



# *BEYOND EATING: THEORIZING THE TRINITAS OF FOOD IN SOUTHEAST ASIA*

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*Since time immemorial, food has been the primary reason that family, friends, and new acquaintances are gathered. In recent years, food remains the star of the gathering and is further highlighted with the emergence of social media and heightened by the popularity of food selfies. This development requires a deeper understanding of food, especially heritage dishes of Southeast Asia, beyond eating. In past decades, several cookbooks, historical narratives, blogs, and vlogs on food were beautifully done both in the Philippines and beyond. However, there is no study yet that primarily theorizes the emergence and evolution of food in Southeast Asia. This paper, therefore, attempts to contribute to the continuing discussion of food in the region by using the **Trinitas** of ethnicity, environment, and experiences as framework.*

Keywords: Ethnicity, Environment, Experiences, Southeast Asia, Food

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## INTRODUCTION

Food is the center of most gatherings of families, friends, and new acquaintances since time immemorial. Such a role in recent times remains the same and is further highlighted by the emergence of social media and of the popularity of food selfies. This development requires a deeper understanding of food, especially heritage dishes of Southeast Asia, beyond eating. In past decades, several cookbooks, historical narratives, blogs, and vlogs on food were beautifully done both in the Philippines and beyond. However, there is no study yet that primarily theorizes the emergence and evolution of food in Southeast Asia. This paper, therefore, attempts to contribute to the continuing discussion of food in the region by using the *Trinitas* of ethnicity, environment, and experiences as framework.

Admittedly, the discussion of food in the region is not easy as eating them. The diversity of ingredients, preferences, and tastes matters to one's locale, which therefore added to the challenge of understanding it in the context of the region. Conversely, such diversity also made the study of food enriching and enlightening. The richness of Southeast Asian food ranging from sweet to sour, salty, spicy, or a combination thereof, is not surprising given the diverse and gargantuan nature of the region in terms of its geography, demographics, and experiences.

In terms of geography, the region is composed of 11 countries that are located in mainland and archipelagic zones. Their locations in the tropics have shaped the diet of the inhabitants with the abundance of vegetables, fruits, and spices, as well as various sources of protein from the forests, seas, rivers, and lakes. In fact, the oversupply of these materials in early times has pushed people to find ways in preserving them for future use. Moreover, the temperate conditions also

pushed people to innovate something from the concoction of various fluids, juices, and fibers as food, medicine, and relief to scorching heat during summer.

Demographically speaking, the region is home to more than 1,500 ethnic groups who are adherents to several religio-philosophical traditions. Muslims constitute more than 39 percent of the population, followed by Buddhists with 24.20 percent, Christians with 21.75 percent, folk religion with 7.78 percent, unaffiliated with 4.49 percent, Hindus with 1.18 percent, and other religions with about 0.25 percent. It should be noted that a small community of Jews is found in the region of about .01 percent.<sup>1</sup> The number of adherents of the said traditions has implications for food preparations, taboos, and consumptions concerning religious practices such as the Halal for the Muslims and the Kosher for the Jews among others. Religions also dictate the consumption or otherwise of some or all body parts of the animals, such as blood and intestines. Through the years, these religio-philosophical traditions have institutionalized rituals and offerings to cater to various purposes, including the use of food to appease spirits and deities. The role of food in religious culture is a primordial part of showing respect between and among their communities. As such, many of these religious institutions follow their respective commandments that basically guide the food preparation in several ways.<sup>2</sup>

Muslims, for instance, do their fasting during the daylight hours of *Ramadan* and are allowed to eat and drink before dawn and after sunset. They are also prohibited to consume pork and its

<sup>1</sup> Data generated from Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, 2022. [http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/regions/asia-pacific/religious\\_demography/#?affiliations\\_religion\\_id=0&affiliations\\_year=2010](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/regions/asia-pacific/religious_demography/#?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010)

<sup>2</sup> Vatika Sibal. *Food: Identity of Culture and Religion*. September 2018. <https://www.wathi.org/food-identity-of-culture-and-religion-researchgate/>.





by-products all the time following the Islamic dietary laws. Same case for the Orthodox and several conservative Jews who religiously followed *Kosher*, which specifically governs the proper use and preparation of animal parts as food in the context of spiritual wellness. On the other hand, many if not all adherents of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism are vegetarians because of their belief in *ahimsa* (doctrine of nonviolence). Abstinence from consuming meat is rooted from their belief in avoiding the harming of all animals. Despite the religious taboos and rules on food, dietary practices especially in Southeast Asia vary widely even among those who practice the same faith. Such variations can be attributed to the doctrines embraced by various branches or denominations and even personal or families' own degree of orthodoxy or religious adherence.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, food is also a symbol of religious identity, hospitality, and social status. In many families, activities and ceremonies center on cooking and eating habits. A host family demonstrates its prosperity or societal rank by providing large quantities of food. This is evident in the gift-giving practices in the wedding ceremonies of the Muslims in the region, particularly in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In the Southern Philippines, particularly in Jolo, people show their love for celebration and demonstrate their social standing through food carts which the locals called as *maligay*. It is believed that the said practice showcases the long tradition of appreciating royalty and prosperity as manifested by the artistic (*ukir*) design of the wedding cart and the grandeur of food choices.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, food became an important element in the circle of life, literally and figuratively, from birth to death. It became the symbol of

celebration, ritual and offering, identity, intimacy, wellness, and medicine, as well as a medium of communication. This symbol holds water for all, especially in the case of Southeast Asia.

### TRINITAS OF FOOD

The invention of food and the development of cuisines in Southeast Asia is best explained by the *Trinitas*. This framework is adopted from Joeje Santarita's concept of explaining the foundations of becoming a Filipino.<sup>5</sup> The term *Trinitas*, is akin to the Christian Trinity as the union of three personas in one God, refers to the three important factors that shaped the development of food and by extension the heritage dishes of Southeast Asia such as (*Trinitas 1* or T1 thereafter) ethnicity, (*Trinitas 2* or T2) environment, and (*Trinitas 3* or T3) experiences (See Figure 1).

