

# Cuisine of the Philippines with a Side of...Colonialism?

Katelyn Vidal • March 13, 2024



One of my fondest memories of my Lolo (Tagalog for grandfather) is watching him cook in the kitchen. He was always so content, calm, and collected. He commanded the kitchen with grace compared to how I cook with ingredients and cooking utensils spread out all over the place. He cooked in such a small kitchen, too, and always had all four burners in use, along with food in the oven, but he never broke a sweat while I was sweating just watching him cook. I remember I would always run into the kitchen to see what he was cooking, and every time, my mouth would be watering, and I couldn't wait until the food was done.

Some rumors I've heard about Filipino food are that it's unhealthy and high in sodium, sugar, and fat. This is true for some dishes like *adobo*, which is high in sodium. There's also

*halo-halo*, which is high in sugar, and *lechon*, which is high in fat. However, this doesn't mean all Filipino food is unhealthy, as different regions of the Philippines incorporate less meat-heavy dishes, like *sinigang*, *pinakbet*, or my personal favorite, *tortang talong*, which is essentially an eggplant omelet.



*Halo-halo*, a popular Filipino dessert made of shaved ice, evaporated milk, and a variety of toppings



*Tortang talong*, eggplant omelet

Many of my relatives also struggle with high cholesterol and hypertension, and this made me wonder if the Filipino diet contributed to this and made me question how this perception of Filipino food and culture has evolved into what it is today. To answer this question, I explore the history of the Philippines by delving into the impacts of colonialism, labor export programs, and the Westernization of Filipino cuisine and how

this has contributed to a disproportionate amount of health issues within the Filipino community and a loss of connection to Filipino food and culture.

## Brief History of the Philippines

To understand the connections between colonialism, the Westernization of Filipino food and culture, and the subsequent health effects of this, we must understand the complex and deep history of the Philippines. These events shaped and continue to shape the lives of many Filipinos, both in the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora alike.

The history of the Philippines can be divided into four main events: (1) Spanish colonization; (2) American imperialism; (3) Japanese occupation; (4) and Philippine independence.

Beginning with [Spanish colonization](#), the first trace of Spanish explorers in the Philippine archipelago began with Ferdinand Magellan in 1521. This was followed by expeditions led by Ruy López de Villalobos in 1543 and Miguel López Legazpi in 1565. During [Villalobos' expedition](#), he constructed the future borders of the Philippine state and claimed the island for King Philip II of Spain. [Legazpi's](#) goal was to spread Christianity, and he also led the [galleon trade](#), establishing connections with countries like [China](#). This deadly trade connected and homogenized the continents, which brought diseases that [decimated](#) [Filipino populations](#). Many were massacred, fled their hometowns, cultures disappeared, and languages vanished. It also introduced a variety of non-native plants and animals that altered the landscape.

However, Spanish rule was not met without resistance. This resistance was bravely led by leaders like [José Rizal](#), a national hero and notable writer who risked his life to fight for Filipino liberation from the Spanish, which inspired other leaders and resistance movements in the years to come. For over 300 years, the Philippines was under Spanish rule, in which numerous skirmishes and uprisings occurred, eventually leading to the [Philippine Revolution in 1896](#). This culminated in the [Spanish-American War](#) in which one of the most influential battles—the Battle of Manila Bay—occurred on May 1, 1898, which marked the [collapse of Spanish colonial rule](#). Soon after, Spain relinquished the

Philippines to the US for \$20 million and ended the Spanish-American War in the [Treaty of Paris of 1898](#).



José Rizal, national hero of the Philippines

Once Spanish rule ended, the US took over as the new imperial power over the Philippines for another 48 years, which signaled the first time the US ruled a [distant territory](#). During this time, Manila underwent [massive redevelopment](#), English became the dominant language used in schools and work, and American culture introduced a new way of life that eliminated and oppressed Filipino culture. Like with the Spanish, Filipinos fought back against US rule through Filipino guerilla armies, eventually leading to the [Philippine-American War](#), which was extremely deadly. The US and the Philippines continued to fight over control even after the war ended in 1902, as the US viewed the Philippines—as it views many countries today—as a country they could “fix” by instilling their values onto Filipinos and shaping this “uncivilized” place that had cultural values that didn’t match up to their expectations.

