

Balut to Barbecue: Philippine Streetfood



Street food in the Philippines is not only a convenience for those without time to cook, or an economic phenomenon that flourishes during hard times. It is a lifestyle. Nineteenth century prints, paintings and accounts of the Spanish era by foreign travellers, pay notice to the wayside vendors of carabao's milk, rice cakes, and fruits. Karuth (1858) painted a woman steaming *puto bumbong* right on the road, and her customer eating the product on a low table in front of her. Chinese vendors are shown selling and serving noodles at roadside, or carrying their pastries and *pan de sal* in baskets balanced on a shoulder pole, or on a horse.

The vending continued into the American colonial period, and into the era called “peacetime” — before World War II — when in the districts of Manila, one could find meals and snacks on the sidewalk: *puto* and *bibingka* just cooked; Chinese *bicho-bicho*, *gur-gurya*, and *buchi* a-frying; Japanese *halo-halo* or *mongo con hielo* mixed to order. During the Japanese occupation economic stress brought out such imaginative solutions to privation as “*castanyog*” — a piece of coconut meat roasted on live charcoal, aspiring to the flavor and texture of chestnuts (*castanas*) — and *binatog* — corn kernels boiled till puffed, eaten with grated coconut — both sold on the street.

Today in the 90s, the abundance and variety are so vast that I can luxuriously limit my field, and choose to discuss only food sold on streets, at roadsides, in the open, and meant to be eaten on the spot (not to be taken home, although one could); and only that sold by vendors without fixed stalls or stores. Even though some wheel-less street food stalls have the customers' benches or stools right on the street, with their backs fanned (and dusted) by the passing traffic, these are not included, since they have fixed (albeit ramshackle) structures, and might be said to be a step toward the permanent eating

place. For this exploration, ambulance, impermanence, and transience are primary criteria.

Since food types and selling times intersect and overlap, let us examine Philippine street food of the 90s from the points of view of place and manner of vending.

“Walking” Street Food

The direct heirs of the Chinese vendors who carried paired baskets balanced on shoulder poles are those who sell green mangoes as a snack. They travel the quieter roads, those without too much traffic, and will occasionally rest their baskets, sit on a curb or outside a building (like the U.P. Shopping Center), and peel the mangoes like flowers, then slip them into plastic bags (with salt or *bagoong*) for the customer. In traffic, of course, they use single baskets, with the mangoes already peeled and packaged.

Sharing the busier thoroughfares and dodging traffic with them are the sellers of other fruit (santol, mangosteen, lanzones, boiled bananas) and peanuts. The peanut vendors have progressed from pre-packaged nuts (in brown paper, in plastic) to tubfuls kept hot (fire beneath) on wheels. Even in a traffic jam, even between traffic light changes, they measure, package, receive payment for, and make change for, hot boiled peanuts in the shell.

Also in this category is the *taho* vendor, who plies quiet residential areas. He gets his soy bean curd from a factory, slices it and adds syrup and flavoring, and carries this from house to house in aluminum containers, spooning it into the customers' bowls. Since he usually plies the same neighborhood for years, his regular customers (*suki*) become friends, as do their children, whom he can watch growing up into customers.

A recent escalation of this type is the vendor on a bicycle. One parked at the domestic airport has hot peanuts in the shell as a main product, and beside it peeled green mangoes skewered on sticks, and kept fresh in jars of water, with the *bagoong*-to-go ready in plastic jars. The most recent development is the bicycle equipped with a compartmented, glass-fronted, showcase with 18-24 fruits or nuts preserved Chinese-style. The bicycle man weaves through the streets of Manila and Tacloban, then parks at a school or streetcorner and unfurls its built-in umbrella.

The Sitting Vendors

Outside homes in residential areas sometimes sit solitary vendors — housewives, household help, or children — offering baskets or trays of home products: rice cakes, skewered syrup-coated bananas or sweet potatoes (*banana-cue*; *camote-cue*), even chicken or pork barbecue browning on small charcoal grills, and *halo-halo* makings. These are by-products of the household, and are offered to neighbors, passersby, children coming home from school. Sales are not actively pressed, since whatever is left over can be consumed by the household.

