

21 EASY AND ELEGANT HOLIDAY RECIPES

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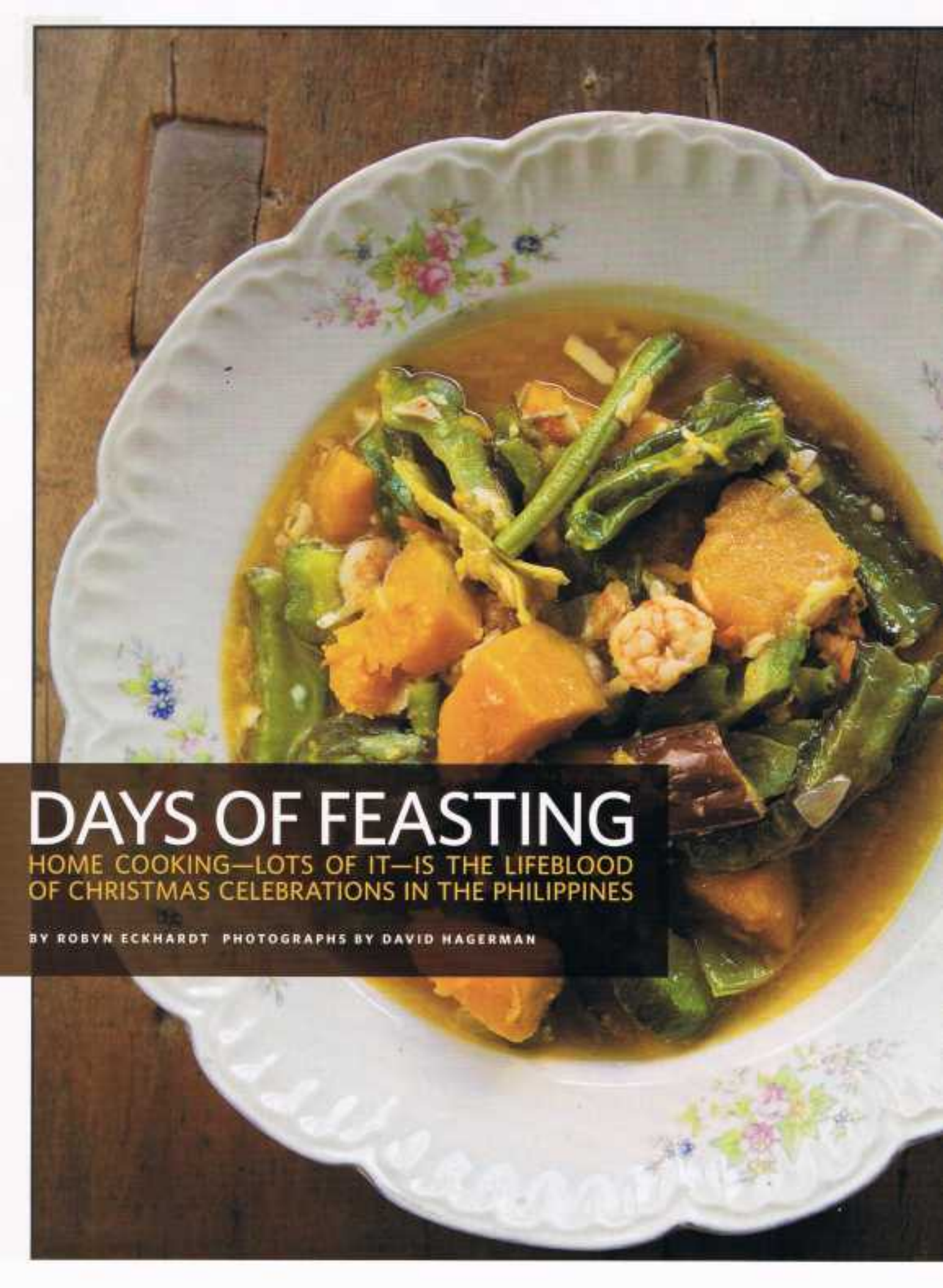
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A top-down photograph of a bowl of soup. The bowl is white with a scalloped edge and a delicate floral pattern in pink, blue, and green. The soup is a rich, golden-brown color and is filled with various ingredients: large, bright orange chunks of what appears to be sweet potato or pumpkin; several green, leafy vegetables, possibly spinach or a similar leafy green; and pieces of light-colored meat, possibly chicken or pork. The bowl is set on a dark, rustic wooden surface with visible grain and a metal fastener. A dark, semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