After the battles between the US and the Philippines quieted, the Philippines was met with yet another force threatening their independence. During WWII, Japan took hold of the Philippines from 1941-1945, in which the US fought alongside Filipinos in the [Battle of Manila](#) and ended Japan’s occupation. Deadly events like the [Bataan Death March](#) occurred

during this time, in which thousands of Filipinos died and suffered from Japanese brutality. Then, in 1946, the [Treaty of Manila](#) was signed, in which the Philippines became an officially independent republic, yet political, social, and economic unrest remained.

This political instability can also be seen in recent news, with [Mindanao](#) calling to secede from the Philippines after many years of burgeoning violence and tension. This possibly could have been prevented, as many scholars argue that if [Magellan never came to the Philippines](#), it could have been a unified Muslim country.

The Philippines would look significantly different compared to the state of it now if it did not undergo these years of constant colonialism and oppression. Like many independence stories, the Philippines' brutal history shows that independence does not mean that it can go on and prosper, as it will take years to undo the structures and systems of destruction forced upon the country. But, the more we learn and talk about this history, the closer we can get to understanding how this history has influenced the traditions we practice and even the food we eat.

## **Continuation of Colonial Practices: The Transition to a Labor Brokerage State**

My Lolo and Lola (Tagalog for grandmother) remained in the Philippines until 1960, 14 years after the Philippines gained independence, before moving to the US, where my Lolo joined the US Navy and was stationed in Japan. Along with many other Filipinos, they participated in this [labor export program](#) that encouraged Filipinos to work overseas so they could earn money to return to their families. Like most migrants, they were in search of a better life to escape the economic, social, and political turmoil of the Philippines.

This labor export program has [roots in US imperialism](#), during which the US popularized English as the dominant language and promoted US cultural values to make Filipinos more "civilized" and "hireable" to work in the states. This set up the foundation for the establishment of [training programs and labor recruiters](#), which specifically targeted training Filipina women to work as nurses in the US. This nursing program was eventually incorporated into the [US Exchange Visitor Program \(EVP\)](#), in which its main goal was to encourage support from abroad for the US during the Cold War against the Soviet Union.

The EVP was especially vital to many Filipino migrants as Filipino immigration in the US was extremely limited, and this program granted entry into the US without citizenship. Military agreements between the US and the Philippines also allowed many Filipino men to serve in the US armed forces without citizenship, which sparked an [exponential rise of Filipino participation in the Navy](#), which my Lolo took part in as his ticket to the US.

Sculpting the Philippines as a labor brokerage state through these programs utilizes this same colonial mindset of creating the “perfect Filipino worker,” which is similar to how the Spanish wanted to “help” Filipinos by spreading Christianity. While these programs helped many Filipinos gain upward mobility, they also allowed the US to rely on cheap labor and prevented many Filipinos from living the lives they deserved. One where they didn’t have to move away from their homes and families and risk their lives just to barely survive.

Looking back at this history, it makes me wonder what would’ve happened if my Lolo and Lola never had to move to the US. What would life be like for millions of Filipinos if the Philippines was never colonized? I would probably feel more connected to my culture, and I think many Filipinos in the diaspora would feel the same.

