



Title: I Survived a 15 Hour Food Frenzy in the Philippines

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Exploring Amazing – and Surprising – Food Choices around the Philippines



Clockwise from upper left: isaw from Sarsa; kaldereta from Cafe Fleur; KF Seetoh in mid-bite; and kikiam from Sincerity Cafe. Photo Credit: Images courtesy of Makansutra

Updated March 04, 2016.

Edited as of 30 March 2016

The call came almost at the last moment: would I be interested in attending a [Philippines food safari](#) conceptualized by Filipino [food blogger Anton Diaz](#) and hosted by Southeast Asia's most famous foodie [KF Seetoh](#)? It was a bit like asking a bull if it might consider charging a bright scarlet cape. Well, *duh*.

Seetoh was in Manila to promote the upcoming [third World Street Food Congress](#), to be held at Bonifacio Global City (BGC) from April 20 to 24.

I'd been to [the first one in Singapore](#), and [it was a riot](#). I expected no less for this one, despite my native familiarity with the local food; Seetoh is [famously opinionated](#) about Southeast Asia's street food scene, and I wanted a front-row seat to the fun.

BGC is only one component district of Metro Manila; to find out about the rest, read: [When is Manila NOT Manila?](#)

Many foodies might be surprised at Seetoh's decision to use [the Philippines](#) for the third installment of his wildly successful street food convention, but as far as chow is concerned, he feels that this country's time to shine had come.

“The Philippines [is] the quiet culinary nation of Asia, of the world,” explained KF Seetoh to us, a mixed gaggle of bloggers and food correspondents from all over Asia and Europe.

“They've got a million years of history, a culinary heritage from Spain, China, America, even Indonesia... you can imagine that there's a lot of flavors buried in here!”

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[6AM – Boarding the Binge Bus in Bonifacio Global City](#)

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The Binge Bus in Bonifacio Global City, Manila, Philippines. Photo Credit: Mike Aquino

The “Binge Bus”, as I liked to call the sleek [Fröhlich Tours liner](#) that would ferry us on our foodie journey, started early. As our tour included stops in the nearby province of Pampanga as well as far-flung spots in the [traffic-choked capital Metro Manila](#), the early start was necessary to get to everything on time.

Seetoh ruefully noted that this last food safari was much tougher to organize than the first.

“Singapore is a small country, [and you can zip around](#),” Seetoh remarked. “[In Manila, it's different](#) – you gotta eat some pollution and traffic jam!”

“[The Filipino] national breakfast, spread on bread, is traffic *jam*!” Seetoh joked. “With a bit of *sugar*!”

Seetoh explained the mechanics of the tour: we would be visiting about a dozen food stops throughout Manila and Pampanga, creating an overall picture of the Philippines' top food hits. As we would be eating throughout the entire 15 hours of the tour, we were warned not to succumb to the temptation to fill'er up. “We're going to wind up finishing everything close to midnight,” warned Seetoh. “Do not load up at every stop just because it's bloody nice!”

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6:30AM – Tapa de Morning (and more) at Recovery Food

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Clockwise from top left: Recovery Food's Annie Montano Gutierrez and MM Vazquez; Hey Jude's Paksig; SST; Tapa de Morning; and Amadobo. Photo Credit: Images courtesy of Makansutra

Our first official stop took us a few blocks down BGC's gleaming streets to **Recovery Food**, an upscale diner that specializes in Filipino breakfast fare with a twist.

Created to meet BGC's burning need for [post-drinking, anti-hangover comfort food](#) (considering the business district's overabundance of bars and watering holes), Recovery Food serves up “silogs” - [Filipino rice-and-egg breakfasts](#) - by the truckload.

You can get a silog at any street eatery in the country, but nobody does silogs like Recovery Food. “We just sort of elevated street food a little,” as Recovery Food proprietor Annie Montano Gutierrez puts it: their rice-and-egg combinations leverage premium ingredients and massive serving sizes to win the hearts of weary drinkers looking for a greasy corrective at 2am on a Sunday morning.

Annie laid out a generous spread of Recovery Food favorites, all served with fried organic rice and eggs sunny-side-up: *Hey Jude's Paksig*, organic Sarangani [milkfish](#) belly cooked in a native vinegar broth and minced “sisig” style; *SST*, an acronym for spicy sweet *tuyo*, or dried herring; *Amadobo*, their take on a classic [Filipino pork adobo](#); and Recovery Food's hands-down top hit, *Tapa de Morning*, a cured and fried beef dish (*tapa*).

