visits with family and friends, of birthday and anniversary celebrations, of reunions and goodbyes. Cleary introduced me to laing, a thick, coconut milk–based stew full of taro leaves, ginger, and chile peppers; to fried chicken adobo, the skin drenched with soy and vinegar. In a year without family, Purple Patch gave me a sense of connection to mine, and a taste of shared history.

Linda Golden eats, reads, writes, and bikes around Washington, DC.