DAYS OF FEASTING

HOME COOKING—LOTS OF IT—IS THE LIFEBLOOD
OF CHRISTMAS CELEBRATIONS IN THE PHILIPPINES

BY ROBYN ECKHARDT PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID HAGERMAN



Left to right, top row to bottom row: a portrait of Marc Medina's grandmother, the author's friend; a rice farmer near Arayat; pedicabs in Arayat; smoked fish for sale; Lucia Mallari with one of her granddaughters; plantainillas (egg yolk crêpes filled with pastillas, a paste of water buffalo milk); a lunch that includes lechon (roasted pork); achara, a Philippine sweet pickle; dawn mass in Arayat. Facing page, pinakbet (Philippine vegetable stew).

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IT WAS NINE IN THE MORNING in Arayat, a small town about an hour north of the Philippine capital city of Manila, in the province of Pampanga, and I'd already been to mass and consumed two breakfasts—one of coffee and sweet-savory cassava cakes topped with cheese and butter, called bibingka, and another of puto puti, puffy rice-flour treats, bought from street vendors around town. I was about to get to work on a third. Seated at the edge of the wood-pillared, thatched-roof kitchen of my friend Marc Medina's nearly 200-year-old house, which sits not far from the old rice plantation his family used to run, I gazed at the breakfast table. It seemed to sag under the weight of all the food on it: fried eggs, pork sausages, slices of cured pork called tocino, fried catfish, rice porridge, sticky rice steamed in banana leaves, and a stack of freshly baked

ensaimada—opulent twists of sweet bread enriched with egg yolks and edam cheese. As I watched Marc and his friends start in on their meal, I tried to get my head around the fact that this was just the beginning.

It was the occasion of the first *misa de gallo* (morning mass) of the Christmas season in the Philippines, the sprawling archipelago of more than 7,000 islands in the western Pacific Ocean. Starting nine days before Christmas and stretching on until the Feast of the Epiphany, on January 6, millions of churchgoing Filipinos—nearly 80 percent of the citizens of this former Spanish colony are practicing Catholics—embark on a series of spirited, family-style and communal feasts.

Everything on the table at Marc's house this morning had been prepared by Lucia Mallari, the 77-year-old woman who has been the head cook for the Medina family for more than 30 years. Marc pointed to a sturdy wooden bench topped with four clay burners and explained that, many decades back, his grandmother had taught Lucia how to prepare the family's favorite Pampangan specialties: unpretentious pork, fish, and vegetable dishes that constitute a sort of heartland cuisine in a country where hearty home cooking is nearly as sacred as mass.

As we ate breakfast, Lucia was at the stove preparing chicken adobo, the flavorful, vinegar-spiked braise that is the Philippines' national dish (see "The Art of Adobo", page 82). When I stepped over to the stove to ask for a peek at the adobo, she handed me her spoon and invited me

to give the pot a stir. Despite my three hours of fasting, the alluring aroma of the dish had already made me

I HAD BEEN HEARING about the Philippines' Christmas feasting season ever since I met Marc, a journalist for the Associated Press, a couple of years earlier while on a short trip to the country from my home in Malaysia. He invited me to his house in Arayat and treated me to a marathon lunch of 16 dishes, all prepared by Lucia. Some of them had tasted familiar foods that reflected a broader Southeast Asian penchant for rice, coconut, and fermented sauces (such as patis, a Philippine fish sauce, and bagoong, a pungent shrimp paste)—but the

RECIPE

Pinakbet

(Philippine Vegetable Stew)

SERVES 6

Bagoong, a pungent, earth-colored fermented shrimp paste, lends this traditional Philippine dish (pictured on page 76) a pleasing depth of flavor. Take care not to stir the vegetables aggressively during cooking, or they will fall apart. See page 94 for hard-to-find ingredients.