“It's comfort food,” Recovery Food's MM Vazquez told us. “[After] heartbreak, exercise or a really long night, before you go home, you get what you need [here] and you go! Hopefully when you leave our door you're fully recovered.”

Recovery Food

Unit R108, Bonifacio Stop Over, Rizal Drive, Bonifacio Global City, Taguig, Metro Manila ([location on Google Maps](#))

tel: +63 2 217 7144; website facebook.com/recoveryfood

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[9AM – Kapampangan Breakfast at Everybody's Cafe](#)

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Clockwise from top left: Everybody's Cafe's Poch Jorolan; camarú; tsokolate batirol; morcón, and suman bulagta. Photo Credit: Images courtesy of Makansutra

Feeling like hobbits, we prepared ourselves for second breakfast in the Philippine province of Pampanga, located at the end of a two-hour drive up the Northern Luzon Expressway. We covered [Pampanga in a previous food expedition](#), and coincidentally, the last stop on that previous jaunt was this one's first: **Everybody's Cafe** in the Pampanga city of San Fernando.

Founded in 1967 by the Jorolan family, Everybody's Cafe became a favorite stop for vacationers driving down the old MacArthur Highway to the Philippine summer capital of Baguio.

Even as NLEX has replaced MacArthur Highway as the main Pampanga-to-Manila link, food-loving travelers still make a detour to Everybody's Cafe for Kapampangan (Pampanga culture) grub.

Second-generation proprietor Poch Jorolan meets us and bids us to dig in. It's a groaning spread intended to represent Pampanga's mind-boggling variety of breakfast foods. Pampanga's rice farming roots are very much in evidence: not just in rice-based dishes like *suman bulagta*, or sticky rice cakes cooked in coconut milk and topped with latik, or cooked grated coconut; but also in other foods like *pindang damulag*, or cured meat from the water buffalo used to tend the fields; and *camarú*, cooked mole cricket usually found in ricefields.

Pampanga was long a loyal fiefdom to Spanish colonial rule, and its close ties to Mother Spain can still be found in Kapampangan dishes like *morcón*, a meatloaf made from ground pork mixed with Spanish chorizo and Edam cheese; and *tsokolate batirol*, a rich hot

chocolate laced with ground peanut and made on the spot with an ancient traditional stone mill.

“This is how breakfast is in Pampanga,” Poch explains. “It's always heavy!”

Everybody's Cafe

MacArthur Highway, City of San Fernando, Pampanga ([location on Google Maps](#))

Tel: +63 45 887 0361, site: facebook.com/everybodyscafepampanga

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10AM – Meeting the Queen of Sisig at Aling Lucing's

Use [this link](#) to navigate.



Aling Lucing's store and its stock in trade: sizzling sisig. Photo Credit: Mike Aquino

The run-down eatery next to Pampanga's old railroad tracks seemed like an odd detour for an international group of food writers, but no Pampanga food itinerary would be complete without a stop at the birthplace of that favorite Filipino pork dish and beer match, *sisig*.

Founded in 1974 by the late Lucing Cunanan, **Aling Lucing's Sisig** invented pork sisig as we know it today. Prior to Aling Lucing, sisig had undergone a slow evolution from being a purely vegetarian sour salad to a fry-up of pork extras cooked with [calamansi lime](#) and chicken liver.

It was Aling Lucing, [explains Kapampangan writer Robby Tangingco](#), who “further redefined sisig by introducing two features in the preparation: broiling or grilling the pig parts after boiling them, and then serving the dish on a sizzling plate.”

Alling Lucing's sisig comes to us crackling on a hot plate, and it is glorious: the *umami* scent of pork fat saturates the air as we squeeze a calamansi lime over the plate and mix up the pieces of pork. A bite of the piping-hot parts explains its popularity with the drinking crowd: sisig's fatty, crunchy/meaty mouthfuls complement the cool bitterness of your average beer.

Aling Lucing met with an unexpected tragic end: her [husband stabbed her to death](#) over her refusal to give him gambling money. Years after her demise, her saintly face still graces her eatery's wall; we murmur thanks to Aling Lucing in heaven for her greasy, meaty, glorious culinary contribution.

