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# Food, precious food: Migrating the palate

## **Abstract**

Food, precious food: Migrating the palate

MERLINDA BOBIS

## Food, Precious Food: Migrating The Palate

### Border Lover

Right after my long flight,  
I wore it on a tree  
under a canopy of green flags,  
my banana heart  
magenta velveteen and just  
beginning to open.

My petticoated flirt:  
three layers of heart-skin unfurled  
in the air,  
*a la* Monroe flashing  
not pale legs,  
but tiny yellow fingers  
strung into a filigree of topazes.

But yesterday,  
Grandmother plucked it,  
stripped it to the core,  
desecrating aesthetics and romance,

One half she served fresh,  
dressed in vinegar;  
the other, she cooked in coconut milk and chilli  
while humming about young girls who fly to learn  
strange ideas in a stranger tongue.

Later plying me with more rice,  
in the dialect, she said,  
*'Honi. Duwang putahe hale sa sarong puso —*  
Here. Two dishes from one heart.'  
I could not eat,  
not on a hollow growing  
peculiar in my breast.

(Bobis 1998)

The banana heart, a vegetable in grandmother's kitchen in the Philippines, migrates to Australia as a precious artefact: a metaphor — indeed, aesthetics and romance. With both literary technique and romantic bent, the migrant writer rarefies and 'makes precious' a domestic food image from the firsthome; or perhaps it is the writer's tongue/palate/sensibility that is reconfigured in the process of migration. These transformations will be addressed in this essay using my own experience as migrant writer, and an examination of the literary and the lived correlation between food and migration. I will cite my own literary negotiations with the food metaphor and the domestic realities in the Filipino migrant's kitchen and table. I will chart how migration re-invents the migrant's representation of food and eating, and inevitably her own representation of herself.

In this scene from my short story 'Border Lover', the migrant protagonist returns to her doubtful grandmother:

But something strange stirred in (these bones), the marrow was changing colour. I heard it, saw it, smelled it. My English she considered un-Filipino and my 'accented dialect', she found even more strange — '*siguro*, you now have a new heartbeat as well and we're all out of step here' — then, in her banana orchard, the memory of the white light of Australian winter, pale as a naked pear, and all the shades of Oz crept in. And the fragrance of fish and chips with vinegar impinged on the sharp sourness of her fish soup, rose-coloured with young, sweet potato leaves.... (1999a 127)

In the hybridised palate, Filipino and Australian food are equally rarefied, migrating their tastes into each other, into a new concoction. 'Nothing is ever pure again in my tongue', a Filipina<sup>1</sup> migrant once lamented. It is impossible to de-contextualise taste. The palate cannot un-know what it has come to know. It is now adulterated by foreign tastes. Even so, it makes sure it does not forget old loyalties. So in the new country, we keep cooking our rice, our coconut milk, our dried fish, and once in a while we ditch cutlery and eat with our fingers, and lick our chops in the old way. Eating becomes a ritual of remembering. Nothing beats the immediacy of body memory in the process of ingesting food: smell and taste affirm old loyalties and bring comfort. Eating becomes a symbolic homecoming. Food from home becomes more precious when eaten far away from home.

'Foodspeak' is doublespeak for the writer and the migrant. Both the literary and the domestic discourse are layered, ambivalent and often shifting between exposure and subterfuge — a state evoked by the image of the banana heart in my novel *Banana Heart Summer*. The 'petticoated flirt' reveals and hides itself in many velveteen folds: '... a purple skirt lifted here and there, a yellow filigree exposed like some lacy slip, a row of flowers uncurled like diminutive legs. This is how hearts open, often shamelessly' (2005 112).

The burden of shame or *hiya* is abhorrent to most Filipinos, especially in relation to the public face of their kitchens and tables. 'We cannot be seen to be poor by our guests' and 'We might be poor but we have dignity' are sentiments often expressed by Filipinos. Filipinos clean out their savings or borrow money to serve an abundant table during a fiesta, or butcher the only chicken in the yard for

an unexpected guest. Most Filipino migrants have not quite exorcised this fear of losing face at the table. We still cook for ten if there are five guests, and we must never allow the rice pot to grow empty. To some extent, this public (and often overstated) presentation of food is a representation of dignified survival that, like food, is a source of nourishment for the meticulous host. It seems that when away from the first home, the migrant cooks and eats with even more fervour.

Most Filipino migrants still talk about going home, even when they have made Australia home for more than twenty years. When they do go home, though, the experience is fraught with ambivalence. 'Too hot.' 'Too dirty.' 'Too poor.' 'I'm whinging too much.' 'Great to see family.' 'Family thinks I'm loaded with dollars to dole out.' 'But the food is so tasty, it will make you forget your name.'

