The Possibilities for *Pan de Sal* and Filipino Food

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ABSTRACT

While rice is considered a staple on the Filipino table, the *pan de sal* (also written as *pandesal,* literally "bread of salt") has not always shared the spotlight. Food historian Doreen Fernandez writes that "[i]t is brown and plain like the Filipino . . . It is good, basic, and strong—just the way we are, and would like the nation to be." In this essay, I examine the pan de sal through cultural studies while considering the field's overlapping concerns with food studies. Fabio Parasecoli's comparison of food and cultural studies, alongside Warren Belasco's take on food choices also contribute to my analysis of the pan de sal and its place in Philippine culinary history. This framework informs my discussion of two literary works, namely "The Bread of Salt," a short story by N.V.M. Gonzalez and "Pan de Sal," a poem by Gelacio Guillermo. The essay proposes wider considerations for how our food can be approached by way of the pan de sal, which can initiate readings that go beyond the usual dialogue of identity and authenticity in Filipino cuisine.

Keywords: pan de sal, Filipino food, cultural studies, food studies

Introduction: The Fascination for Bread

Many were drawn to bread baking throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith of Massey University reveals how this wasn't limited to New Zealand and Australia, citing coverage of the trend in the *New York Times* and *Reuters*. She then lists how bread baking during lockdown had a threefold purpose: "providing sustenance, on a practical level; filling newly available leisure time and providing distraction and comfort; and offering a way to demonstrate one's skill and activities on social media, allowing connection to wider social groups in the absence of face-to-face contact" (37). With a pandemic that is largely ongoing, the making and eating of bread comforted those of us who continue to find ways to cope with the many pauses that this worldwide event has brought to our lives. In her foreword to *The Best American Food Writing 2020*, series editor Silvia Killingsworth writes, "In recent years, spurred by social media, bread became a renewed source of fascination for home cooks around the world. . . . I'm also aware that the trend of upper-middle-class millennials embarking on three-long-day odysseys for the perfect crumb shot is incredibly clichéd" (xi).

The compulsion towards bread baking may not be as clichéd for the Filipino baker as it is for the American. It may actually signify going back to one's roots and recognizing the traditions behind the making of local bread. Glenda Barretto et al., chefs and co-authors of *Kulinarya*, hark back to the late food writer and professor Doreen Fernandez who was said to have labeled the pan de sal as symbolic of culture, memory, and the everyday (197). Could these statements around the pan de sal still apply in the age of the pandemic? Where do we begin if we are to trace the history of the pan de sal and how can we justify its role as "symbolic" of our culture, as Fernandez once said?

This essay follows the history of the pan de sal from Spanish colonial times, and how it evolved into what we consume today. In addition, the short story "The Bread of Salt" by N.V.M. Gonzalez and the poem "Pan de Sal" by Gelacio Guillermo will highlight how the bread would become associated with social class. Finally, the essay will comment on where the pan de sal is headed and how we can create new discussions around the so-called "identity" and "authenticity" of Filipino food. Cultural studies and food studies will frame the discussion which proposes that the pan de sal can set the example for embracing varied interpretations of and perspectives on Filipino cuisine.

The discussion will be limited to two literary texts which consider the pan de sal in somewhat similar veins: one in terms of social position (with the main protagonist as a "working class" hero of sorts and his beloved as bourgeoisie) and the other as social indicator, notably as akin to hunger and poverty. The analysis of these works will be guided by how, as Warren Belasco writes: "Food choices are the result of a complex negotiation among three competing considerations: the consumer's identity (social and personal), matters of convenience (price, skill, availability), and a sense of responsibility (an awareness of the consequences of what we eat)." Only the first two (consumer's identity and matters of convenience) will be made apparent in the analysis of these works, as the third aspect on responsibility would merit a lengthier discussion for another time.

Both food studies and cultural studies will frame my analysis of the history of the pan de sal and the literary works. Fabio Parasecoli highlights how food studies "promotes and practices the analysis of cultural, social, and political issues concerning the production, distribution, representation, and consumption of food" (275), hence its overlapping elements with cultural studies. But Parasecoli adds that while cultural studies "has historically focused on specific communities and subcultures, exploring expressions and practices among which food might or might not be featured," food studies, on the other hand, "concentrates its attention on food in its material, representational, and symbolic aspects as they unfold across societies,

communities, and subcultures" (275). Such a relationship may find cultural studies as being able to provide a general framework or methodology for an investigation on the topic of food. The guiding principles within food studies, meanwhile, could offer a specific take on a particular facet of society's expression of culture.

My analysis of the pan de sal takes its cue from Parasecoli's statements on cultural studies and how food studies can be embedded within such a discussion—specifically, how certain aspects of cultural studies such as its "political sensibilities, its attention for lived experiences, and its critical approach towards cultural hierarchies" can inform the ways in which "food studies can provide an accessible analytical framework to achieve a deeper comprehension of twenty-first-century globalized post-industrial societies" (275). This focus should also be a reminder of how "culture [acts] as the symbolic sites of social power. Culture is of course more than this, but the key emphasis on power remains distinctive to cultural studies" (Pickering 5).

Additionally, "Food studies, as an interdisciplinary field that deals with a specific aspect of material culture, its representations, and its lived experiences, has often embraced subject matters, theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and predilection for the qualitative that would also fall under the heading of cultural studies" (Parasecoli 276). This borrowing and exchange of methods and practices from both cultural and food studies provide the framework for my own study which considers the pan de sal as a viable entry point to understand and problematize Filipino culture.

The Limitations of Food Scholarship

A critical study on Filipino food owes much credit to the research of Doreen Fernandez, with the pan de sal only being one among many examples that could prove useful in helping us trace the history of our food. In her collection entitled *Tikim: Essays on Philippine Food and Culture* (first published in 1994 then revised and updated in 2020), she imparts the key elements of the field, which requires "digging deep into human experience, because tasting, eating, and savoring are very intimate ventures" ("Writing" viii). Michael Pickering emphasizes this aspect of experience in relation to cultural studies, citing its "continuing importance" and one that "arises out of the tensions and conflicts over what is made of experience in our understanding of the social world" (6). It seems inevitable, then, that bread has become indicative of our shared experience of the pandemic, whether in the making of it or its consumption even in our post-pandemic lives.