- 2 **tblsp.** canola oil
- 6 **cloves** garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 **medium** red onion, roughly chopped
- 1 **tblsp.** bagoong (Philippine shrimp paste)
- 3 **plum** tomatoes, roughly chopped
- 3 **tblsp.** fish sauce
- 1 **1-lb.** kabocha or other winter squash, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1" cubes
- $\frac{1}{2}$ **lb.** Asian eggplant, cut into 2" x $\frac{1}{2}$ " sticks
- $\frac{1}{2}$ **lb.** long beans, cut into 3" lengths
- 1 **bitter melon**, peeled, halved lengthwise, seeded, and cut into 1" cubes
- 10 **okras** (about 4 oz.), left whole
- 15 **medium** shrimp (about 8 oz.), peeled
- Kosher** salt, to taste

1. Heat oil in an 8-qt. pot over medium heat. Add garlic and onions and cook, stirring occasionally until very soft, about 15 minutes. Add bagoong and tomatoes and cook, stirring occasionally until paste becomes very fragrant, about 5 minutes. Add fish sauce, squash, eggplant, bitter melon, and $\frac{1}{3}$ cup water. Stir briefly, cover pot, and cook, stirring once or twice, until vegetables soften, about 12 minutes.

2. Add shrimp and okra; cook, covered, until shrimp are just done and okra is tender, 6-7 minutes. Season with salt. Serve with steamed rice.



Clockwise from top: water buffalo near Arayat; Attack, the split master; Santa Catalina Church after Christmas mass. Facing page, altar boys from the church having breakfast at the Medina home.





Left to right, top row to bottom row: dulce prenda (shortbread filled with candied winter melon); young rice harvested in Pampanga; Lucia and her daughter Maricris, preparing the post-tennis tournament feast; fish for sale at the Arayat market; Damiana Santiago, Lucia Mallari's best friend; Philippine-style brioche; Arayat residents at lunch after the tournament; preparing for a dawn mass; patis (a fish sauce) and squash for sale at the Arayat market.

PHILIPPINES

were also local specialties, like *afritada* (pork and chicken cooked with onions and red peppers) and *sisig* (sliced banana blossoms sautéed with pork and vinegar).

The meal hinted at the kaleidoscopic culinary legacy left to these islands by Asian and Arab traders, European colonizers, and Japanese and American occupiers over the centuries. Indeed, evidence of the role of outsiders in Philippine history was easy to come by, especially in Pampanga, whose strategic location in the southwestern corner of Luzon, the Philippines' largest island, made it an auspicious base for American military operations during much of the 20th century. The sprawling former U.S. air base in the Clark Freeport Zone lies just a 45-minute drive from Arayat.

Like many people familiar with the cooking of Southeast Asia, I'd come to love Philippine cooking as the region's comfort food: not intensely or elaborately spiced and frequently characterized by soulful, slow-cooked dishes in which long-grain white rice was invariably the star—more often than not with pork in the supporting role—the cuisine of these islands had always struck me as simultaneously more

ment. One morning, I rose early and, after a breakfast of garlic rice and fried anchovies eaten with a dipping sauce of fish sauce and crushed tomatoes, walked outside, to find two men hoisting the freshly butchered carcasses of two pigs onto spits. The older-looking of the two introduced himself as Attack (a nickname given to him for reasons he would not divulge) and his companion as his son, Delbert. I watched as they seasoned the pig generously with salt and

stuffed its cavity with banana leaves.

