



MAIDA C. PINEDA TAKES YOU ON A FILIPINO FOOD-TRIPPING ADVENTURE, INTRODUCING SEVEN OF THE WILDEST, STRANGEST, MOST EXOTIC AND YET SURPRISINGLY DELICIOUS DELICACIES. READ ON - WE DARE YOU TO CHALLENGE YOUR TASTE BUDS!



Filipinos are infamous around the world for three things: Imelda's gigantic shoe collection, a natural talent for singing, and their appetite for a steaming duck embryo treat called *balut*. In fact, the reality TV show *Fear Factor* frequently dares its thrill-seeking contestants to eat this famed Filipino delicacy. Of course, to many Filipinos there is nothing daring about eating *balut*. Especially not when *balut* is easily surpassed by so many more exotic delicacies you may encounter as you travel through the archipelago - the range of crunchy, slimy or otherwise unorthodox textures that ooze with bursts of flavor. With stomachs of steel and a hearty appetite for both food and adventure, the rural Filipino sees all animals, no matter how frightening, as opportunities to create a delicious bite,

whether it's a meal, a snack, or even just an appetizer to go with their gin and beer. We have no qualms about swatting, cooking, and eating pretty much anything that moves: beetles, pythons, locusts, bats, field rats, sea urchins, frogs and so much more. That's why in the Filipino kitchen, nothing is ever wasted. Every bit of the animal is used. A pig, for example, offers a cook more possibilities beyond pork chops. Its blood, intestines, ears, cheeks, and tail are used as a matter of course - literally - for various specialty Filipino dishes. This creativity and resourcefulness in cooking and consuming the exotic is motivated by hunger and survival as well as the enjoyment and thrill of eating the unusual. Here are my top seven picks of the Philippines' most exotic Filipino fare.

BALUT

WHAT IT IS The ubiquitous fertilized boiled duck's egg. Chicken or duck eggs usually take 28 days to hatch. The perfect *balut* is boiled at 17 days, when the chick is still wrapped in white and does not show beak or feathers
WHERE YOU'LL FIND IT Pateros and neighboring towns of Rizal in Metro Manila
DISH ON THE DISH There is an art to eating *balut*. First, make sure it's hot. Hold up the egg and determine the wider end; lightly tapping it here will allow you to savor the *balut's* tasty broth. Break off a piece of eggshell and then take a draught - you may also want to lightly salt it before doing so. Once all the soup has been sipped, crack the rest of the egg open and sprinkle it with rock salt, eating the yolk and lifeless chick. Said to be an aphrodisiac, *balut* is traditionally sold by vendors who do their rounds on the streets peddling the eggs in baskets in the evening, bellowing, "Baluuuuuuuuuuut!" The menfolk like to gather at street corner *sari-sari* stores with their bottles of beer or gin and *balut* as *pulutan* (bar chow), spending many a happy happy hour.



KAMARO
WHAT IT IS A mole cricket that burrows in the moist soil of rice fields
WHERE YOU'LL FIND IT Pampanga
DISH ON THE DISH These mole crickets are the most delicious *pulutan* in Pampanga, a foodie province known for delicious dishes, the country's best cooks and most discriminating gourmards. The *kamaro* catchers stomp their bare feet on the soil to make the crickets surface, causing them to jump and fly awkwardly, making them easy to catch. Cooking them is even more laborious. The crickets' legs and wings must be removed, after which the body is boiled in vinegar and garlic. It is then sautéed in oil, onion and chopped tomatoes until they are chocolate brown in color. It feels like a party in your mouth with every bite: the initial crunch gives way to a moist interior, making it a perfect pairing with ice-cold beer. Without the legs and wings, there is no scratchy texture.



TAMILOK
WHAT IT IS Woodworm found in driftwood
WHERE YOU'LL FIND IT Agusan, Surigao and Davao
DISH ON THE DISH *Tamilok* is not for the squeamish or the faint of heart. The experience of eating them is more risqué than eating sushi. Forget raw, as these worms are eaten alive. The driftwood is chopped to extract these pink juicy worms that measure about six to eight inches long. Each is washed then dropped onto the tongue. Fans of this worm love the clean taste and the tingling sensation it sends through the digestive tract.