## Precolonial and Postcolonial Foods of the Philippines

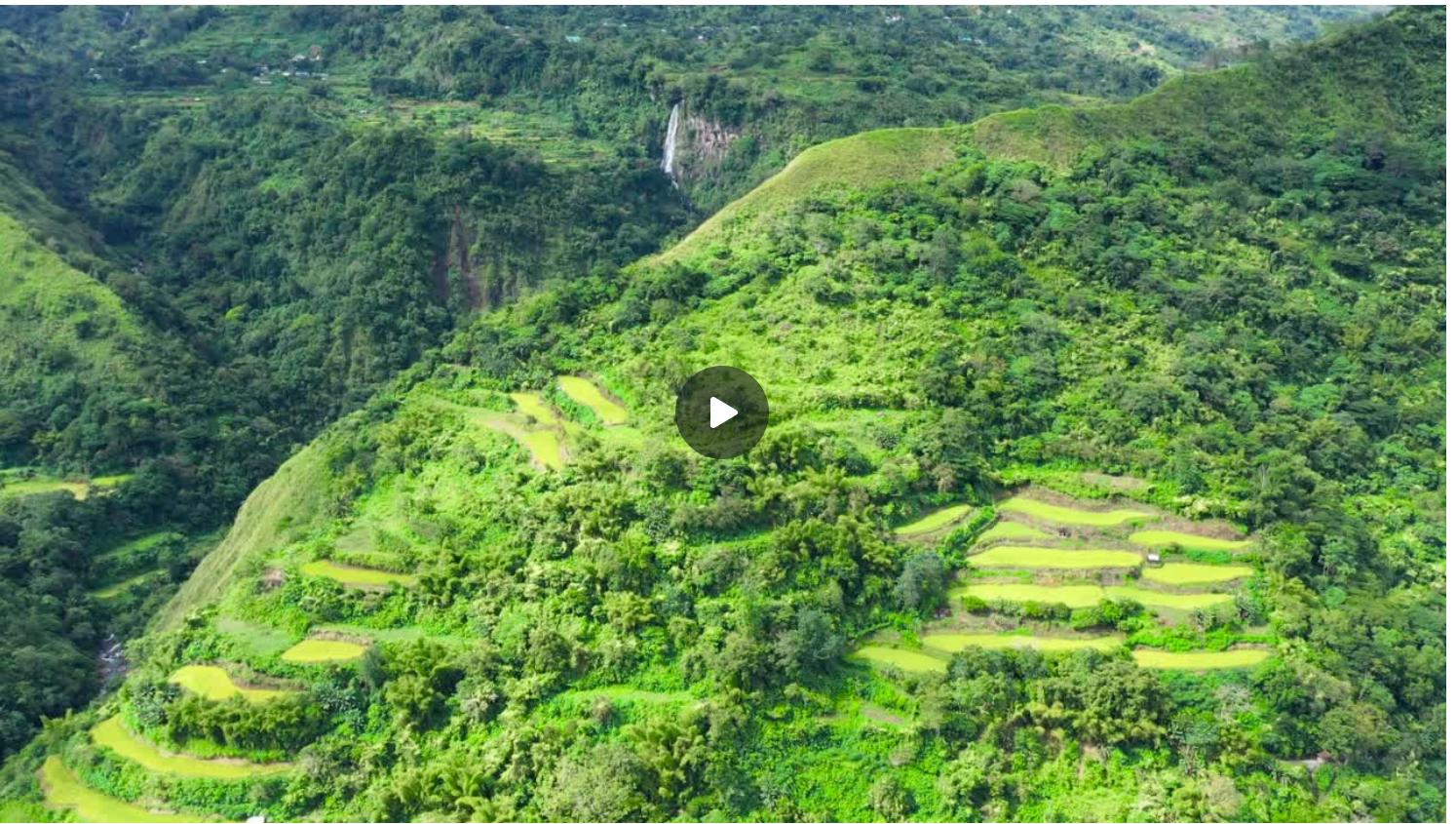
With this plethora of cultural influences poking and prodding at the Philippines along with the dispersal of Filipinos all over the globe, this has resulted in changes in the cultural traditions, practices, and diets of many Filipinos.

But first, starting with the food that ancient Filipinos ate. [Prehistoric Filipino diets](#) include indigenous strains of sugarcane, rice, and millet. They also consumed native taro, yams, and old-world bananas, which are used in a variety of Filipino dishes today. For example, taro is widely used in dishes like *sinigang*, which is characterized as [one of the oldest dishes](#) in the Philippines, dating back to before Spanish colonization. They were also keen on seafood and consumed gastropods and bivalves like coconut crabs and oysters. In mountainous regions, they also hunted wild game, including carabao, deer, and wild boar.



