



Filipino Foodie Fusion

There is a dearth of Filipino restaurants in the UK, and yet this meat-centric, rich cuisine that blends influences as disparate as Mexico and Malaysia has much to offer. Giselle Whiteaker feasts on food from the archipelago at Romulo Café and Restaurant.

The tiki mug is topped with half a lime, in which flames are flickering. They burn for a surprisingly long time before dying out enough for my boyfriend Elio to push the lime into the mug and partake of his Pinoy Mai Tai. I've enjoyed the spectacle while sipping from a ceramic coconut filled with Don Papa Rum, Malibu, coconut cream, pineapple, lime and calamansi juice. The vessel is so large I can't lift it with one hand and the fragrance takes me to a beach in the Philippines.

We're sitting in a boutique eatery tucked away on a quiet section of Kensington High Street. Romulo Café is one of a small number of Filipino restaurants in London. We've

heard it's one of the best, so we're keen to see what's on the menu beyond the eponymous adobo – although we'll have some of that, too.

"Until fairly recently, Filipinos have associated their cuisine with home cooking. Every family, every Filipino parent, had their own version of a dish. The belief was that one could do things better, and more economically, at home," explains Rowena Romulo, who runs this family business, when I ask her why Filipino cuisine isn't more widespread. "But we sense things are changing... People from all over are looking for new tastes and flavours to embrace. Our dream is for Filipino cuisine to become truly mainstream."

It's a dream they're putting into practice. Behind the recently renovated façade, Romulo Café is delightfully unpretentious. Black and white tropical leaf wallpaper adorns one wall, framed by the remaining jungle-green painted walls and dark marble tables. The menu features *platitos* – tasting plates – and *platos* – signature sharing plates, along with a selection of vegetarian dishes that makes decisions difficult. After a period of negotiation and a few more sips of our delectable aperitifs, we reach agreement on an array of flavours that represents the diversity of Filipino cuisine, which borrows from Spanish, Chinese, Malay and American culinary traditions.

"Filipinos take the most desirable and tasty of these influences and create dishes that are uniquely Filipino. For example, we churned out our own version of ketchup using bananas, and the Chinese use of noodles inspired us to come up with our own noodle dishes and Filipino spring rolls. From the Spanish, we created our own versions of paella. Our food is also heavily influenced by Mexico, with the use of bay leaves and annatto seeds," says Rowena.

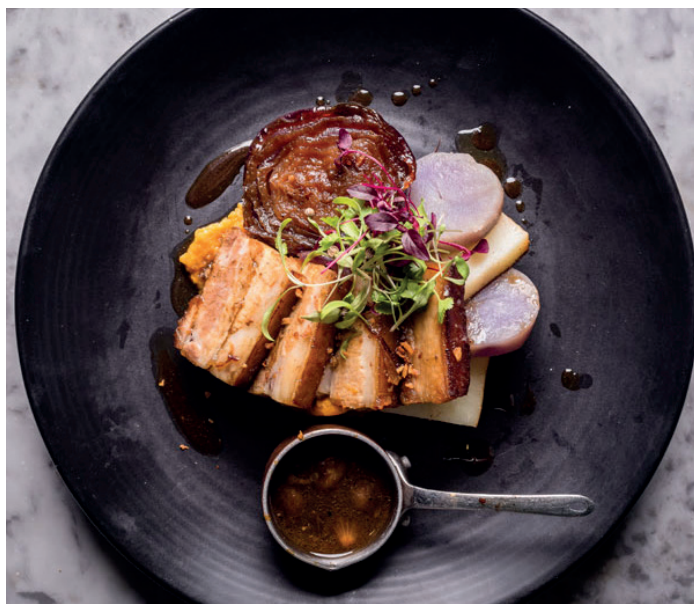


Smoked fish spring rolls

The blend of influences leads to the unique flavours that shine in the dishes we share, from the husky notes of smoked fish spring rolls to the fresh, tangy bite of the calamansi-cured tuna ceviche. The Chinese influence is apparent in the confit duck leg bao bun, which sees tender Creedy Carver duck plated with homemade bao buns, plum sauce, jicama and cucumber, a clear nod to Peking duck. The large coconut chilli king prawns, on the other hand, hint at Malaysia, with the rich, mild sauce gently enhancing the sweetness of the prawns.

One of the most intriguing dishes is the young jackfruit and coconut stew; the meaty tropical fruit is stewed with chilli, ginger and coconut cream and drizzled with annatto oil, resulting in a light, flavour-packed bowl that leaves you wanting more. At this point in our procession of platitos and platos, we have no need for more, but it is impossible to dine at a Filipino restaurant and not sample the adobo, the staple dish of the Philippines. We choose the Dingley Dell pork belly version, which is slow-cooked in soy, garlic and rice vinegar, and served with a trio of potato. It's succulent, rich and immensely satisfying.

"We have some of the sweetest desserts on the planet," says Rowena, encouraging us to partake of pudding.



Pork belly adobo

The Pinoy sweet tooth is evident with *sans rival*, a modern Filipino dessert made with dulce de leche buttercream, cashews, and chewy and sweet meringue. The airy meringue melts in the mouth, leaving us on a sugar high that will last for hours. Our final dish embodies the concepts Rowena has outlined: the Filipino adoption and adaptation of dishes. Called ube cheesecake, it is made with purple yams, giving it a deep amethyst colour that contrasts with the decorative yellow marzipan flower on the plate. Sprinkled with coconut, it also comes with a light coconut ice cream. We leave barely a crumb.

"At Romulo Café, we do our best to showcase the best of Filipino culinary traditions through our family-inspired recipes," says Rowena. Add a dash of imagination from Head Chef Jeremy Villanueva and the result is a menu that will keep you coming back for more. It may be a long way to travel to the Philippines, but with Romulo Café, the Philippines has a growing niche in the UK.



The sweet Sans rival

For more information about the delicious dishes at Romulo Café see www.romulocafe.co.uk.



Blue Swimmer Crab Meat Soufflé

(Rellenong Alimango)

Ingredients

4 small female brown crabs
1 clove of garlic, crushed
10g minced ginger
20g finely chopped shallots
20-30g fish sauce (adjust to taste)
250ml coconut cream
1 lemongrass stalk
30g small diced potatoes, fried
20g chopped green chillies
30g peas
50g vegetable oil
1 spring onion stalk chopped
Salt and pepper
4 eggs

Method

Cook the crabs in salted boiling water for 7 minutes. Remove and allow to cool. When cold, pick the meat from the crabs, keeping the main shells whole. Separate the white meat and reserve the brown meat and any roe.

In a pan, sauté the garlic, ginger and shallots. Do not colour. Add the roe and brown meat, then deglaze with the fish sauce. When the fish sauce has evaporated, add the coconut cream and bring to the boil,

then begin to reduce to a sauce consistency. Add the lemongrass at this stage to infuse. Pass the sauce through a sieve then set it aside to cool.

In a mixing bowl, beat the four eggs. Add the remaining crab meat, cooked potatoes, peas, and green chilli, followed by the coconut sauce. Replace in the shell and bake at 180°C for 15-20 minutes.