



Six or Seven Meals a Day

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Until the age of twelve, before I was exiled to Quezon City to study in Philippine Science High School, I would spend my summer vacations in Cebu City, my late father's hometown. I would spend a couple of months in my paternal grandparents' humble house in Carreta Alley — my grandmother's Chinese-Cebuano family's wealth had been wiped out during World War II, after my Mainland Chinese great-grandfather's candle and soap and wax factories, along with his other businesses, were bombed by the Japanese; and my grandfather's Spanish-Cebuano family's gasoline stations and real estate properties had been lost, parcel after parcel of land, to excessive gambling — and in my paternal eldest aunt's affluent abode inside Maria Luisa Park in Banilad.

But in either household, the number of meals I would partake in any given summer day did not vary much, six or seven of them, depending on the time I would wake up and the time I would go to bed. This was extremely difficult for me initially as a young boy, for aside from showing early signs of insomnia, I was also notorious for being quite picky with food; at the age of four or five, I would only eat ice cream and icebox cake for breakfast back in Iligan City, which my indulgent father was willing to provide, one of the many privileges I enjoyed as the firstborn. And Daddy Allan at the time was still loaded with cash, so spending money on alimentary luxuries was not really an issue at all.

Traditionally, Cebuanos partook of two breakfasts, the first being the *painit*, and the second one, the *pamahaw*, and these I would have to share with the old folks or with my paternal first cousins, since family meals back then in the 1970s up to the mid-80s were taken together by the whole family, nuclear and extended. It was unthinkable to eat by one's lonesome. As Cebu-born fictionist Cecilia Manguerra Brainard had poignantly observed: "Eating is the time when the family gathers, when the community is one, and is something of a sacred time."

As the word suggests, the Cebuano *painit* (*pampainit sa tiyan*) was intended to warm the stomach, so something hot would usually be served: *sikwati* (hot chocolate) with *puto maya* (*malagkit*, or glutinous rice, steamed in coconut cream, and molded in small cups, and then unmolded on banana leaf) or *budbod* (steamed glutinous rice cake rolled inside banana leaf, and better known as *suman* in the rest of the archipelago); coffee with *pandesal* ("the bread of salt") newly purchased from a nearby *panaderia*; or even just a powdered drink, like Milo or Ovaltine — I was too young to drink coffee back then — diluted in a mug of simmering water and milk. The *painit* was served at break of day, usually between five and six in the morning, so oftentimes I would still be groggy from lack of sleep when partaking of this repast.

The *pamahaw*, on the other hand, would arrive three hours later, between nine and ten in the morning. As the term, suggests, this heavier meal would typically consist of the leftover rice (*bahaw*) from the previous day, now transformed into *sinangag* (garlic fried rice), and whatever

remaining viands were to be found inside the refrigerator, now reheated or recombined into a compound dish. If there was no *bahaw* available, then freshly cooked rice would be offered instead, which was usually best paired with *danggit* (salted dried rabbitfish) or the more generic *bulad* (salted dried fish of various species), or the bite-size, sweet-and spicy chorizo de Cebu. The breakfast meal of course would not be complete without some eggs, either scrambled, boiled, or cooked sunny-side up.

It would only be later, when I moved to Metro Manila, that I would encounter the *silog* (a viand paired with garlic fried rice and fried egg) in all its infinite combinations served as lunch or even dinner fare: *tapsilog* (tapa), *tocilog* (*tocino*), and *longsilog* (longganisa); *hamsilog* (ham), *spamsilog* (Spam luncheon meat), *masilog* or *malingsilog* (Ma-ling Chinese luncheon meat); *hotsilog* (hotdog), *cornsilog* (corned beef), and *bacsilog* (bacon); *chosilog* (chorizo), *porksilog* (pork chop), and *chiksilog* or *noksilog* (fried chicken); or even *dangsilog* (*danggit*) and *bangsilog* (*bangus*, or milkfish); and *paresilog* (braised beef stew), *adosilog* (adobo), *bisteksilog* (beef steak), and *litonsilog* (*lechon*).

