

Hot Oil, Monsoon Rains

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It is customary for a typical Filipino housewife to cook good food. In fact, two of her utmost priorities in life are cooking for the family and caring for the children. – Elsa P. Olandres, Philippine Cookbook

Fall, 2004

Sitting at the dining room table together, my husband Kel and I planned our weekly grocery list like two explorers planning a trip into unknown territory. We tried to guess at the terrain we'd find there, armed with new information about the pitfalls of certain foods we had once thought safe to eat.

Bread, rolls, crackers, pasta. These are the first things we knew Kel had to stop eating when he was diagnosed with a severe case of celiac disease, an intolerance to wheat gluten.

Soup, marinades, pasta sauces. These were things we would fix or use once without thinking, and then halfway through a meal realize that we hadn't checked the package's ingredient list. More often than not, he'd have to throw out his dinner and find something else to eat.

Frozen French fries, ice cream, granola bars. These were the things that seemed to be okay until we discovered that ingredients like "msg" and "modified food starch" were code names for wheat-based additives. We learned the hard way that we couldn't trust manufacturers with listing exactly what they put into the foods we were buying. Even the smallest exposure to wheat would cause Kel's stomach to cramp and his peripheral nerves to numb for days.

Alternatives to wheat-based foods were expensive and difficult to find in our small Northwest town. We scoured the grocery aisles for palatable substitutes for the simplest of foods. Breads made with brown rice flour or tapioca starch were novel at first, but lacked the texture of wheat breads. Some organic canned soups and bottled marinades lacked wheat gluten, while fresh unprepared foods were the safest to cook. We found that the best wheat-free pasta comes from Italy, Mexican corn tortillas were really corn-only, and that Thai food was our best bet for going out to eat. We discovered that, for the most part, Asian food was gluten-free if we substituted wheat-free tamari for soy sauce. Slowly but persistently, we adjusted to Kel's new diet, exposing him fewer and fewer times to hidden traces of wheat. Over time, his gut stopped cramping and he suffered fewer weeks of paresthesia, a strange numbness that traveled like a ghost across his body.

Easter, 2005

Explaining Kel's condition to my family during holiday meals required patience and repetition. No, he can't have the rolls. No, he can't have the pancit with the sautéed wheat noodles. The cheesecake has a graham cracker crust; he can't eat that either. My

aunt offered saltine crackers as a substitute, but we explained that the steamed rice was just fine. My mother counted on the stir fried vegetables as safe to eat until we realized they'd been cooked with regular wheat-laced soy sauce. My cousin looked lost because she didn't anticipate Kel not being able to eat her dessert and felt bad when he went without a treat to end his meal. We had to convince her not to quickly run out to the store for something else.

My husband hated the attention, having to explain over and over again, and I felt disloyal to him as I piled food after food that he couldn't eat on my plate. The first time I brought Kel to meet my family after we began dating, they were skeptical that he would eat Filipino food. My mother stockpiled baloney and white bread for him then watched in quiet amazement as he ate plate after plate of rice and adobo chicken. My grandmother watched him carefully and, seeing his enthusiasm, guided him by the elbow to her favorite dishes. She beamed proudly as he dribbled soy sauce and vinegar on his lumpia rolls and munched them. She told my mother that he was a good eater and from then on, Kel was accepted as a member of our family. With his severe change in diet, though, he lost that simple, yet deep tie with my family. We had to pack foods for him on family vacations if we couldn't be sure that the local groceries carried things he could eat. We tried to be nonchalant about the changes while being vigilant about exposure. More than once our shyness to ask a relative how a food was prepared resulted in days of suffering at home.

Within a year of his diagnosis, we had our routine down pat. For every recipe, we would check the common ingredients first then look for easy substitutions. Slowly we converted old family recipes from both his Euro-American roots and my Filipino roots to preparations he could eat. Good old-fashioned Missouri BBQ chicken? Easy, once we found the right kind of wheat-free barbecue sauce. Pancit noodles? Just substitute rice threads for wheat noodles and we were set. Fish sticks? Mochiko sweet rice flour and Pellegrino sparkling water made a crisp, yet tender tempura coating.

