8 - Filipino Phenomenon

With our embrace of mash-up cuisines, Filipino is poised to deliver a flavorful ride

By Katie Ayoub

Traditionally stuffed with ground pork or beef, minced carrots, onion and spices, crispy lumpia rolls are one of the Philippines' most beloved national staples and readily translatable to mainstream menus.

As we look past Korean barbecue in search of more bold flavors from Asian traditions, Filipino cuisine steps into the light. A complex and deeply satisfying combination of sweet, salty and sour defines this casual, communal cuisine. Adobo, acting as both marinade and sauce, is the flagship here, leading with its soulful balance of sugarcane (sometimes coconut or palm) vinegar, soy sauce and garlic. Lumpia, the Philippines' insanely crisp egg roll stuffed with pork, offers another familiar-yet-adventurous entry point. Lechón, the country's version of a whole roasted pig, shows its Spanish influence and its predilection for all-things pork. The list goes on.

But why now? "It's a natural continuation of the trend of wanting to explore fringe cuisines," says Eric Stangarone, creative director at The Culinary Edge. Filipino food represents an opportunity for flavor exploration within the confines of familiar, craveable combinations. And this cuisine inherently proffers fusion—a trend that today takes shape in street food-inspired bold fare. Born from a pantry of native ingredients like seafood, pork, calamansi, coconut and sugarcane, Filipino food also pulls its traditions from humble living. Vinegars to preserve. Pork fat to seal. Inexpensive starches like pancit (a rice noodle) or garlic rice or pandesal (a local bread that tastes similar to a Mexican bolillo). And that fusion of Asian and Latin with just a hint of Americana? The Spanish, Japanese and British all flew their flags here. American culture seeps in through its military bases. So Filipino dishes present both exotic and familiar—a tempting combination for today's diner.

"Differentiate your menu as uniquely bold, brave and curious," says Stangarone. "This cuisine is largely untapped in the U.S. marketplace."

ADOBO ALL THE WAY

Adobo, considered by many to be the Filipino national dish, is fertile ground for both exploration and innovation. Like most national treasures, recipes differ from household to household, depending on which matriarch stirs the pot. Chefs here are making adobo their own, but always keeping that salty, sweet and sour flavor prominently in the mix. King Phojanakong, chef-owner of Brooklyn's Umi Nom and Manhattan's Kuma Inn, features adobo in several ways. Schooled by his Filipino mother on ritual and custom, he adds his own flair. "Mine features vinegar, garlic and soy sauce, but I combine rice vinegar with the sugarcane

vinegar because I like the flavor and acidity the rice vinegar brings to the adobo," explains Phojanakong. He also adds black peppercorns and bay leaf. In his Chicken Wing Adobo, the protein is braised in adobo. At pick up, the wings are pan-fried, then hit with more adobo sauce. At Umi Nom, his Pork Belly Adobo is also braised in adobo, then grilled instead of fried. "It's not traditional, but I like the smokiness the grill imparts," he says.

Kristine Subido, chef-owner of Pecking Order in Chicago, features adobo throughout her chicken-centric menu, marinating and basting the bird for that unique, craveable flavor. "I keep Filipino flavors approachable through chicken," she says. Her adobo combines coconut vinegar, soy sauce, garlic, fish sauce, bay leaf, black peppercorn and garlic. "The coconut vinegar comes from fermented coconut water—it's acidic, but not astringent, and it has a pleasing musky characteristic," she says. Moving away from tradition, she also features adobo in her Coconut Adobo Rice Arancini—garlic rice stuffed with shredded adobo chicken. She adds coconut milk to the adobo to make it saucier.

Chef King Phojanakong is one of America's preeminent champions of Filipino cuisine, serving up signature dishes like adobo pork belly at his New York-based concepts Umi Nom and Kuma Inn. PHOTO COURTESY OF UMI NOM.

LOVABLE LUMPIA

"Adobo is definitely going to take off in the United States," says John Castro, culinary instructor at Louisville's Sullivan University, who boasts a Filipino heritage. "Lumpia is another fantastic dish with loads of crossover potential." It is the natural successor to the Chinese egg roll in this country—it's familiar, crispy, portable, handheld, but it's also exotic enough to titillate. Traditionally stuffed with ground pork, carrot, onion and spices, the gossamer-thin rice wrapper lends itself to a delicate, crisp texture. "It's a superior product, and should be used beyond Filipino dishes," says Castro, who menus Lumpia Shanghai at the school's restaurant, Winston's. His version boasts a combination of ground pork and beef, garlic sausage, shallot, carrot and soy sauce. He serves it with a dipping sauce of sugarcane vinegar mixed with chile and sugar. "They sell out whenever we run them," he says.

Patio Filipino in San Francisco sells Lumpianitas, stuffed with pork, shrimp and vegetables. Marcus Samuelsson stuffs his with ground pork, celery, onion, carrot, garlic and soy with either banana ketchup or chile sauce as a dipping sauce. At Kuma Inn, Phojanakong offers a traditional lumpia, but adds fish sauce to the stuffing. He serves his with a sweet and sour sauce made with sweet chile sauce, rice vinegar and mango juice. As specials, he switches out the pork with oxtail or short rib.

FROM PANCIT TO PANDESAL

National staples, although not always sexy, sometimes bolster that authentic connection, adding intrigue without pushing out too far into hard-to-understand dishes. Pancit is the national noodle made out of egg, rice or sometimes sweet potato. Pancit bihon is perhaps the most common version—rice noodle with chicken and/or pork, carrot, celery, onion, cabbage, chicken broth and fish sauce. “You see this as a side dish mostly,” says Subido. “It’s a staple; a comfort food.” It’s also an example of a dish that can be borrowed from the Filipino library, and with a few creative tweaks, it can lend ethnic panache to small bites and sides menus. Pancit dumplings are served at the Filipino pop-up Milkfish in New Orleans. They’re stuffed with shrimp, chicken and vermicelli, and topped with braised pork and spicy fish. Back at Umi Nom, a side dish of Pancit Canton combines egg noodles with sausage, chicken, soy and fish sauce.

At Pecking Order in Chicago, chef Kristine Subido gives a Southern accent to Filipino fare in her Coconut Adobo Rice Arancini, rice balls stuffed with shredded adobo chicken.
PHOTO COURTESY OF PECKING ORDER.

Pandesal, kneaded out of Spanish influence, is a simple bread roll made with flour, eggs, yeast, sugar and salt. It’s yet another easy entry point into Filipino flavors, and can swiftly join the ranks of global carriers like naan, ciabatta, roti and arepa, all making strides on sandwich menus.

At Pecking Order, Subido mashes Filipino with American Southern in her sandwich, The Country Bird. It features a boneless fried chicken breast, Gouda, pimento mayo, tomato, cilantro and onion dressed with calamansi vinaigrette. It’s all served on grilled pandesal. “I get mine from a local baker,” she says. “Its outer crust has a breadcrumb topping, and the bread itself is just a little bit sweet. It makes a perfect sandwich carrier—crisps up nicely and stays soft in the center.”

There’s so much more to explore in Filipino cookery, such as intriguing lechón and sisig (pig face seasoned with calamansi and chile peppers). “Iconic Filipino dishes like sisig and lechón are some of the most unapologetically porky and indulgent preparations you can find,” says Stangarone. Filipino is indeed following the trail blazed by Korean and Thai. Forged by street-food mash-ups and paved by intrepid culinary champions. Diners want to explore new avenues. Filipino offers a truly delicious one.