SINARAPAN
WHAT IT IS The world's smallest fish
WHERE YOU'LL FIND IT Lake Buhi, Camarines Sur
DISH ON THE DISH At a mere six to eight millimeters when fully grown, the *sinarapan* is definitely the world's smallest edible fish. These diminutive creatures are endemic to this lake, swimming in massive schools of 100,000 to 500,000 fish. Their minute bodies are transparent so much so that only their black eyes are visible. To give you a clearer idea of how small they are, imagine this: A tablespoon holds over a thousand of them! They best time to catch *sinarapan* is two hours before dawn or at three or four in the afternoon. These fish are said to be an aphrodisiac when eaten raw with salt and a few squeezes of lime juice. It is quite amusing as its name seems to come from the root word,

sarap, which means "delicious" in Filipino - a term that can be used to describe food and sex. They are usually added to an omelet for breakfast or Bicolano style with coconut milk, vegetables and chili. Sadly, these little wonders may soon become extinct due to over-fishing.

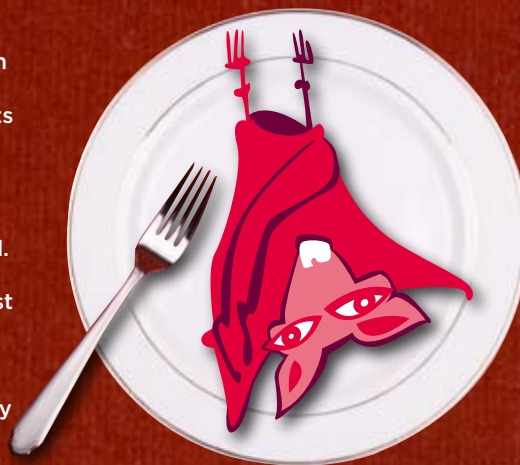


PANIKI

WHAT IT IS A fruit bat that feeds on over-ripe lanzones, jackfruit, durian and other tree fruit

WHERE YOU'LL FIND IT The Philippines has over 50 species of fruit bats found all around the Philippines, including Subic, the Samal Caves in Davao, and San Juan, Batangas

DISH ON THE DISH Batman, beware! Nothing is spared of the fruit bat once it has been caught. To prepare it for cooking, the entire bat is skinned, and the two glands found at the base of the limbs are removed. It is then chopped into bite-sized pieces, sautéed in oil, garlic, vinegar, tomatoes, pepper, laurel leaves, and simmered until the broth has almost dried out. Although some Filipinos consider these fruit bats a delicacy, eating them must be stopped since many bat species are close to becoming endangered. These fruit bats play an important role as they help to maintain the biodiversity of the Philippine's ecological system by propagating fruit-bearing trees.



ANT EGGS

WHAT THEY ARE The eggs of tree ants

WHERE YOU'LL FIND THEM Ilocos Norte

DISH ON THE DISH Known as the caviar of Ilocos' wealthy set, they are found on the branches of certain mango trees where these ants make their homes. You need an expert who can detect them from under the tree's branches. Gathering them requires a light hand and fleet feet as the sound of footsteps makes these ants hide their eggs. Flat baskets are attached under the branches and the tree is shaken vigorously until the eggs fall into the baskets. These are fried in butter. The result: A crisp shell on the outside and creamy filling on the inside.



BETUTE TUGAK

WHAT IT IS Stuffed frog

WHERE YOU'LL FIND IT Pampanga

DISH ON THE DISH Farmers used to depend on rainwater to irrigate their farms. Children would then catch the frogs, which came out during rainy season, while their parents cultivated the land or planted rice. Outwitting the frogs has been a traditional bonding family ritual. *Betute* is a play of words on *butete*, which means "tadpole" in the local dialect. *Betute* is the entire frog stuffed with minced pork – so it looks like a very fat frog – which is then deep fried in oil.

EXOTICA LITE

Too squeamish to try all of the above? Tuck into these less intimidating, but still exotic delicacies available at local eateries in Manila or Cebu

■ TABA NG TALANGKA

One jar of this reddish orange crab fat requires the meticulous shelling and picking of hundreds of tiny crabs. But once cooked, this decadently rich paste is heavenly when poured onto a plate of steamed rice.

■ DINUGUAN

This black dish of pork and pig innards stewed in fresh pig blood is seasoned with garlic, onion, and oregano, and eaten with *puto* (rice cake) or a plate of steamed white rice

■ SKEWERED BARBECUE DISHES

These street food go by witty proper names: Adidas (chicken feet), Betamax (chicken blood

clots), Walkman (Pig's Ears), Helmet (Chicken Ears), IUD or Isaw (chicken and pork intestines)

■ GREEN MANGOES AND BAGOONG

Pregnant women are the ones who usually crave the taste of this sour and salty combo. Try not to squint as you bite into the tartness of sliced green mangoes dipped in a salty, stinky, fermented shrimp paste concoction called *bagoong*



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