

'ETHICAL ENTREPRENEURS' IN THE PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

In Filipino provinces, foodways have changed little in the last millennium. Here we find simple Pacific island regional cuisines, tempered by hundreds of years of Chinese migration, Asian traders and Spanish and American colonization, but little known beyond the Philippines. Metro Manila is a different scenario. Home to myriad cafés, bars and restaurants, nobody is ever more than two steps away from the next mouthful. The supermarket shelves are stacked with largely imported, processed food and 'McDonaldization' is a looming reality as cheap, American-style restaurant franchises flood the market. Yet there is a new urban food trend happening—a shift away from imported, processed food and a move back to more traditional food production. A growing number of local chefs and food historians, often with overseas experience, have been trying to educate both locals and foreigners about the benefits of high quality, fresh, organic produce.

Part of the process has been to draw attention to an increasing number of regional, entrepreneurial farmers with an eye for organic and ethical food production. But are these innovative entrepreneurs and hobby farmers a strong enough force to change the shape of Filipino foodways?

Keywords

ethical entrepreneurs, organic food, regional produce, Philippines

Introduction

'It is not too late to change direction. We can once again become connected with the food we eat, and learn to understand its nature and its history and embrace a more natural diet.' (Jane Goodall, Harvest in Hope)

"Eating is, or should be, one of life's great pleasures," says food writer Angela Crocombe (2008: 1). Filipinos agree. In the Philippines, eating is a communal, convivial pastime. There are two distinctly different foodways in the Philippines. In the provinces, traditional, regionally distinctive peasant cuisines have changed little in the last millennium. Here we find simple Pacific island regional cuisines, tempered by hundreds of years of Chinese migration, Asian traders, and Spanish and American colonization, but little known beyond the Philippines. Metro Manila is very different. Home to myriad cafés, bars and restaurants, and over 12 million people, nobody is ever more than two steps away from the next mouthful. The supermarket shelves are stacked with largely imported, high-calorie processed food and the term 'McDonaldization' is a daunting reality as cheap, American-style fast food restaurant franchises flood the market.

This increasing reliance on processed food is a global issue. As Julie Guthman notes, "hundreds of millions of people buy fast food every day without giving it much thought... they rarely consider where their food came from, how it was made, what it is doing to the community around them" (Guthman, 2003: 54). Yet there is a new urban food trend happening with a shift away from imported, processed food and a move back to more traditional food production, "before agrochemicals, monocultures and factory farming" (Crocombe, 2008: 4). A growing number of local chefs and food historians, often with overseas experience, have been trying to educate both locals and foreigners about regional, fresh, organic produce, arguably better for the environment and for health, as well as developing pride in Filipino culinary heritage.

Alternative food production has been around for over a century: a consumer reaction to industrialized agriculture worldwide (Roberts, 2008: 247). These 'counter-trends' (Guthman, 2003: 46) include vegetarianism, paddock-to-plate marketing, Slow Food and local, seasonal and organic food. While they have only recently gained a footing in the Philippines, this article will examine whether these culinary counter-trends have a chance to alter urban Filipino foodways currently fixated on processed food products and cheap fast food. In reality, many regional communities potentially eat more healthily than their urban relations, due quite simply to insufficient income to buy imported products and the need to live off cheaper, more readily available locally grown produce.

Over the past two years, I have conducted numerous interviews with development specialists at the Asian Development Bank, as well as with restaurateurs, retailers, chefs, tour guides and farmers: innovative entrepreneurs who want to put the heart, health and heritage back into Philippine cuisine. Together we identified some of the many challenges involved in creating and supplying the market with regional organic produce. These challenges include: poverty; changing consumption patterns; educating consumers and producers; improving distribution systems, and unifying a fragmented and infant industry. Furthermore, there will be only limited support from the Philippines government, until such a time as larger food security issues are dealt with. Ultimately, advocates of developing a sustainable market for regional organic produce have many challenges to overcome in order to significantly change consumption patterns and alter the direction of Filipino foodways.

