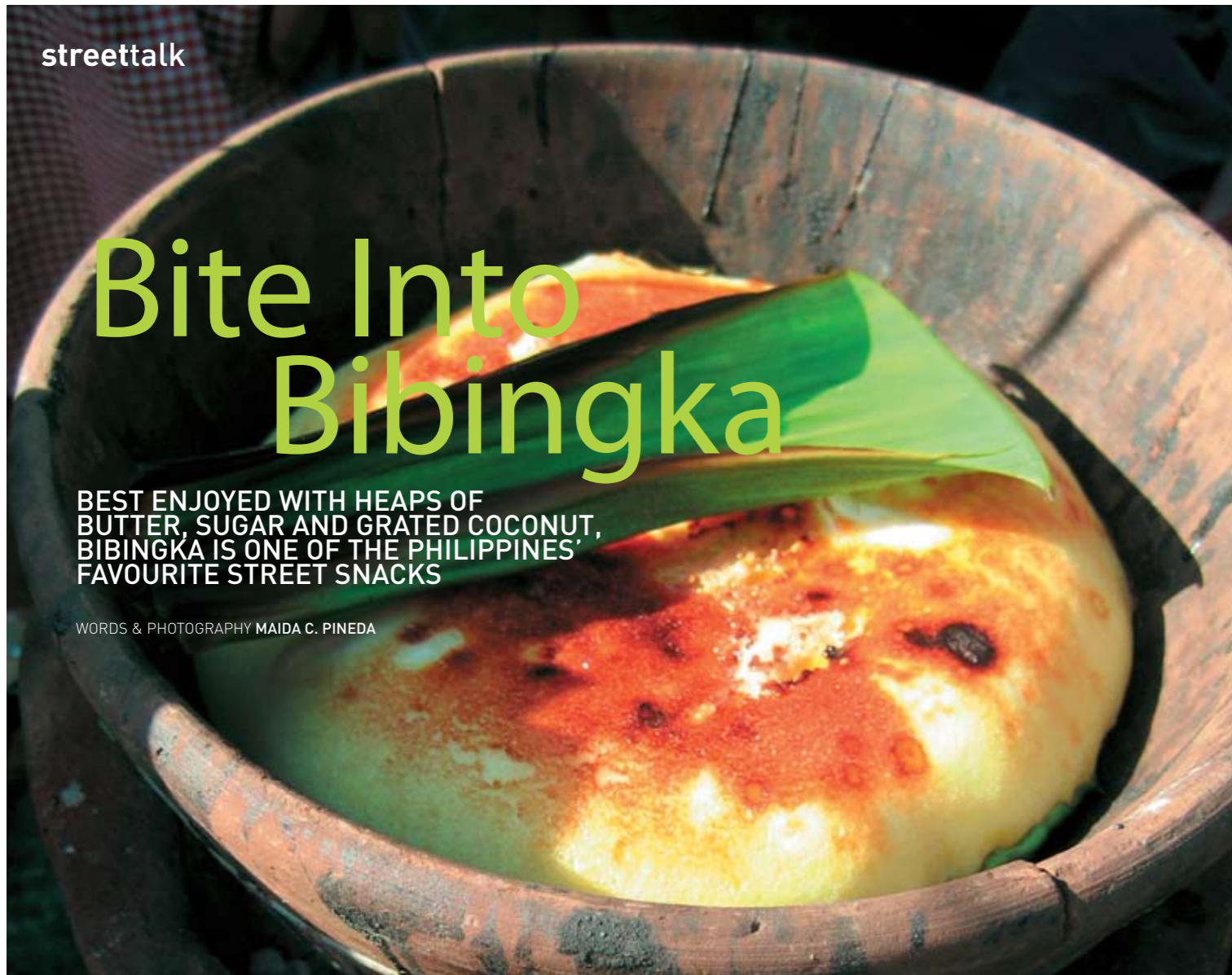


# Bite Into Bibingka

BEST ENJOYED WITH HEAPS OF BUTTER, SUGAR AND GRATED COCONUT, BIBINGKA IS ONE OF THE PHILIPPINES' FAVOURITE STREET SNACKS

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Manila's streets often cause first-time visitors to experience a sensory overload. There are colourful jeepneys swerving and stopping abruptly, bumper-to-bumper traffic, and enterprising vendors selling anything and everything. With Manila's residents spending hours commuting everyday, street food is naturally a booming industry. And the choices are endless.

There's the famous balut (duck embryo) peddled in wicker baskets by men; fish balls fried in small carts on wheels; skewered barbecued meats hot off the grill; and taho, or soy with caramelised sugar and sago, contained in two metal tubs balanced on a bamboo pole and borne on a strong man's shoulders. Among this dizzying plethora of choices, the bibingkang galapong (often referred to as bibingka) stands out. Where else in the world can you find cake cooked right off the street in minutes, and served hot on the spot?

