

# Culture (Philippines): In search of authentic Filipino cooking

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## Delicacies: In Search of the Perfect Uraro

It was a shared memory - the messy , somewhat impolite, but thoroughly amusing game that had us children stuffing our mouths with *uraro*, trying to get the crumbly biscuits down fast, and be the first to whistle a tune. Our elders would try to frown us down, only to be reduced to helpless laughter bordering on tears, as one child after another tried to whistle but only managed to blow *uraro* dust mixed with spit, and even snot, into the air.

So there we were, reliving memories of childhood snacks and games, three friends and advocates of authentic Filipino cooking on our way to a bucolic mountain town of Laguna known for (what else?) *uraro* cookies and « step-ins. » Some people say Lucban was the birthplace of the *uraro* ; some say Marinduque has been successful in modernizing *uraro* production ; but we decided to do our research on *uraro* in the accessible, aptly named town of Liliw.

Once in Liliw, we asked where we could buy the best *uraro* in town and followed instructions of friendly townfolk busy preparing for their fiesta the following week. They said, go to Urencia and Gonzales bakeries, which happened to be located just a few houses apart on the same street.

Urencia's bakery was the first to catch our eye and its present proprietor proved more than willing to share what he knew (which was considerable) about the history of *uraro*-making in Liliw. In 1918, Maura Almonte, young and still unmarried, began making *uraro* for the town fiesta. They were so good and the demand so great that before long, she was producing *uraro* and other Laguna delicacies regularly. Her youngest child, Salvador Urencia, still operates Urencia Bakery which

Maura established ninety-one years ago, and still bakes *uraro* in the huge pugon or wood-fired oven constructed in the 1930s.

The affable Salvador and his wife Olive described the traditional way of making arrowroot flour – a lengthy and backbreaking process. The arrowroot or obedience plant, is frequently found between coconut trees in mountainous areas. It produces starchy roots or tubers resembling small and scaly radish that can be harvested and processed into arrowroot flour only after ten long months.

After harvesting, the roots are washed, shredded and crushed by rolling a slab of stone repeatedly over a slab of hardwood, a process called *pag-ilod*. A starchy liquid is extracted and allowed to sit, *pinapatining*, until the water separates from the starchy mass. The mass is then squeezed repeatedly to extract even more water, allowing the mixture to dry into powder, which is then sieved twice using finely woven cloth. It takes a whole day to produce thirty-five to forty kilos of arrowroot flour of varying quality.

Today's *uraro* is made from a mixture of arrowroot flour, sugar, milk, margarine, and eggs. A longtime Liliw resident said a number of *uraro* makers seem to have resorted to using cassava flour or tapioca to offset the high price and scarcity of arrowroot flour.

The *uraro* of yesteryear was a mixture of pure arrowroot flour, rendered pork fat, only the yolks of duck eggs, sugar, and milk. Mr. Urencia said they have stopped using rendered pork fat since lard from commercially raised pigs last only two days before turning rancid, unlike lard from native, organically raised pigs that last for at least a week.

Changing the recipe is a definite loss for Filipino cooking. Arrowroot flour made *uraro* light, delicate, and easy to digest. The dark orange-red yolks of duck eggs gave its rich color. But it was pig's lard that elevated it into coveted gifts to visitors during town fiestas. An elderly woman whispered, passing on this culinary secret: pork fat, it made all the difference, it made *uraro* melt on your tongue.

The *uraro* from Urencia and Gonzales bakeries that we taste-tested were perfectly acceptable – tasty and fragile – but the stories we heard made us crave perfection. We wished the young enterprising Maura, and others like her, were still alive and making the original and authentic *uraro*.

And if veering away from the proper *uraro* ingredients seems bad, Urencia Bakery now operates only twice a week to produce only 100 packs. Compare that to years ago when the bakery was busy daily.

It is hard to increase your sales and make a profit when the primary ingredient – arrowroot flour— is so expensive and its supply too unstable. Fortunately, there seem to be some signs of a revival of arrowroot production. Farmers in Marinduque are being encouraged to plant arrowroot plants not only for making cookies, but also for other uses and products. The country's first arrowroot processing plant was established in the same province. Today it is easier and faster to produce good-quality pure arrowroot flour. All we need now are lard from organically-raised pigs, fresh duck egg yolks, milk and sugar, and the circle is complete. We can produce the perfect *uraro* of yesteryear.

**Viol A. de Guzman**

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## Purboy : Merienda in the Time of Crisis

Not all *merienda* are created equal. Some are for the haves ; others for those who have-barely-enough ; and still others for the have-nots. I've sampled all three.