Aling Lucing's Sisig

Glaciano Valdez St, Angeles, Pampanga ([location on Google Maps](#))

Tel: +63 45 888 2317

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12PM – [Cafe Fleur, where Kapampangan Food Meets French Technique](#)

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Clockwise from upper right: Chef Sau del Rosario; pork belly kare-kare; Cafe Fleur's modern take on tamales; the Cafe Fleur building; and lamb kaldereta. Photo Credit: Mike Aquino

By high noon, Seetoh was positively slaving at the thought of dropping by **Cafe Fleur**, a new establishment founded by homesick international chef Sau del Rosario. After years working at kitchens in Paris, Singapore and Bangkok, Chef Sau returned to his Angeles City home turf to set up a new restaurant in a local heritage house.

“When we did our dry run, he came up with a feast, a very awesome one,” Seetoh tells us.

“Some of the dishes he made will stick with me for a very, very long time!”

The menu demonstrates what happens when Chef Sau unleashes his French culinary training on traditional Kapampangan cuisine. Out of a very wide-ranging multi-course meal that very nearly tempts us into gorging to fullness, three particular dishes stand out to me:

Tamales – a Filipino take on [a Mexican original](#), replacing cornhusks and cornmeal with banana leaf and rice flour – gets kicked up a notch with Chef Sau's version in a glass cocktail tumbler. It's my modern, 'glorified' take on tamales,” Chef Sau explains. “[Topped with] shredded chicken, and annatto oil.”

Kare-kare is a Kapampangan classic, oxtail stewed in peanut sauce and served with shrimp paste. Chef Sau replaces the oxtail with pork belly and the peanut base with one derived from truffles and macadamia: the end result is surprisingly good, though shocking to the part of me that screams “Tradition! Tradition!”

That inner yell finally shuts up when Chef Sau unveils his *kaldereta*, a dish that is usually prepared with mutton or beef: this one is made with lamb.

The cheesy sauce contains chunks of cottage cheese – as per Chef Sau, three cheeses were used to make the dish. Gorgeous, meaty, and well worth the wait.

Cafe Fleur

463B Miranda St, Angeles City, Pampanga ([location on Google Maps](#))

Tel: +63 45 304 1301; site: facebook.com/cafefleur.ph

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[4PM – A Food "Wok" Through Manila's Chinatown Binondo](#)

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Clockwise from upper left: Ivan Man Dy; Carvajal Street; the 16th-century Binondo Church; and the welcome arch over Ongpin Street in Binondo. Photo Credit: Mike Aquino

Late in the afternoon – with a two-hour drive back to the city and an hour-long press conference intervening – we find ourselves back in Manila, in a district worlds apart from Bonifacio Global City. Where BGC is one of Metro Manila's newer, shinier districts, the **Chinese ethnic enclave of Binondo** is one of the city's oldest and grittiest.

“Binondo has a local, wholesome, old, historic neighborhood feel - something that we have totally lost in Metro Manila,” explains Ivan Man Dy of [Old Manila Walks](#), who has volunteered his afternoon to take us around his home turf.

“The streets, the historic architecture, old family-run restaurants and shops which have been there for 70 to 80 years.”

Binondo was founded in 1594 to house the growing Catholic Chinese community in Manila. Pointing to a map dating back to 1729, Ivan explains that Manila had only two parts in Spanish colonial times: “[Intramuros, within the walls](#); and *Extra-muros*, outside the walls.” The Tagalogs (the natives of Manila) and the migrant Chinese lived outside the walls – the latter made their ethnic enclave into a distinctive business and culinary Manila hotspot that continues to attract foodies to this day.

Ivan runs a “[Big Binondo Food Wok](#)” that makes the rounds of the area's culinary scene - “[Binondo is] something of a food neighborhood, because there's a [very high concentration of restaurants](#) here,” Ivan tells us. “And we're going to try out some of the older ones that relate to that part of our history.”

5PM – Digging Into Binondo's Homestyle Chinese Food

Use [this link](#) to navigate.



