



Manila, Philippines

Title: Mexico Meets the Philippines at 2017 World Street Food Congress

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in the fading heat of late-afternoon Manila, with the descending sun about to turn the sky postcard pink, Lee Arden Yap, 14, was eating the filling of his fish taco with a fork, careful to not touch the tortilla that was laying flat on the plate. It was his first time trying Mexican food, and he was loving the spiciness of the dish he had selected out of 28 stands offering street food favorites from countries such as Indonesia, India, Singapore, China, Thailand, Vietnam, Germany, and his home country, the Philippines. He might try the tortilla after he was done with the filling, he said, sounding unsure; he was not interested in a quick tutorial on the proper taco fold.

It had never occurred to Alam Méndez, who had prepared Yap's dish, that there were people in the world who didn't know how to eat a taco. For the chef and co-owner, with his mother Celia Florián, of Pasillo de Humo in Mexico City, nothing is more natural than the act of taking a tortilla into his hand and bringing it all at once to his mouth, just as it is for millions of Mexicans, and million more lovers of Mexican food.

Florián and Méndez had never traveled to Asia before landing in Manila ready to cook pig trotter tostadas and fish tacos for thousands as part of the 2017 World Street Food Congress, which took place in the Philippines' capital from May 31 to June 4. Florián, the former leader of the group of traditional cooks in Oaxaca, is also the chef-owner of Las Quince Letras there.

Because they had to prepare 800 portions for each of the five days of the Jamboree, as the Congress' food court extravaganza is known, it was not feasible to bring ingredients with them, using instead only ingredients available in the Philippines, which required some adjustments to the initial menu they had devised. They would have included chile pasilla mixe, the smoked chile that is one of the signature flavors of Oaxaca, and chicken in mole. They hauled a small amount of chapulines, or grasshoppers, which they offered as samples to festival goers on the Jamboree's last day, allowing for comparison with the meatier grasshoppers found in the state of Pampanga, the countryside just outside of Manila that stakes claim as the best culinary region in the Philippines.

The tostadas de manitas de cerdo con frijol negro, or pickled pig trotters, represented a street food take on a traditional Oaxaqueño dish. "I had read that they eat pig trotters here," Méndez said, "and you can find tortillas anywhere, so we thought that this would be a tasty dish." The fish taco, from

Baja California, was a request of the organizers; since those are found throughout Mexico, Méndez explained, it was not much of a compromise to prepare.

Florián and Méndez cooked the pig trotters with garlic, onion, epazote, bay leaves, and oregano then chopped and pickled them. They served the tostada on a local organic corn tortilla they deemed very flavorful, if twice as large as the size of a Mexican tostada, making for a filling dish rather than the botana, or snack, it would be in Oaxaca. A schmear of black beans, followed by a schmear of guacamole topped the tortilla, onto which went the pig trotters, followed by chiles de agua, pickled onions, radishes, and carrots.

“It’s brilliantly spicy,” said Brett Burmeister, who was attending from Portland, Oregon, where he tracks the city’s more than 500 food carts. “It’s a simple dish but it has so many flavors. I love the idea of pickled pork trotters; I’m always looking for new ideas.”

The fish taco, which was served on a wheat tortilla, consisted of fried mahi mahi, red cabbage, cucumber, pico de gallo with a profusion of lime juice, and a spicy creamy sauce made with mayonnaise, red chili, garlic, onion, and habanero, topped with grilled green onions.

The major difference that the Mexican chefs observed between their native ingredients and the ones found in the Philippines: the local ones had equally strong flavors, but were much sweeter. Even the limes were less sour than those found in Mexico. As a result, the flavor profiles of the tostada and taco were indeed sweeter than they would have been in their homeland. Cilantro arrived as microgreens still in their soil, and a culinary student helping the Mexico team was tasked with carefully clipping the tiny herbs for each day’s mise en place.

“Mexico and the Philippines have a long history together, going back 250 years, since the galleons,” said Arturo Villaruel, head of international cooperation for the embassy of Mexico in Manila, who came to the congress to support his compatriots—and to get a taste of home thanks to the flavors of Florián and Méndez. “The administration of the Philippines during the Spanish period was done by Mexico, which means that many products, like chayote, calabaza, achiote, tamales, corn, and chocolate, all came with Mexico,” he explained. “In China, you can see that you’re in China. Here [in Manila], you may have the impression that you are in a Mexican market. And Mexico got tamarind, coconut, and tuba from the Philippines.”

Florián, who fell in love with the staple Filipino garlic rice, was pleased to see connections between the two cuisines; a rice with dried shrimp brought to mind the red rice with dried shrimp found along the Oaxaqueña coast and on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Menudo reminded her of pancita, her region’s tripe stew, while mechado—roast studded with garlic cloves—is also found in both countries; in Oaxaca, it is also stuffed with nuts, dried plums, and dates, displaying a strong Spanish colonial influence, while in the Philippines it is rubbed with achiote. Taro is another ingredient found in both places, but whereas in Oaxaca only the roots are used, Filipino cooks prepare the leaves with coconut milk and crispy pork belly bits for a dish called laing, explained Florián. Small yellow mangoes are still called mangoes Manila in Mexico, because they were first brought over by the Spanish galleons returning from the Philippines. When Mexico wanted to register the name of its

mangoes as a denomination of controlled origin, the Filipino government prevented them, Florián explained.

Villaruel added that he saw the Philippines as a gateway to Asia for Mexico, to promote tourism and business, since they have linguistic roots (30 percent of Tagalog, the Philippines' national language, is Spanish, he said), food, and religion in common. The Mexican population in the Philippines is no larger than 100,000, out of a total population slightly over 103 million, and consists mainly of priests and nuns: "This country is more Catholic than Mexico," he added with a smile. Capul Island takes its name from Acapulco, the point of departure of the galleons that would need to make it their first stop for water after the long journey.

Ruth Alegria, a food historian and tour guide based in Mexico City, gave a talk that highlighted these connections as part of an overview of Mexican ingredients for the attendees of the Congress' Dialogues, two days of presentations by chefs and culinary experts covering various aspects of street food around the world.

In previous years, Mexico had been represented at the Congress by Sabina Bandera of the famed La Guerrerense in Ensenada, Baja, and by Churros Locos, a Portland, Oregon-based food truck. KF Seetoh and Patricia Lim, the founders of the World Street Food Congress, met Florián and Méndez while attending the World Forum on Mexican Gastronomy in November 2016 in Mexico City, when they ate at Pasillo de Humo.

"We came here because we wanted to share Mexico," said Méndez. If the lines were any indication, the mother-son pair succeeded—fork or no fork, Manila diners were hungry for Mexican food.