My mother was a GI – a genuine Ilongga, who migrated to Manila when she was sixteen, the offspring of a prolific family tree with roots in Jaro, Iloilo City and branches as far away as Bacolod, Kabankalan, and Bago Cities in Negros Occidental. To her seven children, her most memorable culinary offering was authentic *pancit Molo*, cooked only for major family celebrations which usually lasted from lunch, punctuated by a mahjong session, and ending on a high note with our special *merienda*.

To cook *pancit Molo* for thirty-plus people (relatives by blood and by affection), my mother had to « import » her sister and mobilize her own daughters and daughters-in-law for the tedious task of wrapping hundreds of tiny savory meatballs. A native hen was simmered until tender and then shredded finely ; fresh shrimps were peeled, chopped, and sautéed in whole heads of garlic and onions ; and these two combined went into the making of the broth. The meatballs were made from twice-ground pork, enriched with egg yolks, flavored with soy sauce, the « secret » ingredient, *tahore* (salty fermented bean curd), minced garlic, scallions, chives, and black pepper. It took nimble fingers and much practice to encase these meatballs in *Molo* wrappers so that they looked like a nun's winged, pre-Vatican II headdress. The dressed meatballs had to be sunned for a few hours to make sure they did not fall apart when cooked in the rich broth.

As a young activist during the tumultuous martial law years, my *merienda* of choice was *Divisoria lugaw* or rice porridge. It was cheap, tasty, hot and fast ! Just the thing for people who wanted to still the pangs of hunger while awaiting their evening meal. Fifty centavos bought a bowl and access to bottles of *patis* and *calamansi* juice and shakers of black pepper. An additional fifty centavos got you a piece of meat or intestine (*isaw*). *Lugaw* with *isaw* was filling enough to take the place of both *merienda* and dinner for people trying to live on minimum wage.

It is 2008. The Philippines is the largest importer of rice in the world. National Food Authority rice costs P18.25 per kilo, while commercial rice ranges from P33 to P44 per kilo. A fast-food giant sells an anemic version of our childhood favorite for almost P30. There is no peso-porridge to be had in *Divisoria*, with or without *isaw*. Too often, what passes for *merienda* in the time of crisis for poor working people is a cup of hot coffee.

JR (not Junior but Jay-Ar), another GI like my mother, thirty-something, street smart, affable, born and bred in Kabankalan City, is something of an « authority » on *merienda* in his own hometown.

JR's personal favorite is *purboy*.

It is named *purboy* because it is something that « poor boys and poor girls » can afford ; a small bowl costs only ten pesos. It is cheap because its main and unique ingredient is cattle or carabao hide, sans hair, and supplemented by lips, tongue, tail, and ears. The addition of cattle and carabao « balls » makes it a dish « for the boys, » believed by customers to be an aphrodisiac, a more accessible version of Soup No.5

*Purboy* is a thick, meaty, reddish stew made by cooking cattle or carabao hide (and the other odds and ends) until almost tender. They are cut into small strips which are sautéed in garlic and onions until fragrant. The cook then adds the reserved broth, white beans, sliced red and green bell peppers, carrots, flour as thickener, a little tomato sauce or tomato paste for color and flavor, salt and pepper. Lastly, the dish is spiked with bird's eye chilies or *siling labuyo* to give it a kick.

*Purboy* is extremely versatile. It can be eaten as *merienda*, perhaps with a slice of bread, or as a viand (just add rice and it's dinner). It can also take the place of the usual *pulutan* or *tapas*, to accompany favorite drinks - Tanduay rum, *tuba* or a *tuba*-Tanduay cocktail that can (and often does) bring the « boys » down and out for the count.

If you are a foodie, just curious or short of cash (or all three), and find yourself in Kabankalan, you can ask any tricycle driver to bring you to the houses that serve huge pots of *purboy* from three in the afternoon. By dusk, the pots are empty.

This Ilonggo spicy stew has not reached the status of national popularity that *pancit* Molo and La Paz *bachoy* enjoy, especially among the generations of middle-class boys and girls brought up on instant noodles and fast-food delights. *Purboy* is unknown except in the Negros provinces and parts of Iloilo City. Its recipe cannot be found in cookbooks and will probably not win any prizes in cooking contests. What it is, is a witty, original, down-to-earth, determined and courageous bid for life and survival, spiced with laughter and fun, even in the time of crisis.

**Viol A. de Guzman**

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