*Sinigang*, stewed sour soup made with pork, seafood, or other proteins along with vegetables like okra and taro

As mentioned, the Spanish brought a plethora of non-native plants and animals that drastically reshaped the structure of the land and the agricultural practices associated with it. For example, the pre-colonial landscape of the Philippines, specifically in Luzon, contained [rice terraces](#) along the mountain ranges in the region. However, during the Spanish colonial period, globalization and trade brought invertebrates like snails from South America that [destroyed rice paddies](#), undoing centuries of rice cultivation practices. Luckily, these rice terraces can still be seen today in places such as [Ifugao](#) and serve as a site of sacred knowledge and traditions.



Rice terraces in the North of the Philippines

Before colonization, ancient trade with [India](#) also influenced popular Filipino favorites like *puto bumbong*, which is a luxuriously soft and chewy rice cake. Along with Indian influences, [Indo-Malay](#) influences also introduced the use of coconut milk in a variety of dishes, like *ginataang manok*—a chicken stew with coconut milk.

As previously noted, the galleon trade also led to interactions with China, which has heavily influenced some of the most well-known Filipino dishes. For example, one of my favorite Filipino dishes, *pancit bihon*, has a history of [Hokkien influence](#), introducing both the cooking method of stir-frying and the use of ingredients like soy sauce and Chinese cabbage. Other dishes like *lumpia* and *adobo* also have Hokkien influences, with *lumpia* stemming from spring rolls and *adobo* adopting the stewed method of cooking. But each dish incorporates native Filipino ingredients as well and uses other cultural cooking practices and ingredients to enhance each other. Overall, Filipino cuisine is a melting pot of a variety of cultures, which is what makes it so distinctive from other cuisines.



*Lumpia*, fried roll with protein and vegetables



Chicken *adobo*, savory, tangy, and sweet chicken dish

Lastly, American influence has also altered the way people view Filipino food, has made Filipinos ashamed of eating food from their culture, and repudiated customary practices of preparing and eating Filipino food. This has led to a disconnect from Filipino culture and feelings of embarrassment for eating the foods we do just because they don't align with Western practices of cooking and eating. These feelings of inferiority stem from old hotel menus, memoirs of [Thomasites](#) (American missionaries), and travel guides to the Philippines, which looked down upon Filipino cuisine, etiquette, and behavior, continuing this same colonial mentality of viewing Filipinos as "uncivilized." This demonstrates the magnitude of power that colonialism has on a country and how these power dynamics don't just go away once the country is "liberated," which highlights the importance of preserving and protecting Filipino culture. Because of this American influence on food, many Filipinos were more drawn toward eating [prepackaged foods](#) like canned peaches

instead of fresh mangoes or a Filipino breakfast staple, Spam, which was introduced during [WWII to feed American soldiers](#) stationed in the Philippines. These highly processed foods were also cheap and convenient, making them highly attractive to many Filipinos who moved to the US with very little money.

All of this goes to show the resilience of Filipinos and how, even with all of the turmoil and devastation they went through, they were still able to learn from these cultures that colonized them, incorporate their ingredients and cooking methods, and turn them into something uniquely their own. It also shows the beginnings of the Westernization of Filipino food, shaping the predominant view of Filipino food as “unhealthy.”

## **Health Effects of the Acculturation of Filipino Food**

The influx of Filipinos to the US has also led to the [dietary acculturation](#) of Filipino food and culture to American culture. This has contributed to chronic diet-related health problems like higher rates of [obesity, hypertension, and diabetes](#). For example, studies have [linked migration and length of US residency](#) to increased hypertension in Filipino immigrants. Filipino immigrant women were also found to have [higher rates of obesity](#) compared to women in the Philippines. These high rates of health issues are partly due to the Westernization of Filipino cuisine, which promotes the consumption of less traditional Filipino food and an [increase in caloric and fat intake](#).

