I didn't know that my mother made ice cream and cones during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. She was just sixteen. When I learned that, I said, “We could have been “Ben & Jerry's” or “Dreyers.” I guess we were already in the States when I learned it, otherwise, I would have said “Magnolia” or “Selecta,” the local ice cream companies in the Philippines.

Why didn't my mother think of making ice cream when we were kids? Instead of begging her for a nickel every time the ice cream cart passed by, we could have had the mother lode. We could have helped her make ice cream. My father could have designed a swing set connected to an ice cream churner. We could have cranked the ice cream machine while we played.

What a lost opportunity! Maybe, my mother didn't enjoy making ice cream. She just had to do it to make some money. It was hand-cranked although, she said, one of her suitors used to come and help her. She supplied a batch of ice cream to a saloon and made another batch for retail sale. She was quite an entrepreneur. She doubled the price of her ice cream cones during a Japanese parade in her hometown. The police caught her and took her home to her great uncle, and told him about my mother's racket. “The Japanese soldiers were willing to pay the price,” she said. They probably didn't even know she doubled it. It's the law of supply and demand. When the demand is high, and the supply is
low, the price goes up. I'm sure the police officer didn't know that. He probably didn't go to a business school nor did my mother, but she learned that instinctively. Unfortunately, when the supply of sugar and milk became scarce, she had to stop making ice cream.

In 1972, a neighbor asked my mother to accompany her to see a specialist in “Batangas,” a city about fifty miles from our town. While “Aling” Rosa (Lady Rosa) was at the doctor's office, my mother wandered to the market. She found that the price per kilo of beef was the same whether it was chuck or tenderloin. That was not the case in our town. She told my father that she could make money by buying meat in Batangas every Friday, and selling it to prospective Carmona buyers. She bought and sold beef to doctors, business women and teachers in our town until she left for the States in 1974.

Around the same time she started selling beef, my older brother married a daughter of a deep sea fisherman who smoked fish as a sideline. Their coastal town, Rosario, was known for their “Tinapa” (smoked fish). My mother started buying from him and sold it to her beef customers as well. Smoked fish is good when accompanied with “Atsara” (sweet pickled green papaya), so she made “Atsara” also, and sold it with her “Tinapa”.

My mother probably saved enough money from her small business to pay for her plane ticket when she left for the United States in 1974, not counting all the beef and “Tinapa” that we enjoyed.
Growing up, we had a small poultry farm with 200-250 egg-laying hens. It was mostly for our consumption, but we sold the excess eggs to a bakery, and when neighbors wanted to buy chicken, we sold it to them.

My paternal grandmother did all the cooking at home. When she died in 1957, my mother had to learn how to cook. My father complained a lot about her cooking. He even complained when the rice was too soft or too hard. Upon my mother's suggestion, my father ate out while she learned how to cook. It took her a few years to be as good as my grandmother. With the help of her older sister, Nanay Zolita, she learned other dishes that my grandmother didn't use to cook.

My father was so proud of her cooking, he started inviting his PingPong friends over for lunch on Sundays after the games, and when one of his production staff got married, the reception was held at our house.

When my mother came to San Francisco, she was left alone in the house on London Street while my sister-in-law worked at AT&T, and my brother was on sea duty. She was not even allowed to babysit my niece, Stephanie. It was nothing personal. My sister-in-law probably didn't want her Guatemalan best friend's mother to lose the income from babysitting my niece. Her best friend was Stephanie's godmother also. One day, my mother got bored, and walked to Mission Street, and met Mila, the owner of a Filipino grocery store. She helped her put price tags on food packages while enjoying conversations with customers. Pretty soon, many people learned, from her that she was a
good cook. She started catering parties. My sister and I even helped her in some of them. She also loved inviting people over for dinners to taste her food. My mother developed a big enough clientele to keep her busy.

During my 2005 visit to the Philippines, a neighbor said to me, “Your mother looked so good in her pictures, you couldn't tell she once sold “Tinapa.” He said it in a mocking tone. (“Tinapa” is poor man's food). I responded with, “Oh my mother still sells “Tinapa” in San Francisco. My brother's father-in-law, who used to supply her with “Tinapa”, is now living in Virginia Beach with his retired son from the US Navy. He also got bored, and now smokes fish which he sends by FedEx to my mother to sell. She makes “Atsara” as well. The “selling part” of “Tinapa” of what I said was not true. My sister-in-law's father sent us “Tinapa” just for us to enjoy.

My mother became a home health aide and catered parties on weekends. She still made money from cooking, even after she retired, which she generously gave to her grandchildren.

Nevertheless, I still cry on the inside for the lost opportunity of becoming “Ben & Jerry's” or “Dreyer's” or even just “Mitchells” ice cream.

“Mitchell's” is a small ice cream maker on San Jose Avenue and 29th Street in San Francisco. I could have been the one making Avocado, Ube, Lanka, and other tropical fruit-flavored ice cream.
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