



Manila, Philippines

Title: What to expect at this month's World Street Food Congress

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In Southeast Asia, street food is serious business: it's heritage and hard work rolled into one, mostly undertaken by working-class locals and a small but growing band of millennial entrepreneurs. KF Seetoh – TV host and restaurateur – loves to point out that street food begins with necessity, only incidentally ending up as a cultural touchstone.

“Street food in Asia isn't something created for its own sake,” Seetoh tells us. “It's something my grandfather cooked at home that he learned from his great grandfather and had no choice but to sell it on the street.”

It's this mix of history and business that leads Seetoh to proclaim, without equivocation, “the world's best street food culture comes from Asia.”

From May 31 to June 4, Seetoh's annual World Street Food Congress (originally held in Singapore, now on its second year in the Philippines) brings together both sides of the street food equation – the entrepreneurs who make it and the tourists who consume it by...MORE

01 of 04 Heritage Food with a Modern Twist

Chef Sau del Rosario preparing sisig paella

The hawkers in the World Street Food Jamboree represent the vanguard of street food, quite literally: “They are soldiers of a food heritage – they defend that heritage,” Seetoh tells us. “We may call it the 'World Street Food Congress', but it's really about World Heritage Street Food. It's about imagining the future with ideas from the old.”

Chef Sau del Rosario (who we last met at a 15-hour food safari around Manila and Pampanga) plans to use the Jamboree to introduce a different take on a classic Filipino dish. His new sisig paella – a mashup of the beloved Spanish rice dish and sisig, a chopped-up and spiced mix of pork, onions and chilies native to the Philippines – is worlds apart from the stuff you'll usually find in every Filipino street corner. But Chef Sau reminds us that sizzling sisig only happens to be the latest iteration in the dish's long history.

“[Sisig paella is] evolution; something you cannot stop,” Chef Sau tells us. “Sisig started with sour fruit, and became sizzling sisig that people are making into tacos, pizza, even KFC now has sisig chicken!”

Sisig isn't the only reinvented dish on the menu this year. From Singapore, the second-generation hawkers of Keng Eng Kee plan a comeback with new takes on classic Singapore hawker fare.

“Last year, they did a soft-shell crab dish,” Seetoh explains. “This time, they're taking traditional street dishes and turning them into burgers.” Their coffee pork burgers and curry chicken burgers make their international debut at the Jamboree.

02 of 04 The Jamboree: The World's Best Street Food, All in One Place

The last World Street Food Congress had about 30 stalls serving everything from Philippine batchoy to Malaysian mee siam – the 75,000 hungry visitors who descended on the street food stalls had to contend with massive, munching crowds and a long wait for particularly-prized foods.

Seetoh and his crew learned from the experience: “This year for starters, we're making it bigger,” Seetoh tells us. “It's double the size [from last year], with an additional ten or so stalls [selling] the comfort dishes from the region.”

Only a couple of dishes are coming back from last year's event, among them the Bali ribs and chocolate martabak. The rest are brand-new to the Jamboree, among them Guangzhou soi lum (mochi dumplings in chrysanthemum broth); lamb monggo (green bean stew) from the southern Philippines; coffee-ribs burgers from Singapore; and claypot apam manis (sweet Indian-style crepes) from Malaysia.

“For the first time, we're having people from Germany, Mexico, and Guangzhou and we're having different dishes from India that people have never seen before,” Seetoh explains. “We're having dessert stalls from Thailand, even Taiwan is participating for the first time.”

03 of 04 The Dialogues: Translating Heritage to Hard Cash

Despite the thousands of tourists converging on the 40-odd stalls at the Jamboree, Seetoh says the real action happens in the main conference area adjoining the stalls: where the World Street Food Dialogues draw over 300 international delegates in a two-day dialogue between culinary practitioners and experts.

“This is the reason I do the World Street Food Congress – there's no Dialogue, there's no heartbeat,” Seetoh explains. “We're bringing in speakers that are thinkers, speakers who are practitioners of world class street food culture. And there will be a lot of people showing great techniques in doing street food.”

Which street food masters will make an appearance at this year's Dialogue? Restaurateurs like Peter Lloyd of Sticky Mango Restaurant in London, Mai Pham of Seattle-based Lemon Grass Kitchen, and Malcolm Lee of the Michelin-starred Candlenut Peranakan Restaurant in Singapore; alternating with authorities like Greg Drescher of the Culinary Institute of America and Richard Tan, Former Director of The Hawkers Department, National Environment Agency, Singapore.

Oh, and Anthony Bourdain will be dropping by for a few words.

“Why go? You want to hear the people on stage and mingle with the people around you, so you can mingle, collaborate, to do more ideas in this space,” Seetoh says. “If you are keen, or if you are half a step in the business, if you want to find out how dynamic this culture really is and why so many people are into it, come into the Dialogue.”

04 of 04 Booking it to the Congress

The World Street Food Congress is a joint effort between Makansutra, the Philippines Department of Tourism and its Tourism Promotions Board; and SM Supermalls.

To book your seat at the World Street Food Congress Dialogue and the Pitchbox, visit the official World Street Food Congress ticketing page. Tickets to the Dialogue cost USD 250, covering May 31 to June 2, and includes four tea breaks, two lunches, and vouchers to the Jamboree. Corporate bulk tickets and student discounts can be arranged upon request.

For more on the Southeast Asian street food cultures that will take the stage during the World Street Food Congress 2017, read our articles about Singapore hawker centers; top must-try Malaysian street food and Indonesian street food; and our 15-hour food frenzy in the Philippines led by the World Street Food Congress' KF Seetoh!