While human experience is indeed essential to the study of food, researchers interested in Philippine cuisine are confronted with the lack of scholarly resources

on this topic. Fernandez anticipates this gap, saying that "[t]he researcher who seeks to explore Filipino food before or early in the era of Spanish colonization, probably starts by discovering the dearth of source material" ("Historias" 279). If our ancestors had at some point written down their history on pieces of "bamboo, bark, or leaf" as Fernandez puts it, the colonial powers and the records that they kept would have said "little about food." This may be explained by our ancestors' oral history, wherein recipes or traditions were transmitted verbally, within and among families or small communities. This lack of proper documentation on the food of our ancestors could also be indicative of power dynamics that placed the (Spanish or American) colonizers as those controlling the narrative of our cuisine, one that highlighted the colonizers' food as superior over others (e.g. native and Chinese cuisine).

Another factor that Fernandez cites as a challenge to food scholarship is the fact that "[t]he evidence for this research is always consumed, digested, and transformed . . . one can say that the evidence is always being manufactured and discovered anew, every day, in every meal in every home" ("Culture Ingested" 220). Due to this consistent "consumption, digestion, and transformation" of evidence, that is, the food that we eat, we can surmise that food when treated as a research subject is not fixed, and is expected to change upon every encounter—which in turn explains why Filipino food continues to invite varied definitions and interpretations to this day. It would thus be worth noting how this aspect of changeability can also affect how we view food such as the pan de sal and its role in shaping our food culture.

Fernandez was writing in the early 1990s when she referred to this "dearth of source material," several decades before our own digital age. But her research still resonates today, for example when she talks about how native food during the Spanish colonial years was mostly served at home, and thus not meant for mass consumption in restaurants. "This is the reason that there are few of the usual historical materials relating to Philippine food—no cookbooks ethnic or otherwise . . . the native food not being served in restaurants, only at home, where it went largely unrecorded" ("Historias" 279–80). Historian Ambeth Ocampo also acknowledges this in his 2006 foreword to *Food Tour: A Culinary Journal* by the chef and food columnist Claude Tayag, saying that "most of the materials on our food history lie unprocessed in cookbooks. Historians interested in food . . . have to pursue stray references to food and eating in early travelers' accounts of the Philippines and the Filipinos over the centuries" (ix). Nevertheless, research on local food may have since gained more attention, as Ocampo notes that "a number of books on Philippine food have seen print in recent years, many of them going a step beyond recipes into memory and a search for that elusive thing we call national identity" (ix). This take on the search for identity by way of Filipino food can be supported by Sidney W. Mintz and

Christine M. Du Bois's statements likening ethnicity to nationhood in that it is "also imagined . . . and associated cuisines may be imagined, too. Once imagined, such cuisines provide added concreteness to the idea of national or ethnic identity. Talking and writing about ethnic or national food can then add to a cuisine's conceptual solidity and coherence" (109).

One such resource that has contributed to the formulation of this "nationhood" of Filipino food is *Kulinarya: A Guidebook to Philippine Cuisine* (first published in 2013, fourth reprinting in 2018), which references the works of Fernandez as well as other food scholars in its compilation of local recipes, cooking methods, and a short history of our cuisine. In their introduction to the recipe for pan de sal, the authors (who are chefs themselves) write that "[t]his classic bread is thought to be Portuguese, instead of Spanish as most Filipinos assume. Traditionally served as a breakfast bun, *pan de sal* has found its way into *merienda* as well" (Barretto et al. 197). For their pan de sal recipe, the book lists a few ingredients, namely water, sugar, yeast, all-purpose flour, salt, milk powder, vegetable oil, and breadcrumbs (197); while recipes elsewhere (such as those found in international publications like *Saveur, Serious Eats*, and *Tasty*) use bread flour instead of all-purpose, whole milk instead of milk powder, or add eggs and unsalted butter. Another online recipe (from the King Arthur Baking Company) even calls for a sourdough starter to make the pan de sal. It would be easy to say that *Kulinarya* offers the "more authentic" version of the pan de sal recipe, as it has been produced under the authority of Filipino chefs who are presumed to have been trained in the local cuisine. And yet, the recipes which can be easily accessed by any hobbyist or cook around the globe over the Internet cannot be immediately labeled as inauthentic or less Filipino, as they still all clearly claim to deliver the beloved pan de sal.

Perhaps one way to address this dilemma is to go back to Fernandez herself, who writes about the many ways to eat pan de sal, which serves as an interesting study of the bread's interactions with foreign influences:

> Eat it hot; eat it cold. Halve it, hollow out the *miga* [crumb], fill and bake with olive oil and *chorizo*, and it is a Spanish breakfast. Tear it up and eat it with mouthfuls of *tapa* and *itlog*, or with *menudo*, and it is a Filipino breakfast. Butter it and have it with jam, and it is continental, or with ham and eggs, and it is American. Serve it hot with slices of *jamon China* and *kesong puti*, and it's a party. It has even been known to contain ice cream or bananas. (qtd. in Barretto et al. 197)

This interaction with the foreign as seen in the pan de sal, while allowing for the discovery of new flavors that surprisingly work well together, has given rise to issues on how to accurately define Filipino food, which have been often associated

with questions of identity and authenticity. Fernandez deems that "[t]he 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" ("Culture Ingested" 219).

The only thing constant about Filipino food, it seems, is that it is an ideal venue for contact among different cultures and ideas. While the basics that characterize each dish may stay the same, the adjustments and exchanges that happen along the way contribute to more elusive definitions for Filipino cuisine which many have tried to limit to just one thing. This may also reflect the development of the discipline of food studies itself, if we consider how "From Fernandez's perspective cuisines are dynamic, emergent, fluid, evolving, momentary, and improvised" (Dusselier 332). Hence, in "Consumption and Taste," Bob Ashley et al. emphasize that "[t]astes are not simply a reflection of our identity but work to construct our cultural identity: we may be what we eat, but what we eat also produces who we are" (59). In the particular case of the pan de sal, it may be worth going back in time to see how bread was perceived in earlier times and how it continues to contribute to our culture today.

