

The Zest S13E20

Billy: [00:00:00] The reason I brought the cameras was not to create a show. It was just so that I could be present, 'cause the whole reason I didn't know the recipes was 'cause I wasn't present.

Dalia: I'm Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State.

Today, Filipino food roots. When our elders pass away, too often their recipes die with them. In recent years, this reality became really apparent for actor and restaurateur Billy Dec. So Billy, who's the son of a white father and Filipina mother, decided to travel to the Philippines to find his last living maternal elders and learn his ancestral recipes.

Don't you wanna do that, too? He brought along a film crew, and the result is the PBS documentary *Food Roots*. It is gorgeous. It'll make you wanna travel. It'll make you wanna call your grandma. It's only an hour long, and you can watch it for free. We've got a link [00:01:00] in the show notes of this episode and on our website, thezestpodcast.com.

So we met up with Billy at Sunda Tampa, which is the Southeast Asian restaurant he owns in Tampa's Midtown district. In this conversation, he discusses what his journey to the Philippines taught him about himself, his struggle to fit in as a Wasian, that's white and Asian, kid growing up in Chicago, and the rising popularity of Filipino cuisine.

Billy: I think with Filipino food, it is a really interesting country, culture, history. There's 7,641 islands that create a lot of separation, a lot of disconnect. There are over 100 dialects. There have been many different countries and cultures that have influenced it over the course of history, so it's always evolving.

It's always changing, whether it's Spain, India, Mexico, [00:02:00] Africa, Japan, China, Malaysia. There's all these moments that have affected different parts of the Philippines, so it's not as unified in a sense, and I don't mean that in a bad way 'cause I love the Philippines so much, but that's part of its charm and part of what's unique now.

It's always evolving. And the fact that people have taken so long to understand Filipino food really boggles my mind a- and upsets me in a bit, not just 'cause it's personal, but because the relationship between the United States and the Philippines historically has been so deep. There have been so much of, you know, America relying on the Philippines, whether it's asking them to serve on behalf of the Americans and with the Americans in our armed forces, whether it's occupying parts of the Philippines with different bases.

There's just so much history that I rarely find people that know anything about the Philippines, have never been there, know what the culinary, uh, situation [00:03:00] is. And then I would just say that with the rise of celebrity chef TV and adventure food shows and onto content creators have made their way through the islands, now I think people are going, "Whoa, I didn't realize how beautiful the beaches are, white sand, blue waters.

I didn't realize how nice the people are, didn't realize how abundant and beautiful the fruit and the produce and the fish and the everything is." And I think there's incredible intrigue now because of that, not to mention Filipino operators and chefs around the country are blowing up. You know, you have Kasama in my hometown of Chicago that just won its, you know, second Michelin star and some other things like that.

So again, I don't know if that's the right answer, but that's sort of my, uh, thoughts on it.

Dalia: Yeah. That's a good take. Okay. Speaking of Chicago-

Billy: I feel like we just went deep.

Dalia: I love going deep.

Billy: And I don't- I'm not a history guy, but I feel like I just sounded like a history guy.

Dalia: Yeah, no- But that's not necessarily-

I think you are, you are a history guy. So you mentioned growing up in Chicago, eating a lot of meals [00:04:00] cooked by your Filipino grandmother. What was it like having friends over at that time?

Billy: Oh my gosh, it was, uh, really tough. First of all, she was Lola. Lola is grandmother in the Philippines, but everyone called her Lola, and she was the best cook ever.

And she would make these dishes, and she'd start in the morning when we were getting ready for school, and she would be cutting up all the vegetables and sort of like creating all the different ingredient piles with the shrimp and the pork and all these things, and perhaps when she was making a lumpia Shanghai, which is a Chinese-inspired Filipino egg roll.

