

Book Review

The Foods of Jose Rizal

Felice Prudente Sta. Maria

Mandaluyong City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2012.

Food as Social Transformation^{*}

In an earlier review for *Budhi*, I noted that even the recent milestone of the sesquicentennial of José Rizal in 2011 did not produce much new publications on Rizal, except perhaps Felice Prudente Sta. Maria's *The Foods of Rizal*.¹ It is therefore important to look at the place of Felice's Rizal book not only in the writing of food history but its significance for the world we live in today.

There were earlier works that explored the food that Rizal described in his novels, particularly, the colorful descriptions in his *Noli Me Tangere*. Ambeth Ocampo, in one of the columns in his best-selling book *Rizal Without the Overcoat*, wondered if the *Noli Me Tangere* could have been a

^{*} This book review is an extended version of an op-ed published in *The Manila Times* on April 25, 2020. See Michael "Xiao" Chua, "Food and Human Rights," <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/05/09/opinion/columnists/what-the-quincennial-is-not-and-should-not-be/723634/>.

¹ Review of *Interpreting Rizal*, by Caroline S. Hau, *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 23, no.1 (April 2019), 103.

cookbook.² Reading Rizal's book as a fifth-grade student in 1995 made me think about Rizal's food descriptions and wondered if he knew how to cook. Perhaps he was even admired by many women because he knew that the way to anyone's heart is through their stomach.

José Victor Torres followed up with a whole paper about the *Noli* "cookbook" entitled "What Capitan Tiago Served and Padre Damaso Ate: Nineteenth Century Philippine Cuisine as Depicted in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*," which will be included in his upcoming book. Torres argued that the novel may be fiction, but it can be a primary source of the writer's social and cultural context.

Writers get much of their ideas from what they observed and experienced. Although people, places, events, and time periods can be claimed as fictitious in many literary works, it cannot be denied that these are taken from fact and influenced the author in his writings.³

Torres explains further that in Rizal's novel, he showed the actual excesses of the friars by showing how they ate: for example, when Padre Damaso was disappointed at having been served a "bad" bowl of tinola during Kapitan

² Ambeth Ocampo, "The *Noli* Could Have Been A Cookbook," *Rizal Without the Overcoat* (Quezon City: Anvil Publishing, 2018), 92–93.

³ Jose Victor Torres, "What Capitan Tiago Served and Padre Damaso Ate: Nineteenth Century Cuisine as Depicted in Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*," *Symposium on the Commemoration of the 138th Birth Anniversary of Dr. Jose Rizal* (Manila: National Historical Institute Auditorium, July 3, 2009)

Tiago's party and when Padre Salvi was feeling terrible that he only touched two of his six meals, meaning he usually ate a full course meal by European standards.

Both Ocampo and Torres are well-known Rizal historians. Even as a well-published author, Felice Prudente Sta. Maria claims that she is still uncomfortable being placed among them. (I think she is being too modest.) In her eyes, she is at best a "cultural advocate" having served as a commissioner of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, Philippine Centennial Commission, UNESCO National Commission of the Philippines and as a trustee of the National Museum of the Philippines. She was also one of the people who pioneered and professionalized heritage advocacy in the Philippines and cemented that by publishing in 2001 her book: *A Cultural Worker's First Manual*.

But Felice had already made considerable contributions to the telling of public history, even before the term recently became en vogue in the Philippines. In 1978, she was the photograph editor of the ten-volume *Filipino Heritage: The Making of a Nation*. She has authored other coffeetable books on Philippine history such as *Household Antiques and Heirlooms*, *Visions of the Possible: Legacies of Philippine Freedom* (during the Philippine Centennial of 1998), and other books such as *Halapi: Essays on Philippine Culture*. She counts two past presidents of the Philippine Historical Association as the two women who brought her to the path of Clio, Greek muse of history: Dr. Rosario Cortes in high school and Dr. Milagros Guerrero in her college class, Philippine History 101.

Historians recognize Felice's scholarship when it comes to culinary history. She had been invited twice by Dr. Bernardita Reyes Churchill to read her food history papers for the Philippine National Historical Society. She is also slated to read another one in the National Quincentennial Conference of the Philippine Historical Association in September 2020.

