

Beyond *Sans Rival*: Exploring the French Influence on Philippine Gastronomy



Filipino cuisine as we know it today is a multi-layered expression of culture and history. It has a very obvious Malay matrix in the “native” or indigenous foods like *sinigang*, *pinangat* and *pinais*. It has very strong Chinese influences, as we see from everyday food like *lumpia*, *pansit* and *mami*. The very visible Spanish layer one sees in fiesta food like *lechon*, *relleno* and *morcon*; Arab and Indian traces are seen especially in the south; and the American layer is manifested in the pies, fried chicken, and sandwiches of today. Is there a French connection? a bridge to French culture, consisting perhaps of *gâteau le sans rival*, *petits choux*, *meringue* and *filet mignon*?

I think not, because the sweets came to us as Spanish, through Spain (a recipe found in a cookbook prepared by American ladies in Manila in 1922 calls *petits choux*, “Spanish Cakes”); nor do they constitute a large body or a decisive trend. *Filet mignon* probably came in with American steaks. My hypothesis, however, is that some French influence did come into our lives — indirectly but definitely, and its character can be found by research into the lifestyle rather than the food.

Where does one look? The Frenchmen who travelled or lived here — Paul de la Gironiere, Guillaume Joseph Hyacinthe Jean Baptiste Le Gentil de la Galaisiere, Jean Mallat — commented quite extensively on the food of the natives (*sinigang*, “the aromatic paxio,” etc.) but do not tell us if they taught or served their households or friends French cooking.

The Filipinos who travelled to Paris, however, absorbed French cuisine, and in some cases wrote about it. A valuable witness here is Felix Roxas, who wrote for the Spanish newspaper *El Debate* between 1926 and 1936. He had been Governor of Batangas for a few months

in 1901, Judge of the Court of First Instance and of the Court of Appeals, Mayor of Manila from September 19, 1905 to January 15, 1917, and was related to the Roxases in the Ayala and Araneta lines, as well as to President Manuel Acuña Roxas. In his newspaper pieces, collected as *The World of Felix Roxas* (1970), he provides evidence that many well-to-do Filipinos travelled to Europe in 1890 to attend the Paris Exposition, the main attraction of which was the famous 300-meter Eiffel Tower; and that in 1899 there lived there "a group of respectable Filipinos composed in the majority of those who emigrated from the Philippines to escape the persecutions brought about by the revolution against Spain in 1896."

He writes of Filipinos schooling there, and vacationing in St. Jean de Luz; of the Roxas daughters who had a French governess; of the ladies he and his friends visited and wooed; of dances and dinners; and later of parties given for members of the Philippine Commission like Agoncillo, Riego de Dios, Burgos, Rivera. "I had learned," he said, "to enjoy the inner soul of Paris." And he quotes Isaac Lacson (later Senator), as saying: "He who has not stayed in Paris has not seen the world and has not lived."

He writes often about food tasted in Paris homes and restaurants, and of how exquisite and luxurious and fine it was. Although he does not speak of actually transplanting these dishes to Manila, it seems safe to assume that these Filipinos in Paris brought back at least the taste for French food and wine, and perhaps the will to have them in their homes when the ingredients, the skills and the occasions were available to them.

One source, therefore, of the French influence would be the Filipinos who lived in Europe, especially in Paris, for some time. E. Aguilar Cruz (Francophile, gourmet, painter and writer) points out that Rizal and his companions usually ate in their boarding houses to save money, contributing cash and efforts for parties, and cooking chicken and *adobo* just as Filipino graduate students abroad do today. It is recorded that Rizal was once sent out to buy champagne, and that he thought it extravagant. Vicente Soto of Cebu, nationalist editor and playwright, was quite a Francophile, addicted to restaurants, theater and the Folies Bergere. When he returned home, he is said to have kept a chef, had a menu to announce the dishes as well as the music to be played, and had wine with his meals.

Felix Roxas also mentions food and feasts in the Philippines, especially the fiesta of Sulipan, and his stay at the house of his classmate, Cayetano Arnedo, son of Capitan Joaquin Arnedo, "in a spotless room furnished with a comfortable bed, a European wash-stand, *kananga* toilet water and other colognes." There he was given "new slippers, bed-clothing, perfume, brush and soap." The dining room, he records, was "extremely luxurious: the dishware, glassware, and silverware were all French; the food was unimaginably exquisite"; the napkins were hand-embroidered, the menus "more select and exquisite . . . than the best Manila restaurants could offer: from the tiny *maya* or rice bird, deliciously seasoned, to the rarest shellfish. The most savory fruits, inimitably perfect ices, and 'syrops' were enjoyed by even the most demanding of guests." When the guests left, "a pot full of Sulipeño sweetmeats was placed among their luggage for those members of their guests' families who had not attended the Sulipan festivities."

