

Kamayan – the memory of home

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Growing up, I was never thrilled about the idea of eating out and being in a room full of strangers. I used to find it uncomfortable, troublesome and a bit awkward, yet a meal out to my favorite restaurant was always an exemption. Together with their signature dish and my all-time favorite sinigang, a soup or stew known for its unique and distinctive sour taste, the experience never failed to bring comfort and amenity to me.

Kamayan which translates to “ eating with your hands” is an authentic Filipino restaurant I was fond of since I was young. It is a 30 to 40-minute drive from where we used to live back in the Philippines. The building identical to a traditional Filipino house- nippa hut or bahay kubo which is made entirely of organic materials such as bamboos and other light woods, nipa palm used for its roof arranged precisely in place to give that tall and steeply shape with long leaves to its end. I remember every time I enter, I would be welcome by a pleasing and familiar smell of roasted suckling pig and grilled fish that lingers throughout the entire restaurant. Eyes are drawn immediately to the fish tank that sits on the far left corner of the place filled with colorful, fascinating and exotic fishes collected from different regions of the country. Surrounded by indoor plants and vines, it has the aesthetic that emphasizes the exquisite ambiance of the place and gives a tranquil feeling to it that transports me back to the simplicity of my childhood. One of their signature dishes is Sinigang, a soup or stew distinguished by the savory taste of sourness yet pleasant flavor.

Traditionally, the distinct flavor is made by crushing then boiling a tamarind fruit with its juice then crafted into the stew along with various vegetables and seasonings that adds kick as well as aroma to the dish. Though the main

ingredient is tamarind, the sourness can vary by adding or substituting it for guava which has a hint of sweetness that balances the sourness to it; or calamansi, a hybrid between a citrus and a lemon for a fruity and slightly bitter taste that is completely different from the other two. It is prepared by boiling any type of meat stewed with tomatoes, garlic, and onion to add more flavor and color to the dish. Other vegetables can also be added to enhance the soup. Okra, also known as gumbo, is an ingredient that can be added, has a mucilaginous juice in it when cooked, unique fuzz like texture similar to a peach, and has edible seeds on the inside. Water spinach with its long, almost arrow-like leaves and most of its parts are edible. A Yardlong bean cut to smaller pieces is also a great addition to the soup, with its crispy and tasty pods that are edible.

Miso is another ingredient that gives sinigang its color. It is a paste-like substance made from fermented soybeans, with a brownish almost reddish color and is extremely salty taste on its own. The miso gave the soup it's brownish, almost cinnamon like the color that resembles caramel syrup without the sweet taste and the sticky texture. It also enhances the colors of the vegetables in it, bringing out the green, tasteful and fresh look to it. The tender and juicy meat that has an almost identical color to the soup certainly adds to the appeal of the dish. With a quick whiff, a strong though not overpowering aroma of the tamarind mixed with miso is what can be noticed in an instant. The sourness with a hint of something spicy oozed from the dish can sometimes catch people off guard, like opening a container of vinegar or taking a bite of a lemon. Sinigang is served best when it is hot; though there were few times I burned my tongue because they served it

exactly as it came out from the pot. Usually eaten with rice may it be plain white, with garlic, or brown, the fluffiness and lightness of the rice has an unlikely combination with the soup which I absolutely like. The surprising mixture of the two kept me coming back for more. Together, it brings out what I remember to have always been my comfort food along with its tender meat and the leafy greens.

Though it has an acquired taste to it, the tangy yet savory flavor hits the gullet head-on making the back of the jaw tingle, satisfying with its main protein ingredient and pleasing with its tastiness; face scrunched as the experience of a bit sensory overload with that first slurp, with each spoonful of sinigang the appetite is at once sated and stoked, the taste of miso is evident which compliments perfectly to the already zesty flavor it has, the mouthwatering taste that soaks through the tender meat and vegetables, the sourness with a hint of something slightly spicy brings out the appetizing piquant sinigang has, unfortunately, it is not something everybody will appreciate firsthand. The countless requests I made to my mom to order sinigang whenever we go to Kamayan especially if I needed something to warm me up on cold weather, thinking that the simplicity and familiarity of the food and place would make me feel better, comfortable and at ease brought fond memories back.

Remembering the numerous family dinners we had together, sharing the food we all grew up to and came to love. Something about the serene and calm atmosphere of the place; the pleasant, enjoyable and hearty food; and the familiarity and warmth made Kamayan my safe haven. The memory of

home and comfort placed in a simple, yet timeless dish set for a delightful, comforting meal - all in one deliciously steaming pot.