

Spam

Nikki Celis

Of all the imagery projected by the unconscious mind, I remember most vividly my dreams of SPAM. Not the unsolicited emails that one would receive daily in their inbox, but rather the canned meat so often labelled with connotations related to lowbrow culture.

It was a recurring dream, this unsolicited message, which for some reason my subconscious had overlooked. And yet, among the others that I've managed to recall (mostly fragments), these so-called "SPAM dreams" remain ever so clear to me, even months afterwards.

Cue scene. I'm standing in the centre of the main walkway of a supermarket with a black plastic basket. The overall milieu of the grocer is familiar—its light fixtures old and sparingly replaced; the smell of fresh produce contrasting with the acrid, peculiar smell of fresh (and frozen) seafood. The off-white, mostly yellowed tiled floor had been recently coated, to prevent wear, and the sequential aisles beside me were devoid of human contact (as evidenced by the untouched shelves so often tampered by wanton recklessness). I could hear the speakers blare "Royals" by Lorde as I made my way to the canned and packaged goods section, the products undefinable and unappealing. I made a left, and then another.

In front of me was an entire section dedicated to SPAM. Stacked in the dozens. Each can's details impeccably definable:

the brass rims of the can, the blue wrapper, the yellow logo, and of course a pink, glistening slice of SPAM sandwiched in between American-style cheese, lettuce, tomato, onion, mustard, and white sesame bread. Oddly enough, beside it was a “premium” iteration of Hormel Food’s product—gold plated, glossy white wrapping with a picture of a crisp, smoking slice of SPAM on top of an open-faced pumpernickel sandwich and complimented by roasted tomatoes, spinach, a well-done egg, and (as is the current trend of overpriced cuisine) avocado.

For the subsequent nights that I had these “SPAM dreams”, the scene would always play out the same. I would make my way to the dedicated SPAM shelf, grab a can of regular and premium SPAM (they were likely the same; marketers are smart like that) and then wake up, chuckling to myself.

Out of all things, why SPAM?

I had told my friends about this and they would just take it in jest, but I had a genuine curiosity as to why. A few weeks later I had discovered the work of the late Filipino food historian, highly influential critic, and New York educator Doreen G. Fernandez. Her works were influential in providing remarkable insight and appreciation towards Filipino cuisine and how it ties with culture—something I had regarded with a disdain, not unlike my peers. And, while I still harbour many criticisms of my own culture brought on by hang-ups that I had encountered in my adolescence and well into my adulthood (in Canada and the Philippines) her work has provided me a cause for appreciation and further exploration.

Non-Fiction

Food is directly tied to one's heritage. A common knowledge. The Philippines itself is in a peculiar position, with centuries of colonial influence brought upon by the initial occupation of Spain, United States, and Japan (albeit briefly). And this doesn't exclude the epicurean influence brought in by French-influenced Filipinos in the early 1900's ("Beyond *Sans Rival*: Exploring the French Influence on Philippine Gastronomy") nor the pre-colonial, culinary influence of India and China.

As an outsider to the Filipino community, being a second-generation Asian Canadian strongly affected by the systemic and institutionalised white racial framing as well as the community's enthusiasm to be part of the prevailing culture due to our colonial mentality—alienating me from my own roots—it's an often-said idea that my culture is one of bastardization.

Did you know that papaya soap actually makes you whiter? In fact, there's an entire industry in the Philippines dedicated to skin whitening—though, when all else fails, there's laundry detergent. And if it isn't the skin, it's encouragement that many youths receive from their parents, telling them to only speak English (opportunities open when you can speak English more fluently than your white friends). Compounded with further cultural conditioning prevalent in the media—where Korean celebrities and *mestiza* actors speak in taglish in the most banal of television sitcoms or *teleseryas*, or in the movies where, if it isn't poverty porn, it's the embellishing of the elite or the middle-class, in most cases, we are fostered into an environment where we have to be as white as we can be. An impossible standard.

Sad, I know.

What's ignored, however, is what Fernandez calls—listen—a process of “borrowing”. In her exploration of cuisine, through her 1988 essay “Culture Ingested: Notes on the Indigenization of Philippine Food”, she remarks: “The reason for the confusion is that Philippine cuisine, as dynamic as any phase of culture that is alive and growing, has changed through history, absorbing influences, indigenizing, adjusting to new technology and tastes, and thus evolving.”