Historical Context

The original inhabitants of the Philippines were scattered across an archipelago of more than 7,000 islands. Blessed with an abundant food supply of fresh fruit and vegetables, rice and fish, the indigenous Filipino cooking would remain an unsophisticated, but healthy, peasant cuisine for centuries (Dorai, 2008: 99). The islands, however, were also strategically placed to link east and west trade routes, an advantage that eventually proved irresistible to eastern traders and western colonial powers. Muslim traders settled in the south, and Chinese in the north. In the 15th

century, the islands were seized by Spain, and the Filipinos lived under Spanish rule for the next 300 years, adopting their religion and adapting many of their dishes and to Filipino tastes.

In 1898, at the end of the Spanish-American War, control passed to the United States (US), and a new phase of the culinary evolution of the Philippines began. Each new arrival brought new ingredients, new cooking methods, and new utensils that, over the centuries, impacted on the simple island cuisine. Amongst other things, the US introduced processed and convenience food. Local food historian Monina Mercado puts it succinctly: "Filipino food was prepared by Malay settlers, spiced by Chinese traders, stewed in 300 years of Spanish rule and hamburgered by American influence" (quoted in Dorai, 2008: 99).

The Filipinos have cheerfully adopted and indigenized many of these imports over the centuries, but the cultural cringe that has evolved from generations of colonization means that many Filipinos see imported foreign produce as superior to their own, and something to aspire to. That said, much fast food is lacking in quality ingredients, and is often deep fried or full of sugar, causing obesity, diabetes and other health issues. Also, according to Crocombe, "Much of what we find in supermarkets could barely be called food at all, with minimal nutrients and only a tenuous relationship with anything that has been grown in or on the earth" (2008: 1-2).

Still, Filipinos have illustrated a marked flexibility and openness to change that might prove advantageous in the long term to the ethical entrepreneurs discussed here.

Quality, organic produce

According to Crocombe, in recent years there has been "a heartening rise in international movements that endorse traditional methods of small-scale production... [and] focus on the importance of eating fresh, local foods" (2008: 3).

Similarly, Jennifer Clapp notes how “counter movements have emerged in recent decades that seek to resist, provide alternatives to or transform the current world food economy... to provide more equity... and compensation for farmers, particularly those in the developing world” (2012: 160). Consumers are also beginning to understand the cost to society and the environment of our current global food system.

Organisations such as Fair Trade, Oxfam, Food Sovereignty and global food justice advocacy groups address the global issue of the current agricultural structure. They see that food has become detached from its traditional and vital roles to provide nourishment and cultural meaning for people, and have, in turn, three main objectives: to find a way to change the commodification of food and reduce the number of industrial intermediaries; to rectify the imbalance in the global food economy, and to address the issue of ecological and social damage from industrialized farming techniques (Clapp, 2012: 170).

This global trend has spread to the Philippines, and a growing number of food and tourism professionals, often with overseas experience, have been trying to choreograph a cultural change in the Philippines by teaching consumers more about quality, organic produce and encouraging national pride in regional cuisines. Returning to Crocombe, “Organic farming involves the production of food without the use of chemical pesticides, herbicides or fertilizers... a return to traditional methods of farming” (2008: 19). Free from chemicals, it apparently ensures healthier food for humans and greater environmental sustainability.

Filipino Chef Sau del Rosario is a passionate advocate for sustainable, organic ingredients and regional cuisines. A third generation chef from Pampanga, he spent several years training abroad, but his interest in organic food began over twenty years ago with Gil Carandang, a pioneer in organic produce in the Philippines. Then, it was almost impossible to source organic produce. Now, Chef Sau says, it is gradually becoming mainstream (personal communication with the author September 15, 2012). He believes fervently that organic is not a trend, it is a choice,

and the direction in which everyone is heading. Del Rosario's inner city menus, his sideline as the signature chef with TourFlair (a food safari team that promotes regional Filipino cuisines) and his growing clout as a TV celebrity chef are all helping him to spread the word.