Clockwise from upper left: Ivan Man Dy; Carvajal Street; the 16th-century Binondo Church; and the welcome arch over Ongpin Street in Binondo. Photo Credit: Mike Aquino

We leave the Binge Bus behind and negotiate Binondo's narrow streets on foot. Ivan's tour-within-a-tour served as a crash course in Philippine history and the distinctive culture of the “Chinoy” (Chinese Pinoy, or Filipino-Chinese). In the space of three hours, we manage to stop by the following places:

Quick Snack – located in a nondescript alleyway off Ongpin, Quik Snack serves what Ivan calls “Homestyle Chinese-Filipino cooking.” As we dig into the *Tokwa ni Amah Pilar* (pictured above), a block of fried tofu on a bed of sweetened soy sauce, Ivan points out that Hokkien cooking had to adapt to local circumstances.

“Wherever [the Chinese] went in Southeast Asia, they brought with them their cooking styles, but at a certain point, you have to cater to the market,” Ivan explained. “And they found out they don't necessarily have all the ingredients here that we have in [Fujian Province](#) or [Guangdong](#). So they used local ingredients and invented certain dishes that we think of as Chinese here, but we don't really find in Singapore, Malaysia or Fujian province.”

Sincerity Cafe – this 60-year-old restaurant on Nueva Street has become something of an institution. “It started out as a simple *turo-turo* (open-air diner) which later became a restaurant,” Ivan tells us. The spread includes what Ivan calls “A classic Chinoy homestyle

dish, what we call *ngo hiong*. It's like a pork roll, wrapped in beancurd skin, [seasoned with] [five spice](#) and fried.”

Quick Snack Restaurant

Carvajal Street, Binondo, Manila ([location on Google Maps](#))

Tel: +63 2 242 9572

Sincerity Cafe

497 Yuchengco Street, Binondo, Manila ([location on Google Maps](#))

Tel: +63 2 241 9990, site: facebook.com/sincerityrestaurant.main

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6PM – Dumplings, Ube Hopia and Purple Fire Trucks

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Clockwise from upper left: Dong Bei Dumplings exterior; Northern Chinese dumplings from Dong Bei; Eng Bee Tin exterior; bloggers holding two different kinds of hopia from Eng Bee Tin. Photo Credit: Mike Aquino/Makansutra

Night had fallen by the time we were out of Sincerity Cafe: the streets of Binondo looked cheery in the evening, though the crowded sidewalks meant we had to occasionally walk out on the street itself.

Dong Bei Dumplings was a little distance down Nueva Street, and presented itself as a glass-fronted little shop with very little ambience going for it. The shop is run by a first-generation

immigrant who, unlike the vast majority of Chinoys with Hokkien Chinese ancestry, hailed from further north.

“The most common dumpling [in the Philippines] is [Cantonese style siu mai](#),” Ivan explains as he presents a plateful of Dong Bei's translucent white dumplings. “[Dong Bei serves] the northern variety of [dumplings called jiao zi](#) – it's a boiled dumpling with pork and flavored with chives.”

Eng Bee Tin Chinese Deli is the last stop on our walking tour, located just down the street from the welcome arch on Ongpin Street. The deli might have gone out of business in the 80s, had it not been for owner Gerry Chua's visiting the ice cream aisle of a local grocery. Finding out that [ube – purple yam](#) – was the store's most popular ice cream flavor, Chua set out to create an ube-flavored [hopia pastry](#) that later set the local hopia world on fire.

Some of the bloggers ask about the purple-colored fire trucks we pass along the street on the way back to the Binge Bus. Ivan explains that the Chua family, having grown wealthy on their ube-flavored hopia, are now contributing purple trucks to the local fire brigades.

“These fire brigades are unique to Binondo,” Ivan notes wryly. “I don't think other Chinatowns have a separate fire brigade like in Binondo; *they* can trust their government.”

Dong Bei Dumplings

642 Yuchengco Street, Binondo, Manila ([location on Google Maps](#))

Tel: +63 2 241 8912, site: [facebook.com/dongbeidumplings](https://www.facebook.com/dongbeidumplings)

Eng Bee Tin Chinese Deli

628 Ongpin Street, Binondo, Manila ([location on Google Maps](#))

Tel: +63 2 288 8888, site: www.engbeetin.com

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[8:30PM – Sarsa Kitchen's Daring Take on Traditional Negrense Food](#)

Use [this link](#) to navigate.



