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Palayok, by Fernandez

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Book Reviews

Palayok: Philippine Food through Time, on Site, in the Pot. By Doreen G. Fernandez. Manila: Bookmark, 2000.

The so-called coffee-table book is for the eye as much as the mind. Oversized, hard-bound, jacketed, lavishly illustrated (grangerized?), it is often displayed prominently in the parlor, the lobby, and the lounge to divert, inform, or impress guests—a book, in short, not meant to gather dust in the bookshelf. In some circles, the label “coffee-table” is pejorative, connoting (and not without good cause) the ostentatious or the vacuous glorified—a peacock without pedigree. To be sure, however, some coffee-table books transcend the discourse of fluff and froth, and unite style and substance the way good books do. Doreen G. Fernandez’s *Palayok: Philippine Food through Time, on Site, in the Pot*, even skeptics would agree, is one such book—simultaneously mental aliment and sensory treat.

Designed by John Flores, the book is as delightful as the food and food culture it describes. Interspersed throughout the text are such visual delicacies as paintings by Fernando Amorsolo, Damian Domingo, and Jose Honorato Lonzano, drawings by Charles Wirgman from the *Illustrated London News*, ads from the pre-war *Philippines Free Press*, and postcards and photographs from the turn of the century. It must have been tempting for Flores to self-indulge, but fortunately, he overcomes the xenophobia common among designers of similar books and achieves a kind of minimalist baroque. He leaves many large spaces white, a feature of the book which some people might call “conspicuous waste,” but which I believe prevents ocular indigestion. Like so many cream puffs, the visuals are simply too rich to be consumed in large quantities or in one sitting.

But the use of distinguished art works is perhaps only apropos, for the stuff of the book is rather on the grand side. As the preface states, “The body of the text follows Philippine food from its sources and beginnings through colonization and other foreign influences, to its current state and tastes.” In the first section of the book, Fernandez relates Philippine food to the natural

environment and to historical conditions. Then, she discusses the indigenization of foreign cuisine, which may be seen as a process of appropriation and, in a sense, a mode of resisting colonization. In the last chapter, she discusses food as language—a set of practices, conventions, and tacit assumptions that speak the Filipino. The book also features short articles on various aspects of Philippine food (e.g., the *fiesta*, rice, Filipino breakfasts, the *lechon*, etc.), a bibliography, and a sizeable glossary of Filipino food and cooking terms. Included, too, is Best's article on the representations of Philippine food in art. Certainly, this book is no light *merienda*, but a full and filling *lauriat*, with a short, sweet coda of a dessert: "Food to the Filipino is history. It is also bond, culture and identity."

While the book as a whole makes interesting reading, it is the observations in the last chapter, where Fernandez relates food ways to the larger cultural codes of Philippine society, that are the most arresting. For instance, the common Filipino practice of serving the best dishes for an important guest, particularly a foreigner, is shown to be ironic. The guest thinks he is being feted, but those who understand the subtle language of Philippine food know that the distinction is dubious. As Fernandez explains, "If the hosts bring out the special plates and cook a special dish for the guest, the regard is for someone who is important and most welcome, but remains in the *ibang-tao* or "Outsider" category. If, on the other hand, the hosts ask the guest to forgive the modesty of their fare and table accessories, and invite him or her to join the family anyway, it shows a deep acceptance of someone seen as being in the *Hindi ibang-tao*, or "One of Us" category."

Fernandez's text, though perhaps neither so formal nor so scientific as an article in a learned anthropological journal, is evidently as thoroughly researched, as encyclopedic, and certainly more than lively—enough to whet appetites and to prompt the more studious to read more on their own. Not that this book isn't joyous reading enough. The prose is effortlessly elegant—the parallelisms, asides, inversions, and other rhetorical devices come naturally; the words fall "trippingly on the tongue"—a coloratura in prose.

Fernandez has also perfected the art of cataloguing, which sometimes reaches near Homeric proportions. The effects (musical, semantic, mnemonic, and visual) of this style are highlighted by the book design. We read, for instance, that:

next to *kinilaw* the favored cooking methods are
 halabos or steaming,
 inihaw or grilling on coal,
 sinigang, or stewing in soured broth with vegetables,
 and
 paksiw, cooking in vinegar.

Thus laid out on paper, the text looks like a poem, which fact may pose a problem to the meticulous scholar who wants to quote directly and accurately

from the book, but which is also a delight to anyone who wants to read the book out loud, among friends, over dinner.

Finally, Fernandez rounds off paragraphs with such flourish as only master stylists can achieve. In her article on Philippine breakfasts, for example, she ends, "Go ahead then, and enjoy the global breakfasts available in this country, but do heed the wise, and think of healthy combinations with which to break your fast and open the first day of the rest of your life." In Fernandez's prose, as in genuine *haute cuisine*, presentation makes the edible delectable.

If there must be a bone to pick, it would be the use of miniscule type. "That is no country for old men," Yeats once lamented. *Palayok* is no book for old folks, or young ones with astigmatism. In places, Flores' layout and choice of type make the text look like captions for the photos. But to dwell on that point would be to pick a bone, indeed, and why do that when the rest of the feast is exquisite?

All told, *Palayok* is bound to satisfy all but the captious, whom it is impossible to please, anyway. The coffee will never be strong enough for them, and the pot will always be cracked. But like the mystical cauldron of Celtic lore, *this* pot promises—and provides—treats both nourishing and appetizing, whether one is culinary scholar, cultural historian, hotel chef, household cook, *restaurateur*, antiquarian, bibliophile, designer, common reader—anyone who has a taste for the manifold pleasures and varied flavors of Philippine culture. One merely has to lift the cover and peep inside.

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Paz Marquez Benitez: One Woman's Life, Letters, and Writing. By Virginia Benitez Licuanan. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995.

Not often have I come across a book that offers such delight and pleasure as Ms. Licuanan's tribute to her mother, Paz Marquez Benitez, mother writer, editor, and teacher of writing. This most extraordinary woman, lovely in mind and person, whose unflinching eye saw with joy and courage, compassion and humor, and accepted life's vicissitudes which she faithfully recorded in her diaries, journals, and letters.

Shortly after her mother's death, Ms. Licuanan discovered bundles of her mother's old letters to and from her husband and children which she had kept in an old camphor trunk. Paz's mother had burned her husband's letters after his death ("He wrote those letters only for me"). Unlike her mother, Paz hoarded her letters (explaining in a poem to her daughter)

For some far-off day still in the unknown
 When reading them once again