The Pan de Sal Through Time

We can trace the history of the pan de sal by looking at the Spanish colonial era via the Italian explorer Antonio Pigafetta, a navigator hired by Ferdinand Magellan to keep detailed accounts of their voyage. Pigafetta documented the locals' diet, which primarily centers on the many uses of the palm tree, like the coconut fruit and how the tree can be used for producing bread, wine, oil, and vinegar ("Historias" 281). Pigafetta considers not just one type but "several kinds" of bread as a staple for the Europeans, seen as equivalent to the Filipinos' dependence on the palm tree. Pigafetta also describes the palm tree and the coconut or *cocho*, underneath whose layers of husk is a white marrow about the size of a finger, which he says is eaten fresh by the locals with meat and fish, and is comparable to the flavor of an almond if one is dried to make bread ("Historias" 281). It becomes clear from this insight how the colonizer's familiarity with bread is akin to the locals' dependence on the coconut for sustenance.

The lack of further elaboration on bread (whether on the part of Pigafetta or by choice on the part of Fernandez herself as researcher), may be attributed to the Filipinos' long established fondness for rice, which is highlighted in these accounts from the colonizer. Fernandez emphasizes this by pointing out that "[m]uch of the information focuses on rice, which is obviously the central, staple food—highly valued, highly symbolical" ("Historias" 285). This decentralization of bread as part of the narrative of the Filipino meal could be a consequence of limited historical

documentation in colonial times (or if not limited then controlled by the colonizer), but also of Fernandez's and other scholars' preoccupation with rice as that which clearly identifies the Filipino as distinct when seen in relation to our Spanish colonizers. Researchers have focused on rice as food that encourages commensality on the Philippine table: "Without rice there is no proper meal. Despite the spread of the fast-food industry and the increasing consumption of bread, noodles, pasta, and other cereal products, rice is still the essential food of many Filipinos even in urban centers" (Aguilar 321). This is perhaps one of the reasons why local varieties of bread, including the pan de sal, is to this day more commonly associated with *merienda* or a quick meal rather than one that complements a quintessentially Filipino selection of *ulam*.

While rice and the coconut are more visible in these early accounts, it is still possible to refer to Pigafetta's documents to find references to bread in the local diet. In *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898, Volume XXXIII, 1519–1522,* Pigafetta describes how the locals "make round white [loaves of] bread from the marrowy substance of trees, which is not very good, and is found between the wood and the bark and resembles buttermilk curds." It is worth noting that Pigafetta considers the local bread "not very good," presumably as it was not the kind of bread that he would have eaten back home in Europe. The footnote to this same account cites how "Pigafetta may here refer to the bread made from the casava [sic] or manioc root," which would explain why the explorer would have cared less about it, as it was bread that was not made with ingredients that were more familiar to his taste. Clearly, the Filipinos whom Pigafetta encountered were already eating bread—just not the kind worth praising and documenting for the Italian. In an interview with the food website *Eater*, chef and food historian Ariel Layug shares that at the time when yeast was not yet available, *tuba* (coconut wine produced from the sap of a coconut tree or a similar palm tree) was most likely used for the first type of bread in the Philippines. But the resulting bread was not the pan de sal we know today (Shah).

What may be missing in these excerpts could be supplemented with the work of another food scholar, Felice Prudente Sta. Maria. Her research confirms Pigafetta's reference to the local bread in his writings as something comparable to rice cake or *kakanin*, with the general term for bread being referred to as *tinapay*. Sta. Maria adds that upon the arrival of missionaries and the Spaniard Miguel Lopez de Legazpi (the first governor of the Philippines) in 1565, the word *tinapay* became associated with the Communion host, or the "eating of Christ, the Bread of Life." She writes, "in 1885 it was defined as two white circles about the size of a saucer for a demitasse chocolate cup with a sweet filling between them, and was then folded in half. Perhaps the semblance between tinapay and host was that they were white, circular, and about identical in size." Fernandez also mentions tinapay in her own

research: "We might check, too, related word lists, like Pigafetta's—the first Western recording of the Philippine language. Rice is *bughax* (*bugas*, the Visayan word for rice): and 'certain Rice cakes' are *tinapai*, the word now used for bread" ("Historias" 294).

There is a general consensus among local historians that wheat-based bread was first brought to the Philippines by Portuguese explorers in the 1500s (Shah). In these accounts, there is a strong emphasis on the country's inability to produce wheat. An interview with Jenny Orillos, co-author of *Panaderia: Philippine Bread, Biscuit, and Bakery Traditions*, mentions that wheat was not successfully grown in the Philippines, which led to the use of imported flour for producing bread. It was also a common practice to use a wood-fired oven or *pugon* which resulted in the pan de sal's smoky and crusty exterior (Baes). Another article notes how pan de sal was "the Spaniards' answer to the French baguette. The original *pan de sal* was made with wheat flour, so it was hard and crusty. . . . But since our country isn't big on wheat production, bakers eventually had to use a more inferior type of flour. This resulted in a weaker dough structure, and a softer texture" (Estrella).

As it turns out, we can thank the absence of wheat in our country for why the pan de sal we eat today are soft buns. Lacking conventional ingredients, our ancestors were able to come up with their own version of bread using what is available or natural to the local environment. The wheat-based "hard and crusty" version of pan de sal is what likely appears in the annex to Alice Fuller's *Housekeeping and Household Arts: A Manual for Work with the Girls in the Elementary Schools of the Philippines*, which Sta. Maria cites. Fuller describes the bread's preparation as being similar to that of American bread but a bit harder, measuring up to 15 centimeters in length, and 9 centimeters wide; the top of the loaf is then gashed longitudinally so that it can be easily portioned into halves.

The Filipinos' turn towards pan de sal and other wheat-based food is said to have flourished in the 1900s "when the price of American wheat became cheaper than rice." In addition, former *Eater* editor Khushbu Shah writes that the arrival of American immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century helped lower pan de sal's production costs "through the 'introduction of commercial yeast, canned dairy, and baking pans.' Americans also brought with them their health program which 'promoted better hygiene' (baking bread in pans, not on the floor), and a 'healthier' American diet, which was heavy on wheat and dairy." This foreign intervention on the pan de sal may be most visible in the recipes available to the home baker, which prioritize convenience and access to ingredients; or how professional *panaderos* and business owners maintain a certain quality when preparing bread for their consumers. But for the individual today who buys bread from the local *panaderia,*

bakery, or grocery chain, there would most likely be little recognition for where or how that pan de sal arrives at the table, since "[f]ood is so vague in our culture in part because, thanks to processing, packaging, and marketing, it *is* an abstraction" (Belasco 5). Herein lies our everyday relationship with food, which requires us to look much deeper if we want to understand our cuisine, including the pan de sal.

