THE POLITICS OF FOOD[1]

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Our tastes and diets have been changed dramatically. By what? By aggressive advertising by giant food chains (franchises of American-owned food companies) By changing lifestyles and working habits. By rapid urbanisation. And by trade liberalization. Yes, all of that.

As a result, every Saturday, when the family goes out to eat, there is a tug-of-war between generations -- with Mom and Dad expressing a desire for "real Filipino food" and the kids clamoring for hamburgers, French fries and spaghetti. A compromise is reached. They dine at an old-fashioned Filipino restaurant, but the young ones bring along their kiddie meals bought from Jollibee, Wendy's or McDonald's.

Knowing the impact of sustained and intensive promotions on sales, many companies spend megabucks on advertising alone. Leo Santos, marketing manager of International Family Food Services, Inc. (the sole licensee of Shakey's) says their company spends a little less than P100 million for promotions. This is actually considered a limited budget, he says, since other conpanies spend twice this amount.

The proliferation of fastfood and quick-service food firms cannot be divorced from the ubiquitous presence of shopping malls, a phenomenon brought about by rapid urbanisation. The mall boom is not only happening in Metro Manila but also in other cities like Davao, Cebu, and Cagayan de Oro.

So that these days, instead of spending a day in the park, families flock to the shopping malls, not only to shop or watch a movie but to lounge around in air-conditioned comfort and enjoy the passing parade of people and the mind-boggling array of goods. Invariably, when they get tired, they head for the nearest or cheapest eating place (most huge malls are so designed that if you want to sit or relax, there's nowhere else to go but a restaurant) .

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With potential customers under one roof, it's very convenient to set up a food business in a shopping mall. Moreover, opening a new outlet in a shopping mall is relatively cheaper compared to opening one in other locations.

For instance, if you wanted to open a new outlet outside a mall, you are looking to spend at least P8-12 million for the franchise, facilities, building, and equipment. In a mall, the physical space awaits the entrepreneur.

Changing national food policies have also played a significant role in reshaping our tastes and diet. The loosening of import controls has paved the way for the influx of imported food commodities. In 1993, we spent some $352.15 million for imports of cereals and cereals preparations alone.

Not only are food imports a big drain to our dollar reserves but they are supplanting the consumption of locally-grown food products.

Take the case of wheat. It is rapidly gaining on rice as a staple in the urban Filipino diet. The Filipinos' wheat consumption has increased by an annual average of 10.5% over the past five years. Wheat is the Philippines' second largest food import in value terms after dairy products. The US is the source of 85% of wheat imports. An Annual Agricultural Situation Report (RP) prepared by the American Embassy in Manila reveals that the Export Enhancement Program has been a major instrument in maintaining the US hold over the Philippine wheat market since 1986. Aside from this, food aid instruments like the US Public Law 480 have been utilized by the US government to dump wheat and other food surpluses at subsidized prices, low rates of interest and long pay-back terms. In 1991, the World Bank already prescribed that we eat more bread and less rice to solve our rice supply problem. It does not need a genius to deduce that those who stand to benefit most from our increased consumption of bread (made of wheat) are the wheat producers.

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The growing demand for wheat foods by *Pinoy* consumers can be attributed to several factors. These products constitute a large portion of the food purchases of many working mothers, since they are relatively cheap and attractively packaged. Wheat noodles and bread are often cheaper than rice. As Vivian G., a working mother with two kids says: "*praktikal ihain (ang instant noodles) sa mga bata sa merienda o agahan lalo na kung nagmamadali ka. Mura pa*!" Others like Feline, a 17 year old student, even prefer eating bread than rice. She says that it's easier to prepare compared to rice.

Not only is rice being replaced by imported substitutes but even locally-grown fruits and vegetables are being dislodged from the shelves by imported ones. Even with our country growing an abundance of various fruits - often the envy of those living in the West - temperate fruits like apples, grapes and oranges are making impressive inroads into the *Pinoy* fruit market. In 1993, the Philippines imported $65.68 million-worth of fruits and vegetables compared to $42.4 million in 1991. Data from the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics show that there has been a dramatic increase in the importation of apples, grapes and oranges. The volume of imported apples grew from only 1,000 metric tons in 1985 to 36,980 MT in 1989 while imported grapes from almost nothing in 1985 to 11,340 MT in 1989. The value of apple imports almost doubled in just two years -- from $4.2 million in 1991 to $8.2 million in 1993. BAS reported that most of these imported fruits and vegetables are supplied by the US (43%) and Hong Kong (18%).

With the removal of import restrictions and lower tariffs, now, these fruits are now competitively priced and come out even cheaper compared to such local fruits as mangoes (Class A).

The change in the Pinoy's diet and taste is not just a consumer's concern; it has inescapable political implications. Is the country abandoning a policy of food self-sufficiency and becoming increasingly reliant on food imports? Will the main incentive for agricultural growth be producing "export winners" that give the best returns on our investments rather than meeting the needs of domestic consumption? What is the impact on national sovereignty when the country becomes vulnerable to the decisions of those who are going to sell us rice or wheat in the future? People, especially policymakers, need to address these issues if they want to make an effective response. Otherwise, they end up just bowing to those who control the world's supply of food. After all, the power to decide matters that affect our stomach should not be left to corporate power brokers. These types normally don’t even enjoy food as food; they enjoy food as profit.

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