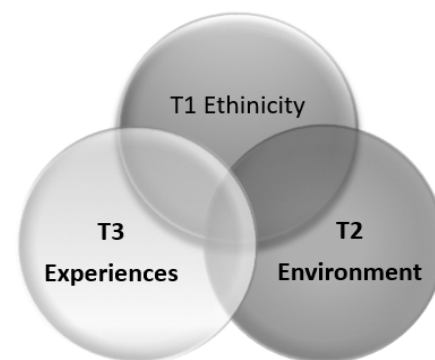


Figure 1. *Trinitas to Explain Southeast Asian Cuisine*

**Ethnicity (T1).** It is said that genes play a greater role in the formation of character traits such as self-control, decision-making, or even sociability. While this study is aware of the

<sup>3</sup> Sibal.

<sup>4</sup> It is the initial finding of an ongoing thesis of Cherry Ladja in the UP Open University where the author serves as an adviser.

<sup>5</sup> Joeje Santarita. *Becoming Filipino*. (Quezon City: Vibal Publishing House, forthcoming 2023).





nature-nurture debate regarding the formation of the traits per individual, it has no intention to drag the discussion about their difference to make a case in understanding Southeast Asian cuisines. In layman's term, nature (inherited) refers to the influences of genetic inheritance and other biological factors, while nurture (acquired) refers to the influences of external factors after conception such as the product of exposure to family and physical environment, life experiences, and earning on an individual.<sup>6</sup> As stated earlier, differentiating the two and arguing that one is the main reason in the formation of the personality or trait is not the focus of this study. Instead, it promotes that both nature and nurture have important roles to play in the making of heritage cuisines in the region.

Going back to the nature-nurture debate, the genetic and ethnic connections have contributed to shaping food delicacies in the region. The phenotype alone with the exception of those admixtures with other races has defined many practices and taboos in contemporary society such as preference for ingredients, materials, and process of cooking. It is unsurprising that Southeast Asians have witnessed the mushrooming of varieties of cuisines and holding of related festivities among others.

The nature-nurture interface also provides spaces for creativity, particularly in food preparation. The ethnic groups collectively have practices and traditions that they followed through several generations. These practices include taboos and preferences that other neighboring communities or islands do not do. Within the island, one can notice the difference in the process of preserving food between the lowland and upland communities. Lowlanders will choose to preserve a piece of meat by using salt or simply

drying it under the scorching heat, while people in the upland will employ the smoking process. Moreover, people also attempt to link to their cultural or ethnic group through food patterns. Food is often employed as a way of keeping their cultural identity. It is obvious that people from different cultural backgrounds naturally eat different foods. Like and dislikes of the food of an individual could be cumulatively influenced by the areas in which families inhabit and the place where their ancestors originated.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, differences in ideals, identities, and roles related to ethnic group affiliation and during times of personal transition and in contexts highlighting contrasts<sup>8</sup> also shaped the food preparation and eating habits. Ideals were deeply held beliefs and expectations about food and eating that provided guidelines and rules for making food choices. Ideals related to ethnicity and food use frequently emerged in the form of beliefs and norms about food use among members of particular ethnic groups. Additionally, beliefs about food included food source or preparation, social norms for meals, and meal definition. In addition, the influence of ethnic identity on food choice was characterized by multiple ethnic affiliations and differential salience of ethnic identity in changing food environments and eating situations. Affiliations with multiple ethnic groups could mean having parents with different ethnic traditions, married to or cohabitating with a person from another ethnic group, growing up in a mixed ethnic neighborhood, or aligning themselves with another subculture through membership in a religious or cultural group. Furthermore, differences in family roles among ethnic groups centered around the influence of the extended family on food use. People who were more

<sup>6</sup> Saul McLeod. Nature vs. Nurture in Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/naturevsnurture.html>. 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Sibal.

<sup>8</sup> Carole Devine, et. al. "Food Choices in Three Ethnic Groups: Interactions of Ideals, Identities and Roles" in *Journal of Nutrition Education*. 31:86-93, 1999. 86-90.





connected to their ethnic roots talked more about having family members in the local area with whom they had food and eating relationships.<sup>9</sup> This would mean preference on the food that is favorite or suitable to aging/venerable members of the family.

**Environment (T2).** Following still the nature-nurture discourse, the environment has also a big role to play in the formation of cuisine. Several channels through which climactic features (e.g., variation in temperature and precipitation as well as weather shocks) are identified to possibly influence cultural traits and by extension in the preparation of food. First is the direct physical and psychological effect of weather patterns. The weather affects a broad range of emotions, where some individuals feel sad when it rains and happy when the sun comes out.<sup>10</sup> Cooking, too, is affected by weather-induced emotions. Even the manner of cooking and the variety of food being prepared also depends on the weather. Soupy dishes, for instance, are usually prepared during colder weather and rainy season. The second channel is the ability of people to adapt to their immediate environs. They adopted beliefs and behaviors that ensure survival in given climatic conditions, learning from one another and passing the information to their offspring, or migrating in search of more hospitable environments. People also mind the influences of climate on agricultural practices because of its consequence on the value of cooperation, optimal family and community size, gender norms, and others.<sup>11</sup>

As stated earlier, the diversity of dishes is clustered based on the locations where humans are situated. Furthermore, humans are very intelligent and possess the ability to manipulate

and create food according to their wishes.<sup>12</sup> The diversity of food is mainly based on how humans interact with their environs and how they adapted to the changing conditions of their natural environment. Southeast Asians, too, made several adjustments to the physical conditions of their region. Southeast Asia consists of mainland and maritime geographic regions, with Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and West Malaysia covering the mainland, while Indonesia, East Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, and Timor Leste are the maritime.<sup>13</sup>

Weather and climate also define the food preparation and preferences of Southeast Asians. The constant rain and tropical sun have provided favorable conditions to raise wheat and rice in the region. The ecological conditions also favored the emergence of various varieties of rice, from ordinary to sticky rice as well as aromatic ones. Many places in the region are observably preparing food, dessert, and sweets based on rice aside from being the staple food. There are products from rice ranging from mature and immature grains of paddy rice to brown rice and milled rice. Immature grains are turned into *pinipig*, which are pounded until they turned into flakes. The toasted flakes are used in an array of Filipino dishes - they are often incorporated in traditional cookies, candies, and cakes, or used as a topping in creamy desserts such as *halo-halo*. *Pinipig* is also utilized in Vietnamese cuisine and is called *cốm* and *kao mow* in Thailand.<sup>14</sup> For mature grains, they are either steamed or cooked with sugar and coconut milk. Some are cooked with meat and other spices. Others are used to make porridge, *binignit*, *lugaw*, and even *arroz con caldo*, *Paella Valenciana*, which are influenced by the Spaniards and will be discussed in the historical experiences section. Moreover,

<sup>9</sup> Devine, et. al.

