

# Kiam Marcelo Junio • Vegan Kare Kare

## ANATOMY of a DISH

Kare Kare gets its name from the Tamil word *kari*, (better known as curry) which refers to a type of spiced sauce or gravy. Curry has numerous variations based on country, region, and even family recipe. In the Philippines, Kare Kare is a beloved national dish with elusive origins, likely developed as a melting pot of flavors from the country's illustrious history (mixing Spanish, Muslim, Indian, Malay, and Polynesian influences with Indigenous cultures).

Traditionally, this dish is made with oxtail, toasted glutinous rice, and crushed peanuts to give it its characteristically creamy texture. This adaptation puts a unique twist (vegan, with additional Pan-Asian spices) on the classic recipe that I learned from my mom.

With meal prep and delivery services now so widely available, it's easy to take our food for granted. We become so distanced from the origins and colorful histories of these ingredients. We forget that some of them traveled across far distances, picked and processed by countless hands before they reach our tastebuds.

Here is a small window into the colorful lives of several beloved ingredients:

## BLACK PEPPERCORNS

While now ubiquitous in kitchens and dining tables around the world, the humble black pepper still only grows near the equator and was once worth more than gold. During the Middle Ages, Arabs had a monopoly on the spice trade, and only the wealthiest Europeans could afford to use it. In fact, the search for pepper was one of the key driving factors of Columbus' failed expedition — he was searching for the Malabar region of India and ended up in the Bahamas instead. While peppercorns were nowhere to be found there, the indigenous people of the area widely used chili peppers to spice up their food. Chilies were much easier to grow in different types of weather, and this led to the cultivation of peppers in all its multicolored forms including sweet peppers and paprika.

## BOK CHOY

Got milk? No. How about Bok Choy? A cup of this low-calorie, high-fiber vegetable provides as much calcium as a cup of cow's milk. It's also high in vitamin A, B6, C, K, Folate, and Potassium. Bok Choy (or Pok Choy) is in the mustard family along with cabbage, turnips, broccoli, and kale.

## COCONUT

Even before the recent coco-craze, the coconut has always enjoyed widespread use all over the tropical world. The fruit provides nourishing water, healing oil, and full-bodied meat, which can be turned into all types of ingredients from flour, to sugar, butter, and many more. Growing up, we even used the coconut husks to polish our floors! Coconut has many health properties as it's high in medium-chain triglycerides (MCT's), which, unlike the long-chain triglycerides of animal fats, bypass the lower digestive tract to be absorbed directly into the liver, helping to burn more calories than it stores. Coconut oil is also used widely in skin and body care due to its antibacterial, anti-fungal, anti-inflammatory, and emollient (skin soothing) properties.

## EGGPLANT

These look nothing like eggs... what gives? Known in Europe as "aubergine" for its purple color, older cultivars of this plant pre-Industrial revolution were smaller and white or yellow, actually resembling eggs. Google it!

## GARLIC

Garlic is not only one of the best-loved ingredients in the world, it's also one of the most highly researched foods in science. Clinical tests indicate that this spice may help prevent or decrease the incidence of major diseases associated with old age, such as atherosclerosis, stroke, cancer, immune disorders, arthritis, and cataracts. No wonder the oldest living cultures love it so much!

## MISO PASTE

Miso paste is made from fermented soybeans and is available in different strengths including red, which is salty and flavorful, and white, which is milder and sweeter. Fermentation is a natural process used to make wine, cheese, and beer in which a carbohydrate (such as a starch or sugar) converts into an alcohol or acid, often with the use of yeast or bacteria. Fermented foods are high in prebiotics and probiotics — meaning the bacteria has had a chance to digest the food before eating, making it easier for the body to process — while also providing some much-needed beneficial bacteria for digestive health.

## ONION

First it makes you cry, then it heals your body. One of the most-used spices in the world, the ordinary onion (and its hundreds of varieties such as scallions and shallots) packs a punch for your health. It's rich in quercetin, a known cancer-fighting chemical shown to reduce risks for developing colon, breast, prostate, ovarian, esophageal, oral, kidney, endometrial, pancreatic, and stomach cancer. It's now easy to see why garlic and onion always go together.

## SAFFRON

If the bodacious black pepper can claim the title of “King of Spices,” then meet the Queen. Saffron is the world's most expensive spice — and for good reason. What we call saffron threads are the stigma (the pollen-gathering part) of the saffron flower. It takes 80,000 flowers and 250,000 dried stigmas to produce one pound of saffron. Here's more: the flowers are so delicate that traditionally only women and children were tasked to pick them. Chemically, the compounds crocin and safranal show great promise in relieving depression due to their ability to protect several brain chemicals such as serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine. Saffron bestows a rich golden color and an unmistakable aroma befitting royalty. It's a worthy investment, as a pinch is all you need.

## TURMERIC

Saving the best for last? Yes, indeed. Turmeric is perhaps the poster child for Food as Medicine. The compound curcumin is a powerful antioxidant and anti-inflammatory — which is a big deal as most modern diseases have inflammation as an underlying mechanism. Turmeric is the key ingredient (and color) of most curry blends. Traditional Kare Kare does not have Turmeric, relying instead on annatto for color. I decided to return this revered spice into my version of kare kare to bridge this traditional Filipino dish with its neighboring curry counterparts.

