

Where's the Patis?

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A Filipino may denationalize himself but not his stomach. He may travel over the seven seas, the five continents, the two hemispheres and lose the savor of home, forget his identity and believe himself a citizen of the world. But he remains- gastronomically, at least, always a Filipino. For, if in no other way, the Filipino loves his country with his stomach.

Travel has become the great Filipino dream. In the same way that an American dreams of becoming a millionaire or an English boy dreams of going to one of the great universities, the Filipino dreams of going abroad. His most constant vision is that of himself as a tourist.

To visit Hongkong, Tokyo and other cities of Asia, perchance or to catch a glimpse of Rome, Paris or London or to go to America (even for only a week in a fly-specked motel in California) is the sum of all delights.

Yet having left Manila International Airport in a pink cloud of *despedidas* and *sampaguita* garlands and *pabilin*, the dream turns into a nightmare very quickly. But why? Because the first bastion of the Filipino spirit is the palate. And in all the palaces and fleshpots and skyscrapers of that magic world called "abroad" there is no *patis* to be had.

Consider the *Pinoy* abroad. He has discarded the *barong tagalog* or "polo" for a dark, sleek Western suit. He takes to the hailments from Hongkong, Brooks Brothers or Savile Row with the greatest of ease. He has also shed the casual informality of manner that is characteristically Filipino. He gives himself the airs of a cosmopolite to the credit-card born. He is extravagantly courteous (especially in a borrowed language) and has taken to hand-kissing and to plenty of American "D'you mind's?"

He hardly misses the heat, the native accents of *Tagalog* or *Ilongo* or the company of his brown-skinned cheerful compatriots. He takes, like duck to water, to the skyscrapers, the temperate climate, the strange landscape and the fabled refinements of another world. How nice, after all, to be away from good old R.P. for a change!

But as he sits down to meal, no matter how sumptuous, his heart sinks. His stomach juices, he discovers, are much less neither as *apahap* nor *lapu-lapu*. Tournedos is meat done in barbarian way, thick and barely cooked with red juices still oozing out. The safest choice is a steak. If the *Pinoy* can get it well done enough and sliced thinly enough, it might remind him of *tapa*.

If the waiter only knew enough about Philippine cuisine, he might suggest venison which is really something like *tapang usa*, or escargots which the unstylish poor on Philippine beaches know as snails. Or even frog' legs which are a *Pampango* delight.

But this is the crux of the problem, where is the rice? A silver tray offers varieties of bread: slices of crusty French bread, soft yellow rolls, rye bread, crescents studded with sesame seeds. There are also potatoes in every conceivable manner, fried, mashed, boiled, buttered. But no rice.

The *Pinoy* learns that rice is considered a vegetable in Europe and America. The staff of life a vegetable!

Where is the *patis*?

And when it comes a special order which takes at least half an hour the grains are large, oval and foreign- looking and what's more, yellow with butter. And oh horrors!- one must shove it with a fork or pile it with one's knife on the back of another fork.

After a few days of these debacles, the *Pinoy*, sick with longing, decides to comb the strange city for a Chinese restaurant, the closest thing to the beloved gastronomic country. There, in the company of other Asian exiles, he will put his nose finally in a bowl of rice and find it more fragrant than an English rose garden, more exciting than a castle on the Rhine and more delicious than pink champagne.

To go with the rice there is *siopao* (not so rich as at Salazar), *pancit guisado* reeking with garlic (but never so good as any that can be had on the sidewalks of *Quiapo*), fried *lumpia* with the incorrect sauce, and even *mami* (but nothing like the down-town wanton)

Better than a Chinese restaurant is the kitchen of a *kababayan*. When in a foreign city, a *Pinoy* searches every busy sidewalk, theater, restaurant for the well- remembered golden features of a fellow- *pinoy*. But make it no mistake.