Fernandez's own definition for native or "original" cuisine are those dishes that "[resisted] 'fraternization' with the foreign invaders. The original dishes have retained their ingredients, cooking methods, and spirit. Foreign dishes have been Filipinized, but Philippine dishes have not been Sinicized or Hispanized" ("Culture Ingested" 229). If we use this as basis for classifying the pan de sal's status, then certainly while some of its ingredients have come and gone—from wheat to that "inferior flour" as well as the introduction of yeast and baking pans—the "method and spirit" behind the pan de sal cannot be said to have stayed the same entirely. Fernandez adds, "The native culture stood firm and 'kept the faith,' borrowing only technology (freezers, pressure cookers, instant flavorings) when necessary but not changing in essence" ("Culture Ingested" 229). But how would we know if it was indeed "necessary," for example, to bake bread in pans instead of the floor as our ancestors once did? Surely it was just because of the foreigners' rejection of a method they considered "unhygienic" and unpalatable for the kind of bread that they encountered in a foreign culture. And as for the pan de sal's spirit, it has clearly remained Filipino by way of the consumer's or bread maker's recognition of it as Filipino—which may still be challenged once it is tasted, processed, or consumed by another who would say otherwise.

Perhaps such remnants of the pan de sal's "original" identity can be drawn from the tradition and artisanship behind it; for instance, the panaderia's laborious process, or the specific methods of the local baker (panadero) who shapes the dough by hand into a *baston*, rolls it in breadcrumbs, uses a wooden cutter to form smaller pieces, and then dusts them again with breadcrumbs before baking (Baes). While a number of bakeries now opt for industrial mixers for ease and convenience, there are a few who preserve their original techniques from the early twentieth century, as seen in the example of Panaderia Dimas-Alang in Pasig City which opened in 1919. It is here where "[t]he pieces are arranged into the pan with the cut side up, which helps showcase the narrow, pointy edges, referred to as the *singkit* or *gatlâ*" (Baes). The singkit is the distinct signature which separates the artisan from the industrial-made pan de sal. In "The Path of Pan de Sal," Orillos compares the singkit to the pili nut, which is also native to the Philippines: "Older *panaderos* refer to it as the *singkit*, Tagalog for 'small eyes.' It is called *gatlâ* in some bakeries in Cavite City. It is not as requisite as, say, the angled cuts done on the tops of the French baguette, but the *singki*t or *gatlâ* completes the look of the traditional *pan de sal*."

If we go back to Belasco's comment on how our food choices are "based on a rough negotiation—a pushing and tugging—between the dictates of identity and convenience, with somewhat lesser guidance from the considerations of responsibility" (8), then it would be worth looking into how the pan de sal contributes to everyday life. We can look towards fiction and poetry to uncover what realities lie in the inner recesses of the beloved pan de sal.

The Social Implications of the Pan de Sal

To test this "pushing and tugging" of food choices as applied onto Filipino dishes, we can draw from the patterns of how pan de sal is represented in the short story "The Bread of Salt" by writer and National Artist for Literature N.V.M. Gonzalez. Gonzalez mulls over a perceptible change in the pan de sal in a later edition of his short story (written in 1956, then first published in the collection *Look, Stranger, on This Island Now* in 1963), when he writes the following in the preface to *The Bread of Salt and Other Stories* in 1993:

> When I wrote "The Bread of Salt," the *pan de sal* was usually the size of one's fist.... Today, it brings on a subdued sadness, for these rolls have shrunk to the miserable size of a chicken's egg. Who can say whether, in a year or two, the *pan de sal* won't be just a wee bit larger than a quail's egg. (xiii)

Gonzalez's comment on the pan de sal of his own day can be seen in light of how it has evolved in recent years. For example, in the bread shop chain called Pan de Manila, one can choose between "regular" pan de sal (pack of 12 priced at 65 pesos) and "big" pan de sal (pack of 10 for 85 pesos),[1] as well as whole wheat, cheese, cinnamon, moringa (*malunggay*), and even "vegan" varieties. Beyond the trend of its expanding list of flavors, a number of local periodicals in the last twenty years have documented a general concern over the inevitability of the pan de sal's rising prices, with one headline from the *Manila Times* in 2002 saying "*Pan de sal* prices are up and little can be done about it."

Orillos notes other changes in the pan de sal, such as in the amount of sugar used (traditional pan de sal with 4% sugar; sweet *pan de sal* with 18% sugar),[2] as well as its weight: according to a nutrition guide in 1908, a large pan de sal at the time weighed 80 grams, which is more than double the usual 25- to 30-gram present-day pan de sal (Baes). These changes have not exactly lived up to Gonzalez's earlier prediction that the pan de sal would become as small as a quail's egg (which is normally around 10 grams), but it does reveal that having more varieties of this local bread means that traditional methods have had to be adjusted, although not completely abandoned. These alterations in the pan de sal's composition are reliant

not just on the bakers themselves and their ability to pass on these traditions, but also the changing cost of ingredients. A 30-day food guide from 1908 lists the pan de sal as a breakfast item, with one large pan de sal costing two cents (Orillos).

Such modifications to the pan de sal are worth noting in an analysis of Gonzalez's "The Bread of Salt," a story which evokes nostalgia over how the pan de sal used to be in its telling a familiar tale of first love. In its initial scenes, a fourteen-year-old boy is described as having the daily task of buying pan de sal at 5 a.m., armed with "the fifteen centavos for the baker down Progreso Street." The young boy talks about pan de sal as food that they're allowed to eat, a comment over what is considered "appropriate" food for the boy and his family which foreshadows what later happens in the story: "For young people like my cousins and myself, [my grandmother] had always said that the kind called *pan de sal* ought to be quite all right" (Gonzalez 175).

