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NO TASTE FOR NATIONALISM

Not having a love for his or her own ethnic food does not diminish one's cultural identity, argues April Zara Chua.

I was eight years old when my family and I migrated to Singapore. During our flight from Manila, I had requested loudly for *tocino* (a caramelised pork dish in the Philippines) from the airline crew. For the past twenty years, my parents have been teasing me about this incident because today I feel no special connection to *tocino*—and other Filipino foods for that matter. I am completely indifferent and unmoved when it comes to *cocina filipina*.

My volte-face to Filipino cuisine was born out of my desire to try the local dishes when I arrived in Singapore. My mother cooked Filipino dishes at home but to my younger self, Singapore food had a certain allure and grandeur. I tended to go for Chinese food, a preference I attributed to my eagerness to embrace the Chinese part of my Filipino-Chinese heritage. It was only in my university days that I understood why I had an appetite for it—I found it to be healthier.

Unlike Chinese food, the majority of the Filipino food were too rich for my taste buds: they were either too salty, overly sweet, cloyingly oily, or a combination of everything at once. Thus, I would choose herbal chicken soup over *kare-kare* (oxtail stew in peanut sauce with sautéed shrimp paste) and braised beef noodles over pork *adobo* (pork marinated in vinegar, soya sauce and garlic). I would say no to *balut* (boiled duck embryo) and *laing* (a spicy vegetable dish made from dried taro leaves and coconut milk), but would greedily tuck into *xiao long bao* and century egg congee.

To other Filipinos, my behaviour marks me out as a traitor of sorts to my own heritage. “But you’re Filipino! How can you not like your own food?” is an accusation I have often received. I find it offensive and unfair to use my food preferences

to question my cultural identity. It is an old-fashioned notion, especially in today’s globalised world. I don’t believe I am less of a Filipino simply because I do not enjoy my own ethnic food.

I have other Filipinos in my camp. Before moving to Singapore six years ago, my friend Mary Irene Lupton, a Filipino-British lecturer at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, shared that she always preferred Japanese food as it was lighter on her palate (much to the chagrin of her mother who ran a Filipino restaurant in the Philippines). She would also opt for Italian cuisine, and considers pasta her staple instead of rice. For Lupton, Filipino food still holds a sentimental value as it evokes nostalgic memories of her family life in the Philippines.

Family togetherness is a core value in Filipino culture, and that—and not love’s for one own food—is a trait that I believe defines me as a Filipino. Just being in the company of my family and relatives, regardless of what cuisine we are having, is enough to make me feel connected to my roots.

I did try to indulge in other Filipino traits, such as karaoke. (After all, aren’t we expected to be musically inclined?) But I found out in later years that my parents’ speechlessness at my singing was hardly a form of awe at all. To my critics—those hardcore Filipino culture police—I’d invite you to a karaoke session. You will agree that between me eschewing Filipino food and ruining the melody of a Lea Salonga classic, the former is the more pardonable and tolerable of the two ‘sins’. **WD**