And then at the end of the day, we'd get home, we'd run home so excited, and we'd wanna like... She'd save the rolls for us to drop in the fryer, and we'd be able to eat them fresh and hot and delicious. But kids would be like, "What is that? What is that fish just sitting there with its head on the table?" Um, what you know, "Why are there sh- you know, full shrimp and these big crispy pata?"

Which is this confit pork shank with this, you know, one of my favorite items, but people just were like, "That looks like a Flintstones like gigantic animal piece." [00:05:00] And they would make fun of it. It was really hard because you grow up with your grandma as a kid, your Lola, and you just think everything but love and amazingness like surrounds this aura.

And then all of a sudden, the kids you try to fit in with start making fun of it, literally physically rejecting it, whether it's the smell, the visuals, the taste. And so it was very conflicting being bullied for that. I mean, I remember people saying that I would say, "Well, you s- what do you smell like?"

What is... What are you... You stink." And I'd be like, "What do you mean?" And it took me a while to understand that- All the robust flavors and ingredients and, you know, things that people die over today that are so excited. You know, all these celebrity chefs. Now it's cool because celebrity chefs are using fish sauce or, you know, fermented shrimp, like, bagoong, or cooking with obviously garlic and ginger, all these things.

That's now perceived as delicious. But back in the day, we were really concerned about maybe finding a fresh shirt before we walked into school or going to a sleepover.

Dalia: Mm. That's so wild. When I [00:06:00] walked in here, your colleague who let me in, the first thing I said to him was, "Oh my gosh, it smells so good in here."

Billy: Yeah. Yeah. It's interesting how people are conditioned in different ways, and I think the world's changed tremendously, right? Like, I think, you know, what was happening back in the day was only a function of conditioning and, and story. I mean, I, I served on the White House Bullying Prevention Task Force when I was appointed by President Obama to serve on the President's Advisory Commission, and one of the things we found out was that the Asian American Pacific Islanders were bullied 20% more than any other racial group.

And really, it all came down to an abuse of power based on content or lack of content or inaccurate content. And it just nowadays really doesn't go through the gatekeepers, and it really isn't only on three channels or it don't... You know, now you can see anything everywhere all the time as much as you need.

So that access to content, which is a really great reason to do Food Roots. You know, one of the reasons why we turned the film that we had captured, which was really just family [00:07:00] film into a documentary, was 'cause the responsibility, I think, of everyone to create content around real, accurate, cultural, diverse reality is important when it doesn't exist.

Dalia: Yeah.

Billy: Yeah.

Dalia: Okay, so from what I understand, you had been to the Philippines previously. Mm-hmm. But this was an extended trip.

Billy: Yeah.

Dalia: When was the trip, and what was the biggest surprise for you?

Billy: So yeah, back and forth to the Philippines my whole life, uh, since I was a kid. At one point, we almost went to school there.

Uh, one point, we... After college, I lived there for months 'cause I had nothing going on with my life, just trying to figure it out, what to do next. But this trip started out of nowhere 'cause I had two of my last three elders died on the same day. I dropped everything and just wanted to find this last remaining elder, this Lola from that generation, and all the family members I could to learn the recipes of my ancestors.

So we were really running and gunning s- and I, you know, filmed with shooters and [00:08:00] editors in the Philippines before, so I called them. They were

down to... I was just like, "I don't have a plan. I'm just gonna be in planes, boats, jeepneys, motorcycles, walk the earth, climb mountains, find beach town, wherever my family is."

And they're like, "We're down." So we actually went 12 days, 12 nights straight on that first journey. Then I went back, and then it wasn't until I met Michelle Houseway, who's this Emmy-winning director, and this- Three-time Oscar winning executive producer that they came together and were like, "We're gonna take your footage."

We think there's something there, and then we're gonna send camera crews out to Nashville to meet with your family and your, in interview and you," and all these things that it became what it is today, which is this incredible story that's much more than Filipino food. It's, uh, and culture. It's, it's a human story.

Dalia: Yeah.

Billy: But I think, what was the question? The sh- what was the most shocking thing?