<sup>10</sup> Volha Charnysh. Does Climate Influence Culture? A Historical Perspective. May 31, 2021. <https://broadstreet.blog/2021/05/31/does-climate-influence-culture-a-historical-perspective/>

<sup>11</sup> Charnysh.

<sup>12</sup> Wahyudi David and Daniel Kofahl. Eds. *Food Culture of Southeast Asia: Perspectives of Social Science and Food Science*. (Germany: Kassel University Press, 2017), 10.

<sup>13</sup> David and Kofahl. 10.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.tasteatlas.com/most-popular-rice-in-southeast-asia>





there are also places in Southeast Asia that used wheat in their cuisines to make bread, noodles, pasta, and pastries.

In terms of milk, there are people who prefer cow's milk versus coconut milk in their food preparation. Such preference also depends on the supply of the materials in the locality. Coconut milk, for instance, is used for dessert, viand, and even drinks.

Furthermore, the bodies of water also define the food culture of Southeast Asians. With the exception of landlocked Laos, the ten countries are surrounded or partly facing the sea in the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Pacific. Laos is not also totally absent from bodies of water since it has rivers and lakes that provided fish and other aquaculture products. Since time immemorial, people in the region used salt that is produced from seawater. In some exceptional cases, there are communities in Bontoc, Mountain Province in the Philippines that sourced their salt from spring water in the highland. Regardless of the process of production, salt is one of the major ingredients in making Southeast Asian cuisines from the preservation of food to the making of condiments, and most importantly to the cooking of heritage dishes. Prior to the introduction of refrigerators, people used salt to preserve pork and other meat for a longer period. Despite the presence of cooling devices in recent decades, there are still people who would like to preserve their food using this old method for the sake of tradition and to bring back the memories of smelly yet savory food.

Same case for the preservation of fish and other marine resources. Dried fish and other variants remain as important dishes to people residing on the coast or serving as a complement to several important cuisines of contemporary societies. *Patis* (fish sauce) is important in the cooking

preparation of many Southeast Asians. The Vietnamese, Indonesians, and Filipinos, among others, are fond of using *patis* in their dried and soupy food. The Cambodians have their *probok* (fermented fish product) that is used in soups, sauces, side dishes, and main dishes. At the same time, shrimps are also becoming the star of the show in any gathering where food is served. Shrimps or the little version of it are made into a paste and popularly used as a dip for sour fruits like mango in Vietnam and Thailand, as *bagoong* to complement the saucy character of Filipino *kare-kare* (stew of beef, pork, or seafood with peanut sauce), as *belachan* as a dip, and as a major ingredient in the sauce for *rojak* (spicy mixed vegetables and fruits) of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia.

Additionally, varieties of shells, including oysters are also abundant in the waters of Southeast Asia. Aside from the raw or steamed ones that are ready for consumption, oysters are also used by Singaporeans in their fried oyster cake or as an ingredient in varieties of noodle dishes.

Lakes and rivers also blessed the region with fresh fish and other aquaculture products, such as the *ikan emas* (carp), which are popularly used in *ikan bakar* (grilled fish) in Bandung City or catfish, minnows, trey riel (silvery carp) that are caught in reservoir and farms of Laos and Mekong river.

Aside from the bodies of water, the landforms such as mountains and hills also contributed to food production and creation in Southeast Asia. The vegetables, fruits, and even domesticated animals such as pigs, chickens, cows, horses, carabaos, and other animals have completed the ingredients of various dishes in the region. It should not be missed that the spices available in Southeast Asia since the pre-colonial period also added flavor to the cuisine. In fact, spices





historically made the region famous and infamous to various traders in ancient times and became the reason for the colonization of the area. The availability of garlic, onions, peppers, cayenne, laurel, and ginger makes the preparation of food more exciting. These spices are not just for cooking but are also medicinal agents for various ailments. Ginger, for instance, is used to remove the fishy taste and smell of the meat, particularly fish. It also helps in alleviating sore throat and other pains in the body. There are also rare plants found in the region that are needed in the cooking preparation of food from other cultures.

**Experiences (T3).** It is the third element to complete the *Trinitas* that shaped the food culture of Southeast Asia. These include colonization, cultural adaption, religion, marriage alliances, education, and many more. From the discovery of the island to the struggles of the natives against the colonizers and the eventual marriage of the East and the West cultures, these historical developments somehow contributed to the enhancement of traditional food, and to some extent, triggered the invention of new ones, either by design or accident, in the region. The advent of Indians, Chinese, Arabs, Spaniards, British, Dutch, French, Americans, and Japanese in the country has influenced the Filipinos in their cooking and gastronomic traditions during and after the formers' rule in the region.

*Indian.* The spread of Indian culture, according to George Coedes, came as a result of an intensification of Indian trade with Southeast Asia in the early Common Era. According to him, Indian influence was not manifested through conquest or colonization but through trade. This laid the foundation for subsequent transmission of the higher culture associated with the development of the indigenous kingdoms,

which willingly accepted Indian conceptions of royalty, the sacred language of Sanskrit, and the prescription of Hinduism. The process of Indianization also included the alphabetical basis of Southeast Asian scripts; the introduction of Indian epics, and also works on a variety of subjects such as philosophy, astrology, medicine, mathematics, styles of art, dance, architecture, and sculpture.<sup>15</sup> While Sonu Trivedi did not mention about Indian influences on food, it is safe to assume that the Indians' stay in the area for a long time had left an imprint in the food preparation and preferences of Southeast Asians, especially when eating together with their own families and servants. Trading of goods also inevitably brought spices from India and other ingredients in Southeast Asia. In fact, Jayshree Sengupta believed that the influence of India can also be felt in the food and flavors of Southeast Asia because of the numerous spices in common between Indian and Southeast Asian foods. Nearly all Southeast Asians eat rice and curry like the people of eastern India with many common ingredients.<sup>16</sup>

*Chinese.* Aside from Indians, the Chinese were also one of the early visitors to Southeast Asia. Chinese migration has a long history for over several millennia. After the 1000 Common Era, Chinese migration increasingly took place on a maritime canvas. Beginning during the Song dynasty (960–1279), Chinese traders regularly sailed to Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Southeast Asia, and India, although relatively small numbers settled abroad temporarily or permanently before the early Ming dynasty (1368–1644). Among these were Song-era Chinese merchants who lived in the Sumatran

<sup>15</sup> Sonu Trivedi. "Early Indian Influence in Southeast Asia: revitalizing Partnership between India and Indonesia," in *India Quarterly* 66.1 (March 2010): 53.

