

OFFICIAL NATIONAL DISHES – AN OFF-THE-WALL IDEA FOR REAL SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH CULINARY PRIDE

By Manny Gonzalez, Resident Shareholder, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa.

Before we get to the food part (don't worry, there's lots of it), here are some very serious observations about our society and our economy.

There are many good and noble things about Filipinos, at least some of us. Many Filipinos endure decades of loneliness and hardship for a chance to help their families. Many Filipinos are patient, self-sacrificing, and cheerful in adversity. We are far and away the most tolerant and inclusive country in the world with regard to sexual orientation, and one of the top countries in the world in respect and opportunities for women. We are good companions and work-mates, and our sense of humor is second to none.

But just look at this table:

US\$ GDP Per Capita (Purchasing Power Parity Basis)	1950	2017	Average p.a. Growth Rate over 67 years (except Vietnam, 27 years)
Vietnam	NA	6,300	7.3% pa (average pa growth since 1990)
China	610	16,600	5.1% pa
Thailand	850	17,800	4.6% pa
Turkey	1,300	26,500	4.6% pa
Romania	1,200	24,000	4.6% pa
Burma/Myanmar	390	6,300	4.2% pa
Indonesia	870	12,400	4.1% pa
Bangladesh	550	4,200	3.1% pa
Ethiopia	280	2,100	3.1% pa
Philippines	1,300	8,300	2.8% pa

Source: Nationmaster.com and World Bank

(Purchasing Power Parity GDP is an adjusted number which tries to account for different price levels among countries, rather than just directly using exchange rates to calculate “nominal” GDP.)

At the end of World War II, the Philippines was one of the richer countries in the world, and just about the richest in Asia. But as of 2017, our per capita income has slid to less than half the world average of \$17,300. We are close to the bottom in Asia, ahead of only a few countries like Myanmar and Vietnam. (Not for much longer; Vietnam will overtake us in about five years).

67 years of dismal cumulative results must mean something. There have been many attempts to improve our performance, but these attempts can mostly be characterized as Dreaming the Impossible Dream, or Trying to Fix the Unfixable (e.g., government corruption, Manila infrastructure, the Muslim problem).

Instead of continuing to waste money and energy trying to **Fix the UN-FIXABLE**, why not start by **Doing What Is DO-ABLE?**

Flashback: Fifty years ago, Singapore had just been kicked out of Malaysia, and its per-capita GDP was less than Bangladesh's. Faced with seemingly insurmountable problems, the Singaporeans started nation-building in an unlikely way. *They cracked down on jaywalking and littering.* They focused on **Doing What Was Do-Able.**

And with that they started to build Civic Pride (“We are the Asians who are orderly, clean, and law-abiding.”) Civic Pride is something that, as far as I can tell, is almost totally lacking in our country. Empty, self-defensive pride, we have by the bucketful, like the kind that bursts forth whenever someone calls attention to our excessive noise, our rowdy children, our unbagged garbage, our refusal to respect rules – but not a genuine pride in our country and our culture.

28.6% in jest, 71.4% seriously, here is an Off-the-Wall Idea for Changing Ourselves and Our Society, and just maybe improving our economic performance in the long run: **Start Building Civic Pride by Selecting, Proclaiming, and Promoting our National Dishes.**

Food is not the ultimate or only solution for building Civic Pride or forging a national identity, but you could pick worse places to start.

The Japanese are not in doubt that their national dishes are raw fish and ramen. As a result, all over the world, people know exactly what to expect in a Japanese restaurant, and consider Japanese food chic and fun. Watch the movie *Tampopo* to understand how ramen both reflects and shapes the Japanese quest for perfection in little things. Mexico has the taco and its variants, which have colonized large parts of the United States and the world. Italy has pasta and pizza, which contribute more to its national cultural identity than Leonardo, Vivaldi, the Sistine Chapel, AC Milan, and Ferrari combined. (By the way, contrary to popular belief, the Italians did not copy pasta from the Chinese; they already had it; tomatoes, however, are from South America.) Thailand has Tom Yum Kung, a highly-successful con job that consists mainly of adding mouth-numbing quantities of capsaicin to common tinola soup.