In residential areas farther from urban activity, especially those in the provinces (e.g. Davao City), these tables may hold one or two covered pots (*caldero*) and thus be mini-*carinderias* or restaurants. The *carinderia* is usually found in markets and at bus or jeepney stops, and is marked by a row of *calderos* (two to twelve or more). The customer peers into the pots, chooses, and is served; he sits at and eats on the area beside the pots. The mini-*carinderias* sell home cooking, the day's menu, or the housewife's specialties, and thus earn enough to subsidize the household food bill.

Also sitting, but more active, and sometimes actually hawking their wares, are the women who sit outside moviehouses beside baskets of peanuts (boiled in the shell; fried with garlic), *corn-nips* (kernels fried with garlic and/or chili), green mangoes sometimes on skewers, fruits in season. Still others set up tables on sidewalks outside stores, restaurants, drugstores, etc. and offer *suman*, fruits, barbecue, *balut*.

Market and Churchyard Food

Although markets have food stalls inside and on the periphery, with the sellers and buyers as their customers, there is as well a proliferation of food in the streets surrounding — in carts, on tables, in baskets and boxes, aluminum and plastic cans and basins. Early in the morning, these are usually filled with breakfast food: hot cakes and fritters frying on hot plates or in woks on wheeled carts; doughnuts, rolls, bread, cakes; *suman*, *bibingka*, *kutsinta*, *puto*, *tamales* — rice cakes of many persuasions — and other less common regional specialties like *budbod kabug* (millet cakes), ube cakes, and *puto maya*, sweetened rice cooked

with coconut milk and spooned out of the basket, wrapped in banana leaf for each customer.

The churchyard before and after Sunday Masses, or on days when there are special devotions, is also crowded with vendors, although in less variety than in the markets. A large part of the Christmas expectation and nostalgia is based on the fragrant steaming *bibingka* and hot *salabat* (ginger tea) awaiting those who attend the dawn masses. Churchyards and markets are the places in which to find provincial delicacies remembered, those no longer made in one's own or in modern kitchens, or requiring ingredients and methods now found only in the provinces.

The market foods progress with the day, since breakfast goods (including coffee, tea or chocolate) are replaced by snacks (fruits, fritters, crackling, pizza, peanuts, ice cream, cold drinks, etc.), then lunchtime fare (noodles, porridge/gruel, fish and meat dishes with and without broth), and more snacks until the market closes. The market is truly a center for food: raw and cooked, *carinderia* and street.

After the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo (June 1991), rehabilitation was first measurable in the markets. In San Marcelino, Zambales, three weeks after, only one table was in business, offering soft drinks, biscuits and cigarettes. In Subic (where the U.S. Naval Base was located) the market, deep in volcanic ash, had a few stalls open, and some snacks were being sold from baskets in the streets. The Olongapo Public market, on the other hand, had re-opened and was doing business as usual in spite of the ash-muddied roads, with most customers wearing masks and handkerchiefs over their noses.

It is almost impossible to enumerate all the foods one can find in markets — to eat right there, or to take home. It provides an inventory of the major types of Filipino fare — especially the more portable kinds. At the provincial *tabu* or *tiangge* — the transient early morning markets at which farmers and fishermen sell produce and catch, and buy household necessities, one can see the range and richness of regional and indigenous food. At the large city markets, one finds the food that has long disappeared from households (too difficult to get; too long to cook) and has never made it to restaurant menus (too “ordinary” or commonplace; too much like home cooking). All markets are indices of both street and household cuisine.

School Street Food

Outside every elementary and high school, vendors cluster, purveying food children like to buy at recess time and after school, pushing carts ingeniously designed for their goods. The sellers of boiled corn have baskets lined with cloth and plastic (to keep the corn warm) mounted on carts, with containers for the husks, hangers for the forks with which to show the customer how good the ear is, and compartments for plastic bags.

Those who sell “ice-drops” (fruit-flavored popsicles) and ice cream have carts with insulated wells for the popsicles or the different ice cream flavors, and containers for cones and bread (for “ice cream sandwiches”). Playful, with folk colors and designs are those that sell “dirty” ice-cream — so called by generations of children whose mothers told them: “Don’t buy ice cream from those carts; it’s dirty” — and who bought it anyway, because of the unusual flavors (corn, ube, cheese) and the minimal prices. Less colorful, but safer and more pleasing to mothers are the “establishment” ice-creams like Magnolia, made by the largest Philippine food corporation.

