Frankly, I was shocked by the responses to my most recent poll on whether readers had ever cooked using a palayok over a charcoal or wood flame. Almost 45% of folks (as of this writing) responded in the affirmative. I was really genuinely surprised. So the novelty that I experienced learning to cook in a palayok may be lost to many of my readers. I have been wanting to learn how to cook using a palayok for years. A few of my long-time readers have even emailed me to ask if I knew if there really was a noticeable difference between cooking in a clay pot or not. So when we took a trip to Ilocos last year and finally acquired a number of different sized palayoks and the base on which they stand, I was simultaneously excited and apprehensive. In fact, it took nearly nine months before I actually got up enough nerve to finally give it a go. Actually, several of those months were spent trying to find firewood in the middle of the city… in the end, I had to “import” the wood from Batangas! So this week is palayok week on marketmanila.com, it doesn’t get any more “native” than this…
The first problem I faced was the proper way to season a new palayok. It’s a bit daunting because a palayok is unglazed, and therefore the thought of eating dissolving hard clay, read “mud”, is hard to keep out of your mind. So I referred to a previous post on burnay and reader comments and traced my way back to counsel that said you had to fill the pot 2/3 full with water and bring it to a boil… don’t scrub, don’t touch the inner surface of the pot and throw out the water after that and it was good to go. Another sage provincial dweller said it was best to coat the inside with some “mantika” or vegetable oil or suet (animal fat). Then heat up the pot until hot, fill it almost full of water and boil that and then throw that all out and the pot would be good to go. I decided to do both versions and frankly, I can’t tell if one was better than the other, but both did NOT result in any muddy dishes so I think they both worked just fine. And don’t season the outside of the palayok. Considering that I have seasoned lots of cast iron before and other pots and pans, why this seasoning should have seemed so daunting is beyond me. The biggest problem is that the first pot I tried to season actually started leeching or leaking some water…
It was hard enough that I had to learn how to properly stoke a wood fire. I will admit now that I couldn’t have done this without my trusty crew. Two guys who are pyromaniacs masquerading as our drivers and handymen and two women who are provincial wood and charcoal fire queens. They patiently showed me how to get the wood fire going, then how to move the wood around to create a natural flow of air to keep the fire raging on… But oddly, something kept putting the fire out and we realized the first pot was leaking like a faucet with a tired gasket. One of the crew said it was fine, that tended to happen with new pots, the hole would seal itself after a few minutes. Who was I to question this wisdom? But after 15 minutes, it didn’t seem like the hole was going to “seal” itself and we removed the pot from the fire and decided to try again with another new pot.
We threw out the hot water from the leaky palayok and turned it over to see a fairly major hole/crack in the pot was clearly visible. Hmmm, another lesson learned. Do not let the palayok vendors inspect your pots for you, choose them carefully yourself! I thought this pot was headed to the garden as a planter until one of the crew suggested he would try to use a sealant on it. A little dab and a quick burn over the fire and voila! A usable palayok, which we later used on some boiled bananas. I hope we don’t die of sealant poisoning… but none of it seemed to leech into the pot itself… Before long, we had the flames roaring and the pots filled and cooking away… stay tuned for several dishes we managed to cook in the palayoks over wood fires! Oh, and one last “fishpan” tip, don’t fire up the palayok near a swimming pool, the ashes can get messy! :)

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