<sup>16</sup> Jayshree Sengupta. India's cultural and civilizational influence on Southeast Asia. Observer Research Foundation. August 30, 2017. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/indias-cultural-and-civilizational-influence-on-southeast-asia/>





state of Srivijaya. During the Song and Yuan eras, traders from Fujian expanded their wares and networks into southeast and northeast Asia. Some of them even traveled far and wide beyond Asia. By the 15th century, diverse Chinese trade networks linked Southeast Asian trading ports to the southeastern Chinese coast.<sup>17</sup>

After many years of interactions, some Chinese settlers blended their own customs and languages to forge the “creolized” cultures such as the Chinese mestizos of the Philippines, the Baba (Straits Chinese of Melaka), and the Peranakans of Indonesia, especially Java. In the Philippines, many Chinese became Catholics and eventually married Filipinas. They contributed to the establishment of a larger mestizo community in the 19th century and the ancestors of several economic and political leaders of contemporary Philippine society. They too contributed to the development of Filipino cuisines in the country by introducing *kanton* (flour and egg), *bihon* (rice flour), *miki* (wheat), among others, and the famous *pancit Molo* of Iloilo.<sup>18</sup> It was also the Chinese that introduced *toyo* or *tauyu* (soy sauce) to Filipino palate. It became one of the most important condiments in the eating habit of people, which nowadays has different variants. Soy sauce is also introduced in other parts of the region and is observably different in taste, texture, consistency, fragrance, and even saltiness, depending on location. Soy sauce is called *kya nyo* in Myanmar, *kechap manis* in Indonesia, *kecap lemak* and *kecap cair* in Malaysia and Singapore, and *sii-iu* in Thailand.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, the Melaka Babas spoke Hokkien-influenced Malay came into existence as a

result of intermarriages between Hokkien men and local women in Malaysia. The continuing interaction of this community with the locals eventually produced the Peranakans, who later developed a mixed Chinese-Malay cuisine<sup>20</sup> called *nonya* cuisine.<sup>21</sup> Numerous cuisines and food preparations are contributed through the years by the Chinese in the Southeast Asian food system but could not be elaborated in this paper due to space constraint.

*West Asian/Arab.* After the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Islam started its expansion towards eastern regions through trade encouraged by the development of the maritime silk roads. Arab Muslims were known to have a commercial talent notably encouraged by Islam as well as excellent sailing skills. These interactions resulted in the further expansion of Islam to the people living in important coastal cities in Asia, including the southeastern islands of modern Indonesia and the Philippines. It is believed that Islam first arrived in these southeastern regions by the 7<sup>th</sup> century. On their way to reach the ports of China, Arab merchants had to pass through these islands via the maritime silk roads.<sup>22</sup>

As soon as Muslims took part in the trading system of the Indian Ocean, and eventually were to dominate it, a discreet and silent process of Islamization began. Focal points along the coast of Sumatra and on the Malay Peninsula, the north coast of Java, Borneo, and the Celebes were established. Such points were convenient stopping places to exchange goods, take on water and firewood, and wait for a change of the monsoon, either to China for silks and porcelain

<sup>17</sup> Craig Lockard. “Chinese Migration and Settlement in Southeast Asia Before 1850: Making Fields From the Sea” in *History Compass* 11/9 (2013): 770.

<sup>18</sup> Randy Madrid. Ang Pariancillo ng Molo, Iloilo sa Pagtatagpo ng Hiligaynon at Hok-kien Bilang mga Wikang Pangkalahalan Noong Dantaon 18. *Saliksik e-Journal*. 2.1. (2013):110.

<sup>19</sup> Rosemary Brissenden. *Joys and Subtleties: South East Asian Cooking*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1971. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Craig Lockard. “Chinese Migration and Settlement in Southeast Asia Before 1850: Making Fields From the Sea” in *History Compass* 11/9 (2013): 770.

<sup>21</sup> Jacqueline Newman. *Cultural Aspects of Asian Dietary Habits*.

In C. Ang, K. Liu, and Y. Huang (Eds.). *Asian Foods: Science & technology*. Pennsylvania: Technomic Publishing Co., Inc., 1999. 472.

<sup>22</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/silkroad/content/did-you-know-spread-islam-southeast-asia-through-trade-routes>







or to take on board spices and locally produced goods. As duly pointed out by Anthony Johns, local evidence is so scarce in the early years of Islamization that it is necessary to proceed by inference.<sup>23</sup> Following this line of thought, it is not far distant that the Muslims' frequent interactions with their business partners and in building their own families in the localities also mean the introduction of their comfort food to their wives, children, and neighbors, including the practices of preparing and consuming *halal* food. Vestiges of such are still present in contemporary Muslim communities of Southeast Asia.

Aside from the early interactions of Southeast Asians with various scholars and traders in the ancient period, such as the Arabs, Indians, and Chinese, Southeast Asia was also colonized by various kingdoms and empires from the West. Their coming also brought with them their food, ingredients, practices, and ideas. Their ingenuity also popped out at times when there was a need to look for ingredients in the colonies as substitutes to the traditional materials that they usually employed when cooking their comfort food at home. This situation is best exemplified in the case of Portuguese rule in colonial Indonesia.

