

# Ancestry Food Traditions and Cultural Identity in a Filipino Spanish American Family

Posted on September 12, 2018

## Ancestry and the Formation of Food Traditions

How I prepare food today was greatly influenced by my background. It applies to everyone that our ancestors shaped our way of life, beliefs, and culture. I was born to parents of a different race. I am a half-cast between a Spanish and a Filipino. Having lived in the Philippines, married in the United States, and brought up in Japan, I still have never forgotten making food my ancestors used to make.

According to my grandma, my ancestors originated from Spain and came to the Philippines during the colonial period.

When I was a kid, my grandma would tell me a story about Spain where my great-great grandma originated. She told me that my great-great grandma used to sail through the sea for many weeks before they reached the Philippines. Some of the stories she was sharing with me had been shared with her by my great-great-grandma. Back in Spain, they had a tradition called "Fiestas" which my great-great-grandma loved to attend. My great-great-grandma narrated that the fiesta was known throughout Spain and it was called Cadiz carnival. The festival used to be an eleven-day street party of non-stop fun. They used to sing, dance, laugh, and have a good time. This was where my great-great-grandma met my great-great-grandpa. In 1521, Ferdinand Magellan, a Portuguese explorer who used to sail for Spain, discovered the Philippines.

This became the beginning of the Spanish colonial period. The Spanish colonized the Philippines for 337 years until 1891. By 1898, the Philippines had gained full independence (Pelmoka,1996). This means that almost half of my ancestors came from Spain. My grandma was a half-cast between a Spanish and a Filipino. My great-great-grandma and great-grandpa were Spanish and migrated to the Philippines in 1888 to start a new life. My great-grandma was born in 1890, a few years after they had settled in the Philippines. My great-grandma met my great-grandpa, who was a pure native Filipino, but according to my grandma, he had Japanese blood. My grandpa was a local fisherman from Samar and was born in the Philippines. They later got married in 1908 when my great-grandma was only 18 years old. In 1912 my grandma was born and had two brothers. She happened to be the youngest among her siblings. My grandma met my grandpa in 1932 when it was thought to be love at first sight. Grandpa was the preacher in the church where my grandma used to attend.

## Religious Gatherings and Family Food Culture

My grandpa's family was famous because of their religious background. They gathered every Sunday after the mass and had a cookout outside the church where the whole town used to be invited. They would prepare Spanish and Filipino foods because they shared the same traditions. Grandma was always impressed with the food Grandpa used to prepare to win her heart. According to Grandma, her famous "Lechon" (roast pork), his favorite food originating from Spain, could always be served to her by the church members. They later got married when my grandma was 20 years old. They bore my dad a year later. In 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and the United States declared World War II against Japan (Pelmoka, 1996). The Commonwealth of the Philippines was also attacked by the Japanese empire for nine hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor. My grandpa was killed during this period by an unexpected explosive bomb which had been set by the Japanese soldiers. A lot of Filipino is reported to have died during this period. Japan invaded the Philippines until 1945 when they lost the war (Pelmoka, 1996). However, my grandma, dad, his two sisters, and a brother survived.

## Grandmother's Migration and Family Resilience

My grandma raised the four children on her own. After the war, my grandma migrated to the province where my great-great-grandma had bought a small plot (Pampanga north of Philippine). She inherited this small plot and built a small house. She later became a farmer, and he used to produce rice and vegetables to feed the four children. Even though they were poor during this period, they would still follow the Spanish traditions and cook Spanish food she had learned from my great-grandma. Dad used to tell us that when he was growing up, he often helped grandma on the farm to pick vegetables and sell them to the market or trade them with chicken. He had mastered making some dishes like Arroz con pollo from great-grandma, a Spanish dish made of rice with chicken and other Spanish spices. "It is delicious, and I still remember the recipe. I can prepare it for my family," he said. In 1955, Dad moved to the city and met my mom, who also had Spanish blood. My mom was a city girl but had come from a conservative family.

## Parental Relationships and Cultural Differences

Dad was in college and working in an American restaurant as a full-time employee when he met my mom. My grandparent on my mother's side did not like my dad because he was not from Angeles (Mom town). Dad pursued his degree in electrical engineering until he graduated summa cum laude. My mom's parents attended mass every Sunday and prayed before meals and bed. According to my mom, she was always forced to pray while kneeling before going to bed even when she was twenty years old. Her parents were conservatives. They would force her to pray for two hours wearing long skirts and not pants, or else she was to be punished. My grandparents used to own a small grocery for a living. My mom would go to college, and after school, she was expected to go straight home and

help in the grocery. My grandparents loved eating “Suman” a native Filipino dessert called cassava cake. So dad had gone to ask for my mom’s hand with 20 Cassava cakes. My grandpa was happy, but he did not fall for it.

## Marriage Family Life and Cultural Identity

He warned Mom not to see my dad anymore, or she would stop schooling. But Mom and Dad used to love each other, so after Dad graduated, they ran away together and got married, where they were blessed with eight children, and I happened to be their 5th child. When Dad passed away in 1991, my mom had to move to the United States to start a new life. She moved with some of my brothers and sisters, but two were left in the Philippines since they were married. My aunt raised me in Japan because my mom could not take all of us to the United States. I met my husband, who is a Native American, in Japan, and he brought me here to the United States of America. My mom lives in Virginia with my two sisters and brothers. I visit them every year with my husband and kids, and we usually cook a lot of food following our ancestor’s tradition, which is Spanish food.

Lastly, I am a mix of a Spanish and Filipino 4th generation. My kids are 5th generation and a mix between a Filipino-Spanish and an American. I have learned to respect and relate to everyone despite their culture.

## References

Pelmoka, J. J. (1996). Pre-Spanish Philippines. Caloocan City: J.J. de Pelmoka, E.P. Ujano.