The process of eating, she continues, is not only the consumption of the environment but also the ingestion of culture, “since among the most visible, most discernible and most permanent traces left by foreign cultures on Philippine life is food that is now part of the every day, and often not recognized as foreign, so thoroughly has it been absorbed into the native lifestyle.”

And yet, among this mishmash of culinary fusion—out of the array of Chinese-influenced foods (*lugaw/congee*), Spanish (*adobo/adobado*), Japanese (*halo-halo/ kakigōri*), and even the indigenous cuisine still cooked at home—the most striking, poignant memory to ever pervade my dreams is an American lowbrow product that doesn't even require any preparation. What the fuck is so romantic about SPAM?

From what I can recall of my childhood, small vague memories that are hard to piece together, I can distinctly remember the heavy, dense salt-infused musk of SPAM as it's left to fry in its own gelatinous mystery-liquid.

Non-Fiction

In the pan, too, are eggs, fried on both sides until the whites are non-existent. We're in one of my childhood homes in Abbeydale, Calgary. My mother is young in this memory. Only traces of white hair can be seen among the coal, curly strands on her head. She's in this minuscule kitchen, by this equally small muddled-yellow stove, tending to the cooking while sweet Filipino (also Hawaiian) dinner rolls, *pandesal*, are left to bake in the toaster oven. Dad is only home in the evenings—an electrician at the time, though he often dabbled in other things away from the privy of mom.

Each slice sizzles until both sides are red and crisp. The eggs, cooked thoroughly, show no signs of leakage. With a fork, mom places a slice of SPAM and a fried egg in an open-faced *pandesal*, toasted and browned, and then moves it unto a large plate. I'm salivating, withholding my intense desire to grab them with my tiny sausage fingers and eat the whole plate surreptitiously.

“Ka-in na,” she says, smiling. “Let's eat.” And I do so willingly.

When we have SPAM or canned food—my mother still, but sparingly, stocks her pantry with canned products such as corned beef, Vienna sausages (yum), sardines, and the like—we bear no prejudices of how these items tie with class and socioeconomic status. Food is food. And, in some ways, food is home.

I'm talking to my consulting editor about my recent foray into discovering my culture through food—and how it relates to my

obsession of SPAM—and he’s perplexed.

“When I think of SPAM, I think of poor, working class people,” he explains. “I mean, I came from a poor, working class family and even still, especially with my background in the restaurant industry, it’s rather peculiar—especially when these cultures tie their identity to a product produced by a corporation.”

And he’s likely right. However, it’s also a sentiment that’s all too common among people in the west, whose people are unaffected by post and neo-colonialism brought on globalization and other influences so tied to a culture’s history. So too is it such an incompatible, albeit completely minor and alien idea to the western, liberal idea of cultural relativity—eliciting deeply rooted feelings of cultural superiority unbeknownst to even the most tolerant person.

“Although SPAM is taken quite seriously as a ‘good to think’ foodstuff in many areas around the world—and especially in the Pacific Rim—elsewhere, it is also the butt of innumerable jokes, many of which place the alleged lack of sophistication and social worth of SPAM lovers at their core,” remarks author George H. Lewis in his essay “From Minnesota Fat to Seoul Food: SPAM in America and the Pacific Rim (2000).”

Released to the public in 1937, the kitsch, often maligned pork shoulder preserve known with a refrained acceptance among American housewives hadn’t attained its global prominence until WWII. With a burgeoning need for non-perishable meats for Allied soldiers overseas, the Hormel Food’s corporation, along

with a myriad of other brands, had sent a cumulative 100 million pounds. A portmanteau for “Spice” and “Ham”, its ability to retain edibility despite being exposed to extreme temperature became a mainstay for American GIs. Though, despite its availability, it never garnered any particular praise (Jay Hormel, son of corporation founder George Hormel, and head of the company from 1929-1954 received a myriad of hate mail, which he calls the “Scurrilous File”).

