

## Romy Dortan

Philippines: master chef and proprietor of the Purple Yam restaurant

Object: taro leaves

*Masiramang ang pagkaing Pilipino!*  
(Tagalog)

*[Filipino food is delicious!]*

My co-author and wife, Amy Besa, left Manila a few weeks before martial law was declared on September 21, 1972. As she writes in our cookbook, *Memories of Philippine Kitchens*, “I looked hard at the palm trees, shacks and people, and said my farewell to a country that shaped my soul and to a people who wounded my heart.” I was from the Bicol islands in the Philippines. I left in 1974, and we met when we were both graduate students at Temple University. We fell in love while protesting the Marcos regime and around our mutual love affair with cooking.

The Bicol region in the Philippines is coconut country, and I grew up on a dish of taro leaves in coconut milk called *Laing*. A few years later, we moved to Flatbush. We opened the restaurant *Cendrillon* in 1995 in SoHo, and then the *Purple Yam* in 2009 in Ditmas Park. Our home in Flatbush, a Caribbean neighborhood, has had an impact on what we cook here. We serve *Laing* made from taro leaves because it turns out that Caribbean people use it for their soup, *Callaloo*, and the Korean markets in Flatbush carry it to sell to the Caribbean market – so we take advantage.

People ask me about one of our most cherished dishes, goat curry wrapped in a scallion pancake with mango chutney.

“Where in the Philippines does that come from?” they ask. The origin of the goat curry is that we live in Flatbush, a West Indian community. So that’s my own take on their goat *roti*. I used a scallion pancake instead of the *roti* for the bread. It’s taking borrowed food from my West Indian community and making it into indigenized Filipino American food.



### Bio:

Chef Romy Dorotan and his wife, Amy Besa, have been in the restaurant business in New York City for the past 25 years. They opened *Cendrillon*, a Filipino pan-Asian restaurant in Manhattan in 1995, serving SoHo and New York City for 13 years. In November 2009, they opened the *Purple Yam* in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. The *Purple Yam Malate*, their first branch in the Philippines, opened on July 4, 2014 in Amy’s childhood home in one of the oldest historical districts of Manila. Chef Romy and Amy are co-authors of the award-winning cookbook *Memories of Philippine Kitchens*. The book was awarded the Jane Grigson Award for distinguished research and scholarship. For more information, visit: [purpleyamnyc.com](http://purpleyamnyc.com)