

Beyond the Balut

HAVING TROUBLE FINDING GOOD FILIPINO FOOD WHERE YOU LIVE? THINK OF IT AS JUST ANOTHER EXCUSE TO HEAD TO THE PHILIPPINES!



"A little sour, a little sweet, a little salty and a little bitter." That was how American celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain once characterised Filipino food, adding, "It's like nothing I've tasted before." His was a more general comment, but he could feasibly have been describing balut, the notorious near-taboo street food snack whose consumption has become a rite of passage in certain circles, both among locals and visiting foreigners. Yet despite what your macho pinoy buddy will have you believe, there's much more to Filipino tucker than a nutritious duck foetus.

Travellers with an adventurous palate will be rewarded with an exciting hodgepodge of flavours with influences that began with the cooking methods of Chinese traders and have incorporated three centuries of Spanish culinary colonisation. Ingredients such as tomatoes, corn and avocados were introduced into Filipino cuisine from other Spanish colonies – Mexico especially. Today, Spanish styles of cooking and Mexican delicacies such as tamales (steamed or boiled dough filled with various fillings) and pipian (a sauce made of ground seeds, nuts, spices and chillies) are still popular in the Philippines – even if in a modified form.

Aside from the distinctive sour taste of Filipino cuisine – provided principally by the use of the tamarind fruit (sampaloc) and variously derived vinegars – there's one thing that's hard to avoid on your culinary journey to the Philippines: pork. Be prepared to find virtually every pig part imaginable on your plate: belly, legs, feet, ears, cheeks, jowls, the entire head even – little goes to waste and there will be a dish to suit even the most experimental gourmands. Certainly, few would dispute the



Claudio Tayag

IFEX: AN INTERNATIONAL FOOD EXHIBITION IN THE PHILIPPINES



To really understand what's happening in the Filipino food scene, make sure you're in Manila for the 7th incarnation of IFEX, an international food exhibition that has become one of the tastiest trade shows in the Asia Pacific.

Organised by the Center for International Trade Expositions and Missions, an agency of the Philippine Department of Trade and Industry, the exhibition welcomes around 300 local companies showcasing the country's best food exports as well as unique local products that are working towards complying with the strict export standards for food quality and safety. *Kain Tayo!* ("Let's eat!" in Tagalog.)

Open to the public for all three days, the Retailers' Zone is the perfect one-stop space to shop for some hard-to-find foods, sample a diverse range of flavours, and even witness a few cooking demonstrations. Chatting to the retailers here is a great way to appreciate exactly what you're trying or buying.

In the adjoining Exporters' Zone – whose doors are open for the first two days to trade visitors only and accessible by the public on the third day of the show –

industry professionals can mingle freely as well as conduct pre-arranged business meetings. Within this area, a special Partner Region Program looks closely at the indigenous food offerings of a particular region of the Philippines. Last year's focus on homegrown food products from Northern Mindanao included the famously delicious ham from Cagayan de Oro and the equally enticing *tablea*, cocoa tablets commonly used to make a distinctively Filipino version of hot chocolate.

One thing you'll likely discover is the importance of the humble coconut to the Filipino food industry, with everything from oil, nectar and sugar to chips, flour and alcohol beverages derived from the ubiquitous palm found across the archipelago. Take a liking to the coconut liquor *lambanog* – which is based on the sap of the tree rather than the fruit – and you'll be a little closer to understanding what makes the common man in the Philippines tick.

IFEX 2010 will be held at the World Trade Center, Pasay City, Manila, from 6–8 May 2010. www.ifexphilippines.com

magnificence of a well-selected Filipino roast suckling pig, spit-roasted over an open fire pit.

Finding familiar South and Southeast Asian components in food from the Philippines is easy enough: rice, soups, seafood, meat and vegetables, in different combinations, will appear on almost every table, and serving sizes aren't huge to allow variety to play a central role. What is more difficult is figuring out where to go to find the most mouth-watering examples. If you possibly can, have a local show you the culinary ropes (see the insider recommendations in A Top Chef's Top Ten opposite). There are also tours on offer to the disparate "culinary capitals" of the archipelago, including, most notably, the Central Luzon province of Pampanga, under two hours' drive from Manila (see www.tourism.gov.ph/Pages/KulinaryTours.aspx).

