

## MEMORIES OF LEGAZPI

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Hepatitis A shot first). Tito Adit was a big guy who looked like the cowardly lion in the *Wizard of Oz* and exemplified the Bicol attitude which is *Perming maugma* (always happy - but more like happy-go-lucky). He had the Bicolano sense of humor; anything could be a joke. He taught me how to say, "*Iyo, Baga*," (Yes, of course). No, by the way, is *Dae*. Other than that, if you turn the L's in Tagalog into R's, and you remember to say *saen/duman* (where/there) instead of *saan/doon*, and put the accent on the last syllable of *Legazpi*, you can pretend you can speak Bicol. Names can be tricky; ask how to spell them. *Leedee* turns out to be *Liddy*, *Rossy* is *Rosie*, *Heel* is *Gl*.

Walking or driving around downtown Legazpi, your guide (a relative, no doubt) can show you the Los Banos legacy. The Hotel Rex is next to the cathedral, and the Rex theatre (showing Filipino double features) is across the street. The Lola Theatre is not far, and there is an intersection in the city where all four corners belonged to the family, including the building in which Lola Luz was born. You can't walk down the street without running into a few relatives along the way.

Someone may point out the tower of the cassava flour plant that belonged to the Bolinas family. On the road to Daraga, one passes St. Agnes, where Lola Luz attended school. (The large hotel on top of the hill, ignore it, it's the Hotel Imperial, which belongs to a rival clan.) The Mayon volcano is quite impressive, just as in the pictures and postcards.

In Manila, I had never heard of *pili nts*. Lola Manang's family is in the *pili nt* business, and I first had dry roasted *pili nts* at her house. Pili candy is good, but a real treat, if you can find it, is homemade *pili nt* mazapan.

At Lolo Coeng's house, for breakfast they would have a brown syrupy spread for bread or bananas that was called *cocojam* or *cocobutter*. This was locally made and delicious. One of Lola Luz's favorites was *pinangat*. She asked us to bring about two dozen back to Manila. This is a regional specialty and an acquired taste. It is a square packet of green *gabi* leaves, cooked until very soft with coconut milk, and it can be spicy and a bit of a mess. To package it for travel, Tita Chin-chin showed us how to take plastic bags, put a single *pinangat* inside, and seal it by folding the open end of the bag over a serrated knife and running a candle flame across to melt the plastic.

In Bicol there is a special warmth, an authenticity, and a sense of humor which is very charming. In the province one really sees the Filipino soul. I hope one day to take my children to experience the Los Banos life in Legazpi.

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## CULTURAL LEGACY ON ACACIA ROAD

by Tim Los Banos &lt;tebot@hotmail.com&gt;

I remember arriving at MIA (Manila International Airport), as it was called back in 1978, and not having anybody to meet me, I hopped a cab and gave the driver the Dasmarias Village address. The moment the cab drove up the sweeping semi-circle drive to the house on Acacia Road, my mental mono-

lith of preconceptions and stereotypical baggage regarding the Philippines began its rapid descent into obliteration. My first time ever outside the US, this eye-opening month was my immersion program into Philippine culture (Hey! Their bananas have seeds in them!).

The indoor-outdoor ambience of Philippine homes proved an exotic treat to me; polished marble floors and tranquility behind the lush landscaping betrayed the chaos in the streets beyond the walls of Dasma, almost reminiscent of the movie, *The Year of Living Dangerously*. Lola's total disposition was redolent of gentrified breeding that was *de rigueur* during the Commonwealth era. Never a hair out of place in her meticulous coiffure, she carried herself like a *marguesa* and dressed impeccably, the epitome of restrained elegance that requires no title.

What I recall most vividly were the hours Lola and I would spend sitting in the kitchen after dinner. Dining with Lola became my first experience in using real linen napkins on a regular basis; and to this day I perpetuate my Acacia Road-acquired technique of garlicky *sinangag* with crunchy *dilis* (garlic fried rice with tiny crunchy dried fish)! Lola's war stories intrigued me the most, as she recounted the hyper-inflated price of *bangus* (a fish with white flesh) at the start of Liberation, and how she had thought that pathetic fish was to be her and Lolo Jim's last meal with their family, huddled in the vacant fields of Singalong as American artillery whizzed literally overhead. The kitchen became a movie set as she relived the sounds of Japanese soldiers' wooden clogs as their patrols approached, and the constant specter of apprehension which plagued the years of Occupation. Years later, when I viewed a documentary which included Carmen Guerrero-Nakpil's recollections of her war days in Ermita, I was eerily reminded of Lola's classic demeanor and amazing composure at reliving the holocaust of February, 1945.

The more contemporary memories: going on errands with my new-found pal, the driver Ariel; catching an astonished glimpse at the *Bikolana lavandera* (washerwoman from Bicol), squatting with a laundry soap bar and *batya*, (large washtub) pulverizing the dirt from my polo shirts while Dickie's *yaya* frolicked with him in front of the TV. Tita Rory indoctrinating me into the ritual of eating *kare-kare* with *bagoong alamang* (oxtail peanut stew with salted shrimp paste); Tita Ching's spunky humor and excitement over a box of See's chocolates; being driven to Antipolo by Tita Malu and her gaggle of *colegiala* (college girl) friends; visiting Tita Peewee and Edwin in what was then faraway Alabang; *naku!* the nightly cacophony of bullfrogs in the adjoining vacant back lot which would someday suffocate under Imee's monstrosity of a house (Imee is the eldest Marcos daughter).

Twenty-two years later, I am known in the Hawaii branch of the Los Banos clan as the Filipinologist, and as my collection of treasured *santos* (antique saint figurines) and other Philippine antiques continues to displace my bedroom furniture, I fondly keep my first *santo*, a gift from Tita Rory, in a special place of esteem among the others. Somehow I tend to gravitate toward the handiwork and character that old Philippine artifacts exude; perhaps this is my way of staying in touch with *yung pamana natin* (our heritage), Lola's priceless gift and passion which I have transplanted in Hawaii.

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