PHOTO ESSAY: Contemporary Filipino Foodways: Views from the Street, Household, and Local Dining, “How Filipino Food is Becoming the Next Great American Cuisine.”
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Abstract

As a rich mélange of outside culinary influences variously integrated within the enduring fabric of indigenous food culture, contemporary Filipino foodways exhibit an overarching character that is at once decidedly idiosyncratic and yet uncannily familiar to those non-Filipinos either visiting the islands for the first time or vicariously experiencing its meal/snack offerings through today's all but omnipresent digital technology. Food spaces in the Philippines incorporate a wide range of venues and activities that increasingly transcend social class and public/domestic contexts as the photos in this essay showcase in profound and subtle ways. The pictures contained herein reveal as much about globalization's multiscalar impact as they do Filipinos' longstanding ability to adapt and assimilate externalities into more traditional modes of dietary practice.

Keywords: Philippines, foodways, globalization
For various historical and geopolitical reasons, the Philippines remains largely distinct in the Asia Pacific and, indeed, around the world when it comes to the uniqueness of its culinary heritage and the practices and traditions surrounding local food production and consumption. While the cuisines of neighboring countries (e.g. Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, and China) have enjoyed an elevated status on the global stage for quite some time, Filipino cooking and its attendant foodways has pretty much gone under the radar relatively speaking.

Only within the last two decades or so has this kind of benign disregard from non-Filipino audiences slowly given way to a more engaged global focus of what the Philippines has to offer in terms of its viable food culture. Such considerations, tentative though as they might be, reveal a variegated foodscape suffused with myriad complexities and contradictions. Photos in this essay — taken from 2005 onwards — speak to processes of indigenization that transform and tweak global products to fit the distinct parameters of traditional Filipino palates wherein the sweet and succulent enjoy a privileged position above zesty or dry tastes. Snapped in and around Dagupan City, Pangasinan, as a part of my ongoing ethnographic fieldwork there, these images vividly illustrate the sorts of processed foods and convenience cuisine now equally situated alongside inexpensive street snacks and marketplace fare that collectively comprised ordinary Filipino diets during the 21st century’s first two decades. If any identifiable narrative thread runs through this series of pictures, it probably relates to the variety of snack/mealtime choices available to those living in provincial Philippine cities and surrounding areas.

Figure 1. Vegetable sellers, Galvan Street Market, Dagupan City, Pangasinan (2005). Author photo.
As a rich mélange of outside culinary influences variously integrated within the enduring fabric of indigenous food culture, contemporary Filipino foodways exhibit an overarching

Figure 2. Fruit sellers, Galvan Street Market, Dagupan City, Pangasinan (2015). Author photo.

Figure 3. Street food vendors, City Plaza, Dagupan City, Pangasinan (2015). Author photo.
character that is at once decidedly idiosyncratic and yet uncannily familiar to those non-Filipinos either visiting the islands for the first time or vicariously experiencing its meal/snack offerings through today’s all but omnipresent digital technology. Food spaces in the Philippines incorporate a wide range of venues and activities that increasingly transcend social class and public/domestic contexts as the photos in this essay showcase in profound and subtle ways. If anything, the pictures contained herein reveal as much about globalization’s multiscalar impact as they do Filipinos’ long standing ability to adapt and assimilate externalities into more traditional modes of dietary practice.

Effectively transcending whatever overseas origins that characterized their initial penetration of the archipelago years back, these once novel introductions to local life currently occupy an all but equivalent status with their more traditional counterparts. In this way, Filipino foodways represent more than just the sum of their constituent parts. If anything, they stand as a successful melding of indigenous palates with global ingredients, cooking styles, restaurant formats, dining customs, consumer expectations, and aesthetic sensibilities, into something new and highly evocative of local experiences. It is not for nothing that Filipino cuisine is now widely touted among U.S. tastemakers as the “next big thing”, given its so-called status as the “original fusion” fare within the Asia Pacific and wider sphere of regional influence (McNeilly 2017).