Felice comes from the tradition of culinary historians such as Bulaqueña Milagros Enriquez, who collected recipes relating to Filipino heroes in *Kasaysayan ng Kaluto ng Bayan* (1993), and Doreen Fernandez, who contextualized food in the frame of history and culture in her numerous essays and books. In one of my conversations with Felice on Facebook, she told me, "I read about food history of other countries and wanted to understand how cooking and food culture developed in RP [the Republic of the Philippines]. Since no one was looking into it, I started to. I felt food as part of social transformation needed more research." Her operative terms: food as part of social transformation.

In 2006, Felice authored *The Governor-General's Kitchen: Philippine Culinary Vignettes and Period Recipes, 1521–1935*. Her more recent works were actually initiatives in bringing Philippine culinary culture and history closer to the people, even children: *What Kids Should Know About Filipino Food* and *Kain Na!: An Illustrated Guide to Philippine Food*, released just last year. She led the resurgence of interest in culinary history in this decade. Younger authors have and will follow her footsteps such as Jenny Orillos who authored *Panaderia:*

Philippine Bread, Biscuit and Bakery Traditions and Ige Ramos who authored *Republic of Taste: The Untold Story of Cavite Cuisine* and *Dila at Bandila: Ang Paghabanap sa Pambansang Panlasa ng Filipinas*. They, together with Heritage Chef Jam Melchor, will form the Philippine Culinary Heritage Movement.

George Harrison once sang in a Beatles song, “You know that what you eat you are.” Hence, Felice was seeking our identity in the food we ate. She always asked the questions: “Will it tell me about who the Filipino is? Will the findings hold through generations?” Then she realized that the way we eat needs to stay as traditions because these possess some positive qualities that help us, Filipinos, cope with life.

One of these traditions is the act of offering food to a stranger as an offer of peace, goodwill, and friendship. In 1521, our ancestors demonstrated a gesture of Filipino humanity in Guiuan, Eastern Samar despite the language barrier when they offered food to the weary, tired, and hungry members of the Magellan Expedition when they landed on our shores. Their survival made possible the first circumnavigation of the world. There are also food traditions that serve numerous functions in our society: as thanksgiving to the Almighty for a bountiful harvest; as a show of community spirit as demonstrated by our festivals that were a continuation of our ancient rituals; and as an expression of *pakikisama* (camaraderie) and *pakikiramay* (being there for someone in times of loneliness) in the case of our “*inumans*” (drinking parties).

Sta. Maria's 2012 book, *The Foods of José Rizal*, started this decade's interest in culinary history. During the Rizal Martyrdom Centennial in 1996, she had already authored a beautifully written and designed coffee table book, *In Excelsis: The Mission of José P. Rizal, Humanist and Philippine National Hero*. She took matters to another level by writing a full biography of Rizal based on historical records of the food he ate!

In my *Manila Times* article, "Food and Human Rights,"⁴ I highlighted the obvious importance of Felice's *The Foods of Jose Rizal*: the novelty of seeing the Philippine national hero through meals. Historian Jonathan Balsamo told me in 2011 that during the 150th anniversary of Rizal's birth, aside from compilations and reissues, not much new material on Rizal came out of the Sesquicentennial—this being the case until Sta. Maria's book came out. It was the most important new contribution to the Sesquicentennial of Rizal, except, it came a year late. Who knew that a new way of looking at something old could happen?

Felice traces the book's genesis to 1975, when she was able to leaf through Rizal's actual pocket diary in Europe at the Eugenio Lopez Memorial Museum. The diary included a list of meals he purchased. Tucked inside the November 9, 1891 entry was a small card reading: "The Manufacture of Champagne." Felice wondered, "what else had caught Rizal's culinary fancy."

⁴ Chua, *Manila Times*, April 25, 2020.

This question began years of highlighting with her pen and bookmarking in her mind references of food in Rizal documents and books. She mixed them with her knowledge of world cuisine and food preparation through the centuries. When the Rizal Sesquicentennial came, it was the opportune moment to bring them all out. The end result was a work that incorporated extracts from Rizal's works in addition to his lifestyle and milieu to see not only his biography but also various important themes that were an integral part to the story of the creation of the Filipino nation that may resonate with today's context.

This was how Felice opened Rizal's life from the perspective of the food he ate:

José Rizal was well-fed. . . . There is no record that he experienced hunger as a child.

She went on with the all too familiar background of the Rizal family as farmers and entrepreneurs. Being a family that was well off, she even described in detail the Rizal family home's furnishings, especially those inside their kitchen. Through the forgotten works of Rizal textbook historian Diosdado Capino, Felice was able to tell us about the Rizal family cook Valentina Sanchez or "Vale" who was the wife of a family driver.