Clockwise from upper left: Sarsa's batchoy; kinilaw; sizzling kanso; boodle fight with garlic fried rice, inasal, isaw and tortang talong; homemade ice cream served on piaya pastry. Photo Credit: Mike Aquino

At half past seven, the Binge Bus turned away from Old Manila's dingy streets and headed us back to the clean, wide avenues of Bonifacio Global City. The last two stops of the food safari would take place about a few blocks apart.

Sarsa Kitchen+Bar represents Negrense cuisine – food from the Philippines Negros Island, particularly from its major city Bacolod. Sarsa proprietor and head chef JP Anglo, “one of the new hipster chefs” as Seetoh calls him, “is interpreting traditional stuff, and his restaurant is making waves.”

Anton Diaz is in his element, explaining the food we're about to encounter. “Negrense food is popular for their 'Pinoy ramen', or [we call it here batchoy](#),” he tells us. “[Bacolod is] also popular for chicken *inasal* – chicken marinated with annatto oil and grilled. The key is in the grilling process, so the juices are sealed in.”

We arrive at Sarsa, and they went all out: laying out the food on banana leaves in a [Filipino style called a “boodle fight”](#), a tradition that originated with the Philippine armed forces.

Apart from bowls of batchoy and sticks of inasal laid on garlic rice, we encounter a few other Negrense specialties: sizzling *kanso*, beef shank and marrow served on a sizzling plate; *kinilaw*, a local ceviche; chicken intestine skewers called *isaw*; and for dessert, scoops of ice cream served between a Negrense pastry called *piaya*.

All this Negrense food – the sight and scent of it – almost overwhelms our senses; the temptation to binge is overpowering. But Seetoh steps in. “Despite all that,” Seetoh warns us, “it's still not the highlight of the day!

Leave some space!”

Sarsa Kitchen+Bar

G/F, The Forum, Federacion, BGC, Taguig, 1634 Metro Manila ([location on Google Maps](#))
Tel: +63 927 706 0773, site: facebook.com/sarsakitchen

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9:30PM – Surrender to Midnight Mercato's Lechon and Balut

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Clockwise from upper left: food safari survivors trying balut; a whole lechon stuffed with truffle rice; the author with Mercato Centrale's RJ Ledesma and Anton Diaz; the Midnight Mercato under the spaceman. Photo Credit: Mike Aquino

The final stop for the grueling 15-hour food frenzy is right across the street from Sarsa. We've arrived at Anton Diaz' pride and joy, a night food market that he conceptualized and implemented with business partner RJ Ledesma.

Anton and RJ's [Mercato Centrale group](#) runs a series of midnight markets throughout Metro Manila, and their centerpiece, **Midnight Mercato**, runs every Friday and Saturday from 6pm to 3am.

A rotating bunch of food stalls serve up dining choices from every corner on earth: your usual Filipino favorite foods like many of the dishes we'd covered throughout the day, but also Indonesian [bakmi nyonya](#) and [Western gourmet burgers](#).

As Mercato Centrale's multiple projects across Manila show, food markets are a booming business in these parts. “Filipinos spend 53 percent of their disposable income on food alone – they really have nothing better to do!” wisecracked Seetoh.

We sit at a reserved table and watch as Pepita's Kitchen owner Dedet de la Fuente-Santos unveils the evening's absolute piece de resistance: a [roast suckling pig \(lechon\) stuffed with truffle-oil-impregnated rice](#). While half the food frenzy participants fought over fair shares of the lechon, a handful sat on the side, (trying to) enjoy farmer Chris Tan's contribution to the evening: real [balut, the duck egg embryo](#) so beloved by extreme eaters.

We are all in a food coma at this point, and I'm barely holding it together as Seetoh [proudly hands me a certificate](#) proclaiming my new status as a “foodie commando”.

Seetoh's prediction to us, made fifteen hours and one empty stomach earlier, had largely come true: “By the end of the tour, we want you all to have an idea of the culinary gems in the Philippines,” he had said. “And there will be some weird, wonderful, and iconic dishes.”

Midnight Mercato

Corner of 25th Street and 7th Avenue, Bonifacio Global City, Taguig, Metro Manila ([location on Google Maps](#))

Tel: +63 917 840 1152, site: [facebook.com/midnightmercato](#)