

VERSATILE VINEGAR

Filipino cuisine highlights the complexities of the ingredient



ADOBE STOCK

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PITTSBURGH — Elected “ingredient of the year” by The New York Times, vinegar can have many uses and personalities far beyond its generic role in a salad dressing or as a decorative balsamic reduction.

You can use a splash as a finish to lentil soup or chili to add depth. Some bartenders are throwing it into mocktails. There are folks who use raw vinegar for its supposed health benefits. It can even be lightly sprayed onto cookies.

Long before its current moment in the spotlight, Filipinos used vinegar as an integral element in their cooking. But local chef Rafael Vencio, who was born in Quezon City in the Philippines, points out that Filipinos use a variety of sources to get that acidic hit.

“Filipinos have a deep love for three main flavor profiles, particularly sweet, salty and sour,” said Vencio, who is slated to open his Filipino restaurant, AmBoy, in late spring on Pittsburgh’s North Side. “Sour is just ingrained in our palate.”

A LOVE OF ACIDITY

Filipinos use not only vinegars from different sources but also underripe fruits, such as tamarind, to add acidity. Some will make their own condiments to add to foods, Vencio said, usually using some type of vinegar.

Filipino vinegar can be made from cane, coconut or palm. The type employed depends largely on regional custom and personal taste.

Spanish colonizers expanded the Philippines’ indigenous sugarcane plantations, and sugarcane remains an economically significant crop in the country. Cane vinegar is the most common type used.

For their condiment or dipping sauce — called suka sawsawan — Filipinos up the acid ante by adding the native citrus fruit calamansi, also known as a Philippine lemon or lime. Fish sauce, soy sauce, garlic, peppercorns, onion and chiles are also common components.

“Essentially what we do is we’re

compounding acidity,” Vencio said. “That’s how we make the sour flavor profile more robust and more complex.”

Personal condiments are used to adapt all types of dishes but especially seafood. They can be a dipping sauce for crab, for instance, or fried fish or pork.

‘THE ORIGINAL FUSION CUISINE’

Kimberley Ashlee Haugh, of Kimberley Ashlee & Co. catering, calls Filipino cooking “the original fusion cuisine” because it integrates influences from Chinese, Spanish, Indo-Malay and American cultures.

However, adobo, considered the unofficial Filipino national dish, is uniquely Filipino and has indigenous roots. Although the name comes from the Spanish world adobar, meaning “to marinate,” the dish — chicken or pork braised in vinegar — predates the arrival of Spanish colonizers.

Vinegar is essential to adobo, Vencio said. “It’s not noticeable, but it’s there.”

With cooking, vinegar’s sharpness mellows.

Vencio said vinegar’s role in the dish was partly to preserve the meat, especially back in times when refrigeration was not available. It also balances adobo’s saltiness.

Cane vinegar, which Haugh describes as “clean” and “bright,” is most commonly used for adobo, as well as for a dish called paksiw, fish or pork cooked in a sour and savory broth containing vinegar.

Coconut vinegar — which can be made from fermented coconut juice, sap or blossoms — is “softer” and “rounder” than cane vinegar, Haugh said, and is traditionally used often in the southern Philippines.

Cane or coconut vinegar is used to make a Filipino ceviche, called kinilaw; fish is “cooked” in vinegar rather than Latin-style citrus. It is often mixed with calamansi, ginger, chile and coconut milk. Haugh described palm vinegar as “earthy.”

“It’s got a subtle sweetness to it,” she said.

‘GOING FOR IT’

As someone who grew up in Toronto, being slightly ashamed of bringing her aromatic Filipino lunches to school, Haugh finds it gratifying that Filipino cuisine is

TRADITIONAL CHICKEN ADOBO SA GATA

- 2-2 1/2 pounds chicken (bone-in thighs, drumsticks or mixed)
- 1 whole head garlic, cloves smashed
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 1/3 cup cane vinegar (or white vinegar), divided
- 1 or 2 tablespoons neutral oil
- 2 or 3 dried bay leaves
- 1 1/2 teaspoons whole black peppercorns, lightly crushed
- 1/2 cup water
- 1 cup coconut milk (first press, if available)
- Optional (regional):
 - 2 or 3 Thai chiles (common in the Bicol region)
 - 1 small onion, sliced (not always traditional but common in home kitchens)

Combine chicken, garlic, soy sauce and half the vinegar. Marinate 30 minutes to 2 hours (or cook immediately — both are authentic).

