

Review of:

Balut: Fertilized Eggs and the Making of Culinary Capital in the Filipino Diaspora

Margaret Magat, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. 189, acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, appendix, notes, references, index.

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Margaret Magat's new study *Balut: Fertilized Eggs and the Making of Culinary Capital in the Filipino Diaspora*, takes readers on a thought-provoking journey through the history and tradition of *balut*—Philippines most popular culinary gem. Simply put, balut is an egg that contains a partially developed duck embryo. It is better served hot with various seasonings, such as salt, vinegar, or chili sauce. According to the instructions, the right way to eat balut is to tape the wide end of the egg and bore a hole in it to drink the hot liquid that tastes like concentrated chicken soup. After peeling the egg, which is done similarly to the non-fertilized hard-boiled version, the yolk, embryo, and white (or albumen, which some discard owing to its rubbery texture) are consumed (1-2). The study's main objective, according to the author, is to finally set the record straight about balut's "production, preparation, reception, as well as its consumption," and to examine its shifting cultural traits influenced largely by global migration, social media, and technology (2). The study is based on the work and theories of folklorists, anthropologists, and includes Asian American perspectives. It encompasses a wide range of themes, including postcolonialism, omnivorousness, migration, technology, and nationalism. Greatly informed by the author's background as a Filipino American who was born and raised in the Philippines before immigrating to the United States, this study engages Magat's extensive fieldwork, which includes interviews, surveys and participant-observation methodology.

Magat devotes her introduction to layering the geographical and historical circumstances that have contributed to the formation of Filipino cuisine. In doing so, she recognizes the importance of historical and traditional contexts, particularly when dealing with complex and unfamiliar foodways. Balut's history and place in Filipino foodways, both at home and abroad, has played a key role in the propagation of earlier postcolonial conceptions based primarily on discrimination, racism, and prejudice: "American foods were seen as sophisticated and Filipino dishes were described as 'primitive' and the people who ate them as 'vindictive and treacherous'" (22). As a result, many Filipinos in America had ambivalent feelings about their native cuisine, especially when it came to foods like pork blood stew and balut. By juxtaposing the cultures of making balut in the Philippines and the United States, Magat skillfully displays the multidimensional aspect of this fascinating dish—from being a symbol of history, sustainability, and identity, to representing a pragmatic economic and cultural enterprise.

The second chapter discusses culinary nationalism and the emergence of the Filipino food movement, both of which are inextricably linked to the history and popularity of balut in the Philippines. By exposing the contentious and frequently problematic Philippine-American ties of the past, the author places balut at the forefront of the national discourse and investigates its complexity through concepts like nationalism, authenticity, and collective identity. As the author points out, consuming balut is not a simple culinary habit, but a performance of complex identity through which many

Filipinos reaffirm their national sentiments and strengthen their collective identity: "...eating balut becomes not just feeding the body but feeding the performance of the self for those consciously eating it on their path to become self-realized, whether as a plucky foodie, or as a good Filipina citizen who proves her Filipinanness" (63). While acknowledging the complexities of themes like authenticity and the "commodification of Otherness," Magat, echoing prior California food movements, advocates for more nuanced and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding ambiguous dishes like Filipino's balut. These dishes in turn "...can be used to bring in transformative moments where the diner may be subjected to learning not just what the food she or he is eating from, but where it came from and what migratory movements, colonial upheavals, and political forces caused it to bring the food to the plate" (70).

The third and most folklore-oriented chapter delves into the symbols, legends, and beliefs related with balut's foodways. Despite its popularity as a pick-me-up snack shared among family and friends, balut is also associated with notions of discrimination and social judgement, notably towards elderly women (widows) and outsiders (strangers) in the society. By capitalizing on James Frazer's principles of sympathetic magic and Mary Douglas's work on pollution and taboo, the study investigates the emergence of the legend of *aswang* (a supernatural creature that feeds on people's entrails) and its continuous endurance in present-day Philippines. The legend dates back to the Spanish colonial period, when missionaries used the term *aswang* to delegitimize the status of the female shamans known as *bayan*. Balut, like the *aswang*, has ambiguous and amorphous qualities that reflect a state that is neither an egg nor a duck, but a creature of liminality suspended halfway between life and death (79). Balut's social aspect is intimately linked to cultural codes that control people's appropriate behavior in social settings, such as parties, drinking sessions, and public markets. While balut is consumed by people of all ages and genders, there is a widespread idea that males can benefit the most from it because of its aphrodisiacal properties. As the study demonstrates, among Filipinos and customers from other ethnicities, balut is popularly regarded as a "Filipino Viagra": "In these contexts, males perform gender when eating fetal duck eggs specifically as an energizer to improve their sex life" (89). This form of gender predilection, as Magat astutely points out, not only challenges women's right to sexual and reproductive anatomy, but also reinforces harmful masculinity stereotypes in Philippine society.

In the fourth chapter, the author takes the discussion back to the United States by concentrating on balut-eating contests and the videos and other media discourse that surrounds the practice as public places for identity formation, negotiation, and performance. Based on interviews and observations at the San Francisco contests (2016-2017), the author argues that such events highlight the ways Filipino Americans use balut to negotiate old understandings and new perspectives of their Filipino identity. To better understand these balut-eating contests, Magat suggests a unique localized genre, based on Dan Ben-Amos's "ethnic genres," and Juwen Zhang's "folkloric identity," in which people employ various markers of food to construct identities and control the narrative in public discourse. Examining these contests via the lens of folkloric identity, as Magat points out, one is able to move away from the idea of an 'ethnic' group and the notion of 'authentic' folklore and focus on what the group is "practicing or doing to make its group identity" (130).

While public contests are organized and performed by people of predominantly Filipino heritage, the discourse, performance, and presentation of balut in the virtual world can be a little hazier. Some claim that videos like the “Balut Challenge,” in which individuals from around the world try balut for the first time, contribute to the “commodification of otherness” by gaining economic and culinary capital. The main purpose of these videos, or, as Magat calls them, “the performance of disgust,” is to intentionally cause discomfort and repulsion in both the participants and the audience. While this outrageous and ignorant behavior is clearly a type of culinary colonialism (c.f. Heldke 2003), it can also symbolize a form of empowerment and control, where people reclaim their pride in Filipino cuisine. Balut can also be seen as “reverse” colonization, where the tastebuds of Southeast Asians are shaping, reeducating, and training Western palates to accept and try new foodways with hardly any cultural mediation (154-155).

Balut: Fertilized Eggs and the Making of Culinary Capital in the Filipino Diaspora is a fascinating look into the Philippines’ rich food culture. On every page of the book, Margaret Magat’s investment and enthusiasm are palpable, and she makes sure to stay true to her primary objective: to give the reader an “Asian American interpretation of a Western interpretation of an Asian cultural practice” (165). While some of the theoretical approaches were out of date, and others lacked in-depth examination, the extensive ethnographic work has more than compensated for these minor anomalies. Margaret Magat’s *Balut* is a valuable addition to our folklore collection. It will also prove to be useful to individuals, scholars, students, and researchers from a variety of disciplines who are interested in learning more about the history and tradition of balut, and Filipino cuisine in general.

Works Cited

Heldke, Lisa. 2003. *Exotic Appetites: Ruminations of a Food Adventurer*. New York and London: Routledge.