

Jolly, Sour(?), Spaghetti

In the confines of my cramped bedroom was where I first found my love for the light, acidic red sauce that floods over what Giada De Laurentiis exulted over as the perfectly al dente Italian pasta. No, it was not love at first sight. It was, rather, more like the crawling waves that coat the pasta strands slowly but surely, injecting into their otherwise tasteless and starchy lengths the pulsing and kicking life of rich tomato flavor. I might have been 14 or 15 years old – had never stepped foot beyond the scorching lands of the Philippines – and was already impressionable for the alien and the unfamiliar.

Also, no, I did not engage in a conversation with Giada back then. Of course not. She was merely inside the television screen and I outside in front of it, gazing in awe as the Food Network channel played the introduction to her show *Giada at Home*, perhaps the very first indication of the invisible string that pulls my heart to the wonders of foreign lands and cultures. Giada spoke with much fervor while describing her cooking and the product of that process, that I can remember much. The show's camera crew had its mystical ways of presenting the food so palatable even just in pixels. These, combined with my acute curiosity and almost perpetual solitude characteristic of a temperamental teenager then, lured me just enough to break me away from the binds of the familiar sweetness of Filipino spaghetti – of its sauce's banana undertone, of its all-the-way-cooked slices of red hotdog, of its oftentimes soggy and mushy noodles.

It didn't take long for sour pasta – something I had even yet to try myself – to take center stage and overthrow the sugar-laden spaghetti I, like most other Filipinos, have come to know and grew up with. To hell with all the birthdays and Christmases and New Years and family reunions that served this pasta dish. It was as if a switch had been flicked and my tastebuds became intolerant of my own country's "signature" sweet spaghetti. *Why the hell should spaghetti even be sweet?* I became a traitor, a hypocrite. Shouldn't all Filipino kids love sweet Filipino spaghetti?

There was, however, an exception, an oddity in this great oddity that was manifesting in my traitorous teenage self.

Jolly Spaghetti, its bright red sauce laying with pieces of hotdog and shredded (Velveeta?) cheese on a bed of unremarkably boiled spaghetti.

Don't ask me why. I don't know exactly either. But perhaps I can give a rather sentimental reason as mushy as the overcooked spaghetti noodles that was always laid down on the dining table each year on my birthday.

It's because I can already smell the tangy scent of fast-food spaghetti inside the rustling plastic bag held in one hand by my grandmother long before me and my cousins were called to partake in that hearty meal around the dining table. It's because I was never alone in smearing the sides of my mouth with sweet sauce while enjoying the spaghetti loosely twirled around my fork. It's because I had countless jumbled conversations and rounds of laughter while picking at my plate of spaghetti and saving the cheesiest and meatiest parts for last. It's because I had my relatives to enjoy it with. That damn bee really took its word seriously and made its spaghetti a jolly to eat, huh?

But no. It's not even about Jolly Spaghetti itself. It's about me not being alone while savoring it. And, sure, I can enjoy *any* homemade Filipino spaghetti with my family, but there is something particular about enjoying food that is not cooked by any family member. There is no need to feign any "It's delicious! You cook so well!" statement in the name of being nice and respectful. Agreeing with each other that food from outside *is* tasty guarantees some kind of solidarity in surety. This is well contrasted by my then new-found love for sour pasta, which one of my relatives said tasted like "spoiled" spaghetti.

I am 23 now. I still love sour, Italian-style red sauce pasta, and I *still* love Jolly Spaghetti. I vocally trash sweet Filipino spaghetti that my older sister cooks, but I also consciously eat Jolly Spaghetti one or two or three strands at a time to prolong conversations I have with my sister over it. While I continue to be mesmerized and lured by all tastes foreign to the Filipino palate, I know that I will still look for the distinct Filipino taste of the iconic Jolly Spaghetti—I will always come back and make more lasting family memories with it over time.