Amy Besa, Filipina food historian and co-owner of New York restaurant Purple Yam, is so keen to preserve regional cuisine that she has written a book about it. *Memories of Philippine Kitchens* has been so popular that it was recently re-launched in a revised edition. Her mantra—'If we don't eat it, we lose it!' (Besa, 2010)—is a part of her mission statement for Ang Sariling Atin, the culinary heritage institute she established in 2010.

Our true palate ...has been eroded during the last two decades of fast food and MSG-laden packaged mixes... [and] Filipino food is getting commercial and artificial. The Filipino food landscape is vibrant. We do not want to lose its value to commercially produced flavoring pastes and powders, mass produced traditional foods and other ... convenience products. (Besa, 2010)

Nonetheless, in such a convenience-oriented lifestyle, this is becoming all too probable a scenario.

Education

For local chef and Slow Food advocate Sandralyn Hataway, the need to educate consumers is a critical part of changing consumption patterns. She is determined to teach Filipinos to be more than 'wannabe' Americans and is a firm adherent to the idea "eat who you are" (personal communication with the author, September 28, 2012). Her menus reflect this, in her use of fresh local produce rather than imported ingredients, which she claims, change the flavour of traditional dishes. On the wall of her last restaurant Tourné, Chef Sandra painted the words of Alice Waters in eye-catching colours:

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If you have the best and tastiest ingredients, you can cook very simply and the food will be extraordinary because it tastes like what it is.

Hataway notes: "We need to start from the ground up" (ibid), and, like Stephanie Alexander in Australia, she plans to create kitchen gardens in *barangays* and urban schools in order to show children how to grow and cook their own food.

On a global scale there is an ongoing battle between geneticists attempting to develop superior crops and agronomists who claim this is not safe for farmers or consumers (Roberts, 2008: 239-268). Chef Sau wants to teach Filipinos about the health issues related to eating processed, non-organic foods. He acknowledges that the Philippines is still a developing country, and that cheap, imported food is a boon for the majority of Filipinos who have no choice but to think of day-to-day survival. Nevertheless, he is on a mission. Personal experience has taught him that eating fresh, high quality organic food can save lives. He has been reaching out to local farmers, encouraging them to invest in growing organic produce that he can use in his restaurants. In a recent interview for the *Manila Bulletin* he stated: "People are becoming more aware about the food they eat. With a little more education, and dissemination of information, we will get there" (quoted in Pamaran & Liwanag, June: 2012).

In 2010 Chef Sau and his partner Pacita (Chit) Juan opened *Le Bistro Vert* in Makati City, a restaurant that champions the benefits of organic food. Chef Sau sourced many ingredients from local farmers and producers. He has also instigated a project that brings regional teachers to urban culinary schools where they learn cooking skills to share with their students in the provinces.

Others share the dream of educating the younger generations, and are beginning to put it into practice. Grace Yap has lived for years in the international, corporate world. Recently, in need of a sea change, she invested in a five-hectare property in Pila, Laguna, about an hour-and-a-half's drive south-east of Manila. With no background in farming whatsoever, Yap has become a passionate and dedicated farmer. Over the past 12 months, she has established a herd of Anglo-Nubian goats,

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to produce fresh milk and cheese as well as large flocks of free-ranging ducks and chickens, for the production of salted eggs, a popular delicacy in the Philippines. She also stocks a pond of tilapia (a local freshwater fish) and breeding tanks of fingerlings that are about to expand into her new lagoon. Her mission is to provide top quality, organic produce and to promote the farm for children's education (personal communication with the author, September 20, 2012). Grace provides the opportunity to introduce children to the animals and the animal products they eat, and to show them the process of growing their own food and cooking it.

While there is a growing awareness of the need for such ventures, there is, as yet, little sign of it being instigated at a practical level to reach the general public. For now, such education is only available to the privileged minority who can afford to dine out at high-end, specialist restaurants and educate their children at private schools and hospitality colleges where the benefits of fresh, regional produce and healthy eating habits are already being taught.

