

There are **snooty gourmands** everywhere, but even with her Master's degree in gastronomy, Maida C. Pineda **resists the label** and finds her relationship with food quite different.

foodie

Many people love to be called foodies. They put up blogs to document their love for food, regaling dishes with countless odes. I've worked as a food writer and food stylist for the past 10 years, and I've also chalked up some experience waitressing in a hotel, selling artisan breads and olive oil at a gourmet store in Adelaide Central Market, and cakes at my mum's bakery store in Manila, where she even concocted a Mocha Maida, named after me.

But I hesitate to call myself a foodie. And I refuse to be called a food connoisseur, aficionado, or gourmand who tucks into fancy food on a weekly basis. Yet I have a deep, mad, passionate love affair with food. It's a relationship where it's not about myself in relation to food – hence obviating the need to label myself as anything – but all that food is to me.

Like discovering a potential gem of a friend, I naturally wanted to get to know food better. So when I was offered a scholarship for a Master of Arts in Gastronomy four years ago, I grabbed the chance to study food, from the time it's grown to when it reaches your plate. The course covered history, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies.

It was a degree that baffled many, including immigration officers asking questions like, "So, you know a lot about stars," (Uh, no, I didn't study astronomy) or "You know what to do with an upset stomach" (Nope, not gastroenterology either).

For me, loving food has never been about interludes with truffles or caviar or fancy degustation menus. The most authentic food experiences often involve being open to the pleasures of simple home-cooked meals. Delicious aromas, textures, and flavours bring back warm memories from my childhood in the kitchen with my mother.

I've always been a morning person. Since I woke up earlier than my brothers and sisters, I had to amuse myself for hours. At age five, my morning playmate was food. My mum would be in the kitchen baking cakes and pastries for our bakery. I enlisted myself as her assistant, helping her fold egg whites for chiffon cakes despite struggling with the spatulas that were too big for my child's hands. On Sundays, I delighted in making Mickey Mouse-shaped pancakes.

word

When my parents tried to put me through piano lessons on Sundays, I pretended to be sick, only so I could spend hours flipping through my mum's old *Bon Appetit* and *Gourmet* magazines.

When I left home at 17 for college in Massachusetts, bouts of homesickness were numbed by the good food served in our dorm, like the

most delicious popover rolls paired with split pea soup and roast turkey with cranberry sauce. Smith College was one of the few colleges in the US that still maintains the tradition of Thursday night candlelight dinners and Friday afternoon tea. Perhaps it's no coincidence that it is also the alma mater of food legend Julia Child.

Packs of Maltesers have seen me through many a break-up. There's something inexplicably soothing about biting into those chocolate balls with crisp honeycomb centres. Perhaps, it's symbolic of bursting the bubble of the fantasies I had of the now-failed relationship. These days, when reality is too much to deal with, I eat a cup of silky chocolate pudding. Savouring spoonful after spoonful of its rich, velvety texture, I begin to feel as if life itself is easier to swallow.

And recently, during a time when nothing made sense to me, I mashed the overripe bananas sitting on the kitchen counter and made banana bread. The aroma filled the house, but more importantly, it was as if it seeped into my very being. I returned to work the next day not just with cupcakes for my colleagues, but a much lighter spirit.

In recent years, I've often travelled alone as a freelance writer. Food again is my comfort. In the Australian outback to do a story on the pink salt beds in Mildura, Victoria, I wouldn't see a house or another person for long periods. But the feeling of remoteness vanished when I ate my breakfast of the fluffiest omelette and toast with homemade blood orange jam.

Food has proven itself to be a faithful companion all my life, providing comfort without passing judgment on my feelings or overanalysing my thoughts. It doesn't give unsolicited advice or try to solve my problems (unlike some well-meaning but over-zealous friends) and to my immense joy and gratitude, has become for me not just a fine companion for the present but ultimately, my lifelong match.