



in an eggshell

POSSIBLY THE MOST FAMOUS STREET FOOD IN THE PHILIPPINES, THE BALUT PACKS A COMPLEX GUSTATORY EXPERIENCE WITHIN ITS FRAGILE SHELL

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Manila is known for its glorious sunsets. At dusk, deep orange hues blend beautifully with vibrant purple streaks in the sky. That's when this frenzied city of over 11 million takes its cue to wrap up and wind down for the day. Slowly, the mad symphony of incessant honking from jeepneys and diesel-engine tricycles tapers off, and as the city slides behind the cloak of night, the action is just about to begin for some.

From about 5pm, street vendors of balut, possibly the most famous of Filipino street food, fill their padded baskets with fresh, hot duck eggs, and begin to traverse the streets on foot, peddling their fragile wares. Outside hospitals, nightclubs, discos and other such nocturnal establishments, the gentle night is sporadically interrupted by a deep, modulated voice calling out 'BALUU-U-UT!'

Balut is sometimes called the national street food of the Philippines. Essentially, it is a fertilised duck's egg, cooked in boiling water. To enjoy, simply crack the wide end of the egg, make a hole in the eggshell, sprinkle some rock salt and sip the rich, warm broth. Then, crack the entire egg open and savour the soft yolk and tiny chick ensconced within. The yolk is firmer, succulent and more flavoursome than a hard-boiled chicken egg yolk. The finale to the experience is when you put the entire cooked chick, discernible beak, feathers and all, into your mouth, and crunch away at the very moist meat. It is remarkable how such a complex gustatory experience is all packed in a single egg. Admittedly, for the newbie, this takes some serious daring, a fact that has not gone unnoticed. In recent years, the balut has become a staple frequently featured in TV shows like *Fear Factor*, a strange, exotic food that challenges the



appetite of even the most adventurous of thrill seekers.

In Manila, the balut is readily sold by vendors parked on street corners, for about PHP1 a piece. However, this special egg is traditionally peddled by male vendors who walk the streets until the wee hours, shouting 'BALUU-U-UT' at the top of their voices. These itinerant hawkers tend to charge an additional peso for bringing the delicacy to you — a small price, really, to pay for such thoughtful convenience.

And the best way to enjoy the balut? With a sprinkling of spicy vinegar or rock salt, and washed down with an ice-cold San Miguel beer. It is a tremendously popular snack with Filipino men, and the reason for its popularity is simple — in some circles, balut is believed to be an aphrodisiac, or at the very least, it is said to energise the body. To date, there is no clear proof of either, although there is a local folk song that celebrates this egg as 'pampalakas ng tuhod', which translates into 'it strengthens your knees' — perhaps referring to the high protein content of this snack. Local men typically gather in a group, order up some baluts, and wolf them down standing up amidst much banter and ribbing. There are many women who partake of this snack too, albeit minus the macho conversation.

Chicken or duck eggs take about 28 days to hatch. In the case of balut, the egg is checked when it is between 14 to 18 days old by placing it over a lit candle to determine the chick's development within the eggshell. If the chick is deemed sufficiently grown based on its size, the eggs are hard-boiled and ready for eating. Most Filipinos believe that 17-day-old eggs make the perfect balut. At that stage, the chick is still wrapped in white and does not show beak or feathers. Elsewhere in Asia, especially in Vietnam and China, balut fans prefer their eggs a few days older, when the chick is larger. For more squeamish eaters, there is the milder

version known as the penoy, which is the unfertilised duck egg with yolk, that's safely devoid of the tiny chick.

The town of Pateros, some 12 km southeast of the city of Manila, has been farming ducks and making balut since the early 1800s. Perched beside the Pasig River, it even had a port once, filled with seafaring vessels from around the region. Perhaps it was the passing Chinese-Malay merchants who introduced balut to this town — the origins of balut remain decidedly murky, and many different versions of its history exist.

Andy Concio, owner of Concio's Food Corporation, balut producer for over 20 years and life-long resident of Pateros, noted that life along the river has changed through the years. During his grandmother's time in 1905, he said, the river was filled with ducks and boats. It has since shrunk to 5m wide and is increasingly polluted, to an extent that ducks can no longer survive on its waters. However, producing duck eggs for balut and salted duck eggs still remains a thriving industry in Pateros — the enterprising producers simply obtain their ducks from other provinces.

Aside from selling duck eggs for immediate consumption, Concio introduced a vacuum-sealed, bottled version known as Andoy's Best Gourmet Balut in 2005. Comprising two whole balut eggs bottled in brine, which can keep for up to two years and costs PHP60 per bottle, these 'gourmet' baluts are sold in numerous supermarkets in Manila, and are even exported to Dubai, Hong Kong, and soon enough, America. Now homesick Filipinos abroad and adventurous eaters can have their fill of this specialty egg anytime, anywhere.

This clever entrepreneur even transformed the balut into a complete meal by incorporating it in popular Filipino recipes like afitada (braised balut in tangy tomato sauce with red sweet peppers and potatoes) and

caldereta (braised balut with spicy liver sauce).

Through the years, innovative chefs have also introduced this humble street food to many of Manila's restaurants. Via Mare's Oyster Bar (Greenbelt 3, Ayala Center, Makati. Tel: +(63) 2757-4020), a favourite restaurant and caterer of the city's socialites, started serving a sophisticated version of the dish in 1981 called 'Balut Surprise'. Chick, yolk, broth and all from two duck eggs are removed from their shells and cooked in olive oil and garlic, then placed in a casserole and covered with puff pastry. The dish is then popped into the oven and cooked till the pastry turns golden and crisp. To enjoy, simply break through the delicate pastry and scoop into the hot filling with a spoon. Some drinking joints also serve balut ala pobre, where the duck eggs and chicks are removed from the shell and sautéed in lots of garlic. While the bold flavour of the garlic complements the tender, juicy bite of the egg, it forgoes the ritual of eating balut — i.e. carefully cracking the egg and sipping on the hot, tasty broth.

Filipinos often challenge foreigners visiting the archipelago to sample this exotic delicacy. And challenge it is, to muster up enough courage to crunch through what is essentially a half-cooked, half-grown chick. Fans of balut, however, claim that it tastes a whole lot better than it looks, and that its delicate flavours can barely be described in words. No doubt about it, this Filipino delicacy is an acquired taste, and a gustatory experience one is most unlikely to forget! **E**