

Looking for Lechon

Last month, my grand niece Michelle Orosa, and her husband Carlo Ople, vacationed in Madrid, Spain. On their last evening in Madrid, they went to the fabled *Sobrino de Botin* (nephew of Botin) restaurant, famous for its *cochinillo asado*. That's the Spanish version of roast suckling pig. Botin is the oldest operating restaurant in the world, attested to by Guinness. It has been a restaurant since before the birth of George Washington. Carlo, who at one time doubled as a food critic, pronounced the Philippines' own lechon from Cebu as superior. In Carlo's own words, "*it (cochinillo) was good... but it ain't got nothing on the really nice lechon we have here in the Philippines (like the Zubuchon or Cebu Lechon)*". If you are looking for good restaurants in the Metro Manila area, Carlo has got a list for you.

The Philippine version of the roast suckling pig is *lechon*, the centerpiece of any celebration. It is served at christenings, birthdays, weddings, *fiestas* or even after a funeral. Unless the family is in dire straights and couldn't afford it, there would be lechon. A lechon costs in the neighborhood of \$150, so for a working class family, it would be a hardship. Of course you could do it yourself. Some families in smaller towns even raise a pig or two in their backyard, specifically for lechon. When I was growing up our family cooked lechon once or twice a year. We had a handyman, married to a cousin, who would butcher, clean and roast the pig, turning the spit by hand for hours. The word lechon is of course Spanish. Their former colonies, like the Philippines, Cuba, Puerto Rico, etc., use the word lechon. The Spanish refer to theirs as *cochinillo asado*. But *cochinillo* is a different animal - no pun intended. The pigs Spain uses are very small to start with, split open and embellished with all kinds of condiments. Then it is baked in a wood oven, skin side down. Almost all Philippine lechon is cooked on a spit over glowing coals, rarely in an oven. A typical lechon weighs 40 pounds, at least four times the weight of a *cochinillo*.

It has always been my dream job, to travel and eat like Anthony Bourdain, getting paid handsomely in the process. During one of his episodes, Bourdain traveled to the Philippines, doing a little bit of island hopping. One of his destinations was Cebu. After consuming the Cebu lechon, he proclaimed it as the best he's ever had. (See, Carlo, the famous Bourdain agrees with you.) There have been other episodes where he traveled to Bali, Indonesia, getting a taste of their roast pig. Having this dish in Bali is intriguing, which Bourdain didn't dwell into. Bali is in Indonesia, which is Muslim, whose adherents forbid the consumption of pork. Bali has a heavy Hindu influence, and a lot of Hindus eschew meat, especially beef. But the Balinese have their version of roast pig, calling it *babi guling*. That almost sounds like Tagalog, where "*baboy*" is pig and "*uling*" is charcoal. The Balinese also embellish their *babi guling* with a lot of spices.

Another American travel show host is Andrew Zimmern, who calls his program "Bizarre Foods." I think this is mostly to catch attention, because most of the food he tries are not really bizarre. Although this program has been outlasted by Bourdain's, Zimmern has done his share of checking out lechon. He went to Puerto Rico, where he found a town south of the capital San Juan, with a number of restaurants serving lechon. (In Manila, there is a district called *La Loma*, meaning the knoll, where there are a bunch of lechon establishments.) Zimmern was effusive about Puerto Rican lechon.

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Lechon has become ubiquitous in the Philippines, more commonly available now than when I was growing up. It was really only for special occasions then. Most buffet restaurants will have it. The best is from *Kamayan*, meaning eating with your hands. On the way in to their stand alone restaurants, you pass by a bank of rotisseries, with several pigs getting roasted simultaneously, on a beds of charcoal. For Kamayan restaurants at the big malls, there is no public display. I guess it would be against fire regulations.

If America has food trucks, the Philippines has food carts. While in Palawan last June, I came across three carts selling lechon, in just one intersection. You told the vendor your favorite body part, skin of course, and they would proceed to chop off a portion. That was my dinner one evening, about half a pound of lechon. Low carb but lots of saturated fat.

Lechoneros, or people who cook lechon regularly, all have their recipes. Our handyman didn't use any special ingredients, just basting the skin with shortening. A cousin in law who owns a restaurant in my mother's hometown has a process for making the meat more evenly cooked. He pours boiling water into the animal's cavity, swooshes it around before draining. He does this exactly three times, before placing the carcass on a skewer. I've seen people put lemongrass inside. Another cousin recommends basting the skin with a sweet soda like 7-Up or Sprite, no artificial sweetener permitted.

The Cebu lechon that Carlo and Bourdain talked about is completely different. One version, the Zubuchon, is boneless, marinating, wrapping the carcass around a spit, tying tightly before finally roasting. It does not require any sauce. In another version, not boneless, the cavity is stuffed with all manners of spices and fillings. I haven't gotten wind of any restaurant in Manila that serves Cebu lechon. Its on my list to try for the next trip. If I have to, I'll fly to Cebu to get it,

Philippine lechon is always accompanied by its own special liver sauce. You heard that right, liver sauce. Back in the old days, pork liver is roasted, pounded, strained and simmered with vinegar, sugar and spices. The sauce can make or break the lechon. Nowadays bottled sauce is available, and some versions don't even have liver included. Inevitably, there would be parts of the pig that's left over. This would be most of the head, knuckles, etc. But Filipinos don't let anything go to waste. We take those left overs and cook them in the sauce, until everything is tender. We call this *paksiw*. Some would even prefer paksiw to the lechon.

It is our 37th wedding anniversary as I write this, and Val is off to a retirement dinner. So I'm trying to think of something really pleasant until she returns. Lechon came to mind. Ok, I was reading Carlo's blog. We are going to Madrid this fall. Vamonos a Botin! We have to do our own taste test. I'd like a world tour looking for lechon. A World Series of lechon!

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