Dalia: What was something that surprised you either about returning to the Philippines or- Yeah ... maybe about yourself? Maybe you see it differently because you have somebody [00:09:00] filming.

Billy: Yeah. Well, I'd been so many times, and I had people film me before.

I'd been in the same living rooms, the same kitchens, the same houses at some point in my life, but I think it was much different because the reason I brought the cameras was not to create a show. It was just so that I could be present. 'Cause the whole reason I didn't know the recipes was 'cause I wasn't present.

I wanted to really connect with my family and almost access, it sounds corny, but, like, that's the s- most surprising thing was it felt like there was a portal to go back in time to learn the recipes of my ancestors by hearing the stories about the ingredients, like literally the hand-carved wooden bowls that my Lola used to u- us- like, just everything was so back in time, and it really explained who they were, why they were the way they were, how they loved, cared for each other, fed each [00:10:00] other, cooked, and did all these things, and it really shocked me.

And you saw the, the doc, so you might see that there was a connection between my crazy life, which I don't wanna give away too many parts of the doc, but my

life was crazy, and I never shared it. I hid a lot of crazy parts, but the journey made sense to me afterwards-

Dalia: Yeah ...

Billy: because of what was happening generations before me that I learned on this trip.

Dalia: Your life was crazy, and everything that you tried to sweep under the rug is now, like, front and center.[00:11:00]

Okay, so how did your cooking change, you know, before and after this journey?

Billy: Well, I would say that after the journey, it became less about consuming and more about teaching the next generation or teaching the community or teaching the world about the beauty of our culture that we grew up in. But also doing so to inspire others to go and think about where their ancestors are from, because it doesn't matter who you are, your ancestors are, are from somewhere else, unless you're Native American, in which case that would be cool, too.

I'd love to know, you know, what your ancestors were doing and creating. And, and learning that, sharing it with all, bringing that to the dinner table makes for much more colorful. So for me, it was less physical and transactional, and it became more about [00:12:00] life- Hmm ... and sharing. So I mean, the chefs in the Sunda ecosystem, especially our executive chef partner Mike Morales, or even our, our chefs at Sunda, Tampa are just amazing, and they're really creating all of the beauty in what we're actually serving.

Dalia: Gotcha.

Billy: Yes.

Dalia: So now that you know where you're from, where are you going?

Billy: I don't think knowing where you're going for me is like a destination. Like, I don't... And I want it that way. I want it to be a surprise, and it to be authentic and original and sort of take a life of its own. But I do know how I'm going.

Where I'm going is a, is a much comfortable situation, meaning I'm just comfortable in my skin. I'm really comfortable and in love with my heritage,

traditions, cultures. To me, I'm much happier with how I, you know, try to bring [00:13:00] betterment and happiness to our teams, to our guests. I used to feel guilt, you know, 'cause I went to law school.

I became a lawyer, and I went to Harvard Business School, and I... Well, you know, every, like America, you know, the US always is like, "You gotta do all these things to be successful, and you gotta do this, that, and the other." And, and then I would, like, feel guilty if I was acting or storytelling or... 'Cause it was the stuff that maybe wasn't perceived as being successful from a business perspective.

And to me, all that's washed away. Like, where I'm going just doesn't involve any of that anymore.

Dalia: Wow.

Billy: All of the themes that you see in the documentary that kind of reveal themselves in the end were all things that meant business, and now they just sort of mean how to live and life in general.

Dalia: Hmm. How do you get to that place?

Because there are a lot of little kids, especially, you know, of mixed heritage, the little Billys out there. I don't know if you ever saw the movie Selena, but there's a line where the dad says, "We have to be more Mexican than the Mexicans and more American than the Americans." [00:14:00] So how do you come to a place where you can feel comfortable with your own background and your own skin and not wishing anything had been different?

Billy: I mean, first of all, love that you just reenacted that scene. That was so good. Good stuff.

