



Title: Food frenzy in Manila

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Author: Cheah Ui-Hoon

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The Philippines, with its 7,007 islands, is hard to pin down in terms of its food but a recent 15-hour preview helped showcase its multifaceted cuisine.

IT was barely five years ago that a well-known Filipino food writer lamented the conspicuous absence of Filipino food from the "roster of world cuisines", and how it lagged behind the likes of Singapore, Malaysian, Thai and Indonesian cuisines.

The imbalance has levelled off since, but if you still don't know much about Pinoy delectables beyond adobo and lechon, then a Makansutra-organised World Street Food Congress (WSFC) event to be held in Manila in April is likely to be an eye-opening experience. On the agenda is an in-depth look at the multi-faceted cuisine of the Philippines' 7,007 islands (of which only about 2,000 are inhabited).

To give a taste of things to come, 20 Filipino and regional journalists members were taken on a 15-hour food frenzy tour in Metro Manila last Saturday to get acquainted with Filipino food. And one thing's for sure. Metro Manila and especially Bonifacio Global City (BGC) - as one of the newly built additions to the 16-city Metro - hasn't been left behind in the culinary globalisation movement.

BGC already has more than a few outlets of international food brands present in the Philippines - Krispy Kreme, Starbucks, Breadtalk, JCo Donuts are some - but there are also many local restaurant brands and chains. On weekends, there are at least half-a-dozen food markets which feature pop-up stalls run by food entrepreneurs.

For our crash course in Filipino food we went from Metro Manila to Pampanga, dubbed the food capital of the Philippines, and back - making 10

stops and tasting over 30 items from street to heritage foods, with even a sampling of regional food.

The first stop was at Recovery Food in BGC itself, a new canteen-style eatery that's turned the humble national breakfast of tapsilog (cooked meats with garlic fried rice and egg) into donburi-like, single ingredient rice bowls topped with one sunny-side up egg. It was paired with sweet cured pork (tocino) not unlike bak kwa, then spicy beef (tapa), sausages (longganisa) and, of course, milkfish (bangus) that was fried and flaked.

After that we started on the two-hour journey to Pampanga - the birthplace of many heritage foods of the Philippines - thanks to the early migration of the Spanish and Chinese.

Crunchy crickets (camaru) and carabou (water buffalo) meat topped the "exotica" list at Everybody's Cafe.

The crickets are actually quite neutral in taste, as the thin crunch gives way to an unctuous moistness, not unlike fried lard bits. The carabou was also quite tender. The tamale is made from rice rather than corn, and the meat roll called morcon is understandably the cafe's most popular dish made with ground pork, Spanish chorizo and a local cheese called queso de bola.

The simple, soft scramble of kepampangan omelette with ripe tomatoes and onions spells comfort food. We also saw how they used traditional stone grinders to liquidise roasted cocoa seeds and peanuts, which is then added to hot water and frothed into a hot chocolate (batirol).

A highlight of the Pampanga itinerary was a pitstop at the iconic Aling Lucing for the sisig (chopped whole face of pork, boiled with pineapple juice, chicken liver and peppercorns, then grilled and served with a squeeze of calamansi on a sizzling hot plate) which was invented there.

There's a story that goes back to the 1970s, where a resourceful cook named Lucia Cunanan made use of pig's heads discarded by the American Clark Airbase to create a new Filipino dish. When she turned 80 in 2008, the "dame of sisig" was tragically murdered in her bed. But the carindiria (eatery) still serves a mouthwatering sisig that remains a hot favourite.

For lunch, we arrive at Pampanga's newest upscale restaurant, Cafe Fleur, helmed by celebrity chef Sau del Rosario - just in time for a degustation lunch (yes, where we sample six to eight dishes). Chef Sau's international stints include a stint at Swissotel's Equinox in Singapore in 2004, and after opening several iconic restaurants in Metro Manila had decided to return to his hometown.

Chef Sau is giving a new twist to heritage fare, deliciously demonstrated in his tamales served in a glass, roast pork "curry" or Lechon Kare Kare declared to be the best ever by top Philippines blogger Anton Diaz of Our Awesome Planet, who also curated this 15-hour food tour.

It included a drive to Binondo, which houses the oldest Chinatown in the world - but not before a bite of the insanely rich ensaymada from Homemade Treasures which is actually an edam cheese filled bun topped with butter-and-sugar.