The men were preparing to make *lechon*, roasted pork, which would be the main course at a huge, open-to-all community feast following the amateur tennis tournament. Marc and his family sponsor for Arayat's events twice a year. Thirty-five years ago, his father mowed down his mother's beloved fruit orchard and replaced it with a tennis court, an act that caused Marc's mother no s

RECIPE

Ensaïmada

(Philippine-Style Brioche)

MAKES 10 ROLLS

Although these fluffy sweet-savory breakfast rolls (pictured on facing page) are traditionally prepared with pork lard, most Philippine cooks nowadays use butter instead. Dutch edam cheese is sprinkled inside and on top of the dough, offering a subtle counterpoint to the breads' sweetness; for a more savory roll, add more cheese. To make these rolls, you will need ten 5 1/2" fluted brioche molds.

1/2 cup milk	temperature, plus more for greasing
3 tbsp. active dry yeast	7 cups sifted flour
3/4 cup sugar	2 eggs, at room temperature
22 egg yolks, at room temperature	1 1/3 cups plus 2 tbsp. grated aged edam cheese (see page 94)
2 cups unsalted butter (4 sticks), at room	

1. Heat milk and 1/2 cup water to 115°. Stir in yeast; let sit until foamy, about 10 minutes.
2. Meanwhile, combine sugar, 12 yolks, and 4 tbsp. butter in the bowl of a standing mixer fitted with whisk attachment. Beat on medium speed until smooth, about 2 minutes. Add yeast mixture and 1 1/2 cups flour; beat for 10 minutes. Remove bowl; cover with a damp kitchen towel. Set dough aside in a warm place to let rest, about 15 minutes.
3. Combine eggs and remaining yolks in a bowl. Return bowl of dough to mixer; replace whisk attachment with a dough hook. Working in 4 batches, beat in 1 1/2 cups flour, 3 tbsp. butter, and one-fourth of the egg mixture per batch on medium speed. Scrape down sides of bowl; remove bowl and cover with the towel; set dough in a warm place to let rest for 15 minutes.
4. Return bowl of dough to mixer; knead on medium speed while adding remaining butter in 4 batches (Stop occasionally to scrape down dough hook.) Continue to knead until dough is elastic, 10 minutes.
5. Using your hands, grease a marble slab or other smooth surface with a little butter. Transfer dough to the greased work surface; divide into 10 equal pieces. Roll each piece into a ball; flatten each ball into a circle. Fold edges of each circle in toward center. Transfer dough pieces, seam side down, onto 2 greased baking sheets. Cover with damp towels; set aside in a warm place to let rest for 10 minutes.
6. Line ten 5 1/2" fluted brioche molds with 9" circles of parchment paper. Divide molds between baking sheets. Working with one dough piece at a time, use your hands to press it into a paper-thin translucent square, about 14" x 14", on the greased surface. (The dough will tear in some places; that's okay.) Sprinkle the dough square with 2 tbsp. cheese. Starting at the edge closest to you, use your fingertips to roll the dough toward the far edge, forming a rope about 1/2" thick. Gently flatten the rope. Roll the rope into a spiral, tucking the end under. Transfer the spiral to a mold, tucked end down. Cover the molds with damp towels; set in a warm place to let rest until almost doubled in size, 1 1/2–2 hours.
7. Arrange a rack in the lower third of oven and heat to 350°. Sprinkle 1 tbsp. cheese over top of each risen dough. Bake breads, one baking sheet at a time, until golden brown and puffed, about 20 minutes. Let breads cool before unmolding.



straightforward and more subtle than the foodways of neighboring cultures. That first, languid, expansive meal at Marc's house had more than confirmed my impressions. I remember asking him whether such a generous spread was typical for a weekday lunch. "This is nothing," he said. "You have to come back for Christmas, when we *really* cook."

My current visit to Arayat was starting to make Marc's comment sound like understatement.

ROBYN ECKHARDT is a freelance writer based in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She writes the blog eatingasia.typepad.com.

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RECIPE

Adobong Manok*(Chicken Adobo)*

SERVES 4

Adobo (pictured at right) is often called the national dish of the Philippines. The preparation is endlessly adaptable, and nearly every Philippine cook prepares adobo in a slightly different way. Though some add soy sauce to deepen the color of the dish, we followed Lucia Mallari's method, which omits that ingredient. Philippine cooks favor mild-tasting vinegars made from coconut or palm sugar; we found that white wine vinegar makes a fine substitute.

