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'La Dolce Vita': Interview with a Sugar Planter

Gina Cariño



Adrian Lizares, Adjie for short, is 44. He is among other things a sugar farmer near the city of Bacolod, in central Philippines.

GC: Are you a sweet tooth?

AL: Not really.

GC: What's your favorite dessert?

AL: Strawberry shortcake. It's so dressy.

GC: Do you take your coffee with sugar?

AL: Only *muscovado*, natural sugar, the traditional sugar made with just plain sugar cane juice and heat.

GC: Are you sugary?

AL: No, not at all.

GC: Are you a sweetheart?

AL: Yes, I am a sweetheart.

GC: Do you have a sweetheart?

AL: I am unattached. Who would ever find me here?

GC: Where exactly is your plantation?

AL: In Talisay, in the Visayan province of Negros Occidental. Negros is the biggest producer of sugar in the Philippines. It's Sugarland.

GC: Who started it?

AL: My great-grandmother started Hacienda Matabang over 100 years ago. My part is a small operation, about fifteen hectares. I just started last year.

GC: What does it take to run an hacienda?

AL: Capital, machinery like tractors, farm implements, and of course labor.

GC: How many people work on your farm?

AL: Sixteen on the field and one in the office.

GC: Are there carabaos on your farm?

AL: Two, for the two guys assigned to the tasks that need a carabao.

GC: Any studies and experience needed?

AL: Yes. I have a couple of friends that I consult with. And I am lucky to have a good *cabo*, a foreman in the fields. I guess my love for plants is a bonus.

GC: You like gardening, don't you?

AL: Love it.

GC: Tell us about your garden.

AL: I collect specimens of bamboo and other plants. I did some garden-designing for other people too, including for His Majesty, the Sultan Qaboos of Oman, for whom I worked as a florist in Muscat. And I wrote about gardening for a Philippine newspaper.

GC: Back to sugar. What's the sugar planting process like?

AL: Just like gardening. You prepare the land. This means tilling the soil, breaking the clods of earth, and lining furrows for the planting. We use the tops of canes from the previous year as planting material. These are placed in the ground and cared for with many things: water, fertilizer, etc. We don't use insecticide because we have natural methods of combatting insects. The cycle is 11-12 months. Then comes harvest by hand.

GC: Do you have a distributor to do all the selling and delivering work for you?

AL: Yes, we all work with any of the planters' associations recognized by the sugar mills. We take the sugar canes in big trucks to the local mills, where the canes are turned into sugar. The associations pay us in cold hard cash or they give us something called a *quedan*. It's like a receipt. You can sell your *quedans* when you like, or when the price is okay.

GC: Quedan? From the Spanish *quedar* in the agreeing sense?

AL: Maybe. Hmm, let me ask.

GC: Where does the final product, white refined sugar, go?

AL: Food stores, groceries, markets, wholesalers for bread and pastries, soft drinks, etc.

GC: How does the Philippines rank in world sugar production?

AL: Oh my, I do not know. We used to be the biggest in Southeast Asia. Thailand has taken over. The biggest Asian producer and consumer of sugar is China. And the biggest producer worldwide is Brazil.

GC: What countries buy Philippine sugar?

AL: The local market is the biggest consumer of our sugar. We also have an agreement with the USA whereby a small part of our production goes to them.

GC: In exchange for what?

AL: I do not know that protocol.

GC: How do you burn your energy?

AL: Exercise, I guess. I love walking the fields early in the morning. It's so beautiful in the countryside.

GC: What does a sugar field smell like?

AL: Like smoke, carabao excrement, and freshly cut grass. I just love it.

GC: Besides sugar, flowers, gardens... what have you been up to?

AL: I've been shooting. I'm an extra in a movie about Filipino indies. Fun. I want to be a movie star.

GC: You lived in Hamburg and Paris. Your favorite European city is...

AL: Amsterdam.

GC: Your favorite Spanish city is...

AL: Madrid.