The vendors of “ice-scramble” install ice-graters cranked by hand, containers for shaved ice, and for the colored syrups. The fishball carts have woks sitting on gas burners, stands for the fishballs on skewers, and a special compartment holding bottles of dipping sauces — with and without chili. Some have roofs, others have umbrellas. The vendors fry, or skewer-and-fry as one orders, and one dips into the *sawsawan* while standing around, or before walking away. Although many vendors make their own goods (rice cakes, ice cream), the fishballs are made wholesale in Chinatown or in markets (with shark meat, it is rumored), and the vendor’s creativity is limited to the creation of his *sawsawan*.

Food at Office, Factory and Construction Sites

As soon as ground is broken for a building, food vendors appear. Some set up semi-permanent stalls that serve meals to workers until the construction is completed. Others appear at meal and snack times, as they do at break and going-home times at factories.

A special variant of street food has appeared in urban Makati. The office buildings that face Ayala Avenue, the prime location, constitute

what has been called Manila's Wall Street. Their glass, steel and concrete facades remind one of any big city in the world. Behind many of them, however, at lunchtime, gather food vendors — motorized this time. There are jeepneys or small vans, from the back of which one can buy sandwiches, Chinese dumplings (*siomai*), steamed filled Chinese bread (*siopao*), noodles, cookies, fruits. There are even vans or *kombis* from which one can buy rice, soup, various lunch dishes — all in plastic bags. This street food is not, however, eaten on the busy Makati streets, but taken up the building to one's desk.

The Transportation Center

The transportation hub, where hungry travellers come and go, is one of the prime centers for street food. At every stop bus passengers do not need to get off to get something to eat, since vendors push their baskets and wares into the windows, or get on the bus nimbly (avoiding the bus conductors who would shoo them out) to offer sweet rolls, hard-boiled eggs, packaged chips and such — and the specialties of the town. Thus one could do a survey of regional specialties from a bus window, e.g.: *ensaimada* at Malolos, Bulacan; *puto* at Biñan, Laguna; *tupig* in the Ilocos-provinces; *bukayo* in the Pangasinan towns; *pili* candies in Bikol; *chicharron* at Baliwag, etc., on through Luzon, the Visayas, and Mindanao.

At the large urban centers like Cebu City, Davao City, and in Manila, Quiapo and Cubao, there is street food round the clock. At Cubao, for example, bus, jeepney, tricycle and pedestrian traffic converge and criss-cross, and a plethora of street food keeps everyone fed at any time of the day.

From about 4 to 10 p.m., the merienda and going-home crowd are the customers. Right on EDSA, a principal highway, at the Farmers' Market, where buses disgorge and load passengers, vendors stand on the street, near rows of edibles on the sidewalk: vari-colored iced drinks faintly flavored with pineapple, coconut and strawberry; green mangoes fresh-peeled per customer, to dip in salt or *bagoong*, peanuts boiled or fried; whole peeled, or sliced fresh pineapple in plastic bags; and especially *balut* and barbecue, which deserve and will be given special attention.

As one turns the corner into Aurora Boulevard, the main artery of Cubao, the barbecue stands parade and proliferate, along with fruit (apples, oranges, native fruit in season) and snack stalls. One turns a corner into a side street where buses load up, and finds large wheeled carts serving as mini-restaurants. Couples preside over large pots of chicken or tripe porridge (*arroz caldo*; *goto*); and three or four people sit on the bench facing, with the cart as table. Dishes are washed in pails and basins on the sidewalk.

There used to be as well pushcart restaurants that would roll up, and unload on the sidewalk tables, benches, plates, gas stove, washing paraphernalia, and small display stand for noodles, *adobo*, fried fish, rice, and other dishes. For a few hours they would be sidewalk restaurants, then would load up and roll away into the night. Although the practice has passed in Cubao, they still exist elsewhere.

This operation goes on till 10 or 11 p.m., at which time “dining” ends, and the carts are supposed to be wheeled home. Actually, they are pushed a block or two away, where they “park” away from the eyes of the police, to return the next day. These carts have permits from City Hall, or, in the provinces, what are called “tickets,” signifying payment made to market, barangay, or police authorities, but they are often harassed for bribe money (as all vendors are). Regulations require that they have wheels, to indicate that they are not to stay, but some do stay, some make only token moves, and others have stayed on so long that their wheels have rotted and are no longer usable.