- 4 chicken thighs (about 1 lb.)
- 4 chicken legs (about 1 lb.)
- Kosher salt, to taste
- 14 cloves garlic, sliced
- 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups coconut, palm, or white wine vinegar (see page 94)
- 2 tsp. whole black peppercorns
- 10 bay leaves
- Steamed long-grain white rice (optional)

1. Place chicken thighs and legs on a cutting board and, using a heavy cleaver, cut each piece in half crosswise, through the bone. (Alternatively, leave the chicken pieces whole.) Sprinkle chicken pieces generously with salt and place in a 14" nonstick skillet. Add garlic to skillet along with vinegar, peppercorns, and bay leaves. Bring to a boil over high heat; stir briefly, then lower heat and simmer, basting chicken occasionally with liquid, until meat is cooked through and most of the liquid has evaporated, about 40 minutes.

2. Increase heat to medium-high. Continue to cook chicken, turning it frequently, until crisp and lightly browned all over, 6-8 minutes. Transfer chicken to a platter and serve with steamed white rice, if you like.

**THE ART OF ADOBO**

Adobos are the Philippines' most beloved, and most versatile, dishes. They consist of meat, poultry, fish, or vegetables (such as okra and eggplant) slow-cooked in an aromatic broth of vinegar or coconut milk, garlic, black pepper, bay leaves, and, sometimes, soy sauce until virtually all the liquid has evaporated. The resulting dish is a sort of inverted braise, with the main ingredient browning at the end of the cooking process rather than at the beginning. The name comes from the Spanish *adobar*, meaning to marinate, but Philippine adobo

doesn't really have much in common with Spanish adobos (vinegar-based condiments) or the adobos of Latin America (where the name usually denotes chile-based rubs soured with lime and vinegar). The dish closest in taste to adobo that can be found in Asia is the Indian specialty vindaloo, a curried stew made with vinegar, an ingredient that Portuguese traders likely brought to the Indian coastal city of Goa in the 1500s. The challenge in making the dish successfully lies in reducing the liquid slowly enough that the main ingredient, which absorbs the flavors of the liquid as it cooks, is fully done by the time the liquid has simmered

away, at which point it sautés and browns in its own savory, rendered fat. The process can be counterintuitive for many Western cooks who are accustomed to browning early in the preparation of a dish, not at the end. If the main ingredient is done before the liquid has been fully reduced, I often take it out of the pan, remove the wok and brown it quickly in a separate pan before returning it to the rich, concentrated reduction left in the other pan. Either way, adobo is a tender, beautiful marvel that takes me back to the Philippines every time I make it. —Amy Besa, author of *Memories of Philippine Kitchens* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2006)

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amount of consternation but has been a source of immense pleasure for the town's citizens ever since. Situated just outside the kitchen window of the Medinas' house, the court is as much a community center as a playing field.

Inside the house, Lucia and a small army of helpers were cooking chicken and pork for adobo in oversize woks. I knew that many Filipino cooks add soy sauce to achieve the caramel color prized by adobo aficionados. But when I asked Lucia about her take on whether or not to use the condiment, she said, "Not in this house!" As she cooked, she explained that she believes that the recipe Marc's grandmother had taught her is the "real" version. After the meat had been added to the woks, Lucia stepped to the other end of the stove to tend to a large tray of six-inch-long catfish, which she would fry in vegetable oil and then serve with crisp, raw mustard leaves and *balo-balo*, a tartly pungent paste of fermented shrimp and rice. From the tennis court I could hear the crowd of 50 or more people who had gathered to watch the tournament as they shouted encouragement to the players in a mix of English and Tagalog, one of the major indigenous tongues of the Philippines.