Dalia: That was my Edward James Olmos.

Billy: So the good news is back in the day, that would be a really tough question to answer. But nowadays, you're able to really find your tribe, find your likeness and your comfortability in community, perhaps online at first, you know, kind of really deep diving on where...

I mean, this is such a s- stupid thing, but for some reason, maybe this is just in my, what do you call it when it's in your social media feed? Um- Yeah, like

your algorithm?

My algorithm, okay. So I don't know if it's like AI, I don't know what's going on, but for some reason, there's like this movement around Wasian meetups.

Ooh. Where that means white Asian.

Dalia: Yeah.

Billy: So there's, it's in my algorithm now, these white Asian [00:15:00] Wasian meetups. There's like 3,000 people. I was just in New York doing this Today Show. I get out and, like, there's parades of thousands and thousands of Wasians. For me, that was a very, like, sensitive spot around all my bullying related experiences growing up because not only was I this ambiguously brown, you know, never called Filipino, it was always something different.

On the Asian side, I was also very much equally made aware that I didn't fit in on that side as well. So it's just interesting to see that there's this movement on, online where these, there's meetups. And my point is, is that if you're feeling uniquely d- different, you have to understand that you're uniquely different, which is a beautiful thing, and that beauty exists in the world.

You're just on a journey where you haven't connected with it yet. Once you connect with it through physical or just understanding it, you'll realize that there's a real fit or a real [00:16:00] purpose and meaning and comfortability about your uniqueness.

Dalia: Yeah. And what a time to be alive, where we have the internet, and you can find all those people who are just like you-

Billy: Yeah

Dalia: who maybe didn't live in your town.

Billy: Right.

Dalia: Did you ever try to pass as white?

Billy: I have a couple answers for that. Yes, I always tried to fit in as a kid, and depending on what situation I was in, I will say that I was quite the chameleon. There's something that is inherent in Filipino culture, or at least my family

heritage, where you're always caring and pleasing and serving and creating smiles.

Um, and through that, you're trying to assimilate and fit in, so it was weird because, yeah, I did fit in, and it was kind of disheartening to hear the way in which particular groups would talk about other groups, [00:17:00] especially other groups that I was actually a part of. But, you know, I grew up in the nightclub scene in Chicago early.

I grew up in a really diverse city, downtown Chicago, and I could literally become... You know, I always wanted to fit in, you know? And it's funny, I started acting, and I would get these auditions, and it was always playing something different. It could be anything imaginable. Like, could be white, it could be Native American, it could be Mexican, it could be Italian, it could be Middle East, uh, but it was never Asian, never Filipino.

So yeah, did I try to f- I always tried to fit in, especially earlier on when that was really what the world required A little bit more clearly through less access to what the world really is made up of, which is diverse situations that you definitely fit into.

Dalia: Yeah. Okay, one more question about your trip.

Towards the end, you get a tattoo that looks so painful. It looked like the [00:18:00] woman was just hammering a nail into your chest.

Billy: She was.

Dalia: So I felt it for you.

Billy: Did you?

Dalia: Yeah. So y- and I don't have any tattoos, and now I never will. But-

Billy: Oh, look at you.

Dalia: That's so funny ... you, you already had all of this footage and all of these memories that you'll keep with you forever.

Yeah. So why was it important to get the tattoo, and what does it symbolize?

Billy: So I didn't really know that that was for sure gonna happen, right? Like, that was very much surrounded by a lot of folklore. I mean, the idea that there was these tribes that ran into the hills to protect their families and their art and culture when they were taken over by other countries and colonized, and that there was a headhunting village u- up in the sky above the clouds where a 103-year-old, you know, woman was this master tattooer.

Like, I didn't... You know, you really didn't know, and plus you had to be off the grid for two days without f- a phone signal or internet, and just climbing the [00:19:00] mountain with a crew, and there was storms that washed away, like these like mini dirt sliding wet roads that could have killed us for sure, and no hospitals for days.

