

Acquired Food Habits

This essay was inspired by my recent communication with an Australian based first cousin who is in the food export business, exporting Australian corned beef and other products to the Philippines. This brought back childhood memories of one of our favorite breakfast foods - canned corned beef. We called it "*carne norte*," Spanish for northern meat. Its a goofy translation but that's the name someone came up with. It was an unquestioned favorite of Filipinos from all walks of life. Well, maybe not the rich. I'll have to contact one of those on the Forbes list to ask if they ate *carne norte*. It was almost always served at breakfast time, sauteed with onions and garlic. Sometimes fresh tomatoes would be added, at other times it would be made into an omelet. I like it with diced potatoes. The brands we ate at the time usually came from Argentina or the U.S. But today there are locally produced brands plus those imported from Australia. During my visits back, my sister's cook sometimes prepares *carne norte*. I can easily visualize the appetizing meaty aroma with a touch of garlic.

One other breakfast food is Vienna sausage, canned eight or so to a can. They are short, less than 3 inches, and homogenized. How this got to be a staple, I'll never know. Unlike *carne norte* which could be prepared a number of ways, what could you possibly do with a short, stubby, salty piece of fine ground pork? Little hot dogs, Val calls them. This product is so popular that it could be found in even the smallest *barrios* or hamlets. I remember meeting a former Peace Corps volunteer who served in some small *barrio* in the province of Bukidnon in Mindanao. It was so isolated there was no public transportation, she had to hitchhike to get around. She said she ate a lot of Vienna sausage since it was available, a can provided one serving, didn't require refrigeration and she couldn't get the knack of cleaning fish or butchering a chicken. I forgot to ask if she even bothered to warm it up. She would have had to make a fire. There were no microwave ovens back then in 1960's Bukidnon.

Going halfway across the Pacific Ocean, we encounter the Hawaiian islands chain. Guess what their favorite breakfast meat is - Spam! With their population of a million and a half, Hawaiians consume more Spam than Texas or California, 15 to 20 times their population. Islands in the Marianas also consume a lot of Spam. Restaurants in Hawaii have Spam available for breakfast, sliced and lightly grilled. Even McDonald's and Burger King have Spam on the menu.

Let's step back for a minute and ponder the geography of the Philippines and Hawaii. Both are surrounded by vast bodies of water. Fish are abundant. Well, maybe not as much as before with rampant overfishing. In the Philippines, dried fish of all sizes and shapes are available and the smaller ones are a breakfast tradition. *Daing* is the generic Filipino word for dried fish. You can't beat *bangus* (milkfish) *daing* for breakfast or any meal. There are a couple of other dried fish that are absolutely notorious for its smell. Stories abound about Filipino tenants around the world being forbidden from frying these types of fish. I would agree, the smell carries throughout the neighborhood. From the Spanish, we learned to make sausages and the local version, called *longanisa*, is another staple for breakfast. But somehow *carne norte* and Vienna sausage got added to the menu. As for Hawaii, I could never find what I'd call a traditional native Hawaiian food for breakfast. How about poi pancakes? Topped with coconut and a little cane sugar syrup, it wouldn't be bad.

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So how did these decidedly ungourmet and unsexy canned products become popular in islands where fresh or dried fish and fruit are plentiful? The consensus is that they were popularized by the U.S. armed forces during and after WWII. That makes sense for the Philippines since there was a lot of food aid distribution in the aftermath of the war's devastation. Livestock was decimated. I have relatives in their 90's who are invaluable in researching out this kind of information. A 92 year old uncle, slim, vigorous and a raconteur, tells me that corned beef and Vienna sausage were a staple even before WWII. He even remembers Libby's as the most popular brands. He would make a Vienna sausage sandwich using *pan de sal* (Spanish for salt bread but actually a small oblong bun) and pack it for lunch.

Halfway across the globe, there is a canned product that is popular among the people of another island nation. The English absolutely love "baked beans" for breakfast. The beans are typically heaped on toast. I had a working sojourn in the English midlands a number of years ago and I sometimes ate breakfast at the plant cafeteria when I had to start early. There was always baked beans on hand. It is referred to as baked beans but it is actually the canned pork and beans that abound in our grocery stores. To Americans, these kind of beans are often served at picnics or as a side dish with barbecued meat. But not breakfast. So how did the English come to serve baked beans for breakfast? I asked a number of English people then and no one seemed to know how it all got started. Well, if one doesn't know nowadays, you check the internet. According to one source, baked beans was introduced by the American food company Heinz a century ago. It has remained a staple ever since. According to the book 1227 QI (Quite Interesting) Facts, Britons eat 97% of the world's baked beans. All thanks to a company started in Pittsburgh, PA by the son of German immigrants.

So there you have it, America's contribution to the world's gastronomy - canned goods like corned beef, Spam, Vienna sausage, pork and beans. And nowadays, fast food of all stripes. They are artery clogging (lots of fat) and blood pressure raising (lots of salt), but cheap and filling. Beans are nutritious, but the sauce is loaded up with sugar. Nevertheless, they are all comfort foods. They'll get you through the day. They bring back warm memories of family breakfasts and dinners. Yes, our family ate all meals together. Bon appetit!

"Food, like a loving touch or a glimpse of divine power, has that ability to comfort." - writer and professor Norman Kolpas.

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