We have no clearly agreed national dish. This is a deficiency which detracts from our sense of national cultural identity and therefore national unity and purpose. When Filipinos entertain foreign friends, we either underwhelm them with ineptly-prepared adobo, or show lack of pride in our culture by serving almost anything, but not something distinctly Filipino.

Some will say that we already have a National Dish, Lechon. One problem with Lechon is that it is also Spanish, Polynesian, and German, to name a few; another problem is that hardly any Filipino is capable of doing it right. Only Cebuanos come close, but they foolishly omit the liver sauce. (*Ayaw'g ka-lagot, kay Sibvano man ko.*) Moreover, making a whole roast Lechon is simply beyond the capability of an average

household, especially those abroad, which constitute the majority of our country's connection points with other nationalities.

(Because I like you, here are three tips for making a better Lechon: Before roasting, soften the skin with very generous amounts of boiling water; sew up the belly very, very tight so the juices don't just drain out immediately over the spit; and enrich the supermarket Lechon sauce with French pâté, caramelized onions, fresh cracked peppercorns, and a soupçon of Drambuie liqueur.)

Some maintain our National Dish is Adobo. If so, it is a lousy one. One problem with Adobo is that no two Filipinos cook it the same way. Also, despite it being easy to make, almost no one bothers to do it right.

(And because I really, really like you, here are two tips for making better Adobo, regardless of your recipe: Before stewing, sauté the meat along with whatever spices you chose, until well-browned; and second, stew it long and slow, without ever permitting the liquid to come to a boil or even a vigorous simmer.)

Whether you follow my tips or not, neither Lechon nor Adobo will ever make the grade as a national dish. A proper Filipino national dish would need to conform to a number of fairly stringent parameters.

1. It should be recognizably different from what most other people around the world cook, and not a mere variation or simplistic fusion. Maki filled with Adobo is Out. Ceviche with Pinakurat and Tropical Fruits is Out. (By the way, we do this in Plantation Bay, and it's goooood.) Chicharon is (to my enormous regret) Out - every Latin country has it, and the Colombians make a better one than we do.
2. While distinctive, the dish must not be weird or offensive-sounding, -looking, or -smelling to large segments of humanity. Dinuguan is Out. Unusual animals and body parts including grasshoppers, goat, tripe, brains, and, of course blood, are Out. All varieties of dried fish are Out. Nor should the

dish offend a significant part of the Filipino population. So anything with pork is Out, including Lumpia Prito, most pancit, and Spam. Our list of possibles is shortening.

3. A good national dish should be within the competence of an averagely-intelligent Filipino to make, using readily-available ingredients (and not too many of them). Put another way, a national dish should be almost idiot-proof, like Tom Yum Kung. So Mango Soufflé is Out. Pancit Palabok is Out. Most seafood requires careful timing and temperature control, so Seafood is Out.
4. A good national dish should not require more effort than the averagely-lazy Filipino man or woman will, realistically, be willing to expend. Chicken Relleno is Out. Most desserts and pastries are Out, even Leche Flan since most Filipinos will not bother to get or jury-rig a baño Maria.
5. A good national dish cannot be particular to any region, or every other region would demand equal representation and there would never be an end to the debate. Therefore, Sisig is Out. Bicol Express would be Out even if it were vegetarian. Pancit Malabon is Out. La Paz Batchoy is Out.
6. And, of course, it should taste good, and appeal to an international audience.

Once you have worked logically through all the constraints, here are the best remaining Filipino foods that In My Humble Opinion could qualify as our National Dishes:

Kare-Kare is ridiculously easy to make (with my recipe, using peanut butter and beef shank, which unlike oxtail is available everywhere and not too variable in quality). It will not offend Muslim sensibilities, important considering how many Filipinos are in the Middle East. It is quite different from most other beef stews around the world, and has no close relation among the better-known world cuisines. The peanut is native to South America (whose inhabitants haven't done much with it), and we got it through the Spaniards (who also ignored it), so we have a better claim to it than other Asians. Filipinos love Kare-Kare, and so do most foreigners provided you don't make them

eat *bagoong* (and maybe we can eventually coax the world into liking *bagoong*, too; for now, we can offer anchovy paste or patis). (Would you like my recipe? Please write pr@plantationbay.com.)