By then, I felt I was living in reduced circumstances, staying inside the boys' residence hall on campus, and having to eat cafeteria food during the weekdays. But I was quite lucky that during my first year in Pisay, during the weekends, my Iligan-based but itinerant businessman Uncle Jun, the older brother of my father, or my Manila guardian, Tito Tony, the manager of the Makati branch of Uncle Jun's company, made sure that I would partake of better tasting *lutong-bahay* (home-cooked food) in Tito Tony's domicile in Pasig, or more palatable restaurant dishes (as opposed to canteen fare) in the popular establishments that Uncle Jun would bring me to whenever he would be in the Metro for his bi-monthly visits, like Barrio Fiesta, The Aristocrat, Sulô Restaurant, Ma Mon Luk, and Kamameshi House. Needless to say, Uncle Jun was as generous as my Daddy Allan, and just as indulgent where gustatory pleasures were concerned.

Sometimes, when the *pamahaw* was a bit early and relatively light, and the lunch meal intentionally late, for one reason or another, there would also be some snacks available in the morning: more rice-based Cebuano delicacies, like *biko* (glutinous rice cooked in coconut cream and sweetened by red or brown sugar) or *bibingka* (oven-baked rice cake); *cuchinta* (small semi-translucent, brown-colored steamed rice cakes) or *calamay* (sweetened glutinous rice pudding flavored with coconut milk, molasses or brown sugar, and anise seeds). Or one of the two kinds of biscuits Cebu had become famous for: *otap* (the oblong-shaped, flaky biscuit coiled in thin crispy layers and lightly coated with granulated sugar); and *rosquillos* (flower-shaped, circular sweet biscuit with scalloped edges and a big round hole in the middle). The latter had an interesting etymology behind it—originally concocted by Margarita "Titay" T. Frasco in 1907 in Liloan, it was reputedly named as such by the late Philippine President Sergio S. Osmeña, Sr., then Governor of Cebu Province, for its resemblance to ringlets (*rosca*).

Similar to the Tagalog *tanghalian*, the Cebuano *paniudto* or lunch meal was ideally served at high noon (*udtong tutok*), right in the middle of the day, neatly dividing the morning from the afternoon hours. Traditionally, since it was the most important meal of the day, for middle-class households, it would consist of four or five or even six courses—a soup or soup-based dish, a

salad or vegetable dish, a fish or seafood dish (this was almost a must, Cebu after all being an island province), a chicken dish, and one or two red meat dishes—with rice and some variety of noodles to satiate hungry stomachs, then finally capped with a piece of fruit or dessert.

Soup-based Cebuano dishes I had savored in my childhood years—whether on the dinner table of my grandparents' ramshackle home or in my paternal aunt's stately domicile—range from the *utan bisaya* (Visayan vegetable soup, *sinabawang gulay* in the Tagalog-speaking provinces) with its clear broth to the thicker *mungos ug kalamunggay* (mung beans and *moringa* leaves) soup, from the healthier *tinowang manok* or *isda* (chicken or fish soup slightly soured with ripe tomatoes, ginger, and lemongrass) to the more sinful *pochero* (well-spiced stewed beef knee-bone, including part of the shank and shin-bone, served with big chunks of *mais tilaobon* (boiled sweet corn on the cob) and slivers of *ubod sa kawayan* (bamboo shoots).

Memorable fish and seafood dishes included *escabecheng lapulapu* (fried grouper fish floating on sweet-and-sour sauce with julienned ginger and bell peppers), *rellenong bangus* or *lambay* (stuffed milkfish or crab), *inun-onan* (fish boiled in vinegar and spices, similar to the Tagalog *paksiw na isda*), *ngohiong* (deep-fried sautéed *ubod sa lubi*, or coconut pith, rolled in *lumpia* wrapper, a dish of Chinese origin), *chopsuey* (stir-fried vegetables with some bits of seafood and/or meat left to simmer in a thick sauce, and often seasoned with oyster sauce or *patis* (fermented fish sauce), and the succulent and briny *ensaladang lato* (sea grapes salad).