Gluten-free lumpia, though, the Filipino version of a Chinese egg roll, eluded us. The filling wasn't troublesome; sautéed meat and vegetables seasoned with garlic and a little wheat-free tamari, but the wrappers were more difficult. Our local Asian food store had commercial lumpia wrappers available in their frozen case, but a quick flip of the box revealed the ingredients: flour and water. "Flour" meant "wheat" and when we asked the clerk about a wheat-free wrapper, she recommended Thai spring roll wrappers dipped in cola to give the right color. We brought a package home, but I was suspicious that their glossy sheerness wouldn't hold up in the hot oil. We made Thai Spring rolls instead and missed the crunch of fried wrapper between our teeth.

Then I started to remember. *The white edge of a wrapper curled away from the curve of a black bottom pan.*

A child's memory: someone I knew made lumpia wrappers from scratch. I searched my cookbooks for recipes to make lumpia wrappers. I asked my mother and she was certain, as were the cookbooks, that the only viable wrappers were the frozen ones in the red and white box "available at most Asian groceries." I was certain, though, that manufactured wrappers were a new invention, that lumpia had been made by hand from start to finish.

My memory enlarged. *The pan was heavy and hot. The wrapper took only seconds to cook. Nearby, on a piece of wax paper, a small stack of lacy edged wrappers. Cloud-filtered sunlight filled the picture window above the table.*

I remembered I was standing close enough to the pan to see the wrapper cooking, but not too close. The pan was hot so I was told to keep away. Instead of leaving, though, I stayed. I watched.

The memory was old; I knew because it came slowly and wasn't connected to anything but this need to find a solution. Every time I tried to linger in the memory, it slipped away as if it had never been there at all. I told my husband about the memory and he asked me where the scene had taken place.

"Lola's house," I said without thinking. "My grandmother's house. She's the one who told me not to get too close to the pan."

For months I struggled with the memory, trying to recall the moments before I stood by the pan on the stove, to see how my grandmother made the wrappers, but the scene faded as quickly as it had emerged.

Spring, 2006

At church, I discovered that one of the choir members took orders and delivered homemade lumpia to parishioners. My friends said her lumpia were perfect, tightly rolled and filled with deliciously spiced meats. When I found her before Mass one Sunday, I explained that I couldn't order her regular lumpia, but I wanted to know if she knew how to make lumpia with other wrappers, like the ones for Thai spring rolls? No, she said, but was willing to try the spring roll wrappers. I could tell she was doubtful about the spring roll wrappers, so I asked if she'd ever made lumpia wrappers from scratch.

"My Lola made them. I remember," I said. She shrugged, saying she had always bought the wrappers, even when she lived in the Philippines.

A low table. A two-burner stove. A stool. A white smock. Brown hands wrinkled. A paintbrush and batter. The rise and fall of a dialect I never learned, was never taught.

Lola had the softest hands. I would sit in her lap and she would just hold me while my parents visited with them, the dialects flowing freely among them. My father spoke only Tagalog, the standard dialect of the Philippines. My grandfather spoke Pangasinan while my grandmother spoke Ilocano, the second most common dialect of the Philippines. When my parents talked with my grandparents, the dialects would fuse with English phrases that I'd catch, but adult talk is adult talk no matter the language. If I got impatient and squirmed on her lap, Lola would pat my hands gently and rock me back and forth like a baby. I'd trace my fingers along her knuckles and nails, feeling the difference between her hands and mine.