It was just full of unknowns, so I didn't really know much. Plus, I had already finished my travels to do what I came to do, and so the rest was like almost just dreamy and kind of a throwaway, takeaway, just adventure that pulled me in that direction. You know, of 7,641 islands, and I was looking on a map in northern Luzon, which is the biggest island where my family's from in Ilocos Sur.

And I was just like, you know, like as a kid when you had a protractor and you're like, "Oh, if you could just..." Like, we drove this far and it was four hours, so if we just turn it, it should be just four hours to this, like, story I heard. And there was mountains, and it was [00:20:00] this off-the-grid part of the world where it took two days.

So, so, um, I didn't know much. And it wasn't until we came home months later that I learned what the tattoo really meant.

Dalia: Are you serious?

Billy: Um, yeah. And there's 100-plus dialects in the Philippines, so our team and our, my family that was with me spoke a different dialect than they did. And so from what I hear, 'cause we did film fests across the country in diverse, packed audiences, and it seems like that scene gets people.

It for sure got me. Um, but that was the most, one of the most magical, mind-blowing things that I ever got to experience, and it means a lot.

Dalia: Wow. So what does the tattoo mean?

Billy: I can't tell you- Okay ... 'cause then people would have to watch the movie.

Dalia: Okay, okay.

Billy: Um- All

Dalia: right ...

Billy: but it is beautiful, and it is meaningful.

Dalia: Okay.

Billy: You gotta see it.

Dalia: It's [00:21:00] beautiful.

Billy: Yes.

Dalia: Yeah, and a little scary. Okay, so- And

Billy: a little scary. Well, you know, she, yeah, I mean, she took a thorn off a pomelo tree, tied it to a stick, just took the soot off a cauldron and put it in a hollowed-out coconut, added some different coconut oil and some, uh, yam and some other things to create, like, a paste.

And then she dipped it, the thorn, in there, and took another stick and hammered it into my, uh, chest.

Dalia: Ooh. Yeah. Don't try this at home.

Billy: Yeah.

Dalia: Okay. As we wrap up here, you learned so much about your mom's side on this journey. Did it make you more curious about the food traditions on your dad's side?

Billy: That is such a good question, and I wasn't planning on this, but now I'm super curious.

And you're s- asking me a question that now that I hear it out loud, I'm really- I'm really interested in perhaps... This might happen, [00:22:00] and it might, it might... You may have to come with me. Say less. My dad is from, you know, Eastern European de- descent, and oddly enough, where I was always half Asian, he is from a small region that touches Germany, Poland, and Czech, where it's called Silesia.

It's a tiny little region that is bordered by these three countries. I know that he's also Italian, and I, I have, uh, Scottish and French in me as well on the Caucasian European side. I think that's an interesting... 'Cause there's been talk about what's next. You know, do we go and do the rest of the Philippines?

Do we do Food Routes on the road? But maybe, maybe in all fairness, that's a great, great question and a thought, and maybe we should do that. Should we do that? Let's take a poll.

Dalia: Let's do that. Yes, 100% of the people in this conversation say yes. I'll bring the Ybor legs. You're the

Billy: host. There you go. Oh my gosh.

Dalia: Okay. Thank you,

Billy: Billy. All right. This was great. Thank you so much. Okay.

Dalia: Billie Deck is the [00:23:00] owner of Sunda Tampa and the subject of the PBS documentary Food Routes. You can find a link to watch the whole doc for free on our website, thezestpodcast.com, or in the show notes wherever you're listening to this episode. It's almost summer in Florida, and heat and humidity have already entered the chat.

It is too hot to be in the kitchen, so we at The Zest are gonna take some time off, but you will still be able to catch us on the WUSF programs Florida Matters: Live and Local and The Bay Blend, so be sure to give both of those a follow. I'm Dalia Colon. I produce The Zest with Andrew Lucas and Alexandria Ebron.

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