The journey from the first to the third world is a shock to the system, especially if the third world is 'home', not some playground where the tourist can 'live well so cheaply'. The in-your-face poverty a few metres from the airport unhinges me the moment I land. I am now an Australian citizen with all the comfortable trappings of the West, and yet each time I return to the Philippines, I am stripped of all these defences. I am peeled back to the core, like the banana heart plucked by grandmother from my safe, writerly meanderings in the West — and cut in two. She feeds this heart of the matter to me, the truth that I am, in a way, riven by my departure sixteen years ago. All my loves and loyalties are shuttling between two homes in constant push-and-pull. Yet, in every homecoming, 'the food is so tasty, it will make you forget your name.'

For the migrant, this local superlative takes on another layer of meaning: as the meal progresses at grandmother's table, I become nameless. I, in fact, lose my public identity (both as Filipino and Australian) and for the moment it is all right. On return to the old rituals of the body, the public face loses currency and grandmother's scepticism follows suit.

This peeling of layers of defence happened in the community writing and performance workshop that I conducted for eight Filipina migrants in 2001. The workshop was spread out through three lunches where the women brought their own cooked food from the first home. The third meal we cooked together, while still doing exercises in storytelling, writing and devised theatre. Each activity was geared towards producing stories about food, family and migration.

Despite being non-writers, the women quickly fell in love with metaphor. When we read Pablo Neruda's 'Ode to a Lemon' they all saw that indeed 'Cutting a lemon / the knife leaves a little cathedral' (1967 237). This 'foodspeak' was nothing new. Back home they had used layered language with food. Suddenly around the workshop table, they began telling food stories from the first home in metaphoric language. 'Remember the very rare Christmas treat of cheese? Blade-thin, you could hardly taste it.' The inevitable doublespeak progressed, the shifting between exposure and subterfuge. Most stories were little glimpses into little or lack of food, into poverty, but quickly hidden by good humour. The food

banter continued with much laughter, until someone grabbed a box of tissues and set it in the middle of the table. I realised all had begun crying. The banana heart had been stripped to the core, but quickly the women built fresh layers to restore it, inventing new food metaphors that will speak to this new home. Among them was one about the smell of caramel as illustrated in this excerpt from one of the short stories written in the workshop:

Nagluluto ka pa rin ba ng puto tuwing lingo, Inay? Naaamoy ko ang balat ng saging na pinaglulutuan mo ng puto. Lumulutang sa loob ng bahay — parang hanging matamis. Amoy aribal ... amoy inay.

[Do you still cook rice-cake every Sunday, Mother? I can smell the banana bark when you cook the cake. It floats inside the house — like sweet air. Caramel scent ... mother scent.] (Filipina Workshop text, 2001)

‘Caramel scent ... mother scent’ is a simple yet potent metaphor. The critic Herbert Read defines metaphor as ‘the swift illumination of an equivalence’ (1963 25). The ordinary caramel is made equal to mother scent. The point of course is that the smell of caramel reminds the migrant of mother when she cooked caramel in the Philippines, but the simplicity (and purity) of rendition makes it even more poignant and urgent. Food does not only remind her of home; food is home. What is so ordinary as caramel in the Philippines takes on ‘a preciousness’ once brought over to Australia, because it is now invested with all the longings of the heart. It is not just caramel; it is *my* mother; it is *my* first home; it is *my* first heart.

In the workshop the women learned about narrative, image and metaphor, and used these tools in writing their own stories and poems. We consolidated these works into a radio piece, which was eventually recorded and broadcast in the Filipino program. One of them wrote about cooking taro leaves in coconut milk to tell the story of her sister’s horrible death from rabies in the Philippines. It was the first time that she told it in Australia. Previously she did not have the confidence to tell her Australian husband of eighteen years about this death and her grief. After the workshop, she made two copies of her story, one for her husband, another for her mother-in-law. In all my years of teaching creative writing, I have never seen such physical release and joy, after finishing a manuscript. The point of the exercise was achieved. The workshop was about validating the personal stories of the migrant and, in her own language, defining and dignifying herself to the host culture, as if to say, ‘I too have stories, I come from somewhere, I am someone’.

The owning of the self and its representation is not an experience shared by many Filipina migrants, especially those who are too conscious of the Filipina mail-order bride stigma. Some even deny they are Filipinas, but not Amy (not her real name) whom I mistook for a South American. She was tending a fruit stall in Kings Cross. She recognised me as a compatriot and proudly announced that she was Filipina. I bought fruit regularly from her. She kept inviting me to a meal at her place, which we never had. I took her to lunch instead. When she learned that I am a writer, she asked me to write her story. She had divorced her Australian

husband because of domestic violence, and even hinted at sexual abuse of her Filipina daughter by the ex-husband. Time passed, her fruit stall disappeared. I wrote a short story, not hers but one inspired by the image of a Filipina tending a fruit stall in Kings Cross.