For reasons not easily fathomed by taste buds seduced by pinoy cuisine, food of the Philippines enjoys none of the ubiquity of Asian cuisines such as Thai or Indonesian. There can be only one good solution: pack your bags for the Filipino isles and sample for yourself.



Painter, sculptor, food and travel writer, and accomplished chef Claude Tayag has been an instrumental cog in the Filipino culinary machine for years, and no food tour of the famous Pampanga region in Central Luzon is complete without an extended stop at his cosy, art-filled Bale Dutung (House of Wood). Make sure you put at least a few of Claude's ten favourite eating experiences on your itinerary.

1 Dawang's Place is a nondescript hole in the wall along the national highway in San Nicolas, just outside Laoag City, Ilocos Norte, Luzon. It has been serving its house specialties for 30 years, including *papaítan* (ox innards cooked in water, vinegar and spices), *imbaliktad* (paper-thin slices of beef, marinated with ginger bits and bile), *igado* (pork liver adobo), *la-oya* (boiled pork soup) and *insarabsab* (grilled pork with tomatoes). Try their famous crispy and cholesterol-laden *dinuguan*, or pork blood stew, which makes use of chunky bits of crispy pork crackling.



2 Riverside Empanada Plaza is a mecca for empanada aficionados. The beloved Ilocos empanada, or turnover, is stuffed with a mixture of sautéed grated green papaya, mung bean sprouts, garlicky *Ilocos longanisa* (native sausage) and raw egg wrapped in a bright orange rice flour dough. Deep-fried and doused with *sukang Iloko* (sugarcane vinegar infused with *samak* leaves), it is often paired with a bowl of steaming *miki*, a thick noodle soup in a rich chicken broth topped with *chicharon* bits (pork crackling) and a hard-boiled egg. Located across the river from Marcos Museum, Batac, Ilocos Norte, Luzon.

3 Aling Lucing Sisig The house specialty *sisig* – "one of the world's best beer drinking dishes" according to Anthony Bourdain – is what made the late Aling Lucing an institution for more than 35 years. *Sisig* has undergone many makeovers and variations.



In some establishments in Manila, it is served with egg and eaten with rice. For the more health conscious, less cholesterol-heavy variants have been concocted out of squid, tuna, shrimp or chicken. Nowadays, it seems that just about anything served on a sizzling plate is called *sisig*. Located by the Railroad Crossing, Angeles City, Pampanga, Luzon.

4 Breakthrough Seafood Restaurant

offers Iloilo's freshest catch from the sea just like its neighbour Tatoy's. But I'd give it an edge because of the aerated concrete water cage where it keeps a stock of *managat*, or mangrove jack, and *imbao* clams. The *managat* is taken out of the water upon ordering, then butterflied and simply grilled, basting with calamansi, garlic and *achuete* oil. The meat of the *imbao*, a large round clam found only in the Visayas, is placed whole in the mouth to enjoy its fatty, jellybean-like texture – and the accompanying burst of fresh and salty seawater. Located at Villa Beach, Brgy. Sto Niño Sur, Arevalo, Iloilo, Panay (Tel: +63-33-337-3027).



5 Chef Maridel Uygongco of Iloilo City does a mean

pork barbecue of *obre*, or the mammary glands of a sow (female pig which has given birth), with all its cholesterol-laden, carcinogenic burnt fat glory. Perhaps it's a good thing that it's by special order only, together with her other Ilonggo specialties like *pata gacadios* (pork leg with black pigeon peas) and freshly baked bread. Located in Iloilo City proper (Tel: +63-33-320-8656).



6 Deco's Batchoy. This extra special dish from the original maker Deco's is the bowl to beat. A serving consists of a large bowl of thin noodles, topped with slivers of the assorted meats cut with barber's scissors, then ladled with piping hot *caldo*, or broth made with meat and bones of pork and beef, liver, intestines and that Ilonggo thing *guinamos*, or shrimp paste, for flavouring, and finally smothered generously with crushed *tulapó* (all-fat cracklings), fried garlic, spring onion, a spoonful of native MSG, and a yellowish dollop of beef bone marrow. A heavenly treat. Find it at La Paz Public Market frontage, Rizal St. Iloilo City, Panay (Tel: +63-33-320-0725).

