



December 23, 2007 by Bee Wilson

The kitchen thinker

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Bee Wilson tastes a different Christmas tradition

Is your house heaving with food? Are you sick of Christmas before it has even started? If so, be grateful that you don't live in the Philippines, the country with the world's longest Christmas celebrations. In this predominantly Catholic nation they start singing carols in September, and the food festivities last the full six weeks of Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. In Manila they will already have feasted with the Mass of the Rooster on 16 December, and are now preparing for the giant Nochebuena meal that happens tomorrow evening after midnight mass, before yet another banquet at Christmas lunch.

Actually, I like the idea of a Filipino Christmas. For one thing, everywhere is festooned with the prettiest star-shaped lanterns. For another, the Christmas food sounds scrumptious. Filipino cooking has been described as 'an exemplary melting-pot of cuisines'. There are Spanish influences, Chinese borrowings, American foods from the US rule of the early 20th century, and the exotic ingredients of South East Asia.

Until recently I knew nothing of Filipino food. It is a blank to most British people, in contrast to Thai food. But the most delicious meal I ate in 2007 was a Filipino feast, which opened my eyes to this enchanting cuisine. Amy Besa and Romy Dorotan run Cendrillon, the leading Filipino restaurant in New York. While visiting Britain in September they cooked a meal organised by a friend. The flavours and colours were extraordinary. There were lumpia, the famous Filipino spring rolls. In Romy's version, the rolls were deeply coloured with purple yam flour, stuffed with raw vegetables and dipped into a heady sauce of peanuts, lemongrass and chilli. Romy also made a vast Spanish-influenced paella, seasoned with fresh turmeric root. Pudding was a luscious cake of fresh coconut and cassava.

Since this meal I have been craving the subtle flavours of the Philippines and have been dipping into Amy and Romy's book, *Memories of Philippine Kitchens* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, £19.95), for inspiration. It was here that I learnt about the traditional Nochebuena table. Christmas comes at harvest time in the Philippines, so there are piles of native green oranges and fragrant cakes made from freshly harvested rice. These cakes - sold by street vendors after midnight mass - come in countless varieties: bibingka, a round cake baked in a banana leaf; suman, made from sticky rice and brown sugar, in a coconut-leaf parcel; and puto, fluffy steamed cakes.

The centrepiece of the Christmas table borrows from China or Spain. There might be Chinese-style glazed ham, cooked in pineapple juice and rum; or Spanish-style chicken relleno, stuffed with chorizo, pork and olives. Another Spanish touch is the knotted cheesy brioche buns called ensaymada, traditionally made from lard, but now made from butter, and all the nicer for it.

It is the drink that appeals to me most. A Filipino Christmas always includes cups of salabat, a soothing gingery brew. I halved Romy's recipe: simply place half a pound of sliced ginger with a peeled and sliced apple and orange in a pan with 1.2 litres (2 pints) of water, bring to the boil, simmer for ten minutes and strain into a teapot. Add honey to taste. Since I have a perpetual cold at this time of year, this is one Filipino tradition I plan to adopt every Christmas. Have a happy one.

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