Arroz Caldo, done right, is light-years ahead of all other rice-based or chicken-based soups anywhere else in the world. Never mind that the name is Spanish; people borrow food terms all the time. (Lechon is a Spanish word, too, by the way. And Pospas is also Spanish, a contraction of *pollo* and *sopas*, so there's no point in arguing what to call it). Let's make sure it is indeed done right (make the chicken broth first, using bones and backs, then cook the rice grains in that broth, along with macerated ginger to taste (remove before serving)). A little more creativity in toppings wouldn't hurt.

and to round out the National Dish A-Team, Halo-Halo Sundae. Skip the shaved ice, which requires specialized equipment, and go straight to the best ice cream you can find, one that is subtly-flavored like mango, ube, or vanilla. Forgive the use of ice cream – most countries have borrowed not just names but food ingredients from others. Simplify life by using a pre-made Halo-Halo Mix bought from the supermarket (by the way, these need to be more usefully and imaginatively packaged); add some form of dry crunch – pinipig, cornflakes, even crushed potato chips. Almost everyone in the world loves ice cream, and almost everyone who tries it loves our colorful fruit preserves and gelatins. Best of all, anyone can make it with hardly any effort, yet there is no doubt at all that it is Filipino. As a National Dish, Halo-Halo Sundae is a sure-fire winner.

There may be other suitable candidates. But the important thing is that we all, as a nation, agree on the dishes, then get behind them.

Three Critical Things to Keep in Mind: One, we could start by having an extended national debate. But knowing Filipinos, the debate would never end, and we would never get around to actually doing something.

So what we really need is a very limited debate for say two months, just for the idea to pick up steam and in case there are other good nominations out there. Then we should go straight to a Presidential Proclamation like the one Fidel Ramos did for the Philippine Eagle in 1995. We have an official national bird, flower (sampaguita), tree (narra), gem (pearl), and martial art (arnis). That's it – five official symbols of Philippine culture (that most Filipinos rarely encounter in their daily lives, or even their whole lives, so what good are they as national cultural symbols?). Food on the other hand is something most Filipinos can get excited about.

Proclaiming our National Dishes would have Zero political cost and almost Zero financial cost. The potential upside for the President is unlimited – even higher personal popularity throughout the regions and among OFWs; a nod to Muslims; a bold, controversy-free international cultural statement for all Filipinos; and a chance to show the world that we as a people have a sense of humor.

How about it, Mr. President?

Second Critical Consideration: We must at all costs resist the temptation to enlarge the list of National Dishes, or we will dilute the message and render the whole initiative useless. Most countries have only one or two dishes they tout to others; three is about the limit. Consumer research conclusively proves that offering too many choices just leads to mental fatigue, a blurred message, and missed sales. One of the reasons our international tourism advertising is so ineffective is that we try to push too many destinations all at once, just to please every possible province and congressman. (Unlike Indonesia, which for fifty years has sold Bali, Bali, and only Bali; or Thailand, which spent two decades pushing Pattaya, then the next two decades Phuket,, and only recently a few other places.)

Kare-Kare, Arroz Caldo, and Halo-Halo are universally eaten around the country, and not linked to any particular region. Almost every single Filipino has had some personal experience with one or more of these. Can we please just all get behind them?

