



# *philippines aflame*

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*I have a confession. My attention isn't entirely focused on the food whilst on the Big Binodo Food Wok Tour in Manila's Chinatown. For starters, I'm a little bit star-struck as not only is our delightful tour leader Ivan Man Dy, a local celebrity in his own right, but I'm retracing the steps of Anthony Bourdain. And so my fascination with the rockstar of the culinary world continues – and in particular his obsession with pork products. I'm thrilled at my quasi-meeting of Bourdain and try hard not to grill Ivan for details, but I do detect I'm not the only one gushing as I'm regaled with snippets of my idol's intelligence and professionalism.*

I decide to follow suit with the latter and put aside dreamy thoughts and focus on the food as much as I can while trying to not melt on the spot. It's so hot that I begin to wonder if I might actually morph into one of the sidewalk woks or satay grills. Although Filipino cuisine is milder in the spice department than its Asian neighbours, the temperature is intensified by all the food sizzling around us.

I might add here that a walking tour in a city with one of the worst traffic problems in the world may seem like a crazy idea. However, within the sprawling metropolis Chinatown is a mini-city with one kilometre of eateries along the main drag of Ongpin Street. The Filipino capital is synonymous with all the vices associated with poverty however very little of this is evident through-out the tour as the locals compete to see who can supply us with the most amount of food.

The Philippines hosts a mixture of Spanish, Chinese, Malaysian, Japanese and American culture. You could say the cuisine is like a dipping sauce combining a staggering array of flavours. The Chinese brought rice which is eaten with almost every meal. The Malays taught the locals how to make noodles and wonton soup in exchange for huge jackfruits, tubers and spices. The Japanese came, conquered, and left a bad taste in the locals' mouths – but sadly didn't think to teach them how to make sushi. The Americans stayed for 50 years; their legacy includes the Jeepney, the English language and fast food joints, such as the franchise Jollibee dotted all over the country serving American style fast-food with a Filipino twist.

Much like chopsticks being replaced with utensils, the Western influence in the Philippines is prominent, given its history as a Spanish colony for over 330 years. One leftover ingredient from the Spanish and integral to Filipino cuisine today is vinegar; nowadays the sourness of kalimansi and guava is often added to many of the



Balut



Chicharon

saucers. The Spanish introduced the method of sauteeing with garlic and onion, and even the local words prito and pinirito are derived from the Spanish word frito and means fried or deep-fried. The Spanish also introduced paella to the Philippines, which is cooked over a flame in enormous pans and is very popular for festive occasions.

Regardless of which region you're visiting, it's impossible to not notice that Filipinos have a fondness for deep-frying, and it is thought that even the name of the island of Cebu originated from the word sibu, meaning animal fat. The aroma of cooking oil, fried meat and spices hangs





in the thick air as Ivan leads with his pouting lips – a common gesture of the locals. I compliment him on his voluptuous lips that many a Hollywood starlet would be envious of. He explains that many Filipinos use their pout as a gesture especially useful when ordering food.

This truly is a culture that think with their mouths and stomachs, as the locals virtually eat non-stop. Three meals a day just isn't enough and they snack wherever they go; a national past-time known as merinda. Which is what we're doing as we make our way through Chinatown, sampling foods from cafes and stalls, some more makeshift than others. Our journey is known as turo-turo, meaning point-to-point.

We sample the infamous sisig, the leftover bits of a pig like the cheek, nose and ear, which is finely chopped and cooked on a hot plate to form a crunchy layer on the bottom. Nothing is wasted in the Philippines. Next up on the menu is pata- braised pork hung up to dry for twenty-four hours then cut into chunks and deep-fried.

We sample pancit, stir-fried noodles, which are often enjoyed as a snack and are likened to Filipino comfort food, much like Westerners resort to chicken noodle soup. During celebrations, noodles are mandatory and long uncut noodles symbolise a lengthy life; today we enjoy ours cooked out on the street over an open flame with pork and vegetable strips. We learn that chicken is often roasted over an open flame and stuffed with rice and dried fruit. Just as we think we might go up in flames ourselves, Ivan offers crackling or fried pork rinds, chicharon, to be enjoyed with a variety of dipping sauces.

Are you noticing a pork theme here? It is of little wonder that the most renowned delicacy of all is lechon, the legendary suckling pig roasted over hot coals. Bourdain refers to this obscenely fatty dish as food-porn, if only for the health rating. There are variations of its preparation all over the country. In Cebu, about an hour south of Manila, lechon is not served with sauce because they proudly believe it doesn't need any. Given that the crispy, crackly skin is so tender and flesh so moist, it's a believable declaration. Naturally, in the true excessive nature of Manila, their lechon is garnished with a heart-stopping sauce made from pig's liver.

By now even Ivan, a life-long resident, is soaked to the bone with sweat and he whisks us off to the air-conditioned comfort of Mr Ube Cafe. The earnings from the cafe go to volunteer firemen, and the word ube means purple yam in Filipino. Purple has practically become the national colour and we pass a purple fire truck along the way and I wonder if they get requests to hose down sweaty tourists. Ivan gives us his closing speech and I feel a little sad that he won't joining us for the rest of our Filipino adventure.

These recommendations are for the more adventurous gourmand:

- Balut- boiled duck egg containing the embryo.
- Halo-halo -an icy refreshment which can include ube, layered in a purple rainbow
- Given the Filipino's love of meat, vegetarians will suffer, but there is a dish called pinakbet consisting of pumpkin, string beans, eggplant, okra and other vegetables seasoned with garlic, onions, ginger, tomatoes, shrimp paste (optional) and coconut milk.

**For more information about Ivan Man Dy at Old Manila Walks on the Big Binodo Food Wok tour visit [www.oldmanilawalks.com](http://www.oldmanilawalks.com)**

*The writer recommends the Manila Diamond Hotel [www.diamondhotel.com](http://www.diamondhotel.com). ■*



*There's a theory that any gourmand will head straight for the markets when arriving in a new destination. Manila's Chinatown is a culmination of the country's cuisine, providing a range of food as generous as the locals are. The Philippines is made up of over 7,000 islands, and after just one taste, you may even consider the country's only Chinatown as another island.*

