


# Overlooked No More: Maria Orosa, Inventor of Banana Ketchup

As a food scientist, she sought to reduce the Philippines' dependence on imported food, pioneering new ways to use local products. And that was before she became a war hero.

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Maria Orosa, a food scientist and nationalist, sought to make the Philippines less dependent on imported food. Banana ketchup was one result. via Orosa family



By **Seth Mydans**

Sept. 29, 2022

*This article is part of Overlooked, a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in The Times.*

Bright red, slightly sweet, slightly tangy, a popular Philippine condiment that’s almost like the real thing: It’s banana ketchup.

Its creator, Maria Orosa, was an innovative food scientist and Filipino nationalist who pioneered methods of canning and preserving native fruits, intent on making her country self-sufficient in food production.

She later turned her skills to feeding the guerrillas fighting the Japanese occupation during World War II and smuggling food to starving American and Filipino prisoners of war, leading some to consider her a war hero.

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But banana ketchup remained an enduring legacy.

When Americans colonized the Philippines in 1898, they introduced elements of their cuisine, and ketchup became a popular condiment. But it was expensive to import, and tomatoes would not thrive in the tropical Philippine climate.

So Orosa set about making her own version.

Banana ketchup, which she created in the 1930s, is smoother and more viscous than the tomato version, making it a bit harder to shake out of the bottle. The concoction — made of hardy local saba



shake out of the bottle. The concoction — made of hardy local saba bananas, sugar, vinegar and spices, with a dash of red coloring to make it look more like the imported version — is now a staple on the shelves of Philippine grocery stores.

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“I would say it’s a defining part of the Filipino palate,” said Yana Gilbuena, a Philippines-born chef who, based in Oakland, Calif., runs a series of pop-ups called SALO serving Filipino food in the United States and other countries.

“Growing up with it, I’ve always thought that was how ketchup was supposed to taste,” she added, in an email. “Big surprise for me when I immigrated and tasted what ‘real’ ketchup tasted like.”

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Today banana ketchup accompanies a wide range of dishes and snacks and is used as a sweetener in barbecue marinades and stews. People say it’s a must with fried chicken at the popular multinational Max’s Restaurant, a Filipino chain.



It's also the key ingredient in the red "tomato sauce" used in Filipino-style sweet spaghetti, which uses small chunks of hot dog instead of meatballs — a popular dish at the global fast-food chain Jollibee's.

First mass-produced in 1942, banana ketchup has become so popular that Heinz, arguably the king of tomato ketchup, now makes its own version. Heinz introduced it in 2019, [saying](#) it was doing so "in honor of Maria Orosa" and promising that ketchup lovers would be "fascinated with its bold and delicious taste, the taste of overcoming any challenge, even making ketchup without tomatoes."



Banana ketchup, now a Filipino staple, came into being because tomato ketchup was an expensive import and tomatoes don't grow well in the Philippines. Shutterstock

Maria Ylagan Orosa was born on Nov. 29, 1893, in Taal, Philippines, a coastal town in Batangas Province, the fourth child of Simplicio Orosa y Agoncillo and Juliana Ylagan. Her father, a merchant, joined the ill-fated war of resistance to American colonization as captain of a steamship that transported Filipino troops among the country's islands. Her mother ran a small shop.

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In 1916, when Orosa was 23, she traveled to the United States as a government-sponsored scholar and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in chemistry and pharmaceutical science at the University of Washington in Seattle. While studying, she worked in the food laboratory at the university's School of Pharmacy, experimenting with and testing products to ensure that they met government standards. It was a rare opportunity for a non-U.S. citizen.

“Here in America, it is very difficult to obtain the kind of job I have just been offered and accepted,” she wrote in a letter to her mother in 1918. “Before they offer to a person of color, such as Filipino, Japanese or Chinese, the jobs are first offered to whites.”

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She ended her letter with advice for keeping healthy:

“Eat well, consume nutritious foods such as meat, eggs and milk, if available in the morning. Don't overexert yourself and get enough sleep. You should be in bed by 9 p.m. and get up at 7 a.m. You need lots of sleep.”

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After completing her studies, Orosa was offered a job as an assistant chemist for the State of Washington but, as a committed nationalist, she chose to return to the Philippines to help her country become self-sufficient in food production through modern methods of preparation and preservation. She joined the government's Bureau of Science and was soon leading its home economics and food preservation divisions.

Orosa was often called "an alchemist in the kitchen," conjuring wines and jellies from native fruits, flour from bananas and cassava, and vinegar from coconuts. She developed local methods of canning fruit, notably frozen mangos, and invented the palayok oven, an earthenware pot widely used for cooking in rural areas without electricity.

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“The practice of canning was virtually nonexistent in the Philippines,” the journalist Jessica Gingrich wrote in 2020 in [the most authoritative account](#) of Orosa’s life, published on the website Lady Science. “She nourished a nation through chemistry and culinary ingenuity.”

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When Japan invaded and occupied the Philippines in 1941, Orosa joined a resistance movement called Marking’s Guerrillas, holding the rank of captain. She turned her attention to inventing nutrient-dense foods to sustain local fighters.







An illustration from an advertisement for Soyalac, a nutritious drink made from soy beans developed by Orosa.

Her most notable inventions included soyalac, a drink made from soy beans, and darak, rice flour that could be eaten or baked into cookies rich in vitamin B-1, essential in preventing beriberi disease.

“One teaspoon a day” of darak “could keep a starving man’s digestive system open, his bowels functioning normally, no cramps,” Yay Panlilio, a guerrilla leader who was a friend of Orosa’s, wrote in a 1975 article in *Women’s Journal*. “A palm full could keep him on his feet. Two palms full, he could fight.”

She also organized a system for smuggling these lifesaving inventions to detainees in the Santo Tomas Internment Camp, where more than 4,000 civilians, most of them Americans, were held for four years.

During the final battle for Manila, Orosa was wounded in the foot by shrapnel and taken to Remedios Hospital, which overflowed with the wounded and with refugees from Japanese massacres.

The hospital came under American shelling, and Orosa was one of hundreds who died there, on Feb. 13, 1945. She was 48.

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She kept people “from being starved to death,” her cousin Apolinario Orosa told the Filipino television network ABS-CBN in 2020. “And it was an American shell that killed her. That was the irony of it.”

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Pedro Picornell, a volunteer at the hospital, wrote in a memoir that it was impossible to bury the bodies because the “Japanese shot at anybody who tried to move around in the streets.”

The dead were eventually buried in mass graves. Orosa’s remains were never identified.

Of her many legacies, banana ketchup remains the most beloved.

Claude Tayag, a Filipino chef, food writer and artist, said banana ketchup was “my savior” as a poor student when he doused it streetside on mashed sweet potato sandwiches or fried fish.

That it is made of bananas is “really not a big deal as far as we’re concerned,” he said in a telephone interview, “because it’s ours, it was invented here.”

He added: “Is there a law against making ketchup out of bananas? Does it have to be out of tomatoes?”

Seth Mydans reported as a foreign and national correspondent for The New York Times and its sister publication, The International Herald Tribune, from 1983 to 2012. He continues to contribute to The Times.