



THE HUMANITIES THAT SURROUND US

Youth Voices

A Mixed Plate of Home

Alleena Villaluz

First Place

A250 My Marianas Writing Contest

Inaugural Issue • September 2026

Published by the
Northern Marianas Humanities Council

This essay is published as submitted by the author as part of the A250 My Marianas Writing Contest.

©2026 Alleena Villaluz. Published by the Northern Marianas Humanities Council with permission.

A Mixed Plate of Home

Every gathering, or fiesta, in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands begins the same way: with a table overflowing with a variety of foods. After the prayer has been said, often led by the eldest grandparent, their hands clasped tightly as the rest of us bow our heads, family members form a winding line toward the center of it all. Grandparents move slowly but steadily, cane in hand; children weave between plastic folding chairs; and cousins pause mid-conversation as everyone waits in eager anticipation for their turn to reach the spread. There is an unspoken understanding that this table is not merely a place to eat, but the heart of the fiesta itself.

Plates are filled generously, almost instinctively, with red rice stained a deep orange from achiote seeds, soft triangular titiyas still warm from the pan, and smoky barbecue ribs pulled freshly from the grill. Alongside them sit crispy fried chicken and bright, creamy potato salad, their colors almost artificial against the more earthy tones of the traditional foods. Nearby, the sharp metallic click of a can of Spam opening cuts through the sound of Chamorro music and overlapping conversations, its slices fried and served as casually as any dish prepared from scratch. No one questions the combination, as nothing feels out of place.

At first glance, this abundance appears purely physical: a table prepared to feed a large family. Yet over time, I have come to recognize it as something far more significant: a reflection of the CNMI itself, where cultures are not kept separate, but intentionally layered, combined, and lived together.

This layering did not occur by fortuity, but through centuries of movement and exchange. Long prior to the arrival of colonial powers, the Chamorro people dexterously navigated the Pacific in *sakman*, swift outrigger canoes engineered for long-distance travel. Utilizing star

paths, wave patterns, and wind direction, they sailed between islands, including Luta (Rota), Tinian, and Guåhan (Guam), maintaining networks of trade and kinship. These voyages carried more than people, but language, tales, and traditions that persist in defining the region today.

Centuries following, Spanish colonization reshaped island life in visible and lasting ways. Catholicism became deeply embedded in the islands' culture, evident in the rosaries held during prayers before meals and patron saint fiestas celebrated across villages. The very communal, family-oriented nature of fiestas themselves is reflective of this influence. Under German administration in the late nineteenth century, land ownership systems were reorganized, altering how indigenous communities interacted with the land. Japanese rule in the early twentieth century introduced formal schooling systems, expanded sugarcane production, and left behind linguistic aspects still heard in everyday Chamorro speech.

The conclusion of World War II brought about the introduction of the islands to the United States administration as part of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, eventually entering into political union through the Covenant in 1976. With this came American-style public education, English being the dominant language of instruction, and foods once foreign but are now commonplace: fried chicken at celebrations and Spam, a wartime ration, transformed into a staple of island cuisine.

Each of these influences remains present, with none having disappeared. Instead, they exist simultaneously, being layered into daily life in forms both subtle and unmistakable. Nowhere is this more visible than in the plates we carry.

When I stand in line at a fiesta, balancing a paper plate that bends slightly under the weight of too much food, I am not simply choosing what to eat. I am engaging with history. The red rice and titiyas ground me in a culture that predates colonization, while the fried chicken and

potato salad reflect the strong influence of the United States. The presence of Spam, introduced during World War II, connects global conflict to something as ordinary as a family meal. Each item carries its own origin, yet on my plate, they exist without hierarchy.

This coexistence mirrors my own experience. Having been born in and spent much of my early life in the continental United States, I recognize familiar elements in these gatherings. The taste of fried chicken recalls school lunches and community events; the potato salad is reminiscent of potlucks and neighborhood barbecues. These moments create a sense of continuity, enabling me to see my past reflected in my present.

Yet, life in the CNMI offers something more layered and complex than familiarity. Here, meals extend beyond consumption. Food is passed from hand to hand, with elders being served first, and no one leaves without being offered more. Conversations stretch for hours, shifting between English and Chamorro, blending languages as naturally as the food blends cultures. This emphasis on community contrasts starkly with the more individual-centric pace I experienced in the mainland United States. The mixed plate, in this sense, is not just a reflection of cultural blending, but of values of collectivity, respect, and interconnectedness.

This duality of belonging both within and beyond the United States is furthermore exhibited in the CNMI's political reality. As a U.S. territory, the CNMI operates under American governance, yet its residents lack the ability to vote in presidential elections. It is a form of partial inclusion, one that complicates traditional conceptions of citizenship and belonging. Despite this profound limitation, the CNMI continues to shape broader narratives. Leaders such as former Governor Pedro Tenorio played a critical role in negotiating and strengthening the Covenant relationship, ensuring that the islands retained a degree of self-governance. Concurrently, cultural advocates work actively to preserve the Chamorro language, teaching it in

public schools and speaking it in homes, thus ensuring that it remains a living language rather than a relic of the past. These efforts demonstrate that influence extends beyond formal political power; it exists in preservation, in leadership, and in the ability to autonomously define one's identity.

In many ways, the CNMI's place within the United States resembles the role of red rice on a mixed plate. Its subtle flavor may not dominate, but it is essential, providing context, depth, and meaning. Without it, the plate would lose its identity entirely.

Looking ahead to the next fifty years, I aspire for a political relationship between the two entities that acknowledges this significance more fully. The CNMI is strongly deserving of greater representation and a stronger voice in decisions that directly impact its future. At the same time, progress must be balanced with preservation. Just as no dish on a mixed plate should overshadow another, cultural identity should not be sacrificed for political integration. I envision a future where the CNMI is not seen as peripheral, but as integral. It ought to be perceived as a place whose history, culture, and people contribute meaningfully to the broader American narrative.

Each time I stand in line at a fiesta, plate in hand, I am reminded that identity is not singular. It is layered, shaped by history, and lived through everyday experiences. My plate filled with red rice, titiyas, fried chicken, and potato salad is more than a meal. It is a reflection of where I come from and how I belong.

It is a story of a place shaped by movement, sustained by community, and enriched by diversity. It is a story of the CNMI. Like any mixed plate, it is richer because of everything it holds.