Distribution

Better education is perhaps too simple an answer. There is also a need to address distribution methods. As in many developing countries, transporting produce from rural communities to urban areas can be problematic (Roberts, 2008: 164). The issues can be as complex as insufficient infrastructure, or as simple as poor packaging processes that lead to high levels of wastage. According to Randall Jones, a natural resources and agriculture economist based in the region: "For the small scale farmer on a ten acre plot, it is just too expensive and too hard to transport from islands further south to the major markets in Manila and Cebu" (personal communication with the author, October 1, 2012). Filipina food educator, Bel Castro, agrees. She describes iceberg lettuce farmers in Northern Luzon misguidedly attempting to crush as many lettuces into—and onto—a *jeepney* as possible, before driving to the city markets, in order to overcome the deficit of 70% of produce ruined in transit (personal communication with the author, October 25, 2012).

Chit Juan has similar problems with acquiring new suppliers for her business. With poor transport and packaging processes, many products will not survive the rough ten-hour road trip. In the rainy season, damage and delays can be exacerbated by severe flooding. Inadequate infrastructure and distribution methods in the Philippines are thus restricting smaller producers from far-flung regions from competing in the urban markets.

Certification & Regulation

Richard Bolt, Advisor to the SE Asia Regional Department at the Asian Development Bank says it can be extremely difficult to get such innovative projects up and running in the Philippines due to the lack of standardisation, quality control and regulation enforcement, not to mention the lack of understanding amongst small-scale producers for the term 'organic' (personal communication with the author October 8, 2012). Chef Sandra agrees. She tells a story about visiting a regional market where one stallholder had painted a sign proclaiming that his pork was organic. When asked what he meant by organic, the man replied proudly, "It's oven-baked ma'am" (personal communication with the author, September 15, 2012). This anecdote illustrates a problem recognised by many of the entrepreneurs with whom I spoke. Chef Sau says that many farmers and consumers still fail to understand what 'organic' means. He calls it a "flexible terminology in the Philippines", but also believes it is simply a case of educating producers to ensure consumer protection from misrepresentation (personal communication with the author, September 15, 2012).

When Le Bistro Vert opened, Chef Sau and partner Chit Juan, aware of the state of certification regulations, faced the problem of ensuring the produce they bought was truly organic. The problem led them to set up a small farm in Cavite. The organic produce they grew not only supplied the restaurant, but started to be sourced by friends as well. As more friends inquired, entrepreneur Chit Juan recognised the opportunity to expand into fresh produce. Her latest venture is *Echostore*, a retail outlet and café espousing sustainable living through organic produce sourced from small rural communities. She now has suppliers from all over the Philippines. Yet

the government, to date, shows little sign of supporting these smaller ventures, by upholding quality control and enforcing regulations regarding organic produce specifications.

Elitism versus chronic poverty

On a broader scale, while a recent tourist media campaign suggests “It’s more fun in the Philippines,” many of the benefits of economic development and globalization affect only a tiny percentage of the population at the top of the economic pyramid. This includes high-end or niche market commodities, well beyond the reach of the average consumer in the Philippines.

The élite minority may be starting to appreciate the benefits of healthy eating and organic products, but for the vast majority, poverty is a chronic condition, and consumers respond predominantly to the cheapest price. Consequently, the government’s priorities lie with food security and an infrastructure framework set up for high volume production at low cost. The result, according to Bel Castro, is that Filipinos, on the whole, still have a strong “culture of mediocrity” (personal communication with the author, October 25, 2012).