Gene Gonzalez, Arnedo's great-grandson, tells of the chefs of the Arnedo Family, Capitan Juan Padilla and Emilio Gonzalez, who were responsible for the inaugural banquet of the First Philippine Republic on September 29, 1898. The famous "Sulipan chefs" cooked the families' banquets, daily meals, and pastries, and some of their recipes of European origin or orientation — *Lapu-lapu al graten*, *Pistou Sulipan*, *Jamon Sulipeña*, French White Soup — are now enshrined in Gene's own restaurants and in his cookbook, *Cocina Sulipeña*, 1993. Although Gene does not remember the family as being wine-drinkers, he says that many empty bottles of Mumm's Champagne were found under the house years later.

Solid evidence of the French-influenced lifestyle is a magnificent set of Sevres tableware (possibly for 300, the family believes, calculating from the remaining pieces), all plates and glasses monogrammed, complete with large platters for *pièces montées* and carafes for wine, gift of the Grand Duke Alexis of Russia — and a set before that, both of which prove that the family not only used European style service, but also European style food and wine. Gene further remembers hearing family tales about the sailors on French ships (Sulipan being a port) teaching the natives from whom they brought produce, how to cook food their way. The Sulipan port and wealth were therefore both entries for the French connection into the native lifestyle.

To return to the food at the Malolos Congress and the inauguration of the First Philippine Republic, this is what was served:

HORS D'OEUVRE

HUITRES - CREVETTES ROSES - BEURRE -

RADIS - OLIVES - SAUCISSON DE LYON -

SARDINES AUX TOMATES - SAUMON HOLLANDAIS

COQUILLES DE CRABES

VOL-AU-VENT

a la Financiere

ABATIS DE POULET

a la Tagale

COTELETTES DE MOUTON

a la Papillote

Pommes de Terre Faille

DINDE TRUFFÉE

a la Manilloise

FILET

a la Chateaubriand

Haricots Verts

JAMBON FROID

Asperges en branche

DESSERT

FROMAGES - FRUITS - CONFITURES.

GELEE DE FRAISES - GLACES

VINS

BORDEAUX - SAUTERNE - XERES - CHAMPAGNE

LIQUEURS

CHARTREUSE - COGNAC

CAFE - THÉ

Although the *Abatis de Poulet a la Tagale* may well have been a *Tagalog adobong atay at balun-balunan*, and the *Coquilles de Crabes a relyenong almasag* (or *tortilla de cangrejo*) in the shell, the rest seems almost surely French.

In the years after the revolution, Filipinos who travelled abroad did not usually do so for political reasons, as had the friends and relatives of Felix Roxas. Travel was for the wealthy, and they often travelled with chefs or valets. Martin Tinio, Jr., himself an accomplished cook and a devotee of food and wine, speaks of recipes that he or his family prepare for holidays and other special occasions, and which his parents or he himself had first encountered in France.

For example, there is a roast chicken from the Pyrenees (stuffed with olives and garlic, charcoal-broiled with rosemary and thyme), and from Les Halles, oranges glazed with syrup and Cointreau. He points out that the Nakpil family's specialty, stuffed bell peppers served on the tree, represents not a Spanish, but a French verve and style of presentation. He also suggests that the *Pescado en Mayonesa* featured at legions of Philippine parties probably started out as a French (perhaps Escoffier-influenced) dish, as did the luxurious *relleno* of the Ermita Guerreros, stuffed with Oxford sausage, *paté de foie gras*, and truffles.

The Guerreros of Ermita have been written about by two of their many famous members. Carmen Guerrero Nakpil and Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero, but anyone who knows them knows that a special family fame lies in the fields of food and drink. Leny Guerrero Joven, whose mother was French, tells of her family's paramount interest in food. Not only did her mother cook French dishes; her brother used to bake elaborate cakes to give to his girlfriends. When she opened a restaurant called Costa Brava in the 60s, one of her centerpieces was an excellent *bouillabaisse*, and another was *Polio a la Veronica* (with grapes), which in French menus is called *Poulet Veronique*. Her mother, moreover, brought her French tastes to Filipino dishes as well, and to the pairing of foods. Her *sinigang sa pinya* for example, soured with green pineapple and *alibangbang* leaves, came with an unusual *sawsawan* of tomatoes, *bagoong*, green mango, and onions, and was paired with *inihaw na baboy*. Her *paksiw na banak* made with Paombong vinegar, was accompanied by a *sawsawan* of *patis*, *chicharron* and *wansoy*.