I am forty. Divorced. No children. I own a fruit stall in Kings Cross. And I am Filipina, but this is my secret. People ask, 'Are you Spanish? Mexican? Italian?' A big man, brushing his hairy arm against my waist, whispers in his beer-breath, 'Aha, Latina!' Cringing, I say, '*Si, si, si*' to him, and to all of them. I am Filipina, but this is my secret.

I dyed my hair brown. It goes well with this pale skin from my Spanish grandfather whom I never saw. He owned the hacienda where my grandmother served as housemaid. They sent her away when she grew a melon under her skirt.

Melons have their secret, too. No one knows how many seeds hide in their rose-flesh. Or who planted them there. Mother used to say, it is God, it is God who plants all things. I don't believe her now.

'Is this sweet?'

'Very sweet. And few seeds.' I pretend to know a secret.

But he's not interested. This man frowning at the melon sounds like a customer back home. He touches the fruit doubtfully, tentatively. His hand is smooth and white against the green rind.

'Want a taste?' I offer the last slice from a box labelled 'For Tasting'. I pretend I am a fruit seller at home where we let the buyer sample the merchandise before any business takes place.

Sample the merchandise. This is how the men who go to my country to find themselves a nice, little brown girl put it. 'They're great, these rice-ies. Give them a bowl of rice and they can fuck all night!' A US serviceman said this once, grabbing me by the waist. I was twelve then. I remember I went home crying. (1999b 5)

'Give them a bowl of rice and they can fuck all night!' is a quote from an American in one of the bars around what was then the US bases in the Philippines. The Filipina is associated with food and sex, not far from how some Australian men have pigeonholed the bride they seek in the country where 'one can live so cheaply'.

This time, food is the representation of the Filipina. The fruit motif runs through the short story as a metaphor for the Filipina treated as commodity: a fruit to buy and consume. The reader finds out how the Australian husband treated his Filipina wife: her constant humiliation, the marital rape and the forced abortion because he does not want 'brown kids'. This is an extreme and shocking story of migration, not exactly the story of Amy whom I met but not completely fiction either. I have been told worse stories of violence committed against Filipinas by their Australian husbands. Unfortunately, while there is also the reality of successful marriages, victimhood seems to be the dominant narrative with which Filipina migrants are judged by the mainstream: the 'poor Filipina' is incapable of agency. On rare occasions, the flipside takes centre stage: the Filipina has too much agency as the gold-digging witch who will clean out her 'poor Australian husband'.

In the stories of migration, the focus is often on the migrant. Those left behind tend to remain invisible, so I attempted a short story about them. Like ‘Fruit Stall’, this story was inspired by an actual situation. Rica (not her real name) is the saddest little girl that I have ever met. When she was three, her mother left for Paris to work as a domestic helper. She was desperate to ‘complete her family’, so she engineered childish schemes to pair me off with her father. Her mother eventually left the marriage for good, because she had another family in Paris. The mother that Rica knew at three years old never returned.

This short story developed into ‘The Sadness Collector’, my narrative about the phenomenon of Filipina domestic helpers working probably in all seven continents now. Again I use food and eating as metaphors. In order to comfort her daughter after her mother leaves, the father invents a bedtime story about Big Lady. Here is an eating metaphor and a child’s defence mechanism, a Big Lady who eats our collective sadness:

She senses that there’s more to a mouthful of sadness than meets the tongue. A whisper of salt, even the smallest nudge to the palate, can betray a century of hidden grief. Perhaps she understands that, for all its practice, humanity can never conceal the daily act of futility at the dinner table. As we feed continually, we also acknowledge the perennialness of our hunger. Each time we bring food to our mouths, the gut-emptiness that we attempt to fill inevitably contaminates our cutlery, plates, cups, glasses, our whole table. It is this residual contamination, our individual portions of grief that she eats, so we do not die from them — but what if we don’t eat? Then we can claim self-sufficiency, a fullness from birth perhaps. Then we won’t betray our hunger.

(1999c 132–33)

Food evokes more than good things. It makes the mouth water or the stomach grumble. These undeniable physical responses remind us that food also evokes the lack of it. It is bound with hunger, evident in this excerpt from the short story ‘The Kissing’:

Gingered chicken in green papayas, smothered with coconut milk, never fails to keep the tongue moist long after the meal is over. So does slightly burnt sugar lodged at the roof of the mouth, melting with infinite slowness. The acrid sweetness teaches the tongue not to forget. Such is the taste of a kiss at the front door, when one foot must already seek the first step down, while the heart remains on a plate at the head of the table. (1999d 82)

Delectation bound with longing: every Filipino migrant or overseas worker’s departure comes with this gift and scourge of the tongue. The sweetness of the touching of lips also evokes the loss of the sensation, the loss of touch. A thing houses its opposite, its absence. Food evokes hunger and hunger evokes food, which are the main players in my novel, *Banana Heart Summer*.