7 Zubuchon of Cebu City. This is the *lechon*, or whole roasted

pig, that won the heart (and stomach) of Anthony Bourdain. Added to the usual Cebu-style *lechon* stuffed with lemongrass/garlic/salt/whole peppercorns are spring



onion, red and white onion, fresh rosemary, thyme, lemon, red bell pepper and chili peppers – and it's basted with olive oil and sea salt. Towards the last stages of roasting, it is sprinkled with water to make the popped skin separate from the layer of fat. Order in advance. Sold by the kilo at Banilad Town Center, Cebu City and at Mactan International Airport. Call Edrid Juezan (Tel: +63-32-236-5264 or +63-917-622-1572).

8 Talisay City, Cebu. Drive south 30 minutes outside Cebu City, along the scenic Osmeña highway, and you'll find a narrow street near the beach with food stalls on both sides selling *lechon*, roast native chicken, assorted grilled pork, chicken and fish, *dinuguan* (pork blood stew), and several kinds of seaweed *kinilaw*, or *ceviche*. *Lechon* is sold by the cut, with a measure of haggling. *Puso*, heart-shaped steamed rice wrapped in coconut fronds and roasted sweet potato, can accompany the meal. Located at Burgos corner Garces Sts, and only open on Sundays.

9 Lic-Lic's Sugba Tula Kilaw.

This is much like the favourite Metro Manila dining experience of buying fresh seafood in the wet market and have it cooked in a nearby eatery any way one fancies. But at Manga Market in Tagbilaran, Bohol, it is the baby sea eels, fresh sea urchin roe, and various kinds of shellfish that will get your gastric juices churning. The name "Sugba Tula Kilaw" refers to the uncomplicated Visayan cooking style: grilled (*sugba*), boiled (*tula*) or marinated in vinegar (*kilaw*). Have the shells boiled, the mackerel *kilaw* with coconut milk, and the baby eels deep-fried to crisp perfection and dipped in spicy vinegar. Find Lic-Lic across from Manga Market, Tagbilaran, Bohol (Tel: +63-910-301-2193).



10 Aup-Aup Seafood Restaurant's

patrons dine inside bamboo-slatted *cabanas* on stilts by the water's edge leading out to the Bohol Strait. "Aup-Aup" means flickering light, probably an allusion to the distant kerosene lamps on boats out fishing at night. Coupled with the gentle sea breeze and idyllic setting, the very fresh seafood – mainly in the "Sugba Tula Kilaw" tradition – defines the dining experience. Worth going back for are the steamed conch (which must be ordered a day ahead), mackerel, steamed crabs, grilled fish, and native chicken *adobo*. Located at the town of Maribojoc, Bohol, towards the wharf past the big church (Tel: Inday Campos on +63-38-504-9467 or +63-928-399-9376).



Culled from a forthcoming book tentatively titled "120 Philippine Dishes to Look For" by Claude and his wife Mary Ann, expected to be launched in September 2010 by Anvil Publishing. Find out more about Claude Tayag at www.claudetayag.net

A BRIEF, BUT ESSENTIAL, FILIPINO FOOD GLOSSARY

Adobo A typical Filipino way of cooking meat, vegetables or poultry by braising in garlic, peppercorns, vinegar and salt; in some regions, coconut milk might be added into the mix

Balut Boiled egg containing an almost-developed duck embryo, famously consumed as a delicacy in the Philippines

Calamansi Ubiquitous native citrus fruit resembling a small lime, used to add a sour flavour to Filipino dishes

Lechon de leche Roasted suckling pig, typically around six weeks old; particularly tasty in Cebu

Sinangag Fried rice, combined with meat or fish and usually served for breakfast

Sinigang Broth made with seafood, beef or pork, soured with tamarind; suck vigorously to get that scrumptious bone marrow!

Sisig Finely chopped pork ears, cheeks and jowls, boiled and grilled – and served on a sizzling hot plate; not for the squeamish