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THE GIFT OF PASSION: HOW ONE TEACHER IGNITED MY LOVE FOR COOKING



APRIL M. BAGON-FAELDAN, PhD

Associate Professor III
Mindoro State University
Victoria, Oriental Mindoro

True teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross; then, having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create their own. -Nikos Kazantzakis

Bird's-Eye View

In 1999, I was a first-year student at Mindoro State College of Agriculture and Technology (MinSCAT), a government school in Oriental Mindoro. I did not know that a home economics class (at THAT time) would shape the entire course of my life. That time, all I knew was how to magsaing ng kanin and maglabon ng itlog (cook rice and boil an egg). What began as a simple school requirement and a series of activities became a journey that taught me far more than recipes, measurements, and cooking techniques. It made me realize that outstanding teachers do not just transfer knowledge—they ignite passion. The teacher who guided me through this transformation was Mrs. Merlinda Dozina, my THE instructor, a strong woman whose own story of courage and determination would inspire me just as much as her demonstrated cooking lessons.

The Instructor Who Inspired Through Example

It was June 1999, and I was so excited to meet the new set of teachers who would offer us a new perspective. High school life is a new chapter. Mrs. Dozina introduced herself on the first day of class not with credentials or awards, but with her own story. Like many teachers whose aim is to inspire and narrate the challenging moments of their lives, she told us that she had started high school at age thirty (30). Her admission stunned us. She had married young, as was common in her time, and spent her younger years, or her twenties, raising her two (2) children. When her children grew older and had their degrees, she made the brave decision to continue her education. This act of returning to school while being a mother and wife showed us that it was never too late to pursue growth and learning. Age is always a factor in continuing your dreams and ambitions. It was never too late to continue your dreams. To me, with my young mind, it was amazing to think about how she survived with her younger classmates.

I remember how she cared deeply about every detail in our classroom. She noticed everything—even something as small as messy hair. She would say in Filipino, "Kapag ang girl ay laging nakalugay ang buhok, sya ay nagpapacharming," meaning that how we present ourselves shows who we are inside. Her attention to detail extended to everything she taught us. Her strictness was not meant to frighten us but to push us toward excellence. Some of my classmates feared her personality. But to me, she is one of the best. She focuses on her students' skills. She believed we deserved nothing less than our very best effort. That made her one of my favorite teachers!

The First Taste of Success

I will never forget the day we baked our first cake in class. I strictly followed the ingredient measurements. My hands were nervous as I whisked the egg whites by hand. The goal was to create stiff peaks—a mountain-like shape that would stand firm when we lifted the whisk. When my mixture finally reached that perfect texture, something inside me shifted. This effort was not just

following instructions; this was creating something real, something good. It may be a small win to some, but for me, it is a victory.

That success rekindled something in me. I wanted to cook and bake! I began to try a series of experiments. A series of trial and errors every time I went back to school, and I spent my weekends cooking and baking. In Mrs. Dozina's recipe, she had used pineapple juice. I wondered: what if I used different juices instead? What if I tried orange juice or mango juice? I also tried different kinds of flour. I experimented with a variety of ingredients. It was really fun! Fortunately, my mother believed in my passion and curiosity. She supported my experiments, even when our kitchen became my testing ground. My aunty and my sister became fans. They laugh and sometimes criticize my output. It gave me the motivation to push through.

We did not have an oven at home, so I improvised. I used a large pan and covered it carefully with a lid. Many of my early attempts worked, though some failed. I still laugh when I remember putting a plastic mold into the oven without realizing it would melt. I learned that failure is part of the cooking journey and that each mistake teaches something valuable.

Developing skills and growing confidence

My passion grew beyond cakes. I began making banana bread, raisin buns, and siopao. Each creation built my confidence. Then came high school cooking competitions. In the self-invented snacks category, we students were given basic ingredients—cassava, milk, sugar—and asked to create something delicious and new. I won this competition twice. On my second attempt, I created a dish from glutinous rice. I also won in the low-cost main dish category, proving that great food does not require expensive ingredients.

Each time I won, Mrs. Dozina congratulated me. She noticed my work. She celebrated my growth. When she gave me high grades, it was not just a number on a paper—it was proof that someone believed in me. Those grades became fuel for my determination to keep improving.

An Ignited Passion That Lasted

Years have passed since those first cooking classes. My skills have matured, and so has my palate. Today, my specialty is pasta. I love creating spicy tuna pasta, pesto, seafood pasta, carbonara, and many other varieties. Because I have a sweet tooth, desserts remain a passion—I make panna cotta, crema de fruta, tikoy, and cassava cake. I also cook kare-kare, adobo, caldereta, and baked sushi.

Beyond the recipes themselves, I learned to care about presentation. I pay attention to the details in designing. Whenever I attend a seminar or training at a hotel, I carefully observe how they serve the food. I learned that food feeds not just the stomach but also the eyes and the heart. A simple breakfast or dinner deserves a thoughtful arrangement on the plate. Palatable food begins with how we present it.

Cooking shows every weekend became my weekend hobby. At that time, Del Monte Kitchenomics was one of the most popular shows. I also read my mother's cookbook. Since my mom learned that I read cookbooks, she always borrows books from our school library so I have something new to try.

Until now, when reels and short videos are popular, I love watching cooking shows. It is really satisfying to cook for yourself and your loved ones.

The True Measure of Impact

What has truly sustained my passion is the response from others. When friends ask me to cook for them, when students request a particular dish like my spicy tuna pasta, when family members gather around a table I have prepared—these moments bring me joy. Their requests fill me with joy. This validation reminds me why I cook: not just to follow a recipe, but to express love and creativity.

If teaching had not been my calling, I would have pursued a career in the food business. Cooking could have been my career. I may become a chef and manage my own café or restaurant. Until now, if I were to retire, my dream would be to open my own café serving coffee and tea in a good atmosphere. A café full of plants where everyone can relax while drinking coffee or tea and eating some pastries! Madam Dozina's influence shaped me into a teacher first and a passionate cook second. In this way, she gave me two gifts—a skill and a calling.

Points to Ponder: The Real Legacy of Teachers

Mrs. Merlinda Dozina passed away several years ago, but her influence remains in my heart. She taught me that teachers shape not just minds, but souls. The teachers' influence are beyond the four corners of the classrooms. She showed me that passion is not something we are born with—it is kindled when someone believes in us. Great teachers do more than deliver lessons; they see potential in their students and nurture it with care, even when that care includes strictness and high expectations.

Everything is modern nowadays. In a world that often measures teaching by test scores alone, we must remember what truly matters: teachers change lives. That's what my teachers did! They transform students' weaknesses into strengths. They ignite passions that burn for decades. Mrs. Dozina saw something in me in 1999—a curiosity, perhaps, or a willingness to try. She ignited that small spark into a flame that has warmed my life ever since. I am truly blessed and thankful.

Her greatest gift was not a recipe. It was the belief that I could create something beautiful, something beneficial, something worth sharing with others. That gift, like the warmth of a kitchen, stays with us always.