Bibingka is traditionally made of galapong — rice soaked overnight and laboriously ground by hand in a stone mortar. The galapong is then mixed with coconut milk and sugar, and the mixture is poured in clay pots lined with banana leaves. Glowing coals are placed precariously above and below the pots to cook the batter. When cooked through, the rice cake is garnished with slices of kesong puti (white cheese made from Carabao milk) and wedges of salted eggs.

It is often enjoyed guiltlessly slathered with butter, sprinkled with sugar and lots of grated coconut, and washed down with salabat or ginger tea. If you desire



an extra special bibingka, the vendor will simply toss an egg into the batter. A crucial element is the use of banana leaves to line the clay pot. The banana leaves prevent the batter from sticking while imparting a sweet, subtle flavor to the rice cake. A small piece of banana leaf is also placed on top of the bibingka to prevent it from burning from the heat of the hot coals above.

The bibingka is a street dish that captures three facets integral to Filipino culture: rice, coconut and Christmas. Rice and coconut are the two main ingredients of the dishes cooked throughout the archipelago. And this predominantly Catholic nation celebrates the longest Christmas season, beginning in September, when Christmas carols can be heard and Christmas bazaars begin. While the bibingka is sold all year round, it is most popular during December when devout Catholics attend nine-day novena masses at four in the morning. These rice cakes are sold in makeshift stands just outside the church, along with puto bumbong (a steamed, tubular purple rice cake) and hot salabat (ginger tea). The cool dawn mornings and the delicious scent of cooking bibingka are fond memories Filipinos associate with Christmas.

The origins of bibingka are unclear, as is its association with the Christmas dawn masses. Perhaps it can be traced to the use of rice as offerings. Like its Asian neighbors, rice is a central part of the Filipino culture. There are over 80 different varieties of rice cakes in the Philippines, with some ethnic communities planting over 50 different types of rice. During harvest time from November to January, rice and rice cakes are offered as thanksgiving to the pagan harvest gods, a practice that dates back to ancient times. Christmas falls during the harvest season, thus making it easy for the Christian missionaries to introduce the celebratory season to Filipinos. The Filipino farmers accordingly adapted the offering and eating of rice cakes to the Catholic faith.

It is not clear when this began. But the earliest recording of bibingka dates back to 1751 in Fr. Juan Delgado's book, where the Catholic priest devotes a long chapter to rice. Delgado mentions "bibinca" as taken with chocolate and eaten for breakfast. Historians suggest that the bibingkahan (clay pot used in cooking the rice cake) is of a Chinese vintage, while the process of milling wet rice is similar to the way the Mexicans grind corn for tortillas, which can be traced to Spanish colonial rule.

Today, vendors can often be found selling bibingka on roadside stalls close to churches, at outdoor weekend markets, fairs and other festive settings. It has also become quite popular among Manila's elite to hire a bibingka vendor to cater at their parties or even wakes. The rice cake's versatility makes it acceptable to be eaten for merienda (snack), breakfast or even as dessert. The

bibingka is steeped in tradition; efforts to introduce variations such as bibingka-crepe with different toppings were not accepted by Filipinos. There are boxed bibingka mixes sold in the supermarkets, but they will not give you the same fluffy, delicious rice cake. Still, for many Filipino immigrants around the world, the boxed alternative is better than having no bibingka at all.

Linda, a 49-year-old bibingka vendor, has three men and two women assisting her. She can sell as many as 600 bibingkas on a busy Sunday. Each bibingka, about five inches in diameter, is sold for about P40 (S\$1.25). At this low price, Linda confides that her profit is very small. She laments the high cost of her ingredients, especially the increase in the prices of eggs and banana leaves. Still, her growing bibingka business provides enough income for her family, without requiring her to seek work abroad.

While she can do it on her own, she says men are better skilled at enduring the heat from the hot coals. Watching the men masterfully man five clay pots simultaneously is indeed an impressive sight. They have perfected the system of cracking and beating an egg into the batter, placing the banana leaf into the claypot, pouring the batter, garnishing it with eggs and cheese, and putting hot coals over it — all without getting any bibingka under or overcooked. Once cooked, the bibingka is placed on the table, where the women will slather on the butter and sugar. A fifth helper is, meanwhile, busy grating two sacks of coconut, preparing the coconut topping that goes with the cakes. The cakes, Linda says, are best enjoyed piping hot.

The next time you are in Manila, follow your nose to the delicious aromas of a freshly cooked bibingka. And treat yourself to the Filipino food fit for the gods. 🍴