*Portuguese.* The Portuguese came to Southeast Asia with the conquest of the island of Malacca from 1511 until 1666. Certain components of the pre-modern Portuguese diet made the transition to Asia and became signifiers of Lusitanian influence upon indigenous cuisines. Many of these elements were transmitted because of their usefulness to seafarers and cultural importance to the Iberians.<sup>24</sup> Luso-Asian dishes, according to Boileau, are characterized by the layering of ingredients and a complex blending of

both flavorings and techniques. She noted that the Portuguese brought with them to the region some techniques for viticulture, distillation, oven-baking and yeasted doughs, sugarcane processing, and sweet making. In addition, they also introduced Iberian cooking methods such as *fritar* (deep-frying), *assado* (roasting), *recheado* (stuffing), *guisado* (stewing), and *bafado* (steaming). Boileau further pointed out that people in the region do not traditionally eat bread. They adopted later the habit of eating small pieces of breads, buns, and pastries as snacks, such as curry puffs that originated from the Iberian *empada*.<sup>25</sup> Its popularity started when the puff became a trans-Asian snack of the Portuguese on their way to various trade routes. When the Portuguese were supplanted in Asia by the Dutch and English, curry puffs evolved by taking on elements of other European cuisines and with local twists. Asian countries developed their own versions of *empadas* which survived and mutated in the latter occupation of the Dutch and the British respectively.

No wonder, various types of puffs are still offered in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Curry puffs are locally called *epok-epok* and *kari pap* in Singapore and Malaysia, which are made of curried potato, chicken, and other ingredients stuffed in fried or baked pastry. It is said that the term "curry puff" was coined by the British colonizers in Asia, but the dough pockets have been influenced by the colonial cuisines of several European nations down the centuries.

Curry puff is also available in Indonesia and has two versions: *panada* and *pastel*. The former is one of the favorite snacks of the people of Manado, which is closer to the Philippines. Panada has a thick crust made of fried bread filled with tuna

<sup>23</sup> Anthony Johns. Islamization in Southeast Asia: Reflections and Reconsiderations with Special Reference to the Role of Sufism. *Southeast Asian Studies*. 31.1., June 1993. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Janet Boileau. *A Culinary History of the Portuguese Eurasians: The Origins of Luso-Asian Cuisine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Australia: University of Adelaide, 2010), 43.

<sup>25</sup> Boileau. 43; also, <https://research.appetitesg.com/idea/portuguese-influence-in-asian-food/>





and chili. It was believed that the introduction of such food in North Sulawesi was done by the Spaniards, who carried out their missionary activities in the Philippines during colonial times. *Pastel*, on the other hand, has a thin crust and is filled with a mixture of diced potatoes, carrots, leeks, chicken, garlic, white pepper, and sometimes with vermicelli. Another filling in this puff employs curried chicken or potatoes with quail eggs.<sup>26</sup> In Vietnam, striking similarities are noticeable between *banh goi* (pillow cake), *banh xep* (wrapped cake), and *empadas*. The technique of making *empadas* could have been introduced by the Portuguese traders and missionaries who visited the country in the late 1700s.<sup>27</sup>

It should be noted that the Portuguese also occupied Timor from 1702 to 1975.<sup>28</sup> In the process of colonization, East Timorese cuisines were influenced by the presence of Portuguese soldiers who occasionally consumed food such as *Feijoada* (made of pork, cannellini beans, and chorizo), *pastel de nata* (egg tart), among others.

*Spaniard*. In 1521, Spain 'rediscovered' the Philippines and later established political structures from 1565 to 1898.<sup>29</sup> For almost 333 years, the archipelago was under the close supervision of the friars, who were very influential in almost all aspects of Filipino lives. The construction of monumental projects such as churches, watch towers and other edifices contributed not only to the stabilization of peace and order in the communities but also to the enhancement of Filipino gastronomic traditions. The use of egg whites in the construction of these edifices led to the abundance of yolks. In

<sup>26</sup> Silvia Marchetti. Curry puffs: how a Portuguese snack arrived in Southeast Asia in the 1500s and became a hit across the region. South China Morning Post, January 12, 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/food-drink/article/3117240/curry-puffs-how-portuguese-snack-arrived-southeast-asia-1500s>.

<sup>27</sup> Marchetti.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Steele. "Nation Building in East Timor," in *World Policy Journal*. 19.2 (2002): 78.

<sup>29</sup> Teodoro Agoncillo. *History of the Filipino People* (Quezon City: R.P. Garcia Publishing House, 1990), 75.

order to avoid wastage and flavor saturation, friars taught Filipinos how to bake pastries and make numerous desserts out of yolks.

Aside from pastries and desserts, most special occasion dishes trace their roots to the Spanish colonial days. When the Spaniards arrived, they brought with them ingredients and labor-intensive cooking methods that were unknown in the Philippines. Roasted suckling/pigs, the rich meat stews, and dairy-based sweets that the Spaniards loved were considered luxuries to the locals. Hence, Filipino masses would simply taste these dishes in their homes during fiestas and Christmas. *Lechon* (roasted suckling pig), *puchero* (beef or pork stew), *fabada* (bean stew), *paella* (rice dish from Valencia), *morcon* (type of chorizo), *embutido* (meatloaf), *leche flan* (caramel flan), and *churros* (fried dough) are only some of the favorite Christmas dishes.<sup>30</sup>

While the rich can afford to cook and serve authentic Spanish dishes, the not-so-rich individuals cooked and served adaptations of the same dishes by substituting cheaper local counterparts for the expensive imported ingredients. *Lechon* in a humble household may mean a pig's head rather than a whole pig or maybe be contented with *lechong manok* (roasted chicken) to share with loved ones. Moreover, *paella* will probably be colored with turmeric instead of the pricey saffron. The dishes may be budget-friendly versions of the originals but they are still referred to by their traditional names.<sup>31</sup> Filipino ingenuity is still reflected in the Spanish-introduced but already indigenized dishes such as the *adobo*, *menudo*, *sarciado*, *puchero*, or *mechado*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Connie Veneracion. The Spanish Influence on Filipino Cuisine. May 18, 2021. <https://www.thespruceeats.com/the-spanish-influence-on-filipino-cuisine-3030287>.

<sup>31</sup> Veneracion.

<sup>32</sup> Agoncillo. 96.





