



Manila, Philippines

Title: It's time again to talk seriously about street food

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"It's bigger and better," boasts founder KF Seetoh, of this year's World Street Food Congress in Manila, an event that puts the spotlight on street food as a tourism driver and global enterprise.

For five days from May 31 to June 4, hawkers from 13 countries and influencers from around the world will fill the festival venue the size of two football fields at the new SM Mall of Asia in Pasay City, a fabulous location by the sea.

A clear beneficiary of the event has been the host country. "The event has helped launch Filipino cuisine in the international market," says Cesar D. Montano, chief operating officer of Tourism Promotions Board Philippines.

This is the second consecutive year the event, started in Singapore by Seetoh's company Makansutra in 2013, is being hosted in Manila.

Organisers consider last year's event a success; it attracted some 300 international delegates and 24 hawkers from nine countries.

Across both traditional and social media platforms, the event reached a tracked audience of 41 million, according to figures released by the organisers.

So it's not mere chest thumping by Seetoh. For a country not known for its street food culture, the Philippines now joins its South-East Asian neighbours in promoting tourism through its street food, once considered unremarkable.

KF Seetoh at a dialogue session at the 2015 World Street Food Congress in Singapore. Photos: Makansutra

At home, the global attention is helping to define a national cuisine, build national pride and draw out hidden culinary gems.

This year's event is expected to draw a crowd of 120,000, up from last year's 75,000, to its three main events: a street food fest, a series of dialogues with heritage food advocates and industry think tanks, and a Street Food Awards.

The repertoire this year has expanded to include China, Germany, the United States and Mexico as well as the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, India and Japan.

Visitors to the fest this year will be the first to taste “soi lum” outside of China. The little-known street food of water olives and roasted chrysanthemum leaves was discovered on a recent recce to China.

Old favourites like Balinese barbecue ribs will be back. New items stealing the limelight will include Singapore’s Marmite chicken burger, Mexican tacos, and Malaysia’s claypot apom manis from Penang.

The Pinoy stalls this year are curated by Seetoh, a hardcore Singaporean foodie with an impeccable palate, who went on a food hunt deep into the country to identify treasures to showcase to the world.

“I tasted some 250 dishes in 20 days of touring,” he says, bragging rights justified.

Visitors were tucking into this fancy Filipino lechon truffle paella and (top) true-blue Singapore hawker dish, satay beehoon, at last year’s World Street Food Congress jamboree in Manila.

In Davao, he uncovered lamb monggo, a lamb and green bean stew devoured with rice. Philippine specialties from five other cities will also be featured – Bicol, Iloilo, Ilocas, Bacolod and Pampanga.

Reimagining possibilities

To push this year’s theme, “Re-imagine Possibilities”, Filipino chef Sau del Rosario and Seetoh have paired up to reimagine a popular street food, sisig. The Pampanga speciality dish – which has been mooted for a Unesco Intangible World Cultural Heritage listing – is cooked to recycle parts of the pig’s head like the cheeks, snout, ear and brain, mixed with chicken liver and seasoned with coconut vinegar and peppers.

To make it, the head is boiled, grilled, shredded and fried, sometimes served on a hotplate as a sizzling sisig. The reimagined version is fused with Spanish paella, creating a sisig paella.

If Sau and Seetoh’s new dish manages to launch a new favourite into the streets of Manila, they will be creating history of sorts by reverse engineering street food.

The dialogues

Thought-provoking discussions will address matters related to the future of the street food industry – which took a nosedive with the recent mandate by the Thai government to clear hawkers from the streets of Bangkok.

“Just imagine,” says Seetoh who started Makansutra some 20 years ago, “how far a one-dish entrepreneur has come. What lies ahead, now that Michelin stars have been awarded to hawkers? What are the new street food trends around the world? Who or what is in charge of this movement, if any? What culinary gems are hidden in the 7,107 islands and 13 regions of the Philippines?”

It's also time, he says, to start street food academies, consider hawking as social enterprise and culinary tourism that dives into food culture.

"I realised there isn't a movement that guarantees the continuity of street food culture. The new generations are not cooking this food anymore. Singapore stopped building hawker centres. We now need to have a crusade to ensure its future. This can be done through the three P's: Preserve,

Malaysian hawkers at the World Street Food Congress 2015 in Singapore with their nonya yambean lettuce wrap.

"There is no professionalism in street food. We need to get them off the street and onto a world stage. You need to translate the artisanal into a machine," he says.

Seetoh is consultant to the highly anticipated Bourdain Market in New York, tasked to identify 100 hawkers to fill the stalls. Among the speakers lined up, a top draw will be Anthony Bourdain himself, who has been a firm supporter of the congress from the start.

Bourdain is expected to provide the latest update on the Bourdain Market; he is tipped to be recruiting vendors for his market at the WSFC and speaking on how to be a part of it. The Bourdain Market is slated for opening in 2019.

Other industry speakers are from the US, Indonesia, Singapore, Britain and the Philippines: Greg Drescher, California Institute of America (CIA)'s vice-president of strategic studies and industry leadership, Michelin-star chefs Malcolm Lee (Singapore) and Andy Yang (Thailand), among others.

Other attractions

In between the dialogues will be cooking demos of iconic heritage and street food dishes by presenters like Filipino chef and food writer Claude Tayag, Singapore's chef Malcolm Lee and Peter Lloyd of Sweet Mango Restaurant in London.

Pitch Box Hackathon is a 90-minute ideation segment where delegates step up onto the stage, pitch their ideas, visions, concepts and goals. This segment is largely unplanned, raw and filled with fresh ideas.

World Street Food Awards

The congress seeks to award and recognise heritage street food vendors from around the world. At this year's dialogue, 24 of the world's best hawkers will receive their awards. Some Filipino hawkers are expected to be on the list. Will Malaysia's apom manis take home a coveted award?

The World Street Food Congress 2017 is on from May 31 to June 4, at the SM Mall of Asia concert grounds in Pasay City, Manila. Tickets are available on the website: wsfcongress.com.

Read more at <http://www.star2.com/food/food-news/2017/04/27/world-street-food-congress-2017-manila/#gIQFarCyXFMYPH08.99>