How aware or concerned ordinary Filipinos are about such developments remains an open question. In truth, I suspect few really give such matters much consideration. Throughout this essay and, indeed, among many of the daily encounters underpinning Philippine modernity, global/local juxtapositions emerge with such abiding frequency that any novelty they once possessed has long since been honed down into a sort of understated ubiquity that continues to inform myriad aspects of workaday life including those related to local food procurement, preparation, and consumption. Global food conglomerates and their various subsidiaries have doubtless done much to shift local perspectives about what constitutes viable food practices, just as they have significantly transformed established Filipino foodscapes into milieus where street vendors, sari-sari store operators, and carinderia owners ostensibly cede ground within increasingly corporatized food spaces.
Like other Asia Pacific countries, the transnational food industry wields considerable sway across the Philippines’ political economy, especially over the nation’s decidedly syncretic food traditions that extend back to Spanish colonization (1521-1898) and beyond.
In the Philippines as elsewhere in the Global South, the cultural and socioeconomic practices related to food production/consumption are increasingly informed by the seemingly all-pervasive schema of hyperdrive global capitalism. So much so, in fact, that prospects of divorcing contemporary Filipino foodways from the profound influence of this hallmark feature of 21st century global modernity become less and less viable as its branded and mass-produced products — not to mention the contexts these goods/commodities create — indelibly shape the lived realities of millions nationwide.

In this and other ways, the everyday foods of today’s Philippines remain emblematic of the formative historical experiences and aspirational promises of a society continually striving to (re-)formulate a national identity widely recognized as occupying a sociocultural terrain somewhere between East and West. Abiding predispositions towards outside culinary influences assume real material character in the kinds of food and practices that hold meaning for Filipinos across all social strata. Such preferences resonate beyond matters of simple utilitarian eating or experiencing novel flavors or tastes. They also engage Filipino sensibilities in ways rife with symbolic meaning. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than in the processed and convenience fare that is widely consumed in local households and among various peer groups.

Manufactured fare coming from abroad has long captured local imaginations. Early 20th century canned goods imported from the U.S. are deeply evocative of the sort of cosmopolitanism that shaped local perceptions about America’s colonial patronage over the archipelago in the decades both leading up and subsequent to World War II (Elias 2014).

**Figure 6.** SPAM supermarket display, Dagupan City, Pangasinan (2011). Author photo.
More recently *pasalubong*-laden *balikbayan* boxes (Patzer 2018) – replete with all variety of consumables including canned SPAM, Marlboro Reds, Toblerone chocolates, and tubed Pringle cannisters – have been globally deployed to the Philippines from the 10.2 million overseas Filipinos and serve as resonant symbols for all the inherent complexities/ambivalences of today’s highly mobile global Pinoy. No less resonant are the multiplicity of fast food restaurants that invariably punctuate the street-level fabric of towns and cities across the Visayas, Mindanao, and Luzon in the years after McDonald’s came to the Philippines in 1981.

For many middle class/working poor (sub-)urbanites, when it comes to meeting simple dining needs, the corporatized contexts of American-style fast food eateries hold just as much viability as public food spaces located along city sidewalks or municipal marketplaces.
The unmatched success of local quick-service brand Jollibee represents a source of genuine national pride for Filipinos across the islands seeing as it has continually bested the Golden Arches in terms of popularity and profitability.
At the household level, kitchen pantries and refrigerators are stocked with brands familiar to millions worldwide (e.g. SPAM) just as family dining tables serve as convergence points for traditional home-cooked meals or increasingly fast food takeaway.

Figure 10. SPAM and banana ketchup, Dagupan City, Pangasinan (2006). Author photo.

Figure 11. Jollibee delivery meal, Dagupan City, Pangasinan (2005). Author photo.
When these individual photos are considered altogether, inclinations to view contemporary Filipino foodways as entirely subsumed within the hegemonic schema of today’s global food industry become quite compelling. While not discounting transnational brands/companies’ prevailing influence over local life, such reductive perspectives fall short in accounting for Filipinos’ longstanding and seemingly effortless ability to indigenize outside influences to create something new and largely representative of Philippine culture. The active participation of Filipino interests and local capital have demonstrated a considerable amount of agency in articulating a viable food culture increasingly validated beyond the archipelago and Asia Pacific (Matejowsky 2018).

Author Bio

Ty Matejowsky is a Professor with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. His primary research area is food and foodways, particularly the globalization of fast food and the indigenization of Western food practices and products in local contexts. He explored such themes in his 2018 ethnographic monograph *Fast Food Globalization in the Provincial Philippines* (Lexington Books). In 2014, he was awarded the Association for the Study of Food and Society’s Belasco Prize for Scholarly Excellence for his publication “The Incredible, Edible Balut: Ethnographic Perspectives on the Philippines’ Favorite Liminal Food.”
Bibliography