Land redistribution is seen by agricultural economists as a vital component for upgrading the national standard of living, but a government reform program, CARP, to redistribute land to landless farmers has slowed and stalled, stymied by a dwindling budget and resistance from landowners (Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform & Rural Development and International Land Coalition, 2006: 82). Thus many agricultural initiatives remain ‘stagnant or stifled’ (Food & Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2011: 3), and the majority of small-scale producers simply cannot afford to step outside the government framework to invest in new initiatives due to insecure land tenure, and the consequent lack of access to working capital. As Randall Jones says, “If your land tenure is shaky, it becomes difficult to borrow money against the value of the land” (personal communication with the author, October 1, 2012).

Moreover, food price spikes in 2008–9 and 2010–11 had developing countries, including the Philippines, reeling from the impact on household incomes. Lack of food security led to riots and fear for the children, on whom malnutrition could have lifelong effects (Clapp, 2012: 4). At this level, environmental concerns, loss of heritage or healthy eating are irrelevant and affordability becomes the only criterion.

Lourdes Adriano, Advisor of Agriculture, Food Security and Rural Development at the Asian Development Bank, tries to remain optimistic in a cynical environment. In an emerging economy, she explains, there is always expanding urbanization and, inevitably, an expanding, middle-income, better-educated section of society, such that diversity and expectations of an improved quality of life rapidly follow. The benefits of this economic expansion, she explains, will eventually trickle down to the rural communities (personal communication with the author, October 10, 2012).

Ethical Entrepreneurs

Hobby farmers like Grace Yap have become an integral part of that drip-feeding process. Yap's entrepreneurial bent extends to her neighbours. Not only is she employing an ever-increasing number of locals to work on the farm, but she also buys in bulk from local, small-scale farmers and sells the produce on to catering companies in Metro Manila. These small producers are not commercial, nor are they large enough to make an impact on the market alone, but together they can ensure a constant supply for the buyers.

Chit Juan also has a policy of hands-on support for her suppliers, those small-scale farmers in the provinces. Her entrepreneurial attitude has inspired a number of her suppliers to develop new initiatives. One tomato farmer, for example, was encouraged to invest in a solar drier to save excess tomatoes from rotting, and she now provides *Echostore* with a regular supply of sundried tomatoes (personal communication with the author, September 26, 2012).

The whole *barrio* has benefitted from this investment and it has inspired the community to extend its products to include, among other things, turmeric and decaf coffees made from soy and rice, which now have a steady market through *Echostore*. Chit Juan believes that small producers are shaping the future with the aid of entrepreneurs like her. "It is not a trend, but a growing consciousness", she says; "People are getting behind the cause, and word of mouth is very strong in the Philippines" (personal Communication with the author, September 26, 2012).

Conclusion

From the information I have gathered, it would seem that there is a passionate interest amongst a handful of enthusiastic individuals and disparate groups in changing the direction of Filipino foodways from a heavy dependence on processed and imported products back to regional and organic food. However, to date their message is really only reaching the privileged minority. It also becomes apparent during discussions with such a range of entrepreneurs that disparate goals prevent them from creating a unified force to provide a plausible alternative to existing consumption patterns. Thus the fragmented nature of the industry, entrenched consumer patterns, widespread poverty, limited education, expense and inadequate distribution methods also hamper their ability to turn this tiny niche market into a sustainable norm. Furthermore, alternative food producers are still dwarfed by global markets and until food security can be guaranteed for the majority, government attention and support is likely to remain limited, at best.

My study was based on interviews with a collection of individuals. Further areas of investigation would include gathering empirical evidence to support the claims and aspirations of the interviewees. It would also be useful to conduct interviews with relevant government officials, large food producers and distributors in order to compare and contrast policies and opinions on the future of the food industry in the Philippines.

As long as government support remains minimal or non-existent, any further progress towards organic sustainability will only come from a more cohesive

collaboration between urban entrepreneurs and regional producers, and will have only limited impact until not only the privileged minority but the majority consumer base is targeted, and products become affordable to all.

For now, the aspiration to change the direction of Filipino foodways is likely to remain another elitist marketing trend and an aspirational goal. Although, on a positive note, as Chef Sandra says optimistically, "It has to start somewhere!" (personal communication with the author, September 28, 2012).

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