Lola emigrated from the Philippines in 1957 when my grandfather decided to move his family to the US after the Korean War. He was a Philippine Scout and fought in WWII, escaping the Bataan Death March in its early days. My grandfather, who admired the American Dream, wanted his wife and six daughters to live that dream. Lola believed in the power of education, so she worked in a Seattle industrial

laundromat for several years to supplement their income and send all their daughters to college.

Living in the Northwest was hard on their tropical bones, and every Fall and Winter, they complained about the rain. They talked about how, in the Philippines, the monsoon rains were warm but relentless, causing flooding for miles around their farm “back home.”

The brush loaded with batter moved swiftly across the black-bottomed pan and the wrapper sizzled. Hardly a breath passed and the brush was set aside. Soon the edges of the wrapper curled away from the pan and fingers delicately pinched the edge of the wrapper, lifting it away. The wrapper floated onto the stack and she began again. Dip. Brush. Sizzle. Pinch. Lift. Stack. Again and again.

The windows of her kitchen sweat from the humidity.

Outside it rained.

Inside oil sizzled.

Summer, 2006

My husband and I are decent cooks, but we rely on proportions and ingredient lists. Without Lola’s recipe, we had to guess. She probably used flour, but did she use eggs? How much water was in her batter, or did she use milk, or leavening?

Closing my eyes, I brought up the memories I’d gathered and tried to remember her mixing the batter. When nothing came, I realized I must have been in the other room while she prepared the batter and that I had walked in after she had started the task. My frustration hid the pain of missing her. Lola died in the mid-90s after suffering Alzheimer’s disease for ten years. I could have asked her to teach me when her memory was still clear, but what teenager thinks to do that? What grandmother thinks she won’t pass on her recipes in time?

We scoured the Internet for clues. Every search for “lumpia” or “lumpia wrapper” or “lumpia recipe” suggested frozen commercial wrappers. I posted questions on comment boards and received replies that resembled the blank looks of my aunts and the Lumpia Lady— “I always buy the wrappers in the red and white box. Dunno how to make them. Sorry.” I began to wonder if my memories were fantasies, that Lola never made her own wrappers, that somehow the knowledge of making wrappers from scratch had been lost.

Finally, on Google, a recipe for Lumpia Wrappers came up.

1 cup rice flour

1 cup water

Mix the flour and water together and blend well to form a smooth batter. Grease a clean griddle or frying pan very lightly. (The best way to do this is to use a piece of clean cloth or paper lightly moistened with oil to wipe the surface of the pan). Using a paint brush, paint batter thinly over the griddle or pan, working quickly. Remove the wrapper with a pancake turner as batter dries.

Rice flour and water. The perfect gluten-free recipe. Technology Lola would have never understood or dreamed of delivered her recipe. Two simple ingredients, cheap and perfect for the wife of a retired Sergeant living on pensions from the Army and the laundry where she worked.

I saw her clearly bent over a stove worn and marred by brown oil spatters.

The stove rested on a foil-covered wood carving board that separated the stove from the low table. A cotton tablecloth, decorated with bright images of fruits, covered the table and dangled off the edge. Lola balanced a green plastic bowl with the lumpia batter in one hand, while her other hand deftly swept the batter over the surface of the crepe pan.

I knew it was a crepe pan because I heard her sparse English words as she spoke to my mother about it. It was an expensive purchase, the first Teflon pan offered at the PX, but the wrappers cooked without sticking. Swipe, sizzle, flick. Swipe, sizzle, flick. With efficiency borne of years providing food for her family, Lola made wrapper after wrapper, ready to be rolled and fried.

When I told my mother about the memory and the recipe, she said she didn't remember.

"Takes so long to make them," she said. "Then you've got to cook the meat and roll them up and fry them. All that oil! That's why I buy them frozen. All rolled and ready to go.

One moment my mother said my grandmother didn't make her own wrappers and the next moment she said Lola did but then stopped.