For pork and chicken, beef and ox dishes there were *adobong baboy*, *adobong manok*, and *adobong manok ug baboy* (slices of pork and/or chicken meat braised in a vinegar and soy sauce solution, and then spiced with garlic, bay leaf and peppercorn, among others, that gave the *adobo* its distinctive salty-and-sour flavor), *kalderetang baka* (beef *caldereta*) and *apritadang baka* (beef *afritada*), and the *balbakwa* (well-stewed oxtail, foot, shin, and earlap). And there was of course the *humba* (braised large chunks of fatty pork that had been stewed in vinegar, soy sauce, water, brown sugar and spices, particularly crushed garlic, peppercorn, and laurel leaves and left to simmer for long hours until the meat and pork fat turned tender with jelly-like consistency), another Chinese-derived but Cebuano-identified dish, whose meat became more flavorful and tender with each reheating in low fire, a viand that was meant to last for a few days, hence large quantities of it would be prepared in a *caldero* (cauldron or stockpot).

My paternal grandmother, Lola Goding, being of Chinese descent, would also prepare more exotic dishes, like the *papaitan*, a bitter-tasting broth of sliced goat entrails, goat meat, and goat liver boiled in hot water until tender, and the *paklay*, a stew of goat's blood and intestines braised and soured with *balingbing* (star fruit), *iba* (*kamias* in Tagalog), and unripe pineapple. Having a sensitive and often queasy stomach even back then, I refused to eat any form of goat meat due to its nauseating smell, not to mention that the goat in question was an animal that I used to feed before being butchered, and therefore more of a pet than foodstuff. Thus, the most unusual fare that I partook of in my childhood years was turtle soup, but just a couple of spoonfuls of the briny broth and not the meat, and this after a lot of coaxing and cajoling from Lola Goding, with some tears shed in the process on my part.

But being still a sweet tooth in those days, the flavors and textures I would remember best and cherish the most were the sweets. My paternal aunt, Auntie Fe, who was still in those days running the bakeshop named after her eldest and only daughter, Barbara, my eldest first cousin on either side of the family—whom I still call Achi Bamba, both in abiding deference and utmost fondness, even up to this day—would produce from her large and well-equipped home kitchen the most mouth-watering desserts and snacks that I had ever tasted: chocolate cakes and apple pies (“cakes have no crusts, pies have,” I learned from Auntie Fe), tarts and tortes, cookies and biscuits, pastries and pasties, breads and shortbreads, *ensaymadas* and *empandas*. My personal favorites back then (and even up to now) were her moist chocolate cake, fruitcake, and *silvanas* in ascending order.

As chocolate cakes go, Auntie Fe’s version of this dessert popular to kids the world over was perfect: neither too dry nor too soggy, just the right kind of moist; texture-wise, it was not grainy but soft to the palate; and taste-wise, it was neither too sweet nor too bitter, just darkly and sinfully delicious. Her fruitcake, on the other hand, had the perfect blend of sweetness and sourness with a hint of rum and spice. It was neither too hard nor too spongy, so that it would actually crumble in your mouth, with bits of glacé (candied or dried fruits) and nuts adding texture and flavor to the tongue. This was the dessert that I would always look forward to savoring again and again during the summer months when I was staying with her in Maria Luisa Park, as well as during the Yuletide Season back in Iligan City.