This Westernization of Filipino food also includes an “increased consumption of energy-dense and processed foods, decrease in fruits and vegetables, and whole grains, [and] increase in portion sizes and replacement of drinks to [sweetened beverages](#).” This can be seen with Jollibee menu items like *pancit palabok* and *adobo*, which are both high in cholesterol, sodium, and fat. Because of this dietary acculturation, Filipinos have become more disconnected from traditional foods, which [generally don't contain as much cholesterol, sodium, and fat](#) compared to Americanized versions of Filipino food. This, combined with the pressure to not consume Filipino cuisine, shows how the threads of colonialism are still woven into the present, controlling how Filipinos connect with their food, which is one of the most powerful things you can take away from a culture. Food is one of the things that connects the Filipino community, and when this food is unhealthy, it prevents families from carrying on this cultural connection through food in the future.



*Pancit palabok* from Jollibee. Source: Jollibee

My family has avoided eating too much Filipino food because of how unhealthy it can be. We always reserve Filipino food for special occasions and holidays, and this has made me feel disconnected from my culture. It's a weird feeling of not being able to eat our own food without feeling guilty or worrying if it will lead to diabetes or hypertension. However, it doesn't have to be this way. Incorporating traditional ingredients like fresh vegetables such as *ampalaya* (bitter melon) or *talong* (eggplant) instead of overly processed foods or implementing traditional methods of cooking, like stewing instead of frying, can help us reestablish a healthier relationship with our food and, thus, our culture, our ancestors, and ourselves. A [culturally sensitive approach](#) that takes into account cultural cuisine and flavor can also address these health issues while allowing Filipinos to reduce these health risks without compromising their cultural connection to food.

## Reestablishing Relationships

Just asking these simple questions about why we eat the things we do and why we eat the way we do can lead us to discover the myriad of historical and cultural influences on Filipino food and culture. This can also lead us to uncover things we didn't know about ourselves, connect more with our relatives, develop a healthier relationship with food, and cultivate a deeper relationship with our past. Reflecting on all of this has made me feel more connected to my culture and my family and has made me more appreciative of how earnestly my family has worked to keep our culture alive in ways that I've never noticed before.

Sometimes, I would talk to my Filipino friends about food and culture, and at times, I would have no idea what they were talking about. They would always respond, baffled by my lack of knowledge about my culture, and I would always feel ashamed. But learning about how there have been all of these influences purposefully limiting and shaming Filipino culture has helped me understand why my family acts the way they do. Like why my Lola would always offer us sugary and processed foods over healthy Filipino meals or why my family feels as if Filipino foods should only be reserved for special occasions. Unraveling this colonial mentality that has made Filipinos and others view Filipino food as unhealthy or inferior has also allowed me to recognize all of the little ways my family has preserved our culture, like picking up *pandesal* from our local Filipino bakery or eating meals with our hands. And I've learned to still be appreciative of this, even if it doesn't match how others connect with Filipino culture.

## A Taste of the Past, Present, and Future

When we take a look at the food on our plate, it's easy to determine what ingredients were used to make the dish, how it was prepared, and what it might taste like. However, the part that usually goes untold is the history behind each component of the dish and the people and cultures of the past that contributed to bringing this food onto our plates today. When we look beyond the food on our plate and ask questions like "Why are these ingredients used," "Where did they come from," and "How did they get here," it allows us to understand the historical and cultural contexts of our food and culture, and thus establish a deeper relationship with our past, ancestors, and ourselves. It also allows us to rediscover parts of ourselves and our culture that have been ignored or repressed and redirect these misconceptions of our culture that others hold. Whenever we're eating our food, we are taking a bite out of history, and the more we acknowledge this, the more we're able to untangle this complex web of colonialism, imperialism, the Westernization of Filipino food, acculturation, and the resulting health impacts along with the loss of connection to Filipino culture.

Dismantling this colonial mindset toward Filipino food and culture will be an ongoing battle since the vestiges of colonialism are still lingering. But when we explore these stories of our past, it allows us to keep our culture and history alive so we can pass it on to other

generations so it's never forgotten. So, the next time you look down at a plate of food, have these questions in mind, and you'll be surprised at what you might discover.