Third Critical Consideration: Good intentions and Presidential Proclamations are not enough. Let's also put some teeth in this Proclamation, with these Implementing Rules and Regulations:

1. set official national standards on what each dish must contain, and the procedures that must be followed (just as France specifies how to make each of its over 200 recognized cheeses);
2. cultural indoctrination: require all high schools to teach how to prepare all three dishes, as part of Social Studies;
3. require applicants for OFW clearance to at least pass a multiple-choice test about our National Dishes (and probably some other areas, too); ditto for all employees of the Departments of Foreign Affairs, Tourism, and Agriculture; (many countries, when you apply to become a citizen, require you to know their typical foods and even what holidays those foods are associated with; they understand the importance of cultural identity);
4. encourage local and international media to publicize the National Dishes;
5. sponsor cooking contests and street-food festivals, not only here but in all areas with large Filipino populations like California, Michigan, Texas, Dubai, Rome, Hong Kong, Kuwait, and so on;
6. oblige all restaurants which bill themselves as Filipino (especially Jollibee, Goldilocks, and similar establishments) to offer at least one of the three items on their regular menu. (In Prague, almost every restaurant serves something called Traditional Czech Platter; with apologies to the Czechs, this dish usually consists of leftovers which the restaurant tried (unsuccessfully) to resuscitate with apple sauce, but the point is that the restaurant sector is cooperating in what seems to be some government directive to promote the idea that there is a distinct Czech food, even though this is quite a stretch, the Czechs having nourished themselves for over a millennium with mainly beer and bread. (*Omlouvám se svým českým přátelům, jestli mám nějakého.*)

7. And, lobby with UNESCO to declare our National Dishes an Intangible World Heritage. Our only entries so far are Tugging Rituals (who knows what this means, maybe something related to happy endings, and it's shared with several other countries), and the Darangen Epic, a song that not one Filipino in 10,000 has ever heard of, and not one in 100,000 has ever heard. There are only a few foods on the UNESCO list as of now, such as French cuisine generally, and "traditional Mexican cuisine". So there's room for us to elbow in.

Again, why do we need National Dishes?

Because good ones would give us something to be proud of in everyday life (a very scarce commodity in the Filipino context), and build Civic Pride (scarcer still). This in turn might over time encourage a few more Filipinos to follow rules, say No to drugs, strive to excel in science and the arts, and stand up to racist Canadians and Americans as well as condescending fellow Asians. It would give overseas Filipinos an excuse to invite foreign friends over for dinner, and elicit compliments for our country instead of criticisms. In however modest a way, it would help build a positive cultural image, and perhaps command a little more respect and a bit better treatment for Filipinos everywhere. That's a lot of bang for very little buck.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with Doing What is Do-Able. Remember the Singaporean Success Story, which started with a crackdown on jaywalking and littering. A little Civic Pride can go a long way.

Makisama at maki-isa tayo. Dream the Impossible Dream later. Today, let's do something eminently Do-Able, and get behind this Off-the-Wall Idea for Changing Ourselves and Our Country.

*Mr. Gonzalez has lived all around the world, including many of the world's great culinary capitals (Paris, London, Barcelona, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Vancouver, New York, Washington DC, Hong Kong). He is also an experienced amateur cook, and contributed to many of the recipes in use at **PLANTATION BAY RESORT & SPA**, including Home-Made Peanut-Butter Chocolate Ice Cream, Crispy Pork Roll, Sake-Infused Oxtail, Manny's Ceviche, and Roman-Style Spaghetti Carbonara. This unusual background gives him an understanding and appreciation of varied cuisines that few other food commentators could match, regardless of nationality.*



As much as some of us like it, Lechon could never be our National Dish. Find out why in this article by a dedicated amateur chef and globe-trotting Filipino.



A good Halo-Halo Sundae is Soft, Sticky, and Goopy. It has Crunch and a touch of Mystery. Melted is better than Hard-Frozen. It can be made anywhere, with no effort, by anybody. It is capable of endless variation. Yet, it is uniquely and indisputably Filipino. In the author's opinion, it's a National Dish with the potential to conquer the world.



At the Mactan Terminal 2 Inauguration in June 2018, the “Most Wanted” dish was Traditional Arroz Caldo from Plantation Bay, served by their lovely staff. Eventually, almost 800 portions were served, demonstrating its popularity among both Filipinos and foreign guests. (It’s unknown if the President had any, but the Presidential Security Command asked for take-away.)



Kare-Kare is beloved by all Filipinos, and meets all the criteria for a National Dish. Though traditional oxtail is pictured, Beef Shank would do as well, and is more readily available around the world.