

Fast Food and Panciterias

In 1950s Manila, there wasn't any fast food as we know it today. What we had were street vendors who plied their trade by carrying the food in trays or baskets hung from bamboo poles which was slung on their shoulders. There was the *balut* or duck egg embryo vendor who carried a basket of balut covered with towels to keep them warm. A strong voice was necessary to be a balut vendor. The vendors were always male, and you could hear them bellow "*bah looooot*" a block away. By the way four young American guys went to Manila recently to try their hand at selling balut. They filmed it for YouTube. Watch it if you can, it is hilarious. My favorite was the *taho* or sweet tofu vendor. The vendor had one bucket with the taho, which has the consistency of custard. The other bucket contained the syrup and utensils. Unless you brought your own bowl, he would scoop taho into a glass, pour syrup, hand you a spoon then wait till you finish. After rinsing the utensils with some water he carried, he's ready for the next customers. There was no such thing as disposable utensils. We never worried about germs or sanitation. Maybe that's how I built up natural immunity. Our parents knew we ate food from street vendors but never said anything about sanitation. We bought our ice cream cones from the *sorbetero*, who pushed his small cart while ringing a bell. The ice cream was kept frozen with dry ice. With the small cart, he usually had room for only three or four flavors which he would scoop into cones. *Sorbeteros* still roam today. The leading brand is Magnolia, owned by Nestle, the largest food company in the world. So those few pesos from the streets of Manila contribute to Nestle's 100 billion Swiss franc business.

For a meal, there was the *turo-turo*, literally meaning point point. Filipinos like to repeat words, like *halo-halo*, *Balic-Balic*, *sama-sama*, *tayo-tayo*, *Hibok-Hibok*, etc. Hmmm, another essay. Turo-turos were hole in the wall or sidewalk emporiums with cooked food on trays. Give a Filiipina 100 square feet and she can open up all kinds of enterprises. During a trip to Palawan earlier this year, I saw a lot of the turo-turos in the resort town of Coron. Besides the locals, they were patronized by young, intrepid European backpackers. After having spent decades in the U.S., my stomach had probably lost immunity to exotic fauna so I demurred. I ate at the hotel every day.

Family occasions meant going to downtown Manila's *panciterias* or places serving *pancit*. Pancit is the generic name for noodles, which can be rice, wheat or soybean. The round noodles vary in diameter, some even thinner than angel hair pasta. Some are flat, like the noodle we call *canton*. Each pancit type is traditionally cooked with certain flavors, sauces and ingredients. My paternal *lola* or grandmother passed away in 1958 at the age of 95. She was a vigorous and strong woman whom no one dared cross. Up until the year before she died, we celebrated her birthdays by going to a panciteria. These establishments are always owned by Chinese Filipinos, whom we called *intsik* at the time. That word is out of fashion, replaced by Tsinoy. Our meal would be *lauriat* style. That meant 10 or more dishes, served one at a time over the course of a long evening. No fast food this time. The first dish was soup, typically *nido* or bird's nest. They are literally made from the nest of swallows who build their nests on cave walls. The nest consist mostly of the bird's saliva. Don't think of it as spit. I tell you, it is good, with a somewhat mucilaginous consistency. Unfortunately, because of the demand, they have been overharvested. Authentic bird's nest soup is rare and expensive. Other dishes would be shrimp,

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crab, fish, chicken, pork, vegetables and fried rice. Dessert was usually lichee.

My parents, aunts, uncles and older cousins occasionally went to upscale restaurants. Those were typically formal occasions or receptions and the younger children never went. Upscale meant the Manila Hotel, with its Winter Garden and Champagne Room, or Jai Alai with its Skyroom overlooking the *pelota* court. Those were the times my dad would wear a white suit. These establishments were the first to get central air conditioning which was set just above freezing. The Jai Alai was a beautiful art deco building constructed just before the outbreak of WWII. It was the venue for *jai alai*, the Basque game of pelota, claimed as the fastest in the world. A wicker basket is attached to the player's hand which they use to propel a ball against the wall. The opposing player catches it on the fly or after a bounce and hurls it back. Ball speed has been clocked at 200 mph. It is racquet ball on steroids. Betting on the players can be furious. The first local (non-Spanish) player, using the nom de guerre Filipino, was a neighbor and boyhood friend. The game lost its cachet, the building fell into disrepair and has since been demolished. One of Manila's architectural gems went to the wrecking ball. Florida is one of the few places where jai alai is still played.

Today, everyone goes to the malls. There are three competing brands, owned by three of the richest Filipino families. It appears that the average Filipino spends all their spare time and disposable income at the mall, a perfect example of wealth transfer from bottom to top. The choices of food are almost infinite. There are American fast food emporiums of course. But you wouldn't recognize some of the menu. You get rice at Kentucky Fried Chicken, *longanisa* (Filipino sausage) and spaghetti at McDonald's. If you have been to Italy and have eaten real Italian spaghetti, don't even think of ordering fast food spaghetti in Manila. The sauce is sweet and the pasta limp. They never heard of al dente. Local fast food compete with and sometimes outsell the imports.

Whenever I visit Manila, our family gathers at the better restaurants in the malls. There are some remaining stand alone restaurants that are unique which I return to time after time. The modern restaurants are more comfortable (the panciterias had no A/C, only electric fans), probably more sanitary and food is better presented. But I cannot forget the panciterias of my lola's time. Lola celebrating her 89, 90 or 93rd birthday with her seven surviving children, their spouses, my siblings, cousins (there were 32 of us first cousins then), 50 or more Orosas breaking bread - priceless. Here's a link to one of those occasions: <http://snipurl.com/27uz3fx>

"They say I'm old-fashioned, and live in the past, but sometimes I think progress progresses too fast!" - Dr. Seuss

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