

MARIA Y. OROSA
(1893-1945)

Pioneering Food Technologist and Inventor

Advances in modern Filipino food technology owe a great deal to the creative researches and salutary inventiveness of a woman chemist and pharmacist from Batangas – Maria Y. Orosa.

The now-commercially available thirst quencher, the calamansi juice, is just one of the popular native food products in whose preparation and preservation she had a hand. (She produced the “calamansi nip,” the desiccated and powdered form of the fruit which could be made into juice.)

The most notable of her food inventions, of course is “Soyalac,” a powdered preparation of soya-beans, which helped save the lives of thousands of Filipinos, Americans, and other nationals who ever held prisoners in different Japanese concentration camps during World War II. It became known to them as the “magic food.”

She is also credited with the making of the banana ketchup; wines from native fruits, like casuy and guava; vinegar from pineapples; banana starch; soyamilk; banana flour; cassava flour; jelly from guava, santol, mango, and other fruits, as well as the invention of rice cookies, known as ricebran or darak, which is effective in the treatment of patients with beri-beri.

Aside from making food preparations, Miss Orosa taught Filipinos how to preserve such native delicacies as the *adobo*, *dinuguan*, *kilawen* and *escabeche*. Together with her associates in the Bureau of Plant Industry, she invented “Oroval” and “Clарosa.”

This outstanding Filipina was the fourth child of Simplicio Orosa y Agoncillo and Juliana Ylagan. She was born on November 29, 1893 in Taal, Batangas. Her brothers and sisters were Simplicio Jr., Vicente, Sixto, Felisa, Jose, Nicolas, and Rafael. Captain of the *S.S. Bulosan*, her father joined the Philippine commission that lobbied in Washington and Paris for the recognition of Philippine independence by the United States. Her mother operated a general store in Bauan, Batangas, in 1900.

Maria Orosa had her elementary and high school education in her province. In 1915, she studied at the college of pharmacy of the University of the Philippines. In 1916, at the age of 23, she left for the United States as a government scholar. She was in Seattle in July of that year. With the help of Frank Crone, the American director of education, she was able to stay at the YMCA. Through the YMCA, she landed a job as household helper of Mrs. Wrentmore, the mother-in-law of Governor-General Harrison.

She enrolled at the University of Seattle as a partial government scholar in 1916. She earned the degree of bachelor of science in pharmaceutical chemistry in 1917; the BS degree in food chemistry in 1918, the BS degree in pharmacy in 1920, and the master of arts degree in pharmacy in 1921. To support her studies, Orosa worked as assistant to Dean Charles Johnson at the college of pharmacy of Washington University for a monthly salary of \$100. In the summer, she earned \$80 per week at a cannery in Ketchikan, Alaska. Upon finishing her studies at the University of Seattle, she was appointed assistant chemist in the State of Washington on the basis of her impressive academic records.

She returned to the Philippines in 1922, and taught home economics at Centro Escolar University. A year later, she transferred to the Bureau of Science as chemist with a salary of P1,800 per annum. Accompanied by six food demonstrators, she traveled throughout the country to promote public and private health through a nutrition program. In 1923, she helped organize the food preservation division under the Bureau of Science. On June 3, 1927, she became the acting division head.

Orosa also tried her hand in improving household wares. She invented the “Orosa Palayok Oven” for cooking various dishes.

In 1928, the government, recognizing her dynamism and strong leadership, sent her to various countries as a state scholar to specialize in food processing and canning. On her way home a year later, she made side-trips to other countries to observe their canning industries and food preservation technologies. Included in her itinerary were Holland, England, Germany, Spain, Italy, France, Hawaii, and China.

When she returned to the Philippines in 1929, she was appointed head of the home economics division of the Bureau of Science. On January 1, 1933, she became the head of the bureau's food preservation division. (Herminia M. Ancheta, in her book, *Reading the Filipino Woman*, claims that Orosa, starting May 1, 1933 served as head of the home economics division of the Department of Agriculture and Commerce.) As head of the home economics division, Orosa revived her provincial tour activities. She established the Homemakers Association of the Philippines which, in 1941, had a list of 537 member clubs nationwide.

In time of war, as in peace, her spirit of service to her countrymen, along with her patriotism, came to the fore. When World War II broke out, she immediately joined the Marking's Guerillas and was designated captain. She devoted to feeding and caring for allied prisoners in enemy concentration camps in Tarlac, Pampanga, Laguna, and at the campus of the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. With her "magic Food," the Soyalac, she saved thousands of such prisoners who would have otherwise died of hunger.

During an intense fighting between the Japanese and American liberating forces, Orosa was hit by shrapnel while performing her job at the Bureau of Plant Industry building, located in Malate, Manila. She was immediately taken to the nearby Malate Remedios Hospital for emergency treatment. However, while being treated, the hospital was bombed and another shrapnel hit her directly in the heart, thus causing her instant death on February 13, 1945. Her remains, together with those of 70 others, were buried at the yard of the Malate Catholic School.

To perpetuate her memory, the government has named after her a street stretching from T.M. Kalaw to Padre Faura in Ermita, Manila, as well as a building in the Bureau of Plants and Industry. She was one of the 19 scientists who were conferred awards on the occasion of the 65th anniversary of the Institute of Science and Technology.

On November 29, 1983, the National Historical Institute installed a marker in her honor at the Bureau of Plant Industry in San Andres, Manila.

References:

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