

WHERE'S THE PATIS?
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About the Author

Carmen Guerrero Nakpil who is "Chitang" to her family and friends is a practicing journalist whose takes time out now and then from her daily journalistic chores to write fine essays. She is fortunate to have an impish sort of humor that has kept her sense of balance well, a perceptive mind that can see beneath the veneer of sham, a fierce pride in her identity as a woman, and a skill for elegant expression that is the envy of many and the equal of few. Experience has taught her that any clever woman can preserve domestic tranquility by the mere act of perpetuating man's alleged superiority to anything he surveys. This is practically what every woman knows but which unfortunately few men realized.

Nakpil also came into this world under a lucky star. She was born and raised in Manila; her family has been distinguished both in Science and in Letters; she received her education from an all-too-proper private school for girls; she never knew want; and she was the only girl in the family.

Travel has become the great Filipino dream. In the same way what 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 Hong Kong, Tokyo, and other cities of Asia, per chance, to catch a glimpse of Rome, Paris, or London and to go to America(even if only for a week in a fly- specked motel in California) in the sum of all delights.

Yet having left the Manila International Airport in a pink cloud of *despedidas* and sampaguita garlands and *pabilin*, the dream turns into nightmare very quickly. But why? Because the first bastion of the Filipino spirit was the palate. And in all the palaces and flesh pots and skyscrapers of that magic world

called "abroad" there is no par/5 to be have.

Consider the Piony abroad, he has discarded *barong tagalog* or "polo" for a sleek, dark western suit. He takes to the habiliments from Tlong Kong 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 cosmopolite to the credit- card born. He is extravagantly courteous (especially in a borrowed language) and has taken to hand- kissing and too plenty of American "D'you mind?" 's.

He hardly misses the heat, the native accent of Tagalog or Ilonggo or the company of his brown-skinned cheerful compatriots. He takes, like a duck to water, to the skyscrapers, the temperate climate, the strange landscape and the fabled refinement of another world. How nice, after all, to be away from old RP 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 cosmopolitan than the rest of him. They are much less adaptable than his sartorial or social habits. They have remained in that dear barrio in Bulacan or in that little town in Ilocos and nothing that is set on the table before him can summon them to London or Paris.

There he is in the most expensive restaurant in Europe, surrounded by beautiful women and impeccably dressed men bending over their rich meal. Waiters in black ties and tails stand at his elbow ready to cater to his smallest wish. An array of glass, silver, china, and artistic blooms is set before him. An elegant wagon of *hors d'oeuvres* approaches: pink salmon from Scotland, golden English herring, sensuous anchovies from France, green salad from a Belgian farm, mounds of Italian pasta, Russian caviar on ice, melon halves, stuffed eggs, shrimp smothered in piquant red sauce.

At that precise moment the Pinoy is overcome with a yearning for a mound of white rice, a bowl of *sinigang* and a little saucer of *patis*. What would happen, he asked himself, if I shouted for *sinigang na bangus*? The thought that perishes as he catches sight of the world-weary hauteur on the face of the waiter. With a sigh, he applies himself to the foreign delicacies. The herring, after a few mouthfuls tastes almost like *tinapa*. The shrimp would be excellent if he had some white *sukang Iloko* to soak it in but the melon is never half as good as the ones his wife buys from her suki in San Andres.

Now he must make another choice. The waiter, with an air of prime minister approaching a concordat murmurs, something about choosing a soup. The menu is in French and to be safe, our hero asks the waiter to recommend the specialty of the house. A clear *consomme!* When it comes, the Pinoy discovers that it is merely the kind of soup Filipinos sip when they are convalescing from "tifus" or "trancazo". Tomato soup is almost an emetic. Onion soup with bits of bread and cheese is too odd for words but palatable. If he is lucky, the waiter brings *bouillabaisse* with a flourish. A French classic? Nonsense. We Filipinos invented it. It is *sinigang*, he tells the astonished waiter, only not quite as good as we do it at home. And where, for heaven's sake is the *patis?*

The entree or the main course is quite another problem. Poulet is chicken. *Fillet de sole* is fish, though recognizable neither as *apahap* nor *lapu-lapu*. *Tournedos* is meat done in a barbarian way, thick and barely cooked with red juices still oozing out. The safest choice is steak. If the Pinoy can get it, well done enough and slice 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 frogs 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 Pinoys learn that rice is considered a vegetable in Europe and America. The staff of life a vegetable!

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 pork or piled 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 rice, there is *siopao* (not so rich as at Salazar) *pansit guisado* reeking with garlic (but never so good as any that can be had in the sidewalks of Quiapo) fried *lumpia* with the incorrect sauce, and even *mami* (but nothing like the downtown *wanton*)

Better than a Chinese restaurant is the kitchen of a *kababayan*. When in a foreign city, a Pinoy searches every busy sidewalks, theater, restaurant for the well-remembered golden features of a fellow- Pinoy. But make no mistake. It is only because he is in desperate need of Filipino meal and, like a homing pigeon, he follows his nose to a Filipino kitchen that is well stocked with *bagoong*, *patis*, *garlic*, *balat ng lumpia*, *gabi* leaves and *misua*.

When the Pinoy finally finds such a treasure- house, he will have every meal with his *kababayan*. Forgotten are the bistros and the smart restaurant. The back of his hand to the Four Seasons and the Tour d' Argent. Ah, the regular orgies of cooking and eating the ensue. He may never have known his host before. In Manila, if he saw him again, they would hardly exchange two words. But here in this odd, barbarian land where people eat inedible things and have never heard of *patis*, they are brothers forever.

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