

## An Introduction to Filipino Cuisine

(Excerpted from [\*Filipino Cuisine: Recipes from the Islands\*](#)  
by Gerry G. Gelle)

Filipino cuisine is a blend of the exotic and familiar. Just as the Filipino people are part Malay, Chinese and Spanish, so is the cooking of the Philippines. And more recently other cultures have influenced Filipino food. These influences have come from the Americans, Japanese, and Germans.

Spanish additions to the Filipino cuisine predominate. It has been said that about 80 percent of the dishes prepared in the Philippines today can be traced to Spain. The Spaniards introduced tomatoes and garlic along with the technique of sauteing them with onions in olive oil.

Another significant addition to the Filipino cuisine by the Spanish was many baked goods and desserts, among them Pan de Sal (a crusty dinner roll), Flan, (an egg custard), Ensaymada (cheese buns), and many, many other delicious foods.

The most significant influence of the Americans came after World War II, with the widespread distribution of canned goods. One of the results is Filipino fruit salad, which consists of American canned fruit cocktail, mixed with native sweet preserves of buko (young coconut), kaong (palm nuts) and bits of langka (jackfruit), giving it a Filipino taste and mixture.

The coastal and mountainous region around the northern tip of Luzon Island is rugged and so is life. The people tend to be thrifty and live simply, traits well reflected in their style of cooking. This region is populated mainly by the Ilocanos and Pangasinans along with minority groups such as the Ifugaos, Bontocs, Ibanags and Kalingas.

The Ilocanos like their vegetables steamed or boiled and flavored with bagoong, a fermented paste derived from shrimp or fish. And to give their vegetables extra flavor, pork or a broiled fish is added, as in such Ilocano dishes as Pinakbet, Dinengdeng or Inabraw.

In the central part of Luzon, including the area directly surrounding the capital of the Philippines, Manila, the combination of an abundant and stable food supply and the influences of foreign peoples, particularly the Spanish and Chinese, has resulted in the most sophisticated cuisine in the Philippines. The Rellenong Manok (stuffed chicken), for instance, the carcass of a chicken is removed from the intact skin. The skin is then stuffed in such a way that at the center is a sausage, often chorizo de Bilbao, surrounded by a layer of carrots, celery and eggs encased in a mixture of chicken, ground pork, raisins, peppers and spices. This is then stuffed back into the skin, sewn back up, steamed and baked to a golden brown. It is served with a spicy, tangy red sauce, creating a sweet and savory dish satisfying not only to the different tastes and textures of the mouth but to the senses of sight and smell as well.

The Philippines is the only country in Asia that is predominantly Christian, particularly Catholic. The only exception is western Mindanao. Because of the Islamic edicts against eating pork, which is used extensively in the rest of the Philippines, the people of Mindanao have taken advantage of the cattle and fish grown in this area.

Mindanao cooking has borrowed from Indonesia and Malaysia the use of hot chilies and spices used to make curry, as in Tiola Sapi, a spicy boiled beef, Pirna, a fish entree heavily spiced with hot chilies, and Lapua, blanched native vegetables seasoned with salt and vinegar and guinamos.

As you can see, what makes the cooking of Mindanao distinct from the other regions of the Philippines is how it has been heavily influenced by Malaysia, Islam and the food products that are grown or gathered in the area. Being so close to the Equator, both the food and temperature in Mindanao are hot.

As there are differences in regional cooking, there are differences in the attitudes toward food. Of the foods used as staples, most Filipinos on the island of Luzon prefer rice. Visayans on the islands of Cebu, Leyte, and Samar use corn extensively. People of Luzon and some in the Visayas will eat root crops such as sweet potatoes, hams and cassava as a dessert or snack. But to eat them as a staple in these regions would indicate to others that one is desperately poor; whereas in Mindanao, cassava, or paranggi, is the staple crop.

Bicolanos and Tagalogs of Southern Luzon, where coconut trees grown abundantly, use lots of coconut in their recipes.

Many varieties of hot chili peppers are found in the Philippines, the hottest and most popular being the siling labuyo. While they are available throughout the Philippines, only the people of Bicol at the southern tip of Luzon and the Muslims of western Mindanao use hot peppers extensively in their cooking.

The most popular meat for most Filipinos is pork. Other popular meats are beef and poultry. The tagalogs and Pampanguenos eat frogs as a delicacy, but the rest of the people of the Philippines rarely touch them.

Fish is also very popular and readily available. Visayans prefer saltwater fish like sardines, tuna, bonito and mackerel, which abound in the waters surrounding the Philippines. Tagalogs, Pampanguenos, Ilocanos, and Pangasinans prefer freshwater fish caught in the rivers, lakes and streams that are located within these areas. In Pangasinan and Pampanga, there is a system of fish farming or aquaculture in which bangus, mudfish, catfish, carp and tilapia are raised in artificially created ponds and rice paddies.

Traditional Filipinos rarely use cutlery for eating. Instead, they eat with their fingers and hands. The technique is called kamayan and the word for "to eat" is kumain. In this technique, small balls of rice are formed with the fingers while pressing them against the plate. Small pieces of fish, meat and vegetables can also be incorporated into this ball of rice. Then they are brought to the mouth with the finger tips and pushed in from behind with the thumb.