From 1942-1945, Japanese forces had briefly occupied the Philippines, threatening decades of American occupation (1898-1946) that had “liberated” the country from 377 years of Spanish colonialism. Subsequently, the United States declared war against Japan after the events of Pearl Harbor, with American and Filipino forces fighting against the Japanese as part of an overall assault throughout the Pacific theatre. Though the Japanese Empire officially surrendered in 1945 and relinquished the Philippines from their control, an estimated one million Filipinos had died, with many villages, towns, and cities—notably Manila—reduced to shambles.

With a lack of stable infrastructure, and many Filipinos displaced after the war, as well as many American’s establishing permanent residency within the country either as civilians or as military personnel, the rations that have kept Americans relatively well-fed in comparison to other Allied forces—namely SPAM—had likely then become a staple in the limited Filipino diet, further exacerbated due to a lack of more traditional sources of food.

Within the same period, throughout the Pacific, American intervention against the Japanese had also introduced other cultures throughout the Pacific theatre—most notably Hawaii—to various Americanisms introduced and shared among locals. “Beer, chewing gum, military rations—including tinned meats such as SPAM—became valuable artifacts of the most recent occupying culture and as such prized by locals,” writes Lewis.

Fast forward to today and SPAM remains ever popular outside of the occident. Hawaii—being the largest consumer—Korea, Japan, and, of course, the Philippines, have this American product tied so intrinsically to their cultural (and culinary) identity.

Rather than eating the pre-cooked meat from the can as-is, the product is a borrowed and thus indigenized ingredient for many popular dishes: SPAM *Musubi*, an onigiri-like dish from Hawaii; *Budae-jjigae* (Army Base Stew), a noodle-dish paired with a smorgasbord of food items cooked in a Kimchi stew, in Korea; as well as fried or steamed rice paired with SPAM and eggs, which may or not be seen as a common unifying dish among many cultures throughout Asia and the Pacific. The pairing of SPAM and rice, or SPAM sandwiched in between *pandesal*, though a relatively simple dish to prepare, is also an anchor to much of my what I can remember of my youth.

A peculiar restaurant tucked in the corner of an SM Megamall in Manila, Philippines, its name, SPAM JAM, emblazoned in mustard yellow hangs over the register, serves SPAM exclusive dishes such as musubi, though with fried rice, to patrons and passing shoppers. Other items on the menu include a burger

and a dish paired with rice and egg. Now 13-years-old, SPAM JAM was the first of its kind to offer such a product and has since paved way for other establishments to serve SPAM-centric food items.

In Pasig city, *gyoza* and curry are sold in Takashi, a Japanese eatery. Both dishes feature SPAM as the main ingredient. Sizzling pork jowls, ears, and snout, traditional ingredients for *sisig*, are replaced with the pink, “mystery” meat at the Red Cloud Gastropub. At the Bunny Baker in Quezon city, strips of SPAM are coated in panko crumbs, deep fried, and served like French fries with ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise as standard condiments. While these are obviously individual items offered among a diverse selection of choices in each restaurant’s menu, the fact that SPAM is present even within establishments outside of the fast-food industry—Burger King, McDonalds, and Jollibee also have a mouth watering array of SPAM-centric items—is telling.

In supermarkets across the Philippines, there are aisles purely dedicated to the product. Other luncheon meats, local variations and those imported from neighbouring countries such as Ma Ling sell for considerably less than the real American deal. One 12oz can of SPAM sells for an average of P135, slightly more than a quarter of Manila’s daily minimum wage, P491, averaging at about \$13 CAD. And yet, millions of pounds of spam are consumed yearly (a significant detriment to the Filipino diet). Such a preference over localized varieties of what is essentially the same product shows how Filipino culture holds western values, ideas, and products to the highest esteem. It is markedly a symptom of a deeply embedded colonial mentality.

While Fernandez writes in “Mass Culture and Cultural Policy: The Philippine Experience” (1989) that centuries of Spanish colonization had introduced the very fabric of Filipino identity, from “religion, law, town-planning . . . exterior and interior architecture, food, music, dance, drama, words incorporated into native languages, social customs, systems of patronage and ritual kinship, but also a certain Latin bravura,” the subsequent American occupation, though short, had instilled a more profound, evidently detrimental effect to the Filipino character.