*British.* The British ruled Burma (currently known as Myanmar) from 1824 to 1948. In 1786, the British procured the island of Penang and founded Singapore in 1819.<sup>33</sup> The cuisine that was adopted by the majority of the British in India, Malaysia, and Singapore was replete with peculiarities and idiosyncrasies that evolved over decades. These were believed to have been shaped by various factors such as the availability of Western and local food, cooking facilities, input by domestic servants, and traditions from the home country as well as in the colonies.<sup>34</sup>

In colonial times, the dietary habits in Malaysia and Singapore differed between those who lived in urban centers and those in rural environments. Such difference is spelled out by the divergence of castes, ethnicity, races, and religions that added to the peculiarity of food and food preparation. The colonial cuisine, with its hybrid dishes of countless types of curries, mulligatawny, kedgeree, chicken chop, pish-pash, and the inimitable meal of *tiffin* (light lunch or snack) was familiar and recognizable to the colonial community. The peculiarities of food in the said areas can be attributed to the role of domestic servants in the preparation of colonial cuisine. The domestic servants' knowledge of local produce, how to source and prepare food, and their willingness to work with primitive facilities were compelling factors. Thus, it is not surprising that colonial cuisine persisted well beyond the end of colonial rule for both ex-colonizers and postcolonial societies. These cuisines have survived, and some of them have metamorphosed through the years in some clubs, hotels, restaurants, and rest houses.<sup>35</sup>

*Dutch.* The Dutch East India Company (VOC), on the other hand, began colonizing parts of Indonesia in the 1600s. After the abolition of the VOC in 1796, the Dutch government gained control over Indonesia, which was then referred to as the Netherlands East Indies.<sup>36</sup> For more than 300 years, many Dutch settled in Java, Sumatra, and other islands. These interactions with the natives left positive influence on various aspects of Indonesian society, such as traditional dishes. In particular, some Indonesian traditional dishes that have been influenced by the Dutch are croquette, *nastar* (pineapple tart), *klappertaart* (coconut cake), and *kastengel* (cheese stick).

In the interest of space, the case of *klappertaart* is cited here as an example of acculturation in cuisine. This cake originated from North Celebes and is etymologically derived from the Indonesian word "*klapper*" and the Dutch term "*tart*". "*Klapper*" was originally taken from the word *kelapa* (coconut), which was spelled as *klapper* by the Dutch people at that time, whereas *taart* is a Dutch word that refers to a cake. This sweet and savory dish is made from coconut, raisins, and walnuts. The Dutch realized that Indonesians had a very large number of coconut farms that they could substitute for the traditional ingredients in their pastries. The Dutch women, in particular, had experimented with the use of young coconut meat in their tart recipe. This development is a clear example of *Trinitas 2*, where environment and creativity have influenced food preparation in Southeast Asia. This recipe spread in some ways because the Dutch women did not do all cooking. If they had to make cakes for their husbands, native Indonesian maids usually were asked to help them. In addition, some of the Indonesian elites were curious about the cake and got the recipe

<sup>33</sup> [https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Malaysia/sub5\\_4a/entry-3619.html#:~:text=The%20British%20formally%20made%20Malaysia,fratricidal%20wars%20of%20the%20sultans.](https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Malaysia/sub5_4a/entry-3619.html#:~:text=The%20British%20formally%20made%20Malaysia,fratricidal%20wars%20of%20the%20sultans.)

<sup>34</sup> Cecilia Leong-Salobir. *Food Culture in Colonial Asia: A Taste of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 13.

<sup>35</sup> Leong-Salobir. 13.

<sup>36</sup> Olivia Tasevski. The Dutch are Uncomfortable with Being History's Villains, not Victims. *Foreign Policy*. August 10, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/10/dutch-colonial-history-indonesia-villains-victims/>.





directly from the Dutch. The spread of the recipe was further promoted through its sales in Indonesia and also due to the availability of a recipe book written by Dutch women, which subsequently enabled the natives to learn the ropes of making this cake at home.<sup>37</sup>

*French.* France had a long history of interaction with the kingdoms of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. However, its official control over Indochina happened only in 1887 after France won the Sino-French War in 1885 in the case of Vietnam and in 1893 in the case of Cambodia after its victory in the Franco-Siamese War. The Federation lasted until 1954. For more than 67 years of colonization, the French influenced the dietary habits and food preferences of the people in Indo-China. In Vietnam, for instance, their meals were clear hybrids of Vietnamese and French cuisine, such as *Banh mi* (French bread) and *banh xeo* (French crepe). In recent times, the fully loaded *banh mi* comprises French bread stuffed with pate, pork, chicken, pickled carrot, daikon, cucumber, and cilantro, topped with a fried egg, hot sauce, and mayonnaise. *Banh xeo*, on the other hand, is made with rice flour and coconut milk batter. It is filled with ground pork, shrimp, and bean sprouts and served on a bed of lettuce, fresh mint, and basil with a side of spicy dipping sauce.<sup>38</sup>

The same case in Laos, which was also a protectorate of France from 1893 to 1954, baguettes have been the star of the Laotian diet, especially during breakfast, even in rural areas. It is interesting to note that there are several versions of the baguette meal in the country. Aside from the traditional helping of fromage in the bread, Laotians preferred the baguette with

ham, chicken, leafy vegetables, avocado, egg, and some cheese. The other is the sweet version with sweetened, thick condensed milk perfectly complemented by Lao coffee.<sup>39</sup>

Cambodia, too, demonstrates French influences culinarily in their pastries and coffee. Unlike the Laotians and Vietnamese, Cambodians incorporate smoked fish into salads and even bagels with cream cheese at some higher-end cafes.<sup>40</sup> French influence on Cambodian cuisine includes a serving of red curry with toasted baguette. Red curry is often served at special occasions in Cambodia such as weddings, family gatherings, and religious holidays like Pchum Ben, or ancestral days when Cambodians make dishes to offer monks on behalf of the dead.<sup>41</sup>

While the Philippines was not colonized by the French, their influences are undeniably present in the history of the country. The French dishes and cooking styles came into the country through Filipinos living and traveling abroad, Filipinas studying in European cooking schools, French men and women marrying and/or living in the Philippines, and more recently, French restaurants, menus, chefs, and books on cooking and wine. A good example of a Filipino who traveled and stayed in France for a while was Vicente Yap Sotto of Cebu. He was considered a typical Francophile who was addicted to restaurants, theater, and the Folies Bergere. When he returned to the Philippines, it was believed that Sotto maintained his own chef, prepared a menu to reveal the dishes, and required wine to complete his meals.