The young boy expresses curiosity over the bread, describing a scene that recalls the traditional methods of local bakeries:

> The bread of salt! How did it get that name? From where did its flavor come, through what secret action of flour and yeast? . . . I would push my way into the shop so that I might watch the men who, stripped to the waist, worked their long flat wooden spades in and out of the glowing maw of the oven. Why did the bread come nut-brown and the size of my little fist? And why did it have a pair of lips convulsed in a painful frown?... I felt my curiosity a little gratified by the oven-fresh warmth of the bread I was proudly bringing home for breakfast. (Gonzalez 175)

The passage demonstrates the distinguishing features of the pan de sal, which includes the panadero or baker; the pugon or wood-fired oven; and the singkit, those distinctive "lips . . . in a painful frown." The pan de sal is immediately linked to the boy's identity: the bread which is "nut-brown and the size of [his] little fist," and in a later passage, the boy with his "short, brown arm" (Gonzalez 176).

The boy's grandfather served "as a coconut plantation overseer" for an old Spaniard, where he "had spent the last thirty years of his life"; this made the boy consider that he was "being depended upon to spend the years ahead in the service of this great house" (Gonzalez 175–76). But the boy has grand plans for himself, as propelled by his admiration for Aida, his high school classmate who also happens to be the old Spaniard's niece. In more general terms, the boy and Aida's families are characterized by a servant-master dynamic, where the boy may be seen as belonging to the working class; while Aida is bourgeois and her family the bourgeoisie who have access to a more privileged lifestyle compared to the boy's family. While the young

boy mentions an aunt who brings with her a servant later in the story, he is still expected to run errands, which implies a condition of life that honors duty, perhaps as part of the young boy's training to follow in the footsteps of his grandfather who had once served the "great house."

The boy plays the violin, and ends up with a band who gets booked for several gigs around town—but he really has just one thing in mind: "I thought about the money I would earn. . . . I had but one wish, to buy a box of linen stationery. . . . I would fill the sheets with words that would tell Aida how much I adored her" (Gonzalez 177). It becomes apparent that the boy dreams of a life that is detached from the one that awaits him as the servant's grandson: "That night I dreamed I had returned from a tour of the world's music centers. . . . I saw my picture on the cover of a magazine. . . . A young girl in a blue skirt and white middy clapped her lily-white hands and, her voice trembling, cried 'Bravo!'" (177). He is imagining Aida as his admiring audience, since in an earlier section he describes her "in her blue skirt and white middy" (176).

What follows is the boy's devotion to keep practicing the violin, with the primary goal of being recognized by his beloved. Eventually, his commitment to the instrument means that he would no longer have to buy the pan de sal every morning, thanks to his aunt "who brought with her a maidservant, and to the poor girl was given the chore of taking the money to the baker's for rolls and *pan de sal*" (Gonzalez 177). But his joy would only be temporary, as this is soon replaced with other chores that get in the way of the boy wanting to play the violin, and his determination to get noticed by Aida: "I began to chafe on being given other errands. Suspecting my violin to be the excuse, my aunt remarked: 'What do you want to be a musician for? At parties, musicians always eat last'" (177). The aunt's remark is a foreshadowing of what happens to the boy and his band in a later scene: "Perhaps, I said to myself, she was thinking of a pack of dogs scrambling for scraps tossed over the fence by some careless kitchen maid. She was the sort you could depend on to say such vulgar things" (Gonzalez 177–78).

The boy and his band are invited to play music one Sunday at an *asalto* or surprise party that would welcome Aida's cousins who were arriving from Manila. It was to be hosted by the local women's club, but the young narrator seems to know what might become of it just by way of the food that he predicts would be served at the gathering:

> The women's club matrons would hustle about, disguising their scurrying around for cakes and candies as for some baptismal party or other. In the end, the Rivas sisters would outdo them. Boxes of meringues, bonbons, ladyfingers, and cinnamon buns that only the Swiss bakers in Manila could make were perhaps coming on the boat with them.... The local

> matrons, however hard they tried, however sincere their efforts, were bound to fail in their aspiration to rise to the level of Don Esteban's daughters. (Gonzalez 179)

The boy makes a distinction between the futile efforts of the Buenavista Women's Club as opposed to the early anticipation of their honorees who are more capable of putting together an appropriate party, one that befits their social position as the bourgeoisie. The narrator describes the "local matrons" as belonging to a lower tier and thus could not "rise to the level" of Don Esteban's daughters, making it apparent how one group (Rivas sisters) is obviously dominant over the other (local matrons). The capital city of Manila, where the sisters are said to be arriving from, has its access to "Swiss bakers" and other fancy treats; while the provincial hosts could only scramble for "cakes and candies" that would be no match against the "meringues, bonbons, ladyfingers, and cinnamon buns"—a distinctly "foreign" or non-native set of sweets for the upper-class guests of the party.

As the boy's aunt had predicted earlier, the members of the band end up not eating until they are done playing their instruments. When the young boy is set free from his duties, he starts to consider the food on the table: "The sight of so much silver and china confused me. There was more food before us than I had ever imagined. . . . In a silver bowl was something, I discovered, that appeared like whole egg yolks that had been dipped in honey and peppermint" (Gonzalez 180). Some dishes listed in *Kulinarya* which may be close approximations of what the boy describes as "egg yolks dipped in honey" could most likely be the *canonigo* (floating meringue), but there is also *leche flan* (milk custard) or *brazo de mercedes* (rolled meringue with creamy filling). Other recipes found online refer to dishes called "*huevo con miel*" (raw egg yolk with honey) and a Colombian version called "*huevos fritos con miel*" (fried eggs with honey), but whichever one it is, what is apparent is that these egg yolks are foreign to the boy who had only been accustomed to eating pan de sal as part of his daily routine.

Even though the boy has no clue what these dishes are, he grabs what he can from the party table out of sheer hunger: "The seven of us in the orchestra were all of one mind about the feast; and so, confident that I was with friends, allowed my covetousness to have its sway and not only stuffed my mouth with this and that confection but also wrapped up a quantity of those egg-yolk things in several sheets of napkin paper" (Gonzalez 180). It is as if the boy does this out of fear that he would go hungry, fulfilling what had been so offensive to him from his aunt's remark, of them being thought of as "a pack of dogs scrambling for scraps"; and yet among his companions, he is the only one who takes food off the table. He even expresses a sense of "pride" and achievement in his attempt to take some of this strange food home without being seen by anyone else at the party.