Maybe Lola got tired of making the wrappers by hand. Her daughters, wishing to save their mother the work, brought her the boxed and frozen wrappers one day and she never went back to the hot pan on the two-burner stove. She would have been proud to buy the wrappers premade. She had made it in the US and could provide the food she loved to the people she loved, quicker, easier, the American way.

Now I, a US-born Filipino, tried to duplicate her native way. We looked at the simple recipe again, wondered if the wrappers were going to be sticky enough to stretch yet not so sticky that the finished rolls wouldn't release from the frying pan later. We plotted out alternative batters just in case the first ones failed. We decided to buy a pan heavy enough to maintain the right temperature. We gathered and cooked ingredients for the filling, letting the batch cool in the fridge. It all came down to rice flour, water, and a hot pan. Lola would have been impatient with our doubts, would have taken things into her own hands and proven what we only guessed at. With her gone, though, I wondered if it was easier to just go without.

One Sunday Afternoon

The heavy pan is hot and ready. The batter in the bowl is thin like cream. I hold an empty measuring cup in one hand and a silicon brush in the other. Kel has already made two lumpia wrappers and they sit on a white plate nearby. They look right, but he made them, not me, and I hesitate. What if I can't make the wrappers myself? What if I can't follow in my Lola's footsteps and provide lumpia to my family like she did?

Nervously, I stir the batter and check the consistency again before I dip the measuring cup in and draw out a portion. With a tip of my wrist, the pale liquid pours

onto the hot pan and I brush it over the surface. The pan is too hot and the batter sizzles, clumping with each stroke. My stomach knots, feeling the failure. I dump the lumpy wrapper into the sink.

I stir the batter again as the pan cools, then hold my breath as I pour the batter and brush it into a flat circle. The batter stays thin and doesn't sizzle. The edges turn to lace. Micro-thermals form along the sides of the pan, and soon the wrapper edge floats away from the surface. Glancing at the center of the pan where the batter is thickest, I wait for the wrapper to turn transparent like the ones Lola made.

Feet planted as if in battle, I grasp two edges of my wrapper. Slowly, the wrapper peels free from the pan, no tears. I raise it high in the air to check it. Not a rip to be found. I gingerly set the wrapper aside on a cooling rack and stare at it like it was a long lost artifact. Past now present, I take a breath and begin again. Pour, brush, lift. Pour, brush, lift. My technique is different than Lola's but the result is the same. A small stack of wrappers ready for rolling.

Between Kel and I, we make six successful wrappers. Many wrappers failed because the pan was too hot or we lacked skill with brushing and plucking. We feel giddy as we roll ground pork, Napa cabbage, and garlic inside the wrappers. The lumpia crisps golden brown in the hot oil. I arrange the rolls on a plate and place a sauce made of wheat-free tamari, vinegar, and garlic in a bowl nearby. We stand across the counter from each other, the lumpia between us.

"Ready?" Kel asks.

We bite off the tops of our lumpia just like Lola had taught us. The first bite burns my tongue in familiar way, the flavors erupting new memories of Lola's kitchen.

Bright yellow cabinets, speckled linoleum, the ironing board flopped open from its hiding place in a cabinet. Lola sits on a high stool, a steel bowl in her lap, beans snapping as she snips them with her fingers.

We pour spoonfuls of sauce into the hot lumpia and each take another bite. The sauce blends with the crisp wrapper and flavored meat, opening my senses. Memory layers onto the present moment again and I remember Lola's garden outside her kitchen, my grandfather bent over a shovel and the sound of my cousin's laughter.

I look at Kel, wondering what he was thinking, feeling. Half his lumpia is gone and his eyes are wide with wonder.

"Good?"

He smiles crookedly and wipes tears from his eyes, then nods.

I suddenly realize he's been missing Lola as much as I did, missing that little piece from her kitchen lost because of his condition. The crispness, the sizzling heat, the saltiness, and homey-ness. All those things, plus the filtered light through her kitchen window and her memory of monsoon rains, all wrapped tightly in a starchy embrace.

