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FOOD & DRINK

Our favorite Filipino chicken adobo in Hampton Roads is served in a little takeout poke stop

By MATTHEW KORFHAGE
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | AUG 24, 2018



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Chicken Adobo at Maymar Poke & Grill in Norfolk, photographed on Tuesday, August 21, 2018. (Steve Earley)

Los Angeles has by far the poshest Filipino restaurants. And New York and New Jersey celebrate Filipino Restaurant Week every May. But thanks especially to an influx of Filipino Navy vets and family members, Hampton Roads now rivals the big cities of California as one of the most vital Filipino chef scenes in the country.

Our region is a playground for crispy fried lumpia, roasted pork-belly lechon, tamarind-rich sinigang stew and, of course, chicken adobo.

Chicken adobo is perhaps the most celebrated dish of the Philippines: a browned, slow-stewed, salt-vinegar-garlic wonder with as many variations as there are Filipinos: Ask two Filipinos in the same house to make adobo, the old joke goes, and you'll get it two different ways. Go to different regions within the Philippines,

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130 Maple Ave., Norfolk, 757-222-5543, www.facebook.com/MaymarPoke

Tried: Adobo and rice, \$3.99

One could be forgiven for thinking our taste-test winner benefited from a little nostalgia. When taster Coleen Santa Ana and her mother walked into Maymar Poke and Grill – a little counter-service spot serving new-school poke and old-school Filipino favorites to ensigns from nearby Naval Station Norfolk – they were greeted by a face they hadn't expected to see again.

For years starting in 1987, Julieta Mayor cooked her adobo at the now-closed Maymar location in Virginia Beach, which is where Santa Ana used to frequent. Now, Mayor cooks it at her son Jan-Michael's new poke spot, founded last year. The other Norfolk location at 5030 E. Princess Anne Road also uses her recipe, deeply savory and yellow-orange with achuete, the meat cooked just to doneness without turning to stew or rubber.

Unlike other salt or soy or garlic bombs or aggressively tangy versions of the dish, Maymar's tastes simple, hearty, and a bit down-home. Consider it soft-spoken and tender, like an old romantic: All three tasters ranked it as their favorite, evoking comfort hard-wired by memory.

Taster Ariel Pinto, who'd previously voiced his love for the deep flavor that comes with fatty adobo, smiled when he got his plate.

"Here is the fat!" he said.

Tasters praised the depth of flavor, the expert rendering of the fat that adds a layer of natural sweetness to the meat, the balance, and, of course, the value: At \$3.99 for a hearty portion, that adobo might be one of the best deals in all of Hampton Roads. Even the sides were lovely, including well-seasoned pancit and fish-sauce

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"The tang from the vinegar shines through while the earthiness of the achiote gave it a distinct and enjoyable flavor." "Good color, firm texture, natural flavor. A bit weak on the garlic."

Score: 89

Second place

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Susan's Kitchenette

1270 Diamond Springs Road, Suite 109, Virginia Beach, 757-460-4893,
www.susanskitchenette.com

Tried: Chicken adobo with rice, \$5.25

Susan's Kitchenette is another old-school Virginia Beach favorite: Fely Galang has been cooking in Hampton Roads since her time managing the Philippine Food Mart in the early '80s. She eventually founded Susan's in 2001 with husband Elmer, a Navy vet and former airplane mechanic. Since its founding, Susan's has been so successful it's filled out a third of the Diamond Springs Shoppes mini-mall – expanding to three banquet rooms.

The adobo at Susan's is just as down-home as at Maymar, served in the classic Filipino "turo-turo" style: You "point-point" at your hot-plate food, and that's what you get.

But the chicken couldn't have been more different than Maymar's. It was soy-soaked, tangy, garlicky, and a little wild – a flavor profile that left at least one taster feeling immediately at home. The lean meat was long-cooked until it fell off the bone, a divisive quality among our tasters: Some liked that, some didn't.

Tasters' notes: "Good homestyle turo-turo version. Cheap eats." "Very good flavor, what I expect and look for." "Tender, well cooked, falling off the bone."

Score: 74

Third place

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Chicken Adobo leg and thigh combo with lumpia at Glory's Bakery Virginia Beach, photographed on Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2018. (Steve Earley)

Glory's Bakery

665 Aragona Blvd., Virginia Beach, 757-557-0613

Tried: Combo 6, adobo with leg, thigh, lumpia and rice, \$6.10

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known, most of all, [for its addictive p...](#)
wrote me a note that I need to remember to come back for them.

Those rolls have made the place popular with a wide variety of readers and diners – and Glory's pulled in a lot of reader votes for its adobo.