But just as the boy gets his share of the food, Aida sees him and says "If you wait a little while till they've gone, I'll wrap up a big package for you," as if suggesting that he must wait for leftovers until the party ends, once the guests have had their fill of the food. Aida's statement makes it appear that the boy's secret stash of food was not meant for him and his friends, as they do not count as official guests at the party, but rather as a group who provides entertainment—Aida considers them "workers" for the day who serve her own class, the bourgeoisie. This could only leave the boy to conclude, "I was sure that she knew what I had done, and I felt all ardor for her gone from me entirely." And just like that, his hunger fades, overtaken by shame and embarrassment: "With the napkin balled up in my hand, I flung out my arm to scatter the egg-yolk things in the dark" (Gonzalez 181). He throws away the food he had intended to take with him, at the same time as he lets go of his admiration for Aida. This single moment lifts the veil off the reality that highlights the boy's social position as separate from Aida—a realization that is prompted by the boy's hunger and unfamiliarity with the bourgeoisie's expected social graces or etiquette.

The story ends with the young boy returning home, but he first makes a stop at the local bakery: "We stopped at the baker's when I told him that I wanted to buy with my own money some bread to eat on the way to Grandmother's house at the edge of the sea wall . . . . we watched the bakery assistants at work until our bodies grew warm from the oven across the door. It was not quite five, and the bread was not yet ready" (Gonzalez 181). Once the spell of romance is broken, the boy is compelled to go back to the panaderia. In the end, the boy would rather wait for the comfort of familiar bread or the pan de sal, rather than relive his "shameful" encounter with Aida if he had kept those "egg-yolk things" from the party. The young boy, with his dreams of romance and fame, ends up disillusioned and forced back to the same place where he had started: waiting for bread at the panaderia.

"The Bread of Salt" employs food to express a number of oppositions—for example, pan de sal for the young boy, and the egg-yolk dish for Aida and their party guests; or the city/province divide among the sisters arriving from Manila, versus the local ladies who are planning the party for them. While Aida herself may not be from the city, she has access to it by way of her visiting cousins and her social position as one of the bourgeoisie. This is a reality that is not available to the young boy, who is consumed by fantasy as he tries to impress Aida with his violin skills. By ending up at the local bakery where we first see him at the beginning of the story, the boy remains fixed to the same working class state as his grandfather, and he will most likely be the next "coconut plantation overseer" for the old Spaniard's household, as his grandfather had done in "the last thirty years of his life."

The locations mentioned in the story, Buenavista and Badajoz (now San Agustin), are in Gonzalez's hometown of Romblon, an "archipelagic province" that sits in the middle of the larger islands of Luzon and Visayas. As one reviewer notes: "Romblon is the locale of the six stories in Part One [of *Look, Stranger, on This Island Now*] and the knowledge that N.V.M. Gonzalez was born in Romblon may lead us to conclude that the stranger is N.V.M. Gonzalez himself who, through his stories, revisits his birthplace" (De Jesus Jr. 168). By using the province as setting for the story, Gonzalez sets the parameters for the pan de sal (and the boy) so that we as readers are able to differentiate what it is or remains to be, from what it aspires to be (yet fails to do so). Such is the divide which sets apart the province from the city, indicative of past traditions in one locale (the province) as opposed to the progressive symbols that shape the other (the city).

Remmon Barbaza explains the lines that separate city and province when he writes:

> From the perspective of the province, the city is the site of progress and modernity, of science and technology. We speak of 'city-smart,' pointing to the liberal and smart ways of the urban dweller, as opposed to the naïve and backward *probinsyano* . . . Thus, the city appears to possess the allure, glitter, and glamor of modernity, as well as holds the promise of redemption from stagnation in rural life. Always on the move, teeming with color and brimming with excitement, the city is a place that never sleeps. (221)

The domain of power not only rests in the city (where Aida's aunts have come from), but in the egg-yolk dish that the boy is unable to recognize and take home with him. The old Spaniard's household in which Aida is associated represents a social position that the boy can only dream of, and his letting go of the egg-yolk concoction establishes a clear separation from that temporary "delusion." The boy's food choice to pick up and pack up the egg-yolk dessert does not coincide with the identity that binds him to his working class position (social and personal); and the reader is made to realize that this dessert is no match to the price, skill, and availability (matters of convenience) associated with the boy's everyday pan de sal.

What remains evident is how through the pan de sal and the boy, we are able to see how the consumption of food, as Pierre Bourdieu once posited "produces, reproduces and negotiates the class identities and cultures that structure wider relations of power . . . explores how tastes for particular types of food and ways of eating are far from individual but have their basis in class cultures and lifestyles" (Ashley et al. 60). While Bourdieu was primarily focused on French culture in the 1960s in his book *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, there are a

number of statements in his study that could ring true in the case of "The Bread of Salt." In the chapter "The Economy of Practices," Bourdieu writes:

> Tastes in food also depend on the idea each class has of the body and of the effects of food on the body, that is, on its strength, health and beauty; and on the categories it uses to evaluate those effects, some of which may be important for one class and ignored by another, and which the different classes may rank in different ways. Thus, whereas the working classes are more attentive to the strength of the (male) body than its shape, and tend to go for products that are both cheap and nutritious, the professions prefer products that are tasty, health-giving, light and not fattening. Taste, a culture turned into nature, that is, *embodied*, helps to shape the class body. (190)

If the boy is expected to be working the plantation as his grandfather once did, then the pan de sal is his true ally in achieving that goal. The egg-yolk dessert has no use for him, in a sense that it merely serves to entice his eyes rather than ultimately appeal to his stomach. But he does not realize this until Aida catches him in the act, and he experiences the embarrassment that arises out of hunger. This reading aligns with the analysis of how Gonzalez's characters in this short story collection are "in need of illumination":

> The characters can choose to take the leap from ignorance to knowledge, illusion to reality, self-deception to truth. The action of the stories turns on the revelation of character. In the end the protagonist recognizes himself for what he is or, if the protagonist is not revealed to himself, he is at least revealed to the reader. (De Jesus Jr. 169)

Furthermore, there is ceremony and procedure attached to the egg yolk dish that is unfamiliar to the boy, who is used to buying pan de sal at the local bakery without fuss. In this case, the bourgeoisie that Bourdieu studies could represent Aida's family and the party in which these egg yolks are served: "In opposition to the free-and-easy working class meal, the bourgeoisie is concerned to eat with all due form. Form is first of all a matter of rhythm, which implies expectations, pauses, restraints; waiting until the last person served has started to eat, taking modest helpings, not appearing over-eager" (Bourdieu 196). The boy fails to meet these "expectations" that are the trappings of Aida's class when he grabs the egg yolks and thinks he could take them home, which is why he is left realizing that he is better off back at the panaderia with his most trusted pan de sal. By going back to the pan de sal at the end of the story, the boy reclaims his hold on power by making the same food choice that he had done at the beginning of the tale. Hence, it's not

the egg-yolk dessert that is placed front and center, nor is it even found in the title of the story, but instead, it's the bread of salt, the pan de sal, that holds that position.