It is also interesting to mention that French cuisine, such as *abatis de poulet a la Tagale, coquilles*

<sup>37</sup> Chrisfella Cokro Handoyo, et. al. "Klappertaart: an Indonesian-Dutch influenced traditional food" in *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 5 (2018): 147-148.

<sup>38</sup> Eve Turrow. Colonizers' Influence Infuses Southeast Asian Cuisine. October 19, 2011. <https://www.npr.org/2011/10/18/141465353/colonizers-influence-infuses-southeast-asian-cuisine>.

<sup>39</sup> [https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Laos/sub5\\_3b/entry-2958.html](https://factsanddetails.com/southeast-asia/Laos/sub5_3b/entry-2958.html)

<sup>40</sup> Turrow.

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.travelsense.asia/must-try-traditional-food-cambodia/#:~:text=Red%20curry%20is%20often%20served,on%20behalf%20of%20the%20dead>.





*de crabs*, among others, complemented by various types of wine, were also served to delegates of the Malolos Congress and witnesses of the inauguration of the First Philippine Republic in 1899.<sup>42</sup> Despite these historical connections to French cuisine, no French dishes, according to Fernandez, can be said to have become part of, adapted, and indigenized into Philippine cuisine. In her estimation, the French influence is not really on the cooking but on the art or science of good eating, the aspiration or passion to become the standard, and anyone seriously strives to learn about, experience, and imbibe French cuisine.<sup>43</sup>

*American.* The American settlement in the Philippines began during the last years of the Spanish colonial administration. After the Americans defeated the Spaniards in the 1898 war, the latter ceded the administration of the Philippines as a colony to the former. For almost 50 years of the actual colonization, the Americans influenced Filipinos with their iconic foods like burgers, as well as canned meat like corned beef and Spam. They also introduced technology like the fridge and other cooling devices in the archipelago. Moreover, the Americans brought in the fast-food culture, which the Philippines later adapted by opening Jollibee, a Philippine original hamburger chain of McDonald's.<sup>44</sup>

The Americans also introduced the importance of ice to the Filipinos. The need to cool down the temperature of American military forces who were not used to humid and temperate conditions and to preserve the food supply during the Philippine-American War (1899–1902), the

cold storage facility was constructed. Completed on June 13, 1901, the Insular Cold Storage and Ice Plant were considered one of the most extensive and complete cold storage facilities in the world. Three cold storage and ice plant facilities across the Philippines catered to the civilian population in Aparri at the northernmost tip of Luzon, Iloilo in the Visayan region, and Zamboanga in Mindanao. The presence of the cold storage plant and refrigerated transport facilitate access to a steady supply of imported meat, mainly from Australia, encourage meat-producing industries in the country to increase their production, and enable locals to provide fresh fish to Manila, Cebu, and other cities in the north. Cold storage and ice plants played a role in determining what was considered excellent and healthy meat.<sup>45</sup> It should be pointed out that prior to the construction of ice plants, the Filipinos imported their first taste of ice directly from the United States in the mid-19th century. Ships carrying blocks of Wenham Lake Ice sailed from America to India and Australia with a stopover in the Philippines.<sup>46</sup> The availability of ice, along with the introduction of cooling devices in the country, also paved the way for the Filipinos to enjoy 'dirty' ice cream and perhaps the popularization of halo-halo in various parts of the country in the later years.

In addition, spaghetti was introduced to the country by the Americans in the late 19th century. It was one of the dishes requested by the Americans who were looking for food that remind them of home. Filipino spaghetti is a rebellious version of Italian pasta, which has a striking red color and is also sweet and spicy. To make it even more distinct, chopped hotdogs,

<sup>42</sup> Doreen Fernandez. *Beyond Sans Rival: Exploring the French Influence on Philippine Gastronomy*. *Philippine Studies*, 39, No. 1 (First Quarter 1991). 105-107.

<sup>43</sup> Fernandez. 111.

<sup>44</sup> Apple Mandy. *Everything You Need to Know about Filipino Food: the Next Great American Cuisine*. December 5, 2020. <https://www.themanual.com/food-and-drink/filipino-food-guide/#:~:text=From%20that%20time%20through%201946,technology%20like%20microwave%20and%20fridge>.

<sup>45</sup> Nicolo Paolo Ludovico. "The Ice Plant Cometh: the Insular Cold Storage and Ice Plant, Frozen Meat, and the Imperial Biodeterioration of American Manila, 1900-1935" in *Global Food History*, 7:2 (2021): 115, 116 and 125.

<sup>46</sup> Ambeth Ocampo. *Japanese origins of the Philippine 'halo-halo'*. *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. August 30, 2012. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/35790/japanese-origins-of-the-philippine-halo-halo>.





ground pork, onions, and garlic are mixed into the thick sauce made of banana ketchup and tomato paste. A generous helping of cheddar cheese is sprinkled on top of the spaghetti. Such dish is one of the favorite foods offered at several children's parties, along with fried chicken and cake, among others.<sup>47</sup> The love for spaghetti, especially among children, is further deepened by the mushrooming of Jollibee restaurants that offer combo meals in various places in the archipelago and even in its branches abroad.

American influence was also felt in Thailand in the 1960s. While it was not colonized by the Americans, Thais food preferences were affected by the presence of an American military base in the kingdom from 1961 to 1975. Thai classical dinners and dance shows emerged in the sixties as popular venues for entertaining the military elite and wealthy tourists. They provided a standardized set of dishes adjusted to appeal to western tourist tastes. The dishes served included *mee glop* (coated fried noodles), mild curries, and dishes that required extra labor and a classy presentation. Appetizers were also served to the customers with drinks before consuming their meals. The cheap hotels featuring crude sex shows served western food like hamburgers and hot dogs geared to US army furlough tastes. In addition, much of the food served in these places had its origin in the American army PX (Post Exchange). Around this time, Thailand's economic plans included the development of the tourist industry. The invention of tourist food included the use of American PX items such as frozen mixed vegetables, spam, and sausages to create dishes like American fried rice made with salt instead of fish sauce and parsley instead of fresh coriander.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Joeefe Santarita. *Becoming Filipino*. Quezon City: Vibal Publishing House, forthcoming 2023.