From 10 or 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. comes the midnight shift, and from 4 a.m. to about 11 a.m. the breakfast shift — other carts, serving perhaps porridge, but also boiled eggs, perhaps fried soy bean curd, coffee, sometimes noodles. “We have to have wheels; we have to leave to give way to others,” said a vendor. “We also get harassed by the police, even taken to City Hall. But we pay up and return; this is the only way we know to earn a living.”

The daytime shift sells mostly snacks; at 4 p.m. the heavy selling begins all over again.

Barbecue

Skewered chicken and pork barbecue are a special feature of the afternoon-to-evening shifts. In the 1950s only chicken legs, thighs and

breasts, and pork chunks used to be barbecued. In the economic crisis of the 70s, however, almost every part of the pig and chicken came to be used: pigs' ears and intestines; chicken wings, necks, feet, heads, tails, combs, even intestines, meticulously cleaned and looped on thin skewers.

These came to have "pop" names spontaneously given by buyers and sellers, which journalists and their readers (especially those who never ate in the streets) found intensely amusing: Adidas (the shoe brand) for chicken feet; PAL (Philippine Air Lines) for wings; Walkman (the audiocassette recorder with earphones) for pigs' ears; helmet for cocks' combs; IUD for the chicken intestines (because that is what they looked like).

The stands in rows, each with piles of ready, half-cooked, skewered parts, a grill with live coal on which to roast them when purchased, and a row of bottles of dipping sauces (sour, sweet-sour, hot), are each manned (or womanned) by one person who cooks (heats and browns), fans the coals to keep them alive, sells, and makes change — all in a haze of smoke that wafts the flavors along the street and entices customers. This community, barbecue country indeed, is echoed in miniature on smaller streets, in residential areas, alongside markets, etc.

The Balut Vendor

This deserves a separate category, although *balut* is sold all the time and everywhere — on streets, at stalls, outside movie houses, outside nightclubs and discos, in markets; by vendors walking, sitting, or squatting; at midnight and early dawn, at breakfast, lunch, merienda and dinner time. My first introduction to the sounds of Manila as a student, was being awakened by the early morning vendor calling "*Baluu-u-u-ut*" along Mayhaligue Street in Sta. Cruz.

Balut is a fertilized duck's egg, boiled, and eaten by cracking the wide end, making a hole, sprinkling in a little salt, sipping the broth, and then cracking the hole open to savor the red yolk and the tiny chick embryo inside. The perfect *balut*, to the Filipino, is 17 days old, at which stage the chick embryo is still wrapped in white (*balut sa puti*), and does not show beak or feathers (Vietnamese and Chinese like their *balut* older, the chick larger). A Pateros *balut*-maker explains

that the best specimens are sold to his special customers, who become connoisseurs and will have nothing older or younger than perfection. (In the U.S. it is usually sold at 16 days, so as to be less threatening to those unused to this cultural experience.) Older specimens (the *balut* continue to grow until boiled) are sold to ambulant night-time vendors, whose customers are not so particular or steady, and the 19-day holdovers (chicks almost ready to hatch) are sold only by bus terminal vendors, who will never see their customers again, will not hear recriminations, or form friendships with them.

Balut is popularly believed to be an aphrodisiac, or at least to have invigorating powers, and so is sold even in the late evenings and early mornings. It is always carried around in padded baskets, so that the eggs are kept warm, and the seller supplies as well rock salt in little twists of paper, and chili-flavored vinegar, if desired.

Some years back one vendor in Cubao started to sell fried *balut*. These were cracked eggs, which couldn't be sold as *balut*, since the broth had seeped out. She peeled them, rolled them in flour, fried them in her cart, and served them in bowls with a little salt, vinegar and chili. Now the fried *balut* or *penoy* (the unfertilized egg) are the current fad: rolled in orange-colored batter, fried, and sold all over Cubao; eaten from the little bowls, while standing up and fine-tuning the flavor to one's taste by adding condiments.

Somewhat related to *balut* is the day-old chick. Poultry only keep female chicks to grow into fryers; male chicks used to be dumped into the sea — until someone fried them whole, into what is sometimes called “super-chicks” or “Day-0.” These, too, are sold in streets and carts — and at beer places, as *pulutan*.

Balut is, as poet Tom Agulto says, deeply imbedded in Philippine food culture. It is practical, inexpensive, nutritious, and available in all seasons. Prices change only slightly according to place and time. “One can call it,” he believes, “the national street food of the Philippines.”