Writing in 1964, the reviewer Edilberto de Jesus Jr. noted:

> one main motif dominates N.V.M. Gonzalez's fiction of the last seven or eight years: the illusion-reality motif. It seems safe to say that self-knowledge is one value N.V.M. Gonzalez dearly cherishes and that one problem he sees in contemporary society is the inability and sometimes the refusal of so many people to come to terms with reality. (171)

While this may have been the case for the pan de sal and its associations in those days, Gelacio Guillermo's poem "Pan de Sal," which appeared in the July 1971 issue of *Poetry*, associates the bread with deprived social conditions. In the first line of the poem, Guillermo positions the pan de sal as "the bread of the morning." The speaker at first appears to trace the pan de sal's origins by asking "What sob of hunger is it made of?" The lines that follow link the bread with pangs of hunger and desolation, since it is "Dipped in the dark sadness of coffee," then "melts itself into a food and feeds the day . . . without sound, without promise," indicating how the bread quickly disappears, while only providing temporary satisfaction to the stomach. There is a lonesome, formidable feeling amid the pan de sal, with the bread being a "means of living" for the one who consumes it. Noticeably, life with the pan de sal remains "dark" even though it is considered "the bread of the morning." If the young boy in Gonzalez's tale saw pan de sal as a daily morning routine, in Guillermo's poem the image of bread in the morning is not simply repetitive but more so an indicator of sadness and longing for something more than what pan de sal can fulfill.

By the second stanza, the day itself becomes a more prevalent image, one that is described as "never know[ing] how to rejoice in itself." There is no room for happiness, with the feeling of sadness visibly permeating as the day "glides along streets untrimmed of their sorrows." The imagery has shifted from the focus on the first stanza to the pan de sal's utility as "food" and "means of living," to the second stanza where the day is characterized by its inability to rejoice amid "sorrows" and "odors of tears." There is nothing that is particularly satisfying (physically, emotionally, or otherwise) about the pan de sal as it is portrayed in Guillermo's poem. While there may be a lack of further description on the pan de sal, it is made apparent that "sorrows" and "odors of tears" serve to wash over people, "bleaching the bodies / With the colors of their clothes, rags of the shapeless day." The title of the poem itself is "Pan de Sal," and yet the bread immediately disappears by the first stanza (and thus done with its duty for the day), and what remains in the second stanza is a day that is "shapeless," turning into a memory that hardly leaves a mark, similar to the quickly consumed pan de sal.

From the streets in the second stanza, the speaker then moves indoors, observing how "The floors of houses seek nothing but the dark." This darkness is reminiscent of the coffee in which the pan de sal is dipped in the first stanza. Stillness once again dominates as it did in the earlier stanza: "The silence of mats spreading their designs of vague / Prefigurings." We hear no exchanges among household occupants, but rather they appear as "vague prefigurings" lying on the mats, presumably after having eaten the lonesome pan de sal. Instead of being distinguishable, these individuals are heard through their "heavy inhalations" which bear "the weight / Of oppression." They are thereafter described as "writhing," as if sleep is an escape from hunger, wherein it is made clear that "this writhing is the peace of sleep."

The poem begins with "morning," and Guillermo closes it with "sleep," emphasizing how even as the day seems to progress, darkness still pervades from the first to the final lines of the poem. If Gonzalez's "The Bread of Salt" could be seen as ending on a comforting and familiar note for the young boy and his trusted pan de sal, Guillermo's poem depicts the bread as almost nonexistent. The consumption of pan de sal is barely memorable for the person who consumes it, as it paints a picture of hardship that can only be temporarily cured with slumber.

While this discussion is limited to just two among a number of literary works that mention this local bread (Lamberto Antonio, Neal Imperial, and Renato L. Santos would feature it briefly in their writings in Filipino), the pan de sal in these examples is seen as plain and ordinary, situated in the context of lives that have been denied access to something better. The pan de sal in these works is humble, monotonous, and less desired than the other. Other scholars may have turned to these examples as indicative of the struggle and reality of ordinary Filipinos, but I propose that the pan de sal's contribution to food culture need not be limited to class or societal associations. The following section examines some directions for the pan de sal which expand the possibilities for this humble bread, taking it beyond the implications established in these literary works.

The Way Forward for the Pan de Sal

Such dichotomies linked with the pan de sal that existed in earlier times are not so clear cut in today's complex environments. The pan de sal need not be exclusively associated with the working class or provincial, nor should it be completely cut off from the bourgeoisie and any possibilities of progress or innovation. There is plenty of room to reinvent the image of the pan de sal from being "brown, plain, good, basic, and strong," as Fernandez was known to have once put it in her book, *Palayok* (Orillos). The pan de sal, because of its multiple encounters with identities and communities other than the Filipino, can be doused with *ube*, cheese, cinnamon, and more. In turn, the Filipino and our cuisine can also move beyond such definitions for

plainness or strength, for we have also been shaped by our manifold interactions with the larger and more connected world.

The pan de sal's identity is still closely associated with its past, perhaps especially when it assumes modern formulations or techniques. This separation between tradition and the modern is made evident when Orillos describes Panaderia Dimas-Alang in Pasig: "A man in a white *sando* wraps the logs in a towel and carries them inside Panaderia Dimas-Alang. The bakery uses the logs to fuel its century-old wood-fired oven (*pugon*) to make traditional breads—a rarity in Metro Manila these days, when many have switched to gas ovens." Orillos notes how the use of the pugon for baking pan de sal has been replaced with the gas oven in some modern bakeries, but that it is still an important part of the tradition of making this local bread, even when "[the pugon's] popularity diminished after the ban on cutting of the *bakawan* (mangroves) used as fuel."