Vale was present when the rebuilt Rizal home was inaugurated on June 19, 1950. She recalled to Capino that Rizal's favorite food was "*carneng asada*, or beefsteak with

sauce.”⁵ But Felice’s *Foods of Jose Rizal* is not only a history book. True to form, the book is a total experience. Each chapter opens with a recipe of food mentioned in the book approximating them from contemporaneous Philippine cookbooks. This gives the reader the chance to try that *carne asada* as it tasted during Rizal’s time.

Based on documentary evidence like his diaries and “laundry lists,” Felice was able to describe the food and drinks Rizal enjoyed during his many travels. In only one occasion, Rizal described in full detail the food he ate. It was February 17, 1888; and he was in Hong Kong. He was so amazed with the rich variety of courses served to him and his companion by of all people, the Dominicans there, and of all dishes, Chinese food.

The *lauriat* menu moved from tea and dried fruits to goose followed by shrimp, then an egg dish, meat, shark’s fin, bird’s nest, tender duck, chicken with mushrooms, a ray fish, chicken with ham, and shark’s belly. After another serving of tea, more dishes arrived—chicken cooked with ginger followed by fish head. The last item on the menu was mushroom and pork served with two plate of rolls, and tea.⁶

During the lockdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, I joined Ige Ramos and José Victor Torres in a

⁵ Felice Sta. Maria, *The Foods of Rizal*, 9.

⁶ Felice Sta. Maria, *The Foods of Rizal*, 76-77.

Facebook webinar on May 30, 2020 for the Philippine Culinary Heritage Movement entitled “The Philippines on a Plate: Pagkain at Kasaysayan.” During the discussion, we talked about Rizal’s food descriptions in his novels as his way of describing the follies of colonialism.

We discussed how in the first chapters of the *Noli Me Tangere*, Rizal showed what Marcelo H. del Pilar described as “Monastic Supremacy in the Philippines.” The *cabecera* or the end of the table, a place of power usually reserved for the head of the family, was reserved for the priest when he was there. In chapter three of the *Noli Me Tangere*, there were two priests present at a dinner party, Padre Damaso and Padre Sibyla. Not only was Padre Damaso sidetracked when Padre Sibyla finally sat on the coveted chair, he realized that he received a bowl of tinola, “composed of a lot of squash and broth with barely a chicken neck and wing.”⁷ Observing that everyone was enjoying their “good” serving of tinola with chicken legs and breasts, especially Crisostomo Ibarra who had the giblets, Padre Damaso strongly realized that he had received a bad serving. Rizal established Damaso’s pettiness as he “smashed the squash violently, took a spoonful of broth, and then loudly dropped his spoon and pushed his plate away.”⁸

⁷ Jose Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*, trans. Lean Ma. Guerrero (Indiana University Press, 1961), 17. Quotes from Rizal’s novel from the Leon Ma. Guerrero translation.

⁸ Sta. Maria, *The Foods of Rizal*, 118.

With Felice's *The Foods of Rizal* as my guide, I argued that Rizal weaponized food descriptions to expose the problems of his time—not only of colonialism but also of the long prevailing misogyny that was already present during the nineteenth century.

This was evident in Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* in the scene describing Sisa eagerly waiting for her sons Crispin and Basilio. She was cooking their dinner as she anticipated their coming home after their long day of working at the parish. Economic historian Van Ybiernas noted to me that even if Sisa was described as poor in the novel, her nipa hut was on land she owned, which illustrated that more than poverty, the main problem during the twilight of colonial Philippines was really the Spaniards' unequal treatment and racism toward *indios*. In fact, Sisa was able to prepare a meal of sardines accompanied by tomatoes plucked from her garden and some meat from her friend, Pilosopo Tasio—"indeed a dinner fit for friars."⁹

What Felice missed in her book was the next scene from the novel that would have demonstrated male chauvinism in the islands brought about by the colonial experience and the downgrading of women from her ancient status as co-equal. Pedro, Sisa's cockfighter husband, suddenly came and without missing a beat ate everything that she prepared for her kids and then left. This incident will set-up the series of tragedies in the life of Sisa which included her children

⁹ Sta Maria, *The Foods of Rizal*, 119–120.

missing, going crazy, and falling victim to other abusive people, which unfortunately included a woman, the cruel Doña Consolacion. Here we see how Rizal weaponized food descriptions and incidents to fight for human rights!