### References:

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Thompson, C. *Bok Choy: 10 Fun Facts. Feature Stories. WebMd: Food & Recipes*, 2014. <https://www.webmd.com/food-recipes/features/bok-choy-10-healthy-facts>

Trujillo, L. “The Elegant Eggplant.” *Journal of Horticultural News and Research*. The University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, 2003. <https://cals.arizona.edu/maricopa/garden/html/pubs/0203/eggplant.html>

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# Vegan Kare Kare

## Ingredients:

- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil (grapeseed, avocado, or coconut oil for additional flavor) 1 medium onion, chopped
- 6 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 pinch of saffron threads
- 3 ripe tomatoes, diced
- 2 tablespoons red (or mixed) miso paste
- 1 teaspoon powdered turmeric
- 1.5 cup crunchy peanut butter
- 4 cups vegetable stock
- 2 small Asian eggplants, cut into 2-inch cubes
- 2 cups string beans, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 4 bunches baby bok choy, cut in half, with ends off

Serve with:

Steamed rice, coconut milk, chili-garlic paste, and crushed black pepper to taste

## Directions:

1. Heat oil in a large pan over medium heat.
2. Sauté onion, garlic, and saffron until onion is translucent and the garlic browned, about 4-5 minutes.
3. Add tomatoes and simmer until tomatoes are cooked down, about 2 minutes. Add turmeric and stir.
4. Add peanut butter and miso paste, stir until incorporated, about 2 minutes. Add vegetable stock. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low.
5. Add eggplant and string beans. Cover and cook until tender, about 10 minutes.
6. In the last 2 minutes of cooking, add baby bok choy as the final ingredient to maintain its crunch.
7. Serve with rice (white, brown, or wild), quinoa, or riced cauliflower.
8. Garnish with coconut milk, chili-garlic paste, and crushed black peppercorns to taste.



Laura Kina, *Kiam Marcelo Junio's Vegan Kare Kare*, watercolor and pen on paper, 2021, 9" x 12".



Laura Kina, *Ingredients for Kiam Marcelo Junio's Vegan Kare Kare*, 2021, watercolor and pen on paper, 9" x 12".



## Kiam Marcelo Junio



*Photo credit: Stephanie Jensen*

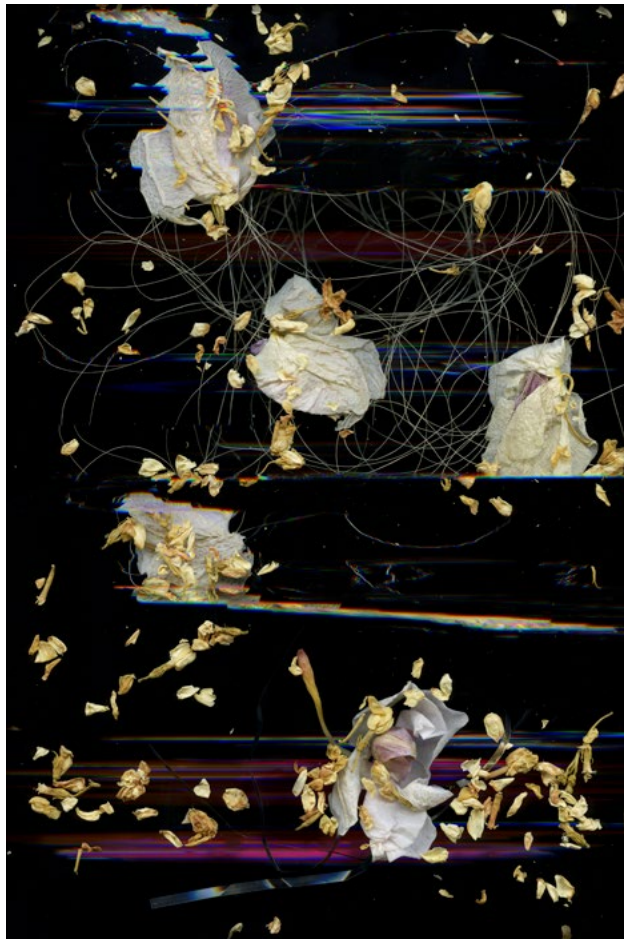
Kiam Marcelo Junio (b. Philippines) is a non-binary artist, certified holistic wellness coach and US Navy veteran. They hold a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a Master of Science in Health and Human Performance at Pacific College of Health and Science.

As an artist, Kiam explores themes of spirituality, identity, and time. Their work eludes rigid definitions of discipline, taking shape as writing, sound, visual art, performance, as well as perfumery, cuisine, fashion, and graphic design — exploring and communicating through all five senses.

As a coach, Kiam works with queer leaders and creative professionals seeking to develop a stronger relationship with their body, mind, and purpose so they can show up more effectively for themselves, the people they lead, and the worlds they inhabit.

Kiam's mission is rooted in helping people cultivate excellence in all aspects of life through deep self-knowledge, sustainable self-love, and authentic self-expression.

Connect with Kiam on Instagram @iamkiam and [mahalhealingarts.com](http://mahalhealingarts.com)



*Kiam Marcelo Junio, Dona Nobis Pacem: Samskaras, 2017, Archival print on metallic paper, 24 x 36 inches.*