But Orillos also expresses a weariness over the rise of "convenient and accessible" pan de sal, which she considers a threat to the time-honored traditions of bread making in the Philippines: "What do we lose when we forget or never know the form and taste of the traditional *pan de sal*? What if our bread makers forego tradition in favor of profit and convenience? In essence, we lose a little of who we are." I would argue that such questions should consider Fernandez's own approach to Filipino cuisine, which according to Jane Dusselier challenges "the concept of authenticity arguing that food is not preserved in some original form . . . Fernandez is not concerned with what Filipino food is but how food becomes Filipino" (332). Thus, if we focus on how food "becomes" Filipino, there could be no such thing as a national identity that is being "lost" in light of the pan de sal's observable developments. If we follow Fernandez's methods, it would appear that Filipino food is subjected to a process that allows it to become or turn into something rather than remain static.

At the same time, we could apply approaches within food and cultural studies, which can enrich our understanding of Filipino food, including the pan de sal:

> Food studies and cultural studies share a keen interest in the fraught and complex connections between lived bodies, imagined realities, and structures of power built around food. Both disciplines acknowledge that not only the material aspects of individual and communal practices, but also desires, fantasies, fears, and dreams coagulating around and in the body, deeply influence our development as individual subjects and as members of all kinds of social formations. (Parasecoli 275)

These interactions between food and cultural studies emerge naturally, wherein the latter is oftentimes inherently interdisciplinary—hence the many avenues from

which we can make sense out of Filipino cuisine and the cultures around food as a whole. It is also worth noting how "cultural studies has been distinguished as a field of study by the ways it has engaged with theory and sought to apply it, rather than by its adoption or development of practical methods" (Pickering 1). For a more explicit outlook on food, it may even be worthwhile to consider "Angela McRobbie's call for a return to sociological questions in cultural studies, and more specifically to what she calls the three Es: the empirical, the ethnographic, and the experiential" (Pickering 4). Such are the range of approaches that can be explored as we look beyond the potential for pan de sal and our food in relation to the rest of the world.

By its very nature, Filipino food, including the pan de sal, is meant to interact, engage with, and be transformed by the people, places, and contexts that it comes in contact with. In addition, these aspects of convenience, accessibility, and profit that Orillos associates with the pan de sal of more recent years could offer further insight into the current food choices of contemporary Filipinos, if we go back to Belasco's framework as being guided by "the consumer's identity (social and personal), matters of convenience (price, skill, availability), and a sense of responsibility (an awareness of the consequences of what we eat)." I would argue against the statement of "los[ing] a little of who we are" because such influences on the pan de sal may offer rewarding avenues from which to study this local bread and how it contributes to Filipino food culture. Instead of something being lost, we gain from these interactions, and whether they are actually chosen by those who create and consume pan de sal, all will be fruitful indicators of how Filipino food continues to grow and diversify.

Why should we shun convenience and accessibility, when the Filipino buys what is available and affordable to them? Surely we cannot fault the person who would not know the difference between a traditional pan de sal (with its signature singkit) as opposed to the everyday bread that they have consumed for most of their lives. While there is definitely an art to bread making that must be preserved, should we not also let our panaderos learn and invent new ways of making bread, even if that means choosing modern ovens over the pugon? In a similar way that we no longer have to see the world as so strictly black and white as it was in "The Bread of Salt," or how it is associated with hunger pains in the poem "Pan de Sal," we also need to expand our definitions for "who we are" as Filipinos, as individuals who can take part in our communities without having to be limited by our "traditions," but rather allow ourselves to be enriched by the much larger world that lies beyond what is expected, familiar, or even comfortable.

Furthermore, our individual and collective engagement with the pan de sal is just one part of the larger web that could provide a deeper insight into our "circuit of culture," in which "consumption is only one process," so that in turn, "We need to understand how our consumption of food takes place within a wider framework in which we consider how foods are produced, regulated, represented, and associated with specific identities" (Ashley et al. 60). As such, the story of the pan de sal can no longer be confined within a discussion of its early history or even where it is headed in the local context; but rather how it connects with broader sets of "identities" beyond the familiar—for instance, starting with the Filipino-American immigrants who are experimenting with their homeland's cuisine.

Filipino-American chefs in the US are exploring more ways to enjoy the pan de sal, with playful concoctions like peanut butter and jelly, bread pudding, or even pan de sal pizza (Shah). Nicole Ponseca, who owns the restaurant Maharlika in New York, uses the pan de sal as base for their eggs benedict: "Dubbed 'Eggs Benigno,' Ponseca swaps *pan de sal* for the English muffins, and tops each piece with crispy Spam (instead of ham), poached eggs, and a drizzle of a *kalamansi*-spiked hollandaise" (Shah). Would it be justified to say that the pan de sal is being placed in a precarious position, because Ponseca has used it for eggs benedict and then served it in her New York restaurant? Perhaps it's about time that we move beyond the conversation of "What is Filipino food"—rather, let's start to think about Filipino cuisine as something that can only be fully articulated and appreciated if it continues to interact with more cultures and innovators locally and around the world. Only then can the pan de sal truly flourish in the spotlight.

NOTES

1. The Philippine Baking Industry Group requested an increase of P4 in the price of bread in August 2022, which meant that the Pinoy pan de sal's price would rise from P23.50 to P27.50 for 250 grams or 10 pieces. See Bernie Cahiles-Magkilat, "Big bakers seeking price hike in Pinoy Pandesal, Tasty." *Manila Bulletin*, 15 Aug. 2022, mb.com.ph/2022/08/15/big-bakers-seeking-price-hike-in-pinoy-pandesal-tasty/.
2. Based on news reports in August 2022, bakers have proposed using less sugar in pan de sal to address supply issues in the country. See Bernie Cahiles-Magkilat, "Bakers to lessen sugar content in pandesal." *Manila Bulletin,* 11 Aug. 2022, mb.com.ph/2022/08/11/bakers-to-lessen-sugar-content-in-pandesal/.

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