Reasons for Street Food

It obviously fills a need. In a country where the restaurant tradition is young, and the economic conditions are poor, public eating is done on the streets. Street food is for workers or passersby who cannot afford restaurants, or to go home to eat. It is for the traveller, the

wanderer, the worker who keeps odd hours or has no food waiting at home; for schoolchildren who have only 15-minute class breaks; for the husband or wife who does not want to go home empty-handed, or has no time to create home-cooked meals.

The Economic Factor

Of the factors that make street food a lifestyle in the Philippines, the most visible one is economic. A street food operation is a small, fast, cash operation. A rice-cake seller in Hagonoy, Bulacan, for example, invests P250-P300 in the materials for a day's sale, and makes it all back by the afternoon, with about P100 profit, and with the family fed with some of his/her wares. A two-caldero *carinderia* in front of a Davao home supplies the day's meals for the family, enough cash profit for the next day's capital, and a little extra.

No credit is needed; no credit is given. Manpower needs are minimal and family-contained; the only skills required are those of cooking and selling (although the designing and building of carts demonstrates considerable skill and flair), and these are acquired without formal education. It is a day-to-day, cash-to-cash, person-to-person, small enterprise suitable for developing countries like the Philippines, in which a large portion of the population is below the poverty line, and constitutes the potential sellers and buyers of street food.

The Cultural Factors

One cultural factor operating in the street food phenomenon is the Filipino idea of a meal. The Filipino meal is named according to the time of the day in which it is taken: *agahan* for *umaga*, morning; *tanghalian* for *tanghali*, noontime; *hapunan* for *hapon*, afternoon/evening. Each meal has considerable leeway of time, and also of space — home, in which there was no special room for dining; field or forest, to which one carried food — and of character. (*Adobo* or *pancit* are breakfast, lunch, dinner, and merienda food; few dishes are bound to particular meals.)

This makes food out in the open, in the market or street or field, not unusual or strange, not at odds with the meal indoors or at home. And if the home meal can be extended to the street, so certainly can

the restaurant meal. (One of the more popular restaurants for taxi drivers in Quezon City is under a tree, from which hang bunches of bananas for dessert.) Most Filipinos are therefore quite comfortable with street food — except perhaps those who have been brought up with strict Western ideas about propriety of place and strictness of sanitation.

There is, of course, a concept of meals as stopping points, as landmarks of the day. Major meals are necessary to ease or to prevent hunger, but between them one may eat to “tide over” hunger: *pantawid gutom*, literally to “cross over” between hungers, to bridge them. The snacks on the street fill this function, and perhaps that is why they are not considered “serious” meals and are given “unserious” names like “Adidas,” “helmet” and “Walkman.”

The Filipino idea of community may also explain why meals outdoors, in the streets, among strangers, are comfortable. In the basic agricultural and riverine communities in which Philippine culture developed, there was a dependence among members of a community — for the plowing and planting of fields, for the mending or setting of nets, for harvesting and winnowing. The family groupings became communities; the communities felt like families. The homes extended to the streets, where could be found the space in which to sit and chat with neighbors, to play games, to dry *palay*, to mend fishnets, to work on pots and baskets, to eat and celebrate. At some fiestas even today, tables are set up in the streets for everyone. Celebrations in small houses without backyards, extend frontward, to the street. Urban congestion and traffic may have eliminated this in cities, but the spirit often remains, and there is a congeniality among the vendors and consumers of street food that suggests rootedness in earlier times.

The process of producing and selling food seems to have begun in the *tabu*, the transient, evanescent early morning market on streets and at crossings, to which one brought what one grew, caught, made, or cooked. The sellers were all ambulant, without permanent stalls, and brought their goods in baskets and pots, on foot or in carts or on horseback. Chinese traders brought their “imported” goods, or their cooking, which rapidly became indigenized. This seems to be where street food began — and continued (and continues, in the provinces), thus filling the spaces consecrated by the culture as communal.

Street food in the Philippines is thus not only a convenience for busy working people with no time to cook, or an economic phenomenon for hard times in a developing country. It is also and especially a communal gathering rooted in a sense of the street as communal space, in an understanding of meals as movable in time, as flexible feasts that make their own spaces and shape their own meanings — in home or village or street. ↪