

TURO TURO



AJ Photo by Nickee V. de Leon

by RENE VILLAROMAN
AJPress

Fastfood's Predecessor in Pinoy Culinary History

In my recollection, fastfood officially became part of the Philippine experience in the mid-70s. SM Department Store in Makati converted its basement level into a Fast Food Plaza. Back then, the word fastfood meant a cluster of different food stores and restaurants competing with each other in a huge venue.

Your preference is usually based either on familiarity or your willingness to experiment. I remember clearly when my colleagues and I went to Fast Food Plaza and tried our first taste of fastfood -- Kimchi, served with a very spicy beef rib stew that cost about seven pesos a bowl.

The Italian Village Pizza Restaurant, in suburban Quezon City and Makati, served 16-inch pizzas for about fifteen pesos, an amount that was considered already upscale during that time. Around 1975, Shakey's Pizza was brought in by the giant food conglomerate, San Miguel Corporation. Wendy's was the first American hamburger restaurant to have a franchise in Manila in the mid-80s, pre-dating McDonald's franchises by about ten years. Before the mid-70s, however, the word fastfood was not a part of the Filipino gastronomic vocabulary.

Tiendas

In the Philippines, the concept may have been invented years before it was labeled as fastfood. We called them *tiendas*, a Spanish word for stalls or stands. As a child, I've seen them everywhere, especially in the province of Bulacan where I grew up. *Tiendas* were very popular during the summer months. Several of them would sprout along the narrow main drag of our *barrio*. These *tiendas* sold the most popular summer refreshment -- the mighty *halo-halo*.

Tiendas reappear during the advent of *Simbang Gabi*, the traditional Catholic dawn Masses that begin nine days before Christmas. You find yourself trying to stay awake, thinking that at the end of this morning sacrifice is an array of rewarding goodies that could be had at the *tiendas*--*puto bumbong*, *kutsinta*, *suman* (in several varieties), and the steaming cup of local tea to facilitate the smooth ingress of the goodies down the gullet and to ward the early chill away. Looking back, I may have been devoted to *Simbang Gabi* not to cull favor from God. I think my devotion may have been motivated more by the native delicacies that awaited us.

Manila's Central Market

In Manila, the most popular "fastfood" center, before it became a by-word, is probably the Central Market along Quezon Boulevard in Manila. If you came here in the 50s, you were probably assaulted by a

cacophony of endearments to try these and that. "*Dito na kayo kumain; masarap ang pancit namin.*" Or "*halo-halo, halo-halo; dito na po kayo.*"

Eventually, I would surrender to their endearments. With a pleading mien I would look up to my mother, hoping that she was in the mood to grant me a reward for carrying the shopping basket and beg if she could buy me a glass of *halo-halo*. Getting my reward constituted my highest achievement for the day.

Roadside diners

I also discovered the pleasures of roadside restaurant dining after college. During the early 70s, roadside diners became a rage in Manila. My friends and I would go to a nondescript roadside diner in San Juan to savor its most talked-about entrée-- *kare-kare*. It was called, well, Roadside, and it gained a cult following because of its inimitable *kare-kare*. *Kare-kare* is a stew of ox tails and beef innards, including stomach and intestines, and vegetables in peanut sauce.

The *turo-turo* (point-point) concept of dining may have pre-dated the fast food craze in the Philippines as evidenced by the proliferation of what we call *carinderias* (literally, diners) in the towns and cities in rural and in some urban areas in the country. These small, unpretentious eateries displayed ready-to-eat, or ready-to-go comfort food. Depending on its location, the *carinderia* offered dishes from their respective regions. For instance, a *carinderia* in the Ilocos region would offer *pinakbet*, a humble entree of sauteed native vegetables like bitter melon, squash, eggplant, topped with shrimp paste (*bagoong*). In Metro Manila and in Central Luzon, *carinderias* served *caldereta*, a mildly spicy beef (or goat) stew, and *adobo*, a delicious concoction of stewed pork in garlic, vinegar and soy sauce. In the Bicol region, spicy ingredients, like peppers and coconut milk (*gata*) predominantly define the cuisine. Spicy numbers like the popular Bicol Express is a trademark.

Urbanization

The *turo-turo's* popularity and acceptance came about because of increased urbanization, where working people increasingly found it necessary to swing by a favorite *carinderia*, or *panciteria* (usually Chinese-owned) to buy a dinner to take home. But that's not all, increasingly, owners of traditional sit-down restaurants converted sections of their establishment to a *turo-turo* counter, where ready-to-eat and ready-to-go entrees arrayed in steam-heated trays, are always ready to be eye-balled by hungry and harried customers. If you wait more than 20 minutes to get your food, it's not considered as a *turo-turo* restaurant. Of course, there's room for dine-in customers who wish to eat in a leisurely pace.

When we arrived in California in the early 1980s, the *turo-turo* style restaurants were already firmly established. One particularly adventurous entrepreneur even went to great lengths to call his restaurant, "Point-Point." The very first restaurant was located at a strip mall on Wilshire Blvd., at Wilton. Today, almost all the familiar Filipino restaurants in the Los Angeles Basin have *turo-turo* counters. **AJ**

"Walang kasing-sarap ang Big Mac!"



**BIG
MAC**

Every bite has my taste buds chanting the ingredients! At inisip ko pa lang, it makes me want to get one right now!

two all beef patties special sauce lettuce
cheese pickles onions on a sesame seed bun

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