

Philippine Food

What is the most typical Philippine food? Is it *sinigang*, a cold, sour stew that equally accommodates fish, meat, fowl, or prawns — so refreshing in hot weather? Is it *adobo*, meat, shellfish, or vegetables cooked in vinegar, which keeps without refrigeration? Is it *pancit*, the many kinds of noodles found at all celebrations? Could it be *rellenong manok*, the capon stuffed for Christmas? Or might it be *pritong manok*, chicken fried after a vinegar and garlic marinade?

Even Filipinos cannot frame a simple answer to the question, so varied is their cuisine. *Sinigang* is obviously indigenous, with all its ingredients found in the countryside, and with its analogs in Southeast Asia. *Adobo*, too, is indigenous but bears a Spanish/Mexican name, perhaps because of its similarity to the Mexican *adobado*. *Pancit* is obviously a Chinese contribution, but it has been indigenized by native ingredients and tastes. The capon and its stuffing are Spanish in origin and the fried chicken is American, but both have been adapted to the local palate.

The variety is explained by history and social adaptation. First, there was food drawn only from natural surroundings: marine, river, and other creatures from the waters on and around the archipelago's 7,000 islands; other animals: fowl, birds, and other creatures from field and forest; and vegetation for edible leaves, pods, seeds, roots, flowers, tendrils, as well as spices, condiments, and fruits. Indigenous cuisine is found everywhere with regional differences depending on the ecosystem: lowland or highland, interior or shoreline.

Chinese traders, who have been visiting since the 9th century or earlier, brought noodles, soybean products, and pork.

Their dishes entered the local diet at a popular level, and are now found in markets, sidewalk carts, restaurants called *panciterias*, school cafeterias, and homes of all social levels. So indigenized has *comida china* become that some dishes bear Spanish names — probably because *panciterias* were among the first places for public eating during the Spanish colonial period. Most of the dishes have been so well integrated into eating patterns that many Filipinos consider them not foreign but native born.

Spanish dishes and cooking techniques came with the colonizers and instantly assumed positions of prestige. For one thing, many of their principal ingredients — olive oil, saffron, hams, and sausages — were imported and expensive. For another, the food of officials, friars, and other foreigners seemed superior and desirable because these people comprised an elite social class. Thus, fiesta food is often Spanish: *paella*, stuffed turkeys and chickens, *morcon*, *mechado*, and rich desserts of the Spanish tradition. Christmas, too, features Spanish dishes, since Christianity arrived with the Spaniards: *jamon en dulce*, *ensaimadas*, *queso de bola*, apples, oranges, and chestnuts.

American dishes and preparation styles — pressure-cooked, precooked, fast, and

Doreen G. Fernandez



A meal served on banana leaves in Paete, Laguna Province. The foods in this meal were prepared mostly from local products and include bagoong (shrimp paste) and sticky rice, representing an indigenous cuisine. Photo by Richard Kennedy

instant foods — were introduced with American colonization, education, standards of hygiene, and technology. The multitude of advertisements for hamburgers, fried chicken, fast food, junk food, and soft drinks might make one think that this is the most typical Philippine food.

But typical Philippine food is all of the above. The indigenous cuisine is alive and well in the provinces, where the ingredients are always available, inexpensive, and sometimes even free. The flavoring sauces and dips — *patis* or fish sauce, *bagoong* or shrimp paste, and *calamansi* (native lime) — are used alone or in combinations to fine-tune even foreign food to local palates. The indigenous, peasant diet of rice, fish, and vegetables has been rated by nutritionists among the healthiest in the world with its high carbohydrate/low protein level and minimal fat.



Indigenized cuisines originally from China, Mexico, and the United States are fairly ubiquitous, although more readily found in towns and cities, in restaurants large and small, and on the tables of the middle and upper classes.

Imported or foreign cuisine that has not been indigenized is eaten and understood as foreign: Japanese, Italian, French, and Middle Eastern. Globalization has made these cuisines known, available, and attractive through the media and through the experience of travelers, the educated, and those who have worked and lived abroad.

Indigenous, indigenized, and imported foods meet and mix on the Philippine landscape. They speak of a history of trade, colonization, foreign influence, and social transformation. They also illumine the social structure.

At home among peasants and workers, indigenous cuisine can also be found on the elite's tables, where it is the food of memory — childhood and provincial beginnings and ancestral holiday tables. Methods of preparation may have changed from long, slow boiling over wood fires to microwave cooking, but

indigenous cuisine does not seem likely to disappear under the onslaught of fast food, for it remains a deep cultural and personal preference.

Indigenized cuisine is found on urban and upscale tables and in public eating places. The Philippines has the best Spanish restaurants in Asia because they are not foreign here, but part of a 300-year history. Imported food is generally expensive and exclusive, although stalls selling *shawarma* (Middle Eastern skewers of meat) established by returning overseas contract workers are creeping into villages and subdivisions.

Tasting the local variations in Philippine food is savoring the many flavors of the Philippine culture and environment. Try *kinilaw*, for example, on an island like Bohol. Fish from clean waters is dressed fresh with palm vinegar and condiments to create one of the islands' oldest dishes. Sample the *lechon* at a barrio fiesta. Unlike the Spanish *cochinillo asado*, this could be a full-grown pig stuffed with tamarind or lemongrass leaves and spit-roasted over coals.

Compare the many varieties of *pancit*: from seaside towns served with oysters, squid, or shrimp, from inland communi-

A meal served on china in Malolos, Bulacan Province. The recipes for several of these dishes are inspired by Spanish cuisine, and include the use of vinegar, saffron, and olive oil. Photo by Richard Kennedy

ties served with meat and vegetables, its noodles fat or thin, transparent or opaque with egg, shaken in broth or water (*luglog*), sautéed or fried, sauced or plain.

Try dishes that retain their native names: *laing*, taro leaves with coconut milk and chile; *pinais*, shrimp and young coconut wrapped in banana leaves and steamed in coconut water. Taste Chinese dishes with Chinese names — *lomi*, *mami*, *kekiam* — and those with Spanish names — *arroz caldo*, *camaron rebozado*. Venture to taste the work of young chefs who prepare mango, coconut, and venison in nouvelle ways. Try local fried chicken; let your tongue tell you how it differs from American style and illuminate for you some principles of Filipino flavor.

Food is not only for the eating, but also for the contemplation of history, society, and taste.

Suggested Reading

Fernandez, Doreen G. Tikim: *Essays on Philippine Food and Culture*. Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1994.

Doreen Fernandez is professor of literature and communication at the Ateneo de Manila University. She writes books and articles on cultural, theater, literary, and culinary history. Her weekly column, "In Good Taste," appears in the Philippine Daily Inquirer.