<sup>48</sup> Penny van Esterik. *Culinary Colonialism and Thai Cuisine: The Taste of Crypto-colonial Power*. Dublin Gastronomy Symposium. 2018.

*Japanese*. While the Japanese occupied the Philippines from 1942 to 1944, their influence on Filipino food greatly came after the Second World War. Before the war, the use of *udon* or *odong* noodles in Baguio, Davao, and other parts of Mindanao is considered to be of Japanese influence. It was believed that the Japanese [migrant] workers who helped in building the Kennon Road in Baguio City at the turn of the century and those who went to work in Davao's *abaca* (hemp) plantations could have introduced this noodle to the locals. In fact, Davao has its own version of lasagna, which people called *haob na odong* that uses *udon* noodles.<sup>49</sup>

More than a decade after the war, *vetsin* or popularly known as Ajinomoto, was introduced in 1958 in the country. The presence of this seasoning has made Filipino cuisines tastier because of the umami (savory) flavor of the Monosodium Glutamate that increases the food palatability even in simple dishes.<sup>50</sup>

In the more recent period, Japanese foods have also begun to be popular in the Philippines. One can conveniently find restaurants or food stands today that offer *ramen*, *sashimi*, *sushi*, *tempura*, and *takoyaki* in many cities and municipalities in the archipelago.<sup>51</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Food is inevitably an important aspect of humanity's survival. It has shaped people, culture, and society. Conversely, the preparation and sharing of food through the years has also molded society to enhance food preparation and innovate if necessary when materials, utensils,

<sup>49</sup> How other countries influence Filipino food. November 19, 2016. <https://foodnetphilippines.wordpress.com/2016/11/19/how-other-countries-influence-filipino-food/#:~:text=The%20use%20of%20udon%20or,Davao%20has%20a%20version%20of>

<sup>50</sup> Understanding Ajinomoto. <https://www.ajinomoto.com.ph/corp-blogs/ajinomoto-vetsin/>

<sup>51</sup> Henry Funtecha. Contemporary Philippines-Japan cultural interconnections. *The News Today*. July 31, 2009. <http://www.thenewstoday.info/2009/07/31/contemporary.philippines.japan.cultural.interconnections.html>





and ingredients are not immediately available in the locality. While there are factors that might shape the food and food preparation in Southeast Asia, the emergence and continuity of food preparation and consumption are best explained by the *Trinitas* of ethnicity, environment, and experiences.

Ethnicity and its admixture with other races, for instance, have defined many practices and taboos in contemporary society with regard to the choices and preferences on ingredients, materials, and process of cooking. It should be noted that food also serves as the connection of an individual with his counterpart or to their cultural or ethnic group through food patterns. People from different cultural backgrounds eat different foods, and this is best exemplified by the widely differing preferences of people between the lowland and upland communities as well as between communities on different islands.

Environment and human “appetite landscape”, on the other hand, also swing based on trends created by humans or by nature and food stuff availability. The diversity of dishes in Southeast Asia is categorized based on the locations where humans are situated. Furthermore, humans are very intelligent and possess the ability to manipulate and create food according to their wishes. Hence, the geographical conditions such as mountains, hills, and other land forms, as well as bodies of water such as seas, rivers, and lakes really defined the diet of the people. Conversely, people in the localities also tried to introduce species that are not endemic in the area to increase the supply of ingredients that are essential in preparing food.

Experiences too also shaped the preparation of food through the years. These include colonization, cultural adaptation, religion, marriage alliances, education, and many more.

These cultural and colonial episodes in the region’s history have somehow contributed to the enhancement of traditional food and the invention of new ones. Notable of these food are those products of the long years of interactions between the inhabitants and the newcomers/colonizers. Indians had introduced to the locals their curries and spices, Chinese their noodles and soy sauce, Arabs with their halal food, Portuguese with their *empadas* and other Iberian recipes, Spaniards with their *mechado*, *paella*, *lechon*, and others; French with their baguettes, Americans with their spaghetti, burger, and hotdog; British with their curry puffs, and tiffin; Dutch with *klappertart* and similar pastries, and the Japanese with their *vetsin*, *takoyaki*, and *sashimi*, among others. It is noteworthy to mention that the process of acculturation and negotiation has triggered innovation and required creativity among Filipinos. Through the years, some of the colonial recipes have metamorphosed/ upgraded to suit the taste of the younger generation.

Such metamorphosis can be interpreted as a form of continuing decolonization even in food. Colonial cuisines and its hybridity afterwards have assumed interesting appearance and offered improved/distinct taste from the original by exploring the re-indigenization of materials/ingredients. For instance, the Chinese-influenced *batchoy* in Iloilo is now cooked using coconut juice and fresh *buko* (coconut) strips. This is far-fetched from the practice of food professionals in the past decades wherein the preparations exclusively used meat, broth, and noodles as main ingredients. Another form of decolonization is the rebellion from the usual and trying to be a better version of what is traditional. This is best exemplified by the preparation of the Spanish-influenced *lechon*. Nowadays, *lechon* is stuffed with seafoods, chicken, and even rice among others instead of the usual tamarin leaves and lemon grass. Because of this, *lechon* has been





faithful to its role as the star of the gathering where one could enjoy both rice and viand at the same time. Moreover, people in the food industry in contemporary times are exploring ways to produce better version of their products. One can feast now of a *lechon* in black skin aside from the classic crispy golden-brown skin because the recent generations are now adventurous to use squid's ink in giving the pork's skin a shiny shimmering black crunchy texture.

Hence, the *Trinitas* of ethnicity, environment, and experiences have successfully molded the Southeast Asian palate to crave and work for more cuisines that simply suit their taste buds and are easily available in the locality. These elements have supported the unfolding of heritage dishes in Southeast Asia and in the understanding of food in the region beyond eating.

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