By noon the tennis tournament had ended. After Marc had awarded trophies to the winners, cooks emerged from the house bearing banana leaf-lined wicker platters piled with food and placed them on a long table that had been set up near the courts. Then Attack carried one of the spit-roasted pigs, its skin deeply browned and glistening with fat, over to the table and began to carve it, doling out tender meat and crisp skin to the eager crowd. In ten minutes the buffet table was bare and the lechon was stripped of its flesh, at which point Attack removed the pig's head and carried it into the Medinas' kitchen. The head would be added to *paksiw na lechon*, a stew of lechon leftovers seasoned with peppercorns, bay leaves, vinegar, and sugar.

A FEW DAYS LATER, ON the morning of Christmas Eve, Marc was preparing to depart for Manila, where the Medina clan has celebrated Christmas for generations. I had decided to stay in Arayat and share *Noche Buena*, the meal that follows the Christmas Eve midnight mass, with Lucia and her family at Lucia's own home nearby. During the week leading up to Christmas, the Medinas' house had been besieged by carolers, ranging from

the accomplished (Arayat's marching band, complete with a baton twirler) to the amateur (ragtag clusters of kids too timid to sing above a whisper). Every caroler was sent away with a 20-peso note (about 50 cents).

Lunch that day would be my last big meal in the Medina kitchen, and Lucia had prepared two of my favorite dishes: *ulang sa gata* (giant freshwater prawns cooked in coconut milk) and *suam na mais* (a corn chowder). At the stove, I peered over her shoulder as she browned a hillock of pounded garlic in a saucepan for the shrimp dish, added coconut milk, *patis*, a bit of vinegar, and sugar (the last addition being a secret passed down from Marc's grandmother), and brought it all to a vigorous boil. Then she placed the prawns in the coconut milk in neat rows and left them to



cook until the fat from their heads seeped out, forming an oily red slick on the surface of the coconut milk. "That's how you know they're done," she said. Next, she prepared the chowder, which entailed little more than grating the corn and adding it, along with its juices, to a pot with garlic, onion, water, and a Maggi chicken bouillon cube; for a garnish, Lucia had taken a handful of fresh squash blossoms from the garden outside. A short while later, we were sitting around the kitchen table, pulling the heads off the tender shrimp and sucking them clean of their coconut-infused fat.

That night, I joined Lucia and her family in Arayat's central square for Christmas




Clockwise from top: a giant freshwater prawn at the Arayat market; prawns being cooked for the dish *ulang sa gata* (prawns in coconut milk); steamed corn for sale at the Arayat market; two residents of Arayat. Facing page, chicken adobo.

mass. With Noche Buena and a midweek holiday ahead, Arayat's residents were jubilant, passing around bags of popcorn and chicharron (fried pork rinds) while talking and laughing in anticipation of the midnight service. After the mass, which takes place in the town's central square, I made my way to Lucia's family compound, a cluster of cement-block houses on the edge of the Medinas' orchards. When I arrived, Lucia proudly showed us around her

newly constructed kitchen, freshly painted in shades of turquoise.

Over the past nine days, Lucia had laid out feast after magnificent feast for the Medinas and their guests, but her own Noche Buena supper was simple: pork and vermicelli soup, a stack of sliced white bread, and kalame bolang (sticky rice cooked with coconut milk and brown sugar and eaten with sliced fresh coconut). There wasn't much conversation around the table as I

and the family—Lucia; her daughter, Maria; her son, Bong, and his wife, Crising; and a bevy of grandkids—ate our late-night meal. Eventually, one was thinking of bed. Before going to sleep, though, we all repaired to the porch, where I snacked on spaghetti with a sweet, tomato-based sauce, a favorite Philippine party dish while Lucia watched her grandsons trace their names in the night with sparklers, which cast a glow across her smiling face. 

RECIPE

Ulang Sa Gata

(Prawns in Coconut Milk)

SERVES 4

This luscious dish (pictured on previous page) gets its richness from unshelled, head-on shrimp, its silky texture from coconut milk, and its pleasant kick from Thai chiles. Serve it with plenty of steamed white rice to soak up the tasty sauce: See page 94 for a source for the flat-bottomed wok called for in this recipe.