The protagonist, Nenita, comes from a poor family in a small Filipino town. At the age of twelve she leaves school to work as a maid in a neighbour’s house. Two months later she migrates as a maid to America where her memories of home shift between an impoverished and violent household, and food. Almost every

chapter in the novel is a Filipino dish that becomes a metaphor for survival: the *palitaw* (a rice-cake) is remembered as ‘floating faith’; the *acharra* (pickled green papayas) teaches the art of preserving dignity and self-respect; the *halo-halo* (an iced mixture of sweets) is a ‘mix-mix’ of life’s enduring moments.

This endless array of food in the novel might raise doubts in the reader. Is the writer simply pandering to the West’s love for ‘exotic morsels’? I cannot deny that there is always the writerly play with language in any literary representation. Metaphors are a tool that can make precious even the most banal or domestic image. But it is not only the writer that manipulates a cultural representation for her or his own end. I think of how Filipino migrants always gather around food — food feast, food talk, food made precious all the time and shared with Australian guests with pride, as if to say, ‘We do come from somewhere special’. Exactly the spirit with which Nenita, the migrant in the novel, serves the dishes in her memory. All are comfort food. All have been reconfigured as stories of dignified survival. In America she fixates on food to allay the hunger for home and mother love. She threads all the hungers of her old street in the Philippines. She finds comfort in this kinship in want: ‘Hunger we all experience. Hunger is the greatest leveller of humankind, if it wishes to be levelled. But how and whether we appease it always restores the social order’ (2005 71).

In the social order, Nenita is a domestic helper in America. Subterfuge cannot be called upon in this instance. It is a fact that there are approximately eight million Filipino overseas workers around the world. They have perfected the art of departure and the long-term absence of family for the sake of basic survival. In 2005 their remittance to the Philippines amounted to 10.7 billion US dollars. The Philippine government hails them as the country’s ‘new heroes’ — such a lame lauding of brave, hardworking and long-suffering citizens from a country with an appalling record of government corruption, poverty, unequal distribution of wealth and human rights abuses. Of course, governments have perfected the art of manipulating cultural representations for their own end: ‘New Heroes.’ If only they could return home and live this name within a country that could take care of its own.

In all corners of the world, these heroes endure like Nenita. ‘It is all right,’ she assures herself, or perhaps ‘It is going to be all right’ (2005 266). A stoic belief or wish lodged in the heart and the gut. As she cooks, she attempts to balance flavours. To still feel like the old home while learning to love this new landscape. To preserve the old configurations in the heart while conjuring new ones. To manoeuvre between exposure and subterfuge so as not to lose face. To live well this layered heart. An earnest cook in a difficult kitchen, she is ‘the master of the ritual of appeasement, of making better, and ultimately of balance’ (2005 266).

Nenita evokes both migrant and writer: she writes and rewrites her story in each dish that she cooks. Food preparation is a migration of home into a foreign kitchen, where home is re-affirmed and re-contextualised. True, this food bears

stories of home, but served on someone else's table, it is no longer 'the old dish'. Adapted to this new country, it is different, more precious, a gift of the first heart, like the migrant's poem or story set before the Australian reader — and the serving body or sensibility is as reconfigured, strange even to itself and hopeful. Sometime at this new table, perhaps it will be seated not as suppliant or guest, but as kin.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> There is distinction between Filipina (female) and Filipino (male, or sometimes a generic qualifier for something of the Philippines).

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## *Banana Heart in Coconut and Chili*

### *INGREDIENTS*

- 1 large banana heart (sometimes called 'banana bell')*
- 1 cup shelled fresh prawns*
- 1 tsp Philippine or Malaysian shrimp paste ('blachan')*
- 4 cloves garlic, crushed*
- 1 thumb-sized piece of ginger root, crushed*
- 1 stalk, lemon grass, knotted and crushed*
- 2 red chillies, chopped (the small, hot variety)*
- 1 can coconut milk*

### *METHOD*

- 1. Peel the purple layers off the banana heart until you get to the whitish pink layer. Shred this core of the heart then 'bleed it' (get rid of the sap by wringing shreds by the handful).*
- 2. In a wok, boil the coconut milk with the spices and shrimp paste for 5 minutes.*
- 3. Add the banana heart shreds. Boil for 3 minutes, then simmer and cover the wok.*
- 4. When the banana heart is nearly cooked, add the prawns or calamari. Simmer. This dish needs perfect timing, so the banana heart is fully cooked and the prawns/calamari are done just right.*
- 5. Season with salt as desired.*
- 6. Serve hot with fried fish, a perfect 'flavour partner', and freshly steamed rice.*