The western influence introduced forks, knives and spoons to the Philippines. In the West, the knife and fork are the primary pieces of cutlery, but in the Philippines, it is the spoon and fork. Here, the fork is held with the left hand and the spoon in the right. The fork is used to spear and hold the piece of food while the spoon is used to cut or tear off small pieces. The smaller pieces of food is then placed in the spoon, and the fork is used to push rice into the spoon. The piece of food and rice are then brought to the mouth with the spoon and eaten.

In the West, dinner is sequential, starting with a soup and/or salad, an antipasto or appetizer, followed by the entree and finished off with a dessert. Planning a Filipino menu is based on contrasts of taste and texture rather than different courses. The taste sensations of sweet, sour, bitter and salty are introduced into the menu along with a variety of textures such as smooth, silky, crispy, crunchy, chewy. Rather than serving the individual components separately, they are all brought to the table at one time, and it is up to the guest to decide what combination they want to create. Dining at a Filipino table is more like eating at a buffet than a traditional western-style sit-down dinner.

At the heart of any Filipino meal is a bowl of rice, short, long or medium grain. There are dozens if not hundreds of different varieties of rice, each of which gives a different “mouth-feel” and taste.

Served with the rice is a meat, fish or poultry, broiled, fried or roasted, giving the meal a crispy and chewy texture. Another way to include that texture is with some fried lumpias, or egg rolls. Both the meats and lumpias are then flavored with something salty, such as a soy sauce, bagoongs (fish or shrimp paste) or patis (fish sauce). These salty sauces are then flavored with something sour such as kalamansi, lemon juice, or vinegar just before being served. A bowl or cup of soup, such as sinigang, is also served, to add a smooth and silky taste and texture to the meal.

Many Filipinos also add a noodle dish, such as pancit, or a stew-like dish such as adobo or caldereta for an added savory taste.

Since the Filipino style of cooking lends itself to individuality, the cook who wishes to can choose dishes with an eye to richness and in content. By varying recipes, the emphasis can be placed on healthy cooking. There are many products on the market now that contain reduced fat content and low-fat coconut milk is also available.

No Filipino meal would be complete without dessert, whether it is simply fruit, like bananas, mangoes, papayas and melons, or sweets like matamis na kamote (sugar-glazed sweet potatoes) and kaong (palm nut) or true desserts like flan (egg custard) and native cakes like biko or bibingka made from rice and coconut milk. The dessert isn't served just at the end of the meal--it is not unusual to eat it as part of the meal, for not only extra texture but the sweetness needed to counteract the salty, sour and sometimes bitter taste that are part of the meal.

As you can see, the cooking of the Philippines is a blend of traditional, native cooking and the best aspects of foreign influences. Recipes and techniques have been adopted and then adapted to the Filipino taste. Filipino cooking is tasty without being too spicy, simple but not sparse, different but not strange, and satisfying without being overwhelming. As Filipinos go out to the rest of the world and as the rest of the world visits the Philippines, new ideas will be brought to the Filipino kitchen. It is this meeting of the East and West with a steady and constant evolution of traditional dishes that is Filipino cuisine.

For Filipino recipes, see the book [\*Filipino Cuisine: Recipes from the Islands\*](#) by Gerry G. Gelle.

## Common Spices in Modern Philippine Recipes

Ref.: <http://www.philippinesinsider.com/filipino-cuisine/common-spices-in-modern-philippine-recipes/>

Modern Filipino recipes are delectable dishes that are at par with the world's best. But modern recipes depend on both modern and native spices. Common spices in cooking modern recipes and dishes are the following:

Annatto or "atsuete" in the vernacular are dark red seeds used for natural food coloring of vegetables, meat, and fish recipes. These are tear-shaped seeds found in clusters inside one-inch diameter balls covered with curly fibers. Annatto is bland, but Philippine cooking considers it a "spice" that often goes with other spices. Recipes are enhanced by coloring. Some food colorings are synthetic and may prove harmful to health, but not annatto seeds. They're natural. Modern Philippine red dishes are "spiced" up with them.

Butter is also a favorite, not only as a cooking oil substitute, but also to improve flavors of dishes. In this sense, butter is commonly thought of as a spice. It is wholly of milk and cream and is applied in recipes for a thick, creamy touch. Butter is used for frying, sautéing, mixing in the middle of cooking, or a melting topping on dishes.

Cheese is another modern Philippine spice. A lot of recipes use it for creamy dish textures and taste. Cheese is also used as a melting topping on various dishes like lasagna, baked spaghetti or macaroni, beef mechado and local hamburgers. Cheese is also grated and mixed as a spice in many dishes like vegetable salads, beef caldereta. Cheese is wholly of dairy products, and popular varieties are cheddar, edam, white cheese (from goats' milk), and parmesan. Cheese melts are also used as dips to supplement other recipes.

Native chili. This is an all-time favorite in Philippine culinary arts. They are a very dependable hot spice to liven up the taste buds and appetite. They can be applied as a recipe ingredient while cooking hot and spicy dishes, and they can also serve in hot sauces and dips. Chicken "tinola" and pork "sinigang" are among the recipes that may include native chili as an ingredient.

Cornstarch is also commonly used in a lot of recipes as a spice. It achieves a thick, creamy, and subtle sauce or stew for a lot of dishes. It is also a cheaper substitute for milk and cream for the same purpose. Cornstarch is dilute in water first before mixed in recipes.

Modern Philippine recipes are rich in ingredients and spices that perk up the savory qualities of dishes. Common spices responsible for delectable dishes are often cheap recipe mixes.