Our two-hour "Binondo Wok" conducted by the inimitable Ivan Man Dy (oldmanilawalks.com) covered three eateries where we sampled typical Hokkien fare and also Beijing sui jiao dumplings. A shoutout is necessary for Quik Snack, or Amah Pilar's restaurant which had fried tofu squares, meaty lumpia and a delicious peanut-enhanced pancit, or Hokkien fried noodles.

Back at Bonifacio Global City, it was a quick stop at Sarsa, a new restaurant serving Ilongo food from the Southern region which comprises grilled chicken meat, wings, innards, and liver on sticks served with garlic rice.

And then there's kinilaw, a Filipino ceviche. A short walk to the open air food market Mercato @ BGC later, also the site of the World Street Food Congress in April, the blow-out finale was by chef Dedet de la Fuente-Santos, who owns Pepita's Kitchen. She presented her truffle lechon featuring a roast piglet stuffed with truffle-flavoured rice, also called "Ooh la la Si Bon Lechon". It was hailed as Asia's best dish at London's 2014 Chowzter awards given by food experts and bloggers.

For Mike Aquino, a Filipino freelance writer, the tour covered the basics very well: street food, carinderia food, fiesta food (Filipinos only break out the lechon for very special occasions), the indigenised Tsinoy fare from Binondo, and dishes from two very strong native culinary traditions.

But as he pointed out, Filipinos are a very diverse bunch. "You should not confuse the Ilonggos with the Cebuanos, the Tagalogs from the Kapampangans from the Ilocanos and so on, as each have their own culinary traditions that they fiercely own with a vengeance," he quips.

As it stands, our 15 hours of almost non-stop eating was just the tiniest tip of the iceberg. There's more to be found not just in Metro Manila but another 2,000-odd islands. No wonder the rest of the world has problems keeping up.

Recovery Food

31st Street Corner Rizal Drive,
BGC Stopover Pavilion,
Bonifacio Global City, Taguig City

Everybody's Café

Del Pilar, McArthur Highway,
San Fernando, Pampanga

Aling Lucing's Sisig

Glaciano Valdez St, Angeles, Pampanga

Cafe Fleur

463B Miranda St, Angeles,
2009 Pampanga

Sarsa Kitchen + Bar

Unit 1-7 Forum South Global,
Federacion Dr 7th Avenue,
Fort Bonifacio, Taguig City

Mercato Centrale Night Market

Corner of 34th street and 8th avenue (across MC Home Depot),
34th St, Taguig, Metro Manila

The World Street Food Congress will be held from April 20-24 in Bonifacio Global City, Manila, Philippines. Tickets are available at www.wsfcongress.com from <http://www.wsfcongress.com/ticket-pricing-registration/>

Makansutra to open first international food market in Manila

MAKANSUTRA will open the first international food market in Manila in the second half of 2016, it announces, even as it brings its World Street Food Congress abroad for the first time in April.

KF Seetoh, founder of Makansutra, wants the World Street Food Congress (WSFC) to be "to street and heritage food what Fifa is to football or F1 to motor-racing".

Now in its third year, and making its debut outside Singapore, WSFC isn't just a street feasting festival, he points out, as it also aims to preserve local food culture, professionalise the industry and also provide the platform for more food business and development opportunities. Its two previous WSFCs were held in 2013 and 2015 in Singapore.

"We want our partners and participants to own their heritage and street foods. It's a place for people to find out what's happening in the street food scene and find opportunities for themselves," says the straight talker whose bold-faced retorts often roll off his tongue effortlessly. Why did it take so long for WSFC to get to Manila? asks a TV reporter. "Because of the traffic jams," Mr Seetoh rebuts.

Manila is the WSFC's first international destination, but plans are zipping ahead as Makansutra has also announced plans to set up two world street food markets in Metro Manila in the second half of 2016.

For the Congress itself, Makansutra's partners are the Philippines Department of Tourism, Tourism Promotion Board Philippines and Ayala Malls (Philippines), and it is quite proud of the fact that no other street festival has

that international dialogue component headlined by top food personalities such as Stephen Werther, creator of the Bourdain Market in New York.

"We think the WSFC will open a Pandora's box of opportunities and bring global attention also to Filipino cuisine, which is what we want to add to the host country," he said.

Meanwhile, this will also be a time for international street food to be featured in Manila with up to 24 hawkers from Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Vietnam, Thailand and the United States.

The World Street Food Congress 2016 will be held in Manila from April 20-24, with the theme The Comforting Flavors of Home. For more information, please go to www.wsfcongress.com