Even in his annotations of Antonio de Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, Rizal was using food to expose the cultural prejudice against Filipinos and forwarded the Filipino perspective. When Morga described our ancestors in the following way:

They prefer meat and fish, saltfish, which begin to decompose and smell.

Rizal gave his annotations in the footnotes.

This is another preoccupation of the Spaniards who, like any other nation, treat food to which they are not accustomed or is unknown to them with disgust. . . . The fish that Morga mentions, that cannot be known to be good until it begins to rot, all on the contrary: it is *bagoong* [salted and fermented fish or shrimp paste used as a sauce in Filipino cuisine] and those who have eaten it and tasted it know that it neither is nor should be rotten.¹⁰

¹⁰ Jose Rizal on Antonio de Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* as cited in Ambeth Ocampo, "Rotten Beef and Stinking Fish: Rizal at the Writing of Philippine History," *Kinaadman* 20 (1998), 141.

Here you see what Felice noted when she said that Rizal advocated respect for the differences in culinary traditions, having been exposed to a variety of them during his travels.

Rizal not only consumed food but consumed it anthropologically. He described his experience inside the Javanese Kampong village and restaurant in the Dutch pavilion of colonized ethnic groups in the Paris Exposition of 1889: “The people are of the same race as ours, and we almost understand each other: They speak Malayan and I, Tagalog.”¹¹ Felice wrote that this incident “helped expand his cause of human rights into a Pan-Malayan one.” Rizal wrote a separate historical essay about commonalities in the languages and maritime traditions of the peoples of Southeast Asia and Oceania long before experts called them the Austronesians.

Despite starting well, the Rizal family fortune dimmed when beet sugar was discovered in Europe, weakening the demand for the sugarcane harvest from Calamba. When Jose Rizal’s brother, Paciano, was no longer sending money regularly, he experienced hunger. He ate frugally in Europe, which was noted by Kapampangan Revolutionary General Jose Alejandrino, Rizal’s roommate in Ghent, Belgium. They agreed to split a box of biscuits. While Alejandrino starved with the set-up and ate all his part in fifteen days, Rizal faithfully followed his regimen for thirty days.¹² They

¹¹ Sta. Maria, *The Foods of Rizal*, 93.

¹² Ibid., 103.

eventually indulged by buying some pansit noodles, which they enjoyed for days (perhaps an equivalent of how Filipino students today consume Lucky Me Pancit Canton), although one wonders where Rizal and his friend got it.

One can surmise that his experience of hunger made him have more compassion for those with whom he was fighting for. That is why when Rizal was exiled in Dapitan, Floro Quibuyen argued that he not only introduced the Dapitanos to progressive education but also to social entrepreneurship. He empowered the locals to improve agriculture and fishing, which gave them more *kaginhawahan* (well-being or having the good life) by securing more food to their tables.

There was one poignant detail in Rizal's last moment. In a great show of compassion and humanity, he did not eat the last breakfast that was served him but laid the three hard-boiled eggs on the floor saying, "Let the mice have their fiesta, too."¹³ He then walked to his martyr's death.

Rizal fought and died that great December morning for the right of people to live with dignity. This included the right of Filipinos to have decent food. In our conversations, Felice revealed to me her whole framework in writing food history "includes Filipinos efforts to keep food on the table." She said, "The fight against hunger is fundamental to individual and societal security." In *The Foods of José Rizal*, she effectively demonstrated that food is part of social transformation. As Felice said, in writing about his food, we

¹³ Sta. Maria, *The Foods of Rizal*, 168.

knew Rizal better—we knew about his principles and motivations, his way of coping and his way of fighting.

With this in mind, we can imagine how culinary historians will talk about how, during this COVID-19 crisis, Filipinos coped with the way they created new ways of delivering and serving food or how restaurants adapted to the new normal.

They will write about how, while having idle time during this pandemic, a “phenomenon” emerged of more people learning how to bake and how families re-experienced and revalued eating meals together with home-cooked food. They will write about the private sector and the government’s relief efforts and *bayaniban* (coming together to help other), or sometimes the lack of it. They will show Filipinos bravely bracing the threat of the pandemic to go to stores just to seek the basic human right to eat and survive. And hopefully, they will talk about how we survived this as a people and as a nation.

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