Martin Tinio indicates still another possible source of French influence: Spanish officialdom, and their own devotion to French as well as Spanish gastronomy. Studying the last will and testament of Governor General Aranda, he found listings such as: 72 gold platters, and silver mustard pots — possible evidence of banquets and a lifestyle beyond the usual Spanish mold.

If the men travelled to sample the foodpots and the fleshpots, the women often travelled to study cooking, one of the few areas of study and accomplishment acceptable for and available to women in pre-feminist times. E. Aguilar (Abe) Cruz observes that in the 1920s women of San Fernando, Pampanga, were among those who went to study at

the Cordon Bleu in Paris. Doña Luisa Lichauco, legendary teacher of cooking, is remembered by her pupils and descendants for dishes like *cocido*, *paella*, *ensaimadas* and *baba au rhum*. She studied at the Fannie Farmer School of Cooking in Boston, at a School for Dietetics in the U.S. (in order to cook for her husband, who had certain ailments), and at the Cordon Bleu, from 1928-29. When she returned, she opened a school in her home, and later in another building, where she offered an eight-month course in cooking.

Mariano A. Henson of Pampanga, a lovely old man in white who came to see me in the late 60s when I first began writing a column on food, has written more than 30 publications (e.g. histories and genealogies of Pampanga), as well as a cookbook in Pampango (1968) entitled: *Cusinang Capampangan, patina ding linutu nang ibat caring Americano, Castila, Frances, Intsic, Italiano, Polaco, Turco at aliwa pa, nahun qng paglasa nang sarili* (Pampango cooking, including American, Spanish, French, Chinese, Italian, Polish, Turkish and other dishes, according to one's own taste).

Each recipe gives exact measurements, the price for each condiment, the total price for each dish, and the date when he tested it. Among the French recipes he obviously cooked and served to his family are: *Salmon au Gratin*, *Chuletas a la Papillote*, *Bouillavaise* [sic] *de Marsella*, *Oysters a la D'Uxelles*, *Mechadong solomillo a la Francesa*, *Fish au Beurre*, and *Glorified Fondue* (note the mix of spelling and languages).

The earlier cookbooks tell stories of their own. *Condimentos Indigenas*, 1918, was written by Pura Villanueva de Kalaw because she wanted to buy a billiard table for her husband, Teodoro M. Kalaw, who had not only lost his court case for "Aves de Rapiña" but had also had a leg amputated. This does not have any recipes even vaguely French; they were gathered from friends and family, and are all indeed indigenous.

Two different cookbooks, *Aklat ng Pagluluto, hinango sa lalong bantog at dakilang aklat ng pagluluto sa gawing Europa at sa Filipinas, na kapuwa nasusulat sa wikang Kastila, at isinatagalog ng boong katiyagaan ni Rosendo Ignacio* (Cookbook adapted from great and famous cookbooks from Europe and the Philippines, both written in Spanish, and translated into Tagalog with much diligence by Rosendo Ignacio), 1919, and *Kusinang Tagalog ng akiatan at limbagan ni P. Sayo balo ni Soriano (ang aklat na ito ay naglalaman ng mga sarisari at*

maraming kiyas ng lutuin sa lalong madaling paraan at napakatipid na paggugugol (Tagalog cooking from the bookstore and publishing house of P. Sayo widow of Soriano [This book contains different recipes and rapid and economical ways of cooking]), 1916, are obviously from the same source, probably translations of the very same cookbook, as an examination of the recipes and introductory portions clearly shows. Although Spanish recipes predominate, some possible French influences are visible: *Salsa holandesa*, *Puchero a la francesa*, *Cocido parisien* (French *pot-au-feu*), *Manilas de ternera en fricase*, *Salchichon de Lyon*, *Queso a la Borgoña*. They are few; they may have been adapted from French recipes and already considered Spanish, but the Gallic strains are visible.

We do, however, have a French cookbook published in Manila: *Pasteleria at reposteria francesa at española, aclat na ganap naglalaman ng maraming palacad sa pag-gaua ng lahat ng mga bagay-bagay na matamis at mga pasteles ni P. R. Macosta; Isinalir sa uicang tagalog ni Crispulo Trinidad, Professor sa Latinidac* (French and Spanish Pastries and Confectioneries, a book that contains many ways of cooking all sweet things and pastries), 1919. The cover features a tall mounted French piece like those in traditional classic French cookbooks, captioned: *Croquemboucheng caranuian*. The word *croquembouche* (*croque-en-bouche*) designate “all kinds of patisserie which crunches and crumbles in the mouth, like chestnuts, oranges or cream puffs glazed with sugar cooked to the crack stage. The recipe illustrated instructs one in the assembling of *croquignoles* (egg whites and icing sugar baked in various shapes, similar to meringues), and is called “*caranuian*” or ordinary in contrast to *Croquembouche a la Reina*, which includes “sweet almonds ground very fine.”