- 1/4 cup canola oil
- 10 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 small white onion, thinly sliced
- 2 tbsp. fish sauce, plus more to taste
- 1 tbsp. palm, coconut, or white wine vinegar (see page 94)
- 1 tbsp. sugar
- Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 20 head-on, shell-on large shrimp (about 2 lbs.)
- 1 1/2 cups canned coconut milk
- 6 whole green Thai chiles (see page 94)
- Steamed long-grain rice

1. Heat oil in a 14" flat-bottomed wok or a skillet over medium-high heat. Add garlic and cook, stirring constantly, until golden brown, about 2 minutes. Add onions and cook until soft and lightly browned, 5-6 minutes.

2. Stir in fish sauce, vinegar, and sugar and season with black pepper. Trim shrimp antennae with scissors, then add shrimp to wok along with coconut milk and chiles; stir briefly to combine, cover wok tightly, and reduce heat to medium-low. Cook at a simmer until shrimp are almost cooked through, about 6 minutes.

3. Remove cover from wok; continue to cook, basting the shrimp with the coconut milk, until shrimp are cooked through, about 2 minutes more. Remove from the heat, taste sauce and season with more fish sauce to taste. Transfer to a large, shallow bowl and serve with rice.

THE GUIDE

PAMPANGA PROVINCE, THE PHILIPPINES

Dinner with drinks and tip:

INEXPENSIVE \$1-\$5 MODERATE \$6-\$15

Many airlines fly from the United States to Manila, the capital of the Philippines. The city lies approximately one hour south of Pampanga, a fertile rice-growing region that's famous for its Philippine home-style cooking. You can also fly from some Asian cities directly to the Pampangan capital city, San Fernando, not far from the former American air base at Clark Field. Hiring a car and driver in Manila or San Fernando is an easy way to explore Pampanga; Filcar Transport is a reliable Manila-based option (www.filcartransport.com).

WHERE TO STAY

HOLIDAY INN CLARK *Mimosa Drive, Mimosa Leisure Estate, Clark Field (63/45/2-845-1888). Rates: \$106 double.* This modern hotel, which offers cheery rooms and a large swimming pool, is a great base for exploring the region.

HOTEL GRACELANE *San Agustin, City of San Fernando (63/45/860-6060; www.hotelgracelane.com.ph). Rates: \$38 double.* This centrally located, simply appointed hotel is surrounded by a lush garden in Pampanga's capital city.

WHERE TO EAT

CARREON'S SWEETS & PASTRIES *472 San Nicolas L. Magalang (63/45/866-0609). Inexpensive.* This third-generation bakery specializes in sweets made with water buffalo milk, such as plantanillas (egg yolk crêpes filled with pasillas, a sweet, creamy water buffalo milk reduction) and empanadalitas (small turnovers filled with

caramelized pastillas).

CORA HIPOLITO'S BIBINGKA SHOP *J. M. Espino Street (next to Santa Catalina Church) Arayat (no phone). Inexpensive.* This bake shop is famous for panara, an empanada-like pastry. Arrive early in the morning; the bakery has closed by the afternoon, when the goodies have invariably run out.

EVERYBODY'S CAFE *Del Pilar, MacArthur Highway, San Fernando (63/45/860-1121). Moderate.* This cafeteria is a stalwart of the Pampanga dining scene; it offers home-style fare such as pak (wild fern tips and tomato salad), herute (stuffed bullfrog), marcon (beef roll served with drippings), and, for dessert, tokolate (hot chocolate) and candied camote (sweet potato).

KABIGTING NUTRI AND DELI HALO HALO *J. M. Espino Street, Arayat (no phone). Inexpensive.* A good place to try halo-halo, a refreshing crushed-ice treat found all over the Philippines. The Pampanga-style version served here is a relatively simple concoction of mashed white bean pastillas (the buffalo milk paste), and canned corn all doused with evaporated milk.

RAZON'S OF PAMPANGA *SF Mall, San Fernando (no phone). Inexpensive.* The house specialties are halo-halo and pancit palabok (rice noodles doused with shrimp gravy and topped with crushed chicharron). Don't miss the excellent leche flan, a custard made with sweetened condensed milk.