



A glimpse of Purple Yam's casual Asian vibe with dramatic lights designed by Filipino artist-cook Perry Mamaril and a bamboo oasis in the backyard

FILIPINO FOOD UNCUT

New York City-based Amy Besa and Romy Dorotan teach us to love Filipino cuisine as it truly is—with no excuses.

BY CJ JUNTREAL

There is a photo of **Amy Besa** and **Romy Dorotan** in the online *Boston Globe*. He is laughing as he wields an offset spatula in one hand and a mango tart in the other. She holds a microphone and looks on with a gleeful smile. The photo was taken at a cooking demonstration called *Iskwelahang Pilipino*. It captures

them at their best, happy doing something they love—cooking and educating people about Filipino food. Amy Besa and Romy Dorotan have come a long way since they first opened **Cendrillon** in New York City's Soho district in 1995. It had been intended as an Asian grill, but media write-ups called it a Filipino restaurant. And by the time it closed in early 2009, it had

been serving more Filipino dishes in the inimitable style of Chef Romy. Filipinos in New York City either applauded and supported the restaurant, or disliked it for the way it cooked their favorite Filipino dishes. Despite the opinions of the city's Filipinos, the couple persevered, and in a 2005 review entitled "Cooking without Concessions," *New York Times* food critic **Frank Bruni** described Chef Romy's *adobo* as having "a boldness that delighted me." He went on to write that Cendrillon favors sour notes, "...which it hits so hard and often that you experience a kind of taste revelation, realizing as never before just how far into the background of most cuisines these notes recede."

Early this year, Amy and Chef Romy made a trip back to the Philippines to celebrate her mother's 95th birthday. While here, she spoke on the topic "Transplanting Philippine Cultural Values in the U.S. through Food" at an industry forum organized by **Enderun Colleges** during the visit of celebrated **Chef Alain Ducasse**. She also moderated and helped organize with Enderun a workshop on Filipino food—**Ang Sariling Atin**. At both forums, it was evident that the title of Frank Bruni's article had hit the nail on the head.

While many people believe that Filipino food should be tweaked to conform to Western standards if we want to take our place on the world culinary stage, Amy declared that we do not need to westernize our food to make it world-class. She went on to explain that Filipino food was delicious because it was cooked with love and served with hospitality and generosity. To capture the hearts of the culinary world, we should simply cook with the very best ingredients we can use; we need to cook with our Filipino values—love, generosity, hospitality—and capture the spirit and tastes of the Philippines. Use organic, fresh ingredients, she exhorted; don't kill the original flavors of the dish and the ingredients.

Historically, she said, the Filipino flavor palate is sour; salty, sweet, and fatty are modern developments. Filipinos are Asians; we share our food when we eat—it is the communal, social glue that binds people together. At their new restaurant, **Purple Yam**, that opened in late 2009 in Brooklyn, the menu has no sections for appetizers, entrees, or soups

because Asians eat with everything on the table at the same time, mixing and matching their food. Diners are coming to an Asian restaurant, she says proudly, so they should adjust to our sensibilities. Purple Yam's waitstaff are taught to understand and practice Filipino hospitality, to be welcoming, to always look out for the customer needs—just the way it is in our own homes.

Purple Yam's menu is said to be a bit more traditional Filipino, but it still contains other Asian flavors. Reviews point out that it is in the Filipino dishes that Chef Romy shines, and that none of the flavors seem to be tempered to please non-Filipino palates. Both the *New York Times* and *Time Out New York* reviews describe tastes and textures that would please and be familiar to Filipino hearts; and the *sisig* seems to have won over quite a few non-Filipinos. Who else but someone with an unshakable belief in Filipino food would put a dish of crispy pigs' ears and cheeks on the menu of a restaurant in Brooklyn? The couple's uncompromising approach to Filipino food seems to have worked. *New York Times* food critic **Sam Sifton** just recently included Purple Yam in his highly-selective list of 50 favorite New York restaurants called the "Sifty Fifty."

Amy and Chef Romy's love affair with Filipino food is unmistakable, enthusiastic, and infectious. It is this love and enthusiasm that make them such effective advocates of Filipino food. It shines through in every word of their book, **Memories of Philippine Kitchens**, published in 2006. The book gives us the food memories of the authors and other local cooks, continuing an important tradition of storytelling and the passing on of knowledge. It is a "must-have" book for people looking not only for a Filipino cookbook, but one that documents our culinary traditions and culture.

At Enderun's *Ang Sariling Atin* forum, Amy told the audience that everything served at her mother's party would be Filipino—native, organic ducks turned into crispy *adobo* flakes, *lechon* cooked on the spot by a *lechon* master from Bacolod, heirloom vegetables from Ilocos, *kakanins* from around the country. She wanted to show that one can have a magnificent feast that is all Filipino, a feast that uses only natural and local ingredients. It underlined the message that she has been trying to



Amy Besa at the Ang Sariling Atin workshop



At the Ang Sariling Atin workshop, Chef Harlequin Boloron teaches the art of puso wrapping using coconut leaves



Chef Romy Dorotan works with fresh talakitok for the 95th birthday of Amy Besa's mother



Modern interiors of Purple Yam with lights designed by Perry Mamaril



A sumptuous Filipino spread for the Ang Sariling Atin workshop



Duck Adobo served at Ang Sariling Atin

propagate—use it or lose it. We must use our native ingredients, seek out and cook our traditional recipes, or lose them forever. Many culinary professionals, she says, sometimes have a tendency to ignore our local vegetables, fish and ingredients because they are not "special" enough. Yet these are our history and culture, and they will soon disappear because our older generations are dying.

The audience at the forum, students and foodies alike, hung on to her every word. She made us want to rush out and eat the perfect *adobo* or search our grandmother's *baul* for heirloom recipes. And when Chef Romy described the *adobo* recipes for Cendrillon and Purple Yam, mouths began to water as he talked of rice vinegar, coconut milk, quail, rabbit, *adobo* with heritage pork, salty, sour, the flavors of the Philippines. By the end of the afternoon, people were chattering excitedly, and plans were afoot for the students of Enderun to undertake a bigger forum and festival on Filipino food in the future.

In May, Amy traveled to San Francisco to participate in a symposium on Filipino flavors, where her *Master Cooking Class on Traditional Souring Ingredients in Filipino Cuisine* was sold out. At a separate event, she shared their experiences in putting together a cookbook, hoping to encourage more people to write Filipino cookbooks or open good Filipino restaurants.

The couple's message is always the same. Be proud of our food—the sour, salty, brown food that we love, but think non-Filipinos will not like. Use the best, natural ingredients. Cook with love and generosity. Use our local ingredients and recipes so we don't lose them. Focus on one dish that the world should recognize as Filipino—a dish she believes should be *adobo*. Cook without concession, without apologies, and you will see the world will love our food, too.

They are not lone voices in the wilderness seeking to preserve our culinary history and bring Filipino food to the world's table. Nor are they the first. There are others, equally passionate. But Amy and Chef Romy are in New York, they are looked up to as a success story, and they are generous in sharing their knowledge. People listen to them now and take their message to heart. Filipino food has found new champions. ■