Among the other recipes illustrated are elaborate creation like: *Mga trufas* (truffles) *empanadas*, *Pastel na mainit ng faisá* (pheasant) *may casamang irufas*, *Pastel na mainit ng cogujadas* (crested larks) *a las finas hierbas*, *Timbal ng mga pichones na may trufas*, *Moli para sa mumunting pastel na gelatina na may codornices* (quail). *Turro a la Turca*. Although there are recipes that may conceivably have been cooked, even become popular locally, like *flan* and *buñuel a la española*, most of the recipes are of 19th century French pastries and party pieces that have left no contemporary evidence of ever having been current. (Where would one get pheasants and crested larks?) We do

not know, therefore, if anyone ever used this cookbook (many copies were and are probably still available at Librer Martinez for P3.60 or so). The book is, however, evidence of interest in French cuisine strong enough to motivate the translation and printing of a cookbook.

A famous and well-used cookbook is *Everyday Cookery for the Home* by Sofia R. de Veyra and Ma. Paz Zamora Mascuñana (Philippine Education Co., 1930, with English and Spanish texts). It came out in the American period, when housewives were eager to learn new recipes aside from “our own cooking” (which meant Filipino and Spanish), and new techniques of home economics and nutrition. Here we find a dominance of American recipes (sandwiches, punch, waffles, muffins), but some whiffs of France: *Potato Galletes*, *Sopa “comptesse,” Sopa “creme Clamart” Homard a la Newberg*, *salmon al gratin*, *filet de veau viennoise*, *relleno para el petit chous*.

Nowhere in sight, by the way, is the *gateau le sans rival*.

Thus French dishes and cooking styles came into the country through Filipinos living and travelling abroad, Filipinas studying in European cooking schools. Frenchmen/women marrying and/or living in the Philippines, and more recently French restaurants, menus and chefs, books on cooking and wine. No French dishes can be said to have become part of, adapted and indigenized into, our cuisine, as have *paella*, *morcon*, *relleno*, *puchero*; and *lumpia*, *siomai*, *camaron rebozado*; and hamburgers, hot dogs and sandwiches.

It seems that, as E. Aguilar Cruz says, “French influence is to be found in the high regard for everything French in food and drink among Filipinos of a certain cultural (social) level. They indulge their taste for French food and drink in restaurants. Their own pantries are not equipped to cater to their preferences for such items.”

In other words, the French influence is not on our cooking, our dishes, our daily bread, but on gastronomy — the art or science of good eating, the aspiration to or passion for epicurism. French cuisine has become the standard, and anyone seriously interested in good food strives to learn about, experience, and taste it. In the 60s came the first really French restaurant, Au Bon Vivant. Abe Cruz says that there was a Restaurant de Paris near the Ideal Theater early in the century, but he doubts if it was really focused on French food (maybe just on Paris?). Au Bon Vivant was, and so were later restaurants and

dining rooms in the 5-star hotels, like the Mandarin's late L'Hirondelle, and now the Shangri-la's Cheval Blanc.

Although Filipinos learned to drink wine in the Spanish colonial period, this was usually *vino tinto*, *rioja* and *jerez*, and the brands that became familiar were Diamante, Valdepeñas, Marques de Riscal. Abe Cruz points out that these were drunk throughout the meal, or during a *tertulia* with little sweetmeats, sort of the way beer is drunk today, and not as the French drink wine, pointedly pairing it with dishes for reasons of appropriateness. Today many epicures and would-be gourmets have learned to drink wine — by studying or travelling abroad, by reading and tasting — and some even keep wine cellars. There are societies and associations like the Chaîne des Rotisseurs, the Wine Society, the Cheese Society; there are columns in the papers on wine-tasting.

The French connection, therefore, does not run in our veins, as the Spanish and Chinese connections do. We did not absorb it and make it ours; perhaps it did not fit in with our Malay taste buds, or did not stay long enough to be adapted and adopted. It lives, however, in standards aspired for — in the ideal, so to speak. It still remains to be seen if *coq au vin* and *soupe à l'oignon* can become Pinoy.

But the French ideal remains and grows. Today every *matakaw* wants to be called a gourmet, even while real gourmets (and there are Filipino gourmets) humbly call themselves learners or Francophiles, acknowledging that they love, but have a lot to learn. Today French food is served by some housewives, by some caterers, and of course by the young chefs (male and female) trained in the hotels and culinary institutes abroad. Our French-speaking former President Corazon Aquino served French meals as well as Filipino meals in Malacanang, and today our gastronomic vocabulary extends far beyond *petits choux* and *sans rival*. 