But the *silvanas* were the pièce de résistance of her entire repertoire of sweets! Unlike commercially-produced versions of this popular Filipino dessert, Auntie Fe’s frozen concoction, consisting of a core of buttercream enclosed in a cashew-meringue outer layer and slightly crusted with the finest cookie crumbs, was impeccable. Her *silvanas* were flesh-colored and ovoid in shape, not the typical yellowish flattened ones that one could mistake for jackfruit-flavored or jaundiced pieces of *polvoron*. They looked quite solid on the plate but melted on your tongue, the buttery sweetness reaching your palate, so that you would never mistake them for their pretentious-sounding cousin, the *sans rival*, which for me had nothing really to crow about.

Since I was Auntie Fe’s favorite nephew, my dad being her favorite brother, I could consume as many *silvanas* as I wanted, which I often did with her youngest son, my paternal first cousin Bennet. In fact, she would coax me to eat more whenever she felt that I was being abashed (“naikog”) or ashamed (“naulaw”) to savor another piece of confectionery heaven; being a scrawny kid, she would constantly encourage me to devour more, be it sweets or main dish, and I obliged, at least in the desserts department.

Two or three hours later was *merienda* time, which Doreen G. Fernandez described in her book *Palayok: Philippine Food Through Time, on Site, and in the Pot* as the “pangtawid gutom, literally “something to bridge hungers” that would be served “in mid-afternoon... which is often not just a snack but something hefty: *dinuguan at puto, pansit, lumpia, ginataan, suman, bibingka.*” Again, there would be more rice-based cakes and puddings, or other rice-based food, like *nilugaw nga bugas-*

humay (rice porridge in chicken or beef broth with ginger, often garnished with chopped spring onion or leeks, toasted garlic flakes, and a slice of *calamansi*), and *binignit* (sweet porridge of boiled glutinous rice with root crops, sugar and coconut milk, mung beans, slices of ripe *saba* banana and strips of ripe jackfruit)

The Cebuano *panihapon* (dinner or supper), like the Tagalog *hapunan*, was served between six and seven in the evening, which would suggest that precolonial Filipinos had their last meal of the day very early in the evening, during the twilight hours when light and darkness were still battling for supremacy in the wide expanse of sky. The Cebuano evening meal would be less heavy than its noontime counterpart, though still substantial, with perhaps only two or three dishes previously mentioned being offered on the dinner table, though the ubiquitous rice and/or noodle staple would still be there, especially the *bam-i* or *pancit bisaya* (combination of *miki* and *bihon* noodles served with slivers of meat, bits of innards, assorted seafood, and vegetables), which was of Chinese origin too.

But during special occasions, like the *noche buena* and the *media noche*, and parties celebrating birthdays or anniversaries, or the town fiesta, more delectable dishes would be displayed on the buffet table and sideboards, and it was considered bad form for middle-class Cebuano families not to serve a whole *lechon* or *inasal nga baboy* (whole roasted pig) to their guests as the centerpiece of the gustatory part—a huge part—of the celebrations. I would therefore end up associating the *lechon* with birthdays, feast days, and the Yuletide Season, so that the first time I celebrated my own birthday without one on the dinner table, at the age of ten or eleven, I actually asked my father, “Di, napobre na ta?” “Dad, have we become poor?”).

The world-famous *lechon de Cebu* was tastier and crunchier than the other *lechon baboy* varieties found in other parts of the Philippines, except perhaps for the Bayug *lechon* of Iligan City, which was equally mouthwatering but a tad spicier. The secret to the *lechon de Cebu*'s flavorful meat and crispy skin was the way it was prepared: the inside of the eviscerated pig was stuffed with *tanglad* (lemongrass), *kalabo* (oregano), and other herbs and spices, and salt; while the outside was constantly basted with a mixture of soy sauce, salt, garlic, onion, pepper, and other seasonings, as the pig was being roasted slowly by being rotated on a spit above an open fire of charcoal and wood.

And of course, if we were sleeping late, there would be midnight snacks too—this time something light and easy to eat, like preserved dried mangoes, *dilis* (dried anchovies), or *masareal* (bars of finely-ground boiled peanuts sweetened with sugar)—especially on those nights when my cousins and I would be having an all-night Betamax video marathon in Banilad.