

DISTINCTLY FILIPINO FOOD CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

INTERVIEW WITH CZARINA SALOMA AKPEDONU

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1. It seems that SPAM, the American processed meat, has become a staple in Filipino pantries. Can you explain this?

The preparation of meals in Filipino middle- and upper-class homes is influenced by the preference for speed and convenience. This preference can be traced back to the introduction of the 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff Act which made the country an instant market for American surplus goods such as breakfast cereals, milk, cocoa, cheese, and soft drinks during the American colonial period. The popularity of SPAM itself in the Philippines dates back to the end of World War II when it was distributed as C-rations by American GIs. Eventually, the availability of surplus goods created what has been termed by food scholar Doreen Fernandez the “SPAM culture,” which favours the taste of processed over fresh food. Today, the SPAM culture defines what meals are eaten at home, in particular breakfast, which typically consists of instant, canned, packaged, and processed foods. The popularity of canned foods, from sardines to beef loaf, is across classes. However, due to price and market exclusivity, some canned and processed goods such as SPAM and premium corned beef are viewed by the middle classes as a delicacy, in contrast to its association with food for children and the less affluent in richer countries.

2. What about food in relation to the climate, how do canned goods fare as compared to fresh produce in a tropical climate?

Canned goods which have longer shelf-life were very much appreciated in the tropical climate, before refrigerators became standard household appliances. Still, I would link the middle class preference for canned goods to the convenience that canned and processed foods offer. For many Filipinos, a meal, even breakfast, is almost always a warm meal of rice and viands¹. Being middle-class in the Philippines is associated with having domestic help. The presence of domestic helpers means that households have some form of help in preparing warm and freshly cooked meals for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and for cleaning up after meals. However, even with domestic help available, research participants claimed they no longer prepare home-cooked breakfast meals using fresh ingredients on a daily basis. Food that has been cooked beforehand, usually during the weekend, is kept in the refrigerator or freezer and thawed, heated, and eaten throughout the week. Canned and processed foods, especially for breakfast, therefore fit very well in the context of Filipino urban living.

¹ Among Filipinos, a viand (*ulam*) is a food item that is partnered with rice (*kanin*) and could be fish, chicken, pork, beef and vegetables, either dry (fried fish for example) or saucy (*menudo*, for example). The expression is *kanin at ulam*, rice and viand.

3. Can you explain the Filipino taste for savoury and salty food?

Taste evolves over time. Processed and canned foods that might have originally been promoted as convenient and nutritious during the American colonial period have become part of food tradition through consumption practices as well as through a system of food production and distribution that makes them ubiquitous. Let's look at SPAM and the link between what is considered *sarap* – a taste for saltiness and sweetness – and processed foods. SPAM is a blend of ham and compressed pork shoulder with additives including salt, sugar, water and sodium nitrate. SPAM's salty, pork taste and fatty texture suits very well with Filipino cooking styles that tend to be fatty. For many Filipinos, *sarap* also refers to an added layer of taste which is best described as a savoury, broth-like or meaty taste. This savoury taste comes from certain natural ingredients such as mushrooms, potatoes and other vegetables, but also from monosodium glutamate, a flavour enhancer which is widely used in cooking in the country as well as in most parts of Asia. It is also commonly added to processed foods such as canned vegetables and meats, dry soups, spice mixes, frozen foods, and meat- and fish-based products.

4. Metro Manila has seen various trends in eating out around cuisines from around the world. What about promoting regional cuisines in the Metro Manila restaurant scene?

One of the factors that promotes regional cuisines in megacities is internal migration. This relationship between regional cuisines and migration is clearer when one looks at Bangalore. With the expansion of the information technology sector, English-speaking young professionals from other Indian urban areas were attracted to Bangalore, bringing with them their regional cuisine preferences. This means that food from across India is available in Bangalore, which is quite different from the case of Metro Manila where a variety of foreign foods are available. Although Philippine regional cuisines are only starting to get a larger share of the food service industry in comparison with global food chains, their emergence is likewise supported by internal migration, which remains the main driver of population growth in Metro Manila. The shopping malls in Metro Manila, which are at the centre of a global and speciality food trend, help promote interest in regional Philippine cuisine.

5. Do you think that healthy food is a trend that is affecting the middle classes in Metro Manila?

Yes, and as our study shows, certain life events lead to changes in taste preferences, time management, and spending patterns. For many who grew up in the provinces, especially in farming or coastal areas, moving to Metro Manila for university or work means having a less balanced and healthy diet, with fresh vegetables and fish becoming less readily accessible. Furthermore, the “SPAM culture” is certainly very much alive and well. Yet concerns about food safety and quality are changing the way some people buy food in Metro Manila. A chemist explained that her family avoids canned and processed food that contained preservatives for health reasons. Married research participants reported shifting to what they describe as healthier eating schedules and foods. Caring for the elderly or the sick or getting older oneself also influences food practices: a research participant told us that because she was diagnosed with a “fatty liver,” her mother with diabetes, and her father passed away due to cancer, the family now eats less rice, less pork, and less fried dishes.

Many research participants who equate healthier food with fruits and vegetables put value on the organic label. Others turn to upscale weekend markets, specialty stores, and certain trusted brands for their fruits and vegetables. Gradually, the enabling environment for healthy eating is developing with the emergence of small-scale, local markets and more vegetarian or organic cooking restaurants on one hand, and policies promoting healthy and organic foods on the other.

6. Can you comment on the link between food consumption, eating out and new condominium complexes?

The condominium phenomenon has become a hallmark of most fast-developing societies in the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, China, and Southeast Asia. There are two distinguishing features of condominium complexes in Metro Manila: they attract the upper and middle classes, and they are sites that closely combine home, work, and leisure, as a way to bypass chronic traffic problem in the mega-city. Condominium design – in particular, limited spaces, inadequate provision for passive cooling and natural ventilation – the high cost of electricity, and condominium rules for preparing and for enjoying food, all play a role in redefining food consumption practices. In particular, the home has shifted from a site where food is usually prepared and enjoyed: new routines emerge as residents embrace the food consumption options offered by the condominium, particularly those with shopping centres and restaurants at the podium level, through eating out or food delivery. Cooking skills are also changing: the lack of proper ventilation means avoiding sautéing with garlic, a very Filipino way of preparing food, and shifting to baking or Western food recipes.

Additional resources:

Ideas mentioned in this interview are further developed in:

Sahakian, M., C. Saloma, and S. Ganguly, “What makes for a tasty meal in Bangalore and Metro Manila? The role of collective conventions and communities of practice” (in preparation).

Saloma, C. and E. Akpedonu, “Eating in vertical neighborhoods: Food consumption practices in Metro Manila condominiums” in Sahakian, M., Saloma, C., & Erkman, S. (Eds.), Food Consumption in the City: Practices and patterns in Urban Asia and the Pacific (in press, 2016, Routledge UK).