From the education system, “which brought attitudes, values, concepts, aspirations”; the esteem of social class tied to one’s command of the English language; contemporary politics, much of it adhering to American political philosophy; and most notably popular culture (more evident than ever before) disseminated through the increased accessibility of television, movies, and—obviously—the internet, all of these echo the Apple pie ideal. It screams America. In a *Twilight Zone* sort of way. Like a foster child living among a family of many, neglected and yearning for recognition.

In the same essay, Fernandez lists symptomatic traits caused by this extreme inferiority complex. First: a subliminal predisposition towards the culture of the colonizer over that of his/her own (“He dreams of emigrating to the U.S. . . . he dresses, sings, dances American”). Second: the resulting receptivity of the collective, ethnic society. Many Filipinos, including myself, are highly acquainted with American/Canadian life and culture long before we acknowledge the existence of our own cultural traditions

and history (“They sing of White Christmases and of Manhattan . . . They embrace the American dream”). Third: American entertainment—as well as Korean entertainment—and its localized by-products continue to be a pervasive influence within the film, television, music, and literary industry (“There are Filipino Western and Kung Fu Karate films. Pinoy rock has Filipino lyrics but rhythms of Western rock. Women’s magazines purvey “Stateside” lifestyles, fashions, horoscopes, [and more]”). And fourth: public relations, advertising, journalism, and other forms of mass communication had been introduced by the colonizer, influencing Filipinos to pursue the American ideal (“Their methods, and their bags of American goodies were copied and assimilated by Filipinos wanting to be “modern,” “with it,” and updated”).

I’m left wondering. With all these implications, does that really impact how I perceive my own culture? When my mother first immigrated to Calgary in the 80’s, did she come wanting to be a part of this American/Canadian ideal? When she had met my father, married him, and gave birth to me alone in a hospital room in Rockyview, carrying the burden of dysfunction so tied with my familial upbringing, did she dream that I would seamlessly integrate into society and become a perfect, model Canadian? God, I hope not.

A part of me surmises that I am the very product that I’m obsessing over. An amalgamation of meats, preservatives, and god-knows-what-else wrapped and presented in a tin, shelved with many others shouting at the world, “eat me, I’m palatable!”

So servile are we—an I—to the western ideologue. Always wanting to please. Always wanting to belong and yet never truly attaining it. Not even within the broad, general category of being “Asian”. Like SPAM, even as an ingredient or a singular element among a wide range of qualities, it is seen as an other.

And while it has a place among the poor, the working class, the immigrants, and the children born of them, it is still patronized by those who—subconsciously—perceive themselves as greater—not just the whites, mind you—and ultimately incorporated into society with a reluctant acceptance.

If this is the foundational element that ties me to my very own ethnic identity, then am I simply a by-product of post-colonial influences? And if I’m not palatable enough—beyond the service industry in which we dominate—if I took it upon myself to sizzle in a frying pan to bring out the umami and nestle myself with garnishing just so I’m presentable enough for you to have a morsel, would you like me more? Would I like myself more?

What I can say with absolute certainty is that, ultimately, if I were to ignore the research and the revelations, then this is my reminder of home. Uncanny, to be euphemistic.

Not of the Philippines, nor of Canada, but of the tiny kitchen in Abbeydale where my mother cooks breakfast ignorant of a product’s implied, and depressing, history. Where I can see her smile as I salivate with my Vienna sausage stump fingers, clawing for a slice of crisp, pink meat and an overdone egg, sandwiched

Non-Fiction

in between toasted *pandesal*. At least, on the surface, this memory provides context to my SPAM dreams.

And with that dream comes fantasy, or at least an ideal that I can never re-experience. Only revisit. It is a moment in which I can revel in its authenticity—if not for a second—until I find myself in a world where I am constantly lost. Despite my own embellishments. Naked and served on a platter for the whole world to see—and to determine my own authenticity (am I “good to think” or “bad to think”?). Skin removed, flesh laid bare. Where I constantly scream for someone to have a bite. Where one day I can hear someone say, “hmm, that’s not so bad,” admire me—if not for a second—before throwing me into the trash.

“This damage, they say, defines the modern Filipino: poor and lost, perpetually wandering the globe for economic survival, bereft of national pride, and – like the women of Mapanique – forced to suffer, to this day, the indignities of their violation”

-Carlos H., “Letter from the Philippines: Long afterward, war still wears on Filipinos”, 2005