Heat oil in a heavy pot over medium heat. Remove chicken from marinade and brown on all sides.

Add garlic from marinade and saute until fragrant.

Pour in marinade, remaining vinegar, bay leaves, peppercorns and water. Do not stir for the first 5 minutes — this allows the vinegar to mellow. Simmer uncovered 20-25 minutes until chicken is tender and sauce reduces.

Lower heat and stir in coconut milk. Simmer gently 10-15 minutes until sauce thickens and coats the chicken.

Taste and adjust saltiness with a splash of soy or water — not sugar.

Optional: Let oil slightly separate for a richer, traditional finish.

Remove bay leaves before serving. Serves 4-6.

— Kimberley Ashlee Haugh

finding acceptance.

“If you were to tell the 10-year-old me that Filipino food would actually be something that people are interested in, I wouldn’t have believed it,” she said.

Her ultimate moment of sharing Filipino cuisine with an American audience came at a charity dinner for the O’Noir Foundation featuring local chefs cooking black-colored food. She decided to make one of her favorite dishes, dinuguan — various cuts of pork stewed in pig’s blood and vinegar, among other ingredients.

“I was like, ‘I’m going to do it. I’m going to go for it. I’m going to serve a bunch of non-Filipinos a stew made of pig, cooked in pig’s blood with a splash of vinegar.’”

The 10-year-old Haugh would have been amazed.

ON THE MENU

OPEN-FACED REUBEN ON BROWN BREAD

For bread

- 2 3/4 cups whole-wheat flour
- 1/3 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- Pinch salt
- 2/3 cup rolled (old-fashioned) oats, plus more for sprinkling
- 2 extra-large eggs
- 2 teaspoons vegetable oil, plus more for the pan

- 2 tablespoons molasses, optional
- 2 cups buttermilk

For Thousand Island dressing

- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 3 tablespoons ketchup
- 3 tablespoons chopped dill pickle or dill pickle relish
- 1 tablespoon minced onion
- 1 teaspoon yellow mustard
- Kosher salt and black pepper, to taste

For sandwich

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon spicy brown mustard
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/2 medium head green cabbage, cored and sliced thin
- 1 pound sliced corned beef
- 8 slices baby Swiss cheese

Make bread: Preheat the oven to 325 degrees and lightly oil a 9-by-5-by-3-inch loaf pan.

Toss flours, baking soda, salt and oats in a large bowl and mix well.

In a separate bowl, beat eggs with oil. If a sweeter, darker bread is desired, add 2 tablespoons molasses. (I split the difference with 1 tablespoon.) Gently stir the wet mixture into the dry mixture. Then, gently stir in buttermilk. It may be sticky.

Turn the batter into the prepared loaf pan and smooth the top with a wet spoon. Sprinkle some oats across the top, if desired, and bake for 1 hour.

After 1 hour has elapsed, remove the bread from the pan. If a crustier loaf is desired, transfer it to a baking sheet, return to the oven and bake for 20 minutes more.

Allow the loaf to cool on a wire rack before serving. (It will keep at room temperature for up to 5 days and in the freezer for up to 3 months).

Preheat oven to 425 degrees.

Prepare dressing by adding mayonnaise, ketchup, dill pickle, onion and mustard to a bowl and giving it a good whisk. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Build sandwiches: Cut 8 1/2-inch slices of bread, place on a cookie sheet and bake in a hot oven until toasty, about 3-4 minutes.

Remove from oven and slather toasted bread with Thousand Island dressing.

Whisk together olive oil, balsamic vinegar, mustard, salt and pepper in small bowl. Place shredded cabbage in a large bowl and pour the dressing over it; toss to coat the cabbage.

Divide corned beef on top of bread slices. Top each with generous pile of cabbage mixture and 1 slice of Swiss cheese.

Bake sandwiches for 5-6 minutes or until cheese is melted. (You also can cook under the broiler until cheese is melted.) Remove to a plate and serve warm.

Serves 4-8, depending on appetite.

— Gretchen McKay, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS)