

INSIGHTS ON THE EXPLORATION OF FOOD CULTURE OF TWO PROVINCIAL PLACES IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Received December 2020, Accepted Mei 2021

ABSTRACT

This manuscript is compilation of insights on the food culture of Malolos, Bulacan and Mexico, Pampanga in the Philippines. The paper discusses factors that affect the food cultures in the said places. The paper has three major parts: (1) food as a social symbol; (2) food diversity; and (3) food history. The researchers resulted into a conclusion that the food cultures of Malolos, Bulacan and Mexico Pampanga have their own characteristics, especially in terms of the taste, but also share some similarities in terms of food preparation and some of its origins and symbols. These aspects were all affected by different factors such as foreign colonization, scarcity of food, availability of resources, religious beliefs, adaptability of the people in the current situation and innovation.

KEYWORDS

food culture; food history; the Philippines; Bulacan; Pampanga

INTRODUCTION

In studying cultural traditions in many countries in this world, food is considered as one of the many aspects that we can look into to know and dive deeper to the customs, practice and beliefs of the natives and groups of people. However, it is undeniable that food probably is the most persistent.

As the way we collectively perceive food, it is just an important necessity in our daily subsistence but truly, food is much more than a tool of survival. In fact, Canadian food historian Thelma Barer-Stein (1999) in her seminal study of global food cultures entitled *You Eat What You Are* emphasized that food is a cause of liking, relaxation and security. Food is also a representation of friendliness, social status, and religious implication.

Food, according to Montanari (2006), when made, arranged and consumed, is culture. Furthermore, how food originated, the approach in cooking it, how it emanated to taste good and how it became symbol and discourse (Montanari, 2006) are only a few things why food is cultural.

In the biggest continent in the world lies Southeast Asia, it is a region or culture area that has been called a colonial construction. Colonists from the past embarked a huge impact in Southeast Asia's culture resulting to culinary cuisines to cut through the region. There are mapping similarities and differences in the way people feed themselves and the value they place on eating as a material, social, and symbolic act (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2013).

Food culture in this part of the globe cannot be mapped neatly on to other cuts like religion or ethnicity. Even considering the ecological diversity in the region, the same food shed may not produce the same food culture. According to Penny Van Esterik (2017), the reason behind it is the complexity and diversity of the 11 countries of Southeast Asia. Compared to other places, that daily food practices shape and are shaped by local communities, throughout Southeast Asia, the capacity to feed others by sponsoring rice meals, ceremonies, and feasts is a mean to acquire prestige and status (Van Esterik, 2017).

In the Philippines, food culture is also diverse in nature just like how it is in the whole of Southeast Asia. The Philippines is made up of more than 7,100 islands and, as a country, has a diverse community comprising numerous ethnic groups, values, religions, and food. In the Philippines, the food culture is motivated by many customs.

Some of which are exotic, some are very intrinsic, some are influenced by colonizers and some are discovered and personally made by the locals. Food culture may be diverse in this country but it is clearly rich (Van Esterik, 2017). Moreover, the food culture in the Philippines has been highly influenced by religion. Christianity is the biggest religion by which the Christian majority celebrate all the ritual events of the Christian calendar.

For every occasion of the Christian calendar, Filipinos have the sense of responsibility to celebrate it by cooking special dishes that are officially made for the celebration. Also, many foods used to mark both personal and seasonal rituals that are derived from Spanish dishes (including rellenos, stuffed food) and are considered fiesta fare (Van Esterik, 2017).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Sources

Insights based on primary and secondary data were reported by the researchers. The primary data composed of the relevant experiences of the researchers during the food tour, spearheaded by Polytechnic University of the Philippines-Graduate School, Master in Communication Program on the 15th of November, 2019. The information gathered during the interview were the experts in food history and cuisine. On the other hand, the secondary data were utilized to review the relevant articles and ideas presented in the study.

Historical Backgrounds

Malolos, Bulacan. Malolos is the capital city of Bulacan, a province renowned for its historical contributions. Maloleños have mastered the slow cooking process that allows them to have patience and to become hardworking people. Similarly, their dedication to crafts can also be seen in their mainly wood-based kitchen utensils. They claim that the taste of food they prepare can also be influenced by utensils (Cordero-Fernando & Baldemor, 1992).

Mexico, Pampanga. Mexico, in the province of Pampanga, is a municipality. It has a population of 154,624 persons, according to the 2015 census (Census of Population, 2015). It was founded in 1581. The town may have been established earlier in 1581, according to Augustinian documents.



Figure 1. PUP-Graduate School's Master in Communication Graduate Students cum Researchers

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

FOOD AS A SOCIAL SYMBOL

(Loraine Cerillo)

The Philippine food culture is highly influenced by different cultures coming in from various races. This is the reason why we have a diverse culture. One of the many aspects about culture is food and I would like to believe that we Filipinos have a strong food culture which symbolizes national history. Just like any other factors relating to culture, food also divides the rich and the poor.

Economic positions of an individual or distinct group in a community are still one of the dominant cultural symbols of social and political status in any Filipino community. However, food as an indication of social status is deemed as one of the many factors to separate the "haves" and the "haves not". Definitely, the food's role is not solely just to full an empty

stomach but to also define and identify to which social class or economic standing in the community a person or group of people belongs to. People who can afford fancy meals or best parts of meat, for example, are classified in higher social status than those who cannot afford anything but only those that are in the ordinary fare of rice, fish, vegetable and anything that is only available in their own backyards.



Figure 2. Bistro Maloleño, a Filipino restaurant in Malolos

Back to time of the Gallon Trade, certain people who can participate in the barter system just to get good spices to satisfy their taste buds are only the ones who have the ability to pay for what they want to eat. It is more of a “want” than a “need.” People who have the liberty to have full set of courses in one meal, from appetizer to dessert are categorically identified to belong to higher standing compared to those who can only provide one viand good for one whole day. They see food as a tool for survival and not for pleasure.

Furthermore, getting the best cook in town to prepare the food for an individual, family and religious sects directs us that they have both the power and the privilege to pleasure food and that they have enough money to pay. In the other hand, average people only eat whatever is served at the table, irrespective of who cooked it. The most important thing about them is clearly that they get something to eat. As observed, both provinces that the team visited possess diverse cultures and evidently, based on the narratives of the resource persons in the names of Ms. Rizza Enriquez (Malolos, Bulacan) and Ms. “*Atching*” Lilian Mercado-Borromeo (Mexico, Pampanga), food as a social symbol arise in their chronicles.



Figure 3. “Atching” Lilian Mercado-Borromeo’s House and Restaurant

Given all the circumstances stated above, I would to raise the following standpoints and major takeaways based from the narratives and observations gathered from the Food Culinary Trip organized by our class:

1. Religious leaders enjoy the best. Leaders of the religious sects over the years have remained their high social stature. In fact, in a country like the Philippines which is considered a predominant Roman Catholic in Asia have the highest praise for the priests and other religious leaders. Given this background, both resource persons from Malolos, Bulacan and Mexico, Pampanga have mentioned about the privilege of the Catholic priests. First, they get to taste the best part of the meat in any dish they like. Secondly, they can hire people to serve them and the best barrio cooks prepare their food. And lastly, it was mentioned that, they simply get what is best out of anything.

2. Imitation is the highest form of flattery. Since people who are less fortunate can only dream of the food such as *Callos*, which is deliberately considered as “*Pagkain Pangmayaman*”, they have arrived to imitating the taste of the dish by consuming available resources from their backyard which they think can replace the original ingredients and at a minimal expense. They called the dish *Menudo* which is considered “*Pagkaing Barrio*”.

3. Rich people just eat. As narrated by Ms. Rizza, children of prominent families do not really know how to cook merely because they can afford education. By those times, education is only for the families who have enough money to send their children to Spain or any parts of the world to pursue their studies. Moreover, cooking then was not considered the way we perceive it today. During those times, it was just a petty job only for the servants.

FOOD DIVERSITY
(Bien Justine Cruz)



Figure 4. Vicente "Bong" Enriquez, descendant of the late Milagros Enriquez, a well-known food historian in Malolos, Bulacan

Food culture in the Philippines is very dynamic. A lot of influences have been the key in creating this culture in the country. One major factor in the cultivation of the Philippines' food culture is the twilight years of the Philippine revolution against the Spanish colonial rule. In the years earlier (before the Philippines' independence) due to scarcity of resources, the *kababayans* (Filipino ancestors) have cultivated many ways to avoid famine and starvation. This event leads to many Filipino dishes that became traditional or also known as "**Native Filipino Cuisine.**" These cuisines are pure, full of spices and sometimes exotic in nature. Although local in nature, some (if not most) are adapted from the foreign culture.

In the search for the best tasting Filipino Cuisine our group together with our classmates had a food tour in Malolos, Bulacan and Mexico Pampanga. This tour aims to analyze the cultural differences and similarities of the food tradition in both places. Our first stop was in Bistro Maloleño found in Malolos Bulacan. Bistro Maloleño served us the "**Pagkain ng mga bayani**" (*Philippine heroes' favorite dishes*). We were so delighted because of the dishes that they have prepared. Most of the cuisines were prepared with a twist.

Originally Maloleños were known with their sweet taste buds as per Rizza (speaker and the presenter). She said that the locals use a lot of sugar in most of their delicacies but not only in sweet dishes does Malolos is proud of, they are also known with spices which makes their food spicy and tasty. According to Rizza, food during the old times signifies the social classes of the people. The ingredients that are used in cooking can differ based on the family's social status. In most instances, though, in the backyard during the old days, the ingredients in the cooking of the

delicacies can be identified. That is also one of the reasons that people do not share their recipes at those days, which contributes to some becoming almost extinct.

In accordance to that, Rizza mentioned that due to modernization, publicizing the traditional recipes made way to its survival. According to the tradition of Rizza and the Enriquez family, cooking must be in full concentration. Any other task according to them may result into alternation of the original taste of the food. Also, the cuts of the vegetables must be strictly observed. Each cut must be identical with one another to preserve the looks and the taste of the food. They also believe in slow cooking because for them, cooking food patiently will result into extracting the natural flavors of the ingredients.



Figure 5. Some of the favorite foods of the heroes or known collectively as “pagkain ng mga bayani”

Rizza also mentioned that in the contemporary, they adapt also the new ways of cooking. She is also in favor of the new things being incorporated in cooking but the soul of the food must be preserved. She also added that using modern things or metal utensils are fine but using wooden utensils and “*kalan de uling*” is the traditional way by which it adds flavor to the food.

Talking about delicacies, the “pagkain ng mga bayani” was composed of many different dishes that was said to be the favorite of the Philippine National Heroes. Personally, my favorite dish during the visit in Bistro Maloleño is what they call “*Tinola ni Rizal*”. Unlike the traditional tinola that most Filipinos know, Tinola ni Rizal has a special ingredient; native pumpkin. Instead of using papaya or sayote, they used pumpkin to give a different touch to the food. Aside from that, ginger is too abundant in the dish. They used a lot of ginger to put a spicy sensation to the tongue of the taster, and it was really tasty.

After the tour in Malolos, Bulacan, we have decided not to prolong the journey going to Mexico, Pampanga. We have visited there a traditional house that was said to be one of the most authentic in terms of cooking. In Pampanga where it is dubbed as the “*Culinary Capital of the Philippines*” our group have found out that food recipes are passed

through different generations from their ancestors. According to Atching Lillian, long time ago, when famine had stricken the province, Pampangeños started to think and invent ways on how to survive, resulting these locals to start venturing in cooking uncertain recipes made from crickets, frogs, grasshoppers, and other insects. This only proves that these people are good in improvising and inventing food coming from the ingredients they see in their environment. This event started the exotic tradition of the Pampangeños.

Atching Lillian also mentioned that most of their traditional cuisines were inspired by Spanish and Chinese tradition. Another fact from the Pampanga's Cuisine is that they have this technique in preserving food, and they call the process "**Singkutsa**". Singkutsa means that it is parboiled, marinated or halfway cooked. It is achieved mostly to eliminate spoilage and waste. It is not only used to deter food poisoning; it is often used to allow the spices last in order to improve the flavor of any food they prepare. Atching Lillian also noted that because it influences the flavor and color of the food, the utensils and other kitchen products should be made of copper.

One of the most famous dish in Pampanga is "**tocino**" (*cured pork*). It is usually sweet but the tocino that we have tasted in Pampanga is somehow sour. It is not the usual taste of an ordinary tocino, but since vinegar is also used in preserving food I thought that this is another version of tocino which was preserved using vinegar.



Figure 6. Tocino, a famous food in Pampanga

The way Pampangeños preserve their food also makes them popular in making sweet delicacies. Desserts are also part of their food culture. One of the desserts that they are proud of is "**Tibok-tibok**". It is made with carabao's milk and coconut cream topped with **latik**. The coconut cream is cooked for an hour to reduce and form a nice golden brown look that makes the dessert more appetizing. By the time I have tasted *tibok-tibok*, I have imagined myself eating egg pies with a twist. It is so soft and it melts in the mouth. It leaves you a sensation that you just can't stop eating it. It is not so sweet like "**Leche flan**" (another dessert that Pampanga is known for) but its taste makes me feel that I want more.



Figure 7. Leche flan, a dessert famous in Pampanga

FOOD HISTORY

(Louie Giray)



Figure 8. Rheeza Hernandez's, descendant of the late Milagros Enriquez, a well-known food historian in Malolos, Bulacan

In Malolos, Bulacan, we had a food tour at Bistro Maloleño, a restaurant which is known for serving traditional Bulacan dishes. Ms. Rheeza Hernandez welcomed us with warmth and gratitude. We threw several questions to her that would enlighten us more on the Bulacan cuisines. Then, we tasted appreciatively the taste of a Bulakeño: they

prepared a Bulacan feast just only for us. Later, she demonstrated the cooking of Bulacan heritage dishes such as *pinaso* single-handedly.



Figure 9. Pinaso, a native dessert in Malolos, Bulacan

Ms. Rheeza Hernandez's aunt is the widely acclaimed food historian Milagros Santiago-Enriquez. The latter was the author of the historical cookbook, *Kasaysayan ng Kaluto ng Bayan*, which documents the history of Bulacan gastronomy from as early as the 17th century, and provides genuine recipes of Bulacan dishes.

According to Hernandez, Bulakeños prefer the usage bare hands, wooden utensils, *kalan de uling*, and other traditional materials when cooking and preparing food. Old culinary wisdom tells that it will make the dish tastier and better. Cooking gradually, and not in a haste must be present. Multi-tasking is not the way of them for they say that it will degrade the *soul* of the food, and hence diminish the food taste.

She said a delectable meat can be gotten from killing the animals such as pig, chicken in a brutal and traditional fashion. Bulakeños are known to use their resources such as getting their vegetables and spices in their backyard. Cutting the vegetables should be almost the same. They emphasize meticulous and industrious preparation of food, in contrast to hurried manner. Focus and concentration of attention should be manifested when cooking. Doing other tasks, according to them, would affect the taste of the food.

Unfortunately, other recipes die because of other Bulakeños do not want to share them, and are just limited to family and relatives only. Anecdotes tell that some ancestors did not like to share their family recipes that they would even add not to share family recipes to others in their last will and testament. On the other hand, other families made their recipes shareable like they publicize their traditional recipes, driving its way to the survival up to this contemporary time. Lastly, Ms. Rheeza Hernandez said that the evolution of Bulacan foods can be linked to colonization. It may now be attributed to numerous variables, such as age, gender, pattern, curiosity, and so on. But according to her, "reconstruct,

deconstruct, fuse, innovate, or modernize the food but do not let it lose its soul.”

One place is well-known if someone wants to round the gastronomy of Pampanga; Kapampangans (or the people of Pampanga) would pinpoint Atching Lillian’s Kusinang Matua, which roughly can be translated as “old kitchen”. Hence, our group went there to savor the Kapampangan feast. We indeed tasted a variety of traditionally inherited Kapampangan cuisines, and had *feels* of being a Kapampangan. Also, I noticed that culinary home was full of culinary traditional Kapampangan cooking tools that majorly I have never seen before.

Dubbed as the famous *queen of heirloom Kapampangan recipes*, Atching Lillian Borromeo welcomed us with warmth and hospitality. While eating appreciatively the Kapampangan feast for lunch, we conversed on the predilection of a typical Kapampangan, their food culture, and other related topics. She told us that food recipes were passed through down by their ancestors to this present generation. Indeed, sharing is the reason why the Kapampangan cuisine continues to exist.

When asked why Kapampangans are known to eating exotic foods, she told the history behind that was a long time ago, when famine had stricken the province, crops and vegetables withered, animals died, Kapampangans started to think of ways on how to cope regarding the untoward situation. Hence, they started to venture in frying insects. From this, the unusual cuisine of cooking crickets, frogs, grasshoppers, and other insects evolved. I could say that they are very adroit and resourceful. They deal reasonably well despite some difficulties.

According to her, Kapampangans like to show off. For instance, if the original recipe states to put three eggs, a Kapampangan will put four or more eggs. I think that this one is a prominent trait of them, like whenever they copy a certain dish, they intend on making their own grandiose. Therefore, by varying the recipe, it will become more of a Kapampangan’s. This will show that they innovate, re-create, and make a certain recipe their own.

Additionally, I found out that Kapampangans like folktale. They would create make-up stories regarding the existence of a dish. These tales are circulated by word of mouth among the common folk. She told us about the culinary folktales such as of *paksing demonyo*. Further, on the cooking aspect, religiosity manifests. When processing or preparing the food, they would use a set of Catholic prayers. This is an evidence of Spanish influence in their food culture.



Figure 10. Paksing demonyo, a native dish in Pampanga

The kitchen utensils such as, but not limited to, wok and cooking pan must be made of copper. The underlying logic behind that was inherited cooking wisdom tells that if the utensil is not made of copper, it will affect the color of vegetables and will create chemical reaction, hence a change on the food taste. Lastly, according to Atching Lillian, Kapampangans have a sweet tooth. Their strong appetite for sweet food is very well-known, and that every dish they cook should have at least a sweet taste.

CONCLUSIONS

Both Mexico, Pampanga and Malolos, Bulacan are in Region 3, also known as Central Luzon. The region is gifted with a balanced mix of environmental assets. Hence, one can expect richness in their harmonizing food culture. Moreover, these two provinces' cuisines were enriched by their topography, tales, religiosity, histories, and foreign influences.

1. Both provinces that the team visited explicate the differences and similarities between their respective food cultures. It can be gleaned from all the observations gathered that we are the food that we eat. Therefore, food's role is not solely just to full an empty stomach but to also define and identify to which social class or economic standing in the community a person or group of people belongs to.

2. Uniqueness of dishes in every part of the Philippines is a proof of how diverse food culture is in the country. It was proven by the traditional cuisines in Malolos, Bulacan and Mexico, Pampanga. Even though food in these places is somehow similar, the process, and ingredients being incorporated in every dish are different. Diversity in food handling, preparation and eating tradition varies from one place to another. It has

been the sum of all traditions both foreign and local being passed through generations.

3. The dishes in Mexico, Pampanga and Malolos, Bulacan have their historical roots. Let it be an exotic, traditional or contemporary cuisine, a story must be underlying behind it. Knowing the food history is an essential part of the culture. Additionally, the passing down of recipes from one generation to the next will reinforce the existence of cultural identity. Food history is imperative for it mirrors origin, and can help one to possibly recreate or modernize a certain dish without losing its *soul* and *identity*.

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