Our tasters enjoyed the hint of spiciness and the tenderness of the leg and thigh, but thought the meat was shy on deep adobo flavor. The consensus was that the salt sauce was less part of the flavor of the meat than an add-on. And while the lumpia was a nice add-on at the low price, opinions on the cabbage-heavy lumpia themselves were pretty mixed.

Tasters' notes: "Tastes like broth, pepper ... a bit more like roast chicken than strong adobo." "Some additional spiciness added, not a strong sense of tang because of seemingly little marinating time." "Not much aroma." "Meat not marinated. Flavor is primarily on the surface."

Score: 67

Fourth place

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Chicken Adobo with potatoes and bread crumbs at Alkaline in Norfolk, photographed on Tuesday, Aug. 21, 2018.
(Steve Earley)

Alkaline

742 W. 21st St., Norfolk, 757-395-4300, www.alkalineramen.com

Tried: Family-style chicken adobo platter with rice, serves three to five, \$24

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expanding his menu of Filipino family n
bistek to killer wonton nachos made with jet-black dinuguan pork cubes.

His adobo is a slightly nontraditional update, cooked in with chunks of potato and dusted on top with fried chicken skins dusted across the top.

Multiple tasters had high hopes for this family-style plate of wings and legs – and so did I, since I'd eaten it only a couple days earlier. And the plates we got at Alkaline advertised themselves well, the only adobo plates of the day that one could describe as "beautiful."

But they may have been a little rushed in their preparation. The potatoes were underdone to the point of being starchy, and the sauce didn't have the same thick, tangy depth as the previous time I tried it – I was even able to try the leftovers side by side to verify.

At its best, Alkaline might have done much better in the rankings. But on this day, they earned a narrow fourth place – though one of our tasters ranked it second behind Maymar, and one ranked it third.

Tasters' notes: "Food for the eye!" "Salty flavor – I wished there was more vinegar to increase brightness." "Sauce seemed a bit thin. Meat is tender and wings/skin cooked well."

Score: 64

Our tasters

Coleen Santa Ana, 38, Elizabeth City, N. C.

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Taste tester Coleen Santa Ana (Matthew Korfhage)

Occupation: Hospital president, Sentara Albemarle Medical Center

Go-to adobo spot: "That's easy, mom's house! That will likely be most Filipinos' answer. If I were to generally eat out for Filipino food and buy food that I may not typically make at home, I go to Kainan [in Virginia Beach]."

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Hillary Ripoll, 33, Virginia Beach

Taste tester Hillary Ripoll (Matthew Korfhage)

Occupation: Physician's assistant

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On adobo: " 'Tidobo' (Tinola plus adobo) was one of my first words. Fondness for adobo has had the strength to pull me from my introversion into arguments over pork vs. chicken adobo, ginger vs. no ginger, whether bay leaves make a difference."

Ariel Pinto, 46, Norfolk

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Occupation: Instructor, Old Dominion University

Go-to adobo spot: Maymar (Princess Anne)

On adobo: Adobe here is never the same as those cooked in the Philippines, e.g. species of garlic smaller but more pungent than those here in the US, how the garlic is browned in oil a shade before it turns burned, free-roaming chicken, how the pieces of chicken are cut so that the bones are broken, hence the marrow get mixed in with the sauce, the vinegar and soy sauce formulated for the Filipino market and not exported to the U.S."

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Fried chicken and waffles

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The next taste test will be devoted to fried chicken and waffles.

Nominate the restaurant(s) that serve your favorite fried chicken and waffles by contacting us with the name of the restaurant and the city where it's located.

If you'd like to be a taste tester, tell us why you love fried chicken and waffles more than anyone you know. Remember to include your name, age, city of residence, phone number and an email address, if you have one. Nominations and applications will be accepted through Sept. 3. Please send emails to taste.test@pilotonline.com

Matthew Korfhage, 757-446-2318, matthew.korfhage@pilotonline.com

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Matthew Korfhage



Matthew Korfhage is food writer for The Virginian-Pilot. For a decade, he wrote about restaurants, bars and beer in his hometown of Portland, Oregon. He accepts Dungeness crab and Upright Brewing beer by mail.

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known for its orange-red color?

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Chicken Adobo Taste Test



So our three tasters had their work cut out for them on our trip to four restaurants – and a little light disagreement in what they wanted on their plate. All were native Filipino or second-generation, all deep lovers of chicken adobo. One brought an engineering professor's diligence to dissecting each plate, so passionate about the food his wife's favorite expression at home is "Adobo na naman!" ("Adobo, again!"). One is a physician's assistant who says she abandons her natural shyness only in arguments about adobo ingredients. One is a hospital president and well-traveled food seeker who brought her Philippines-born mother along for the ride.

But while opinions differed widely on two through four, all three tasters crowned the same plate in the top slot, cooked by a woman whose adobo has been serving the Filipino community in Hampton Roads for more than 30 years.

Winner

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