



'A Trip of a Lifetime'

Diary of the Zest Quest Asia 2019 first prize trip to Manila

As winners of Zest Quest Asia 2019, University of West London students **Marian Tandy**, **Mika Narcisco**, and **Bhumika Rai** embarked on a 9-day educational trip to Manila, Philippines with tutor **Nathan Vasanthan**, taking in the culture and cuisine. They were accompanied by Zest Quest Asia founders **Cyrus and Pervin Todiwala** and member of the ZQA Organising Committee, **Gina McAdam**. Here, Marian, Mika and Bhumika share their diaries:

DAY ONE AND DAY TWO: Sunday, 7th April to 8th April

Departure from London Heathrow to Manila via Hong Kong on the 7th of April. Our flights were generously supported by Crystal Travel.



After a 16-hour journey, we arrived on the 8th of April at Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport at around 19.10 pm. We were met at arrivals by representatives of Fairmont Makati and driven by courtesy car to the **Fairmont Makati and Raffles Makati** hotel complex. The weather was generally hot and quite humid; what

countries like the Philippines experience during this time of year. The Philippines' colourful and distinct culture can be seen everywhere... a jeep-type vehicle called a *Jeepney* caught our eye. Apparently, these are ex- American military vehicles modified for public transport. Crossing the roads was complicated. We found their signals for pedestrians incomprehensible!



Just as we were arriving at the entrance of the hotel, we were met by Gina McAdam, our host in Manila, who had arrived with Cyrus and Pervin Todiwala the day before. Both Cyrus and Pervin were also staying at the Fairmont Makati. We couldn't stop admiring the hotel's architecture and its interior design, including a vast and cosy lounge. Having checked in and after the welcome cocktail, we got some rest, filled with excitement about the up and coming cultural and gastronomic experience.

DAY THREE: Tuesday, 9th April – Day trip to San Fernando, Pampanga, 'culinary capital of the Philippines'

'From the Bangus Caper Pâté to 'Adobo' Shrimp, Sisig Pasta, Dulce Palitaw and many more, every course kept us busy as it was all amazing and delicious!' - Marian

Following a good night's sleep, at 7.30am we gathered at the breakfast buffet of the hotel. We were pleasantly surprised by the variety of cuisines available. The buffet represented almost all of the most popular world cuisines such as English, Indian, French, Chinese (dim-sum) and typical Philippine breakfast dishes.

Following breakfast, we were picked up at 9.30am for a short journey to the family home of Gina's friends, **Dr Manolet and Mrs Mari Delfin**. There, we had the opportunity to meet Gina's family and other good friends. During the visit to the Delfins' residence, we experienced for ourselves the amazing and unforgettable Filipino hospitality.

The team felt so welcome and the hosts made us feel as we were visiting our own families. We were told that Mrs Delfin would be the gastronomic guide during our visit to Pampanga. A 'secret' private dining experience was going to be laid out for us at **Denlim's Kitchen** in the city of San Fernando, with Chef Dennis 'Den' Lim himself doing the cooking. After a 2-hour drive, we arrived at Denlim's Kitchen; it used to be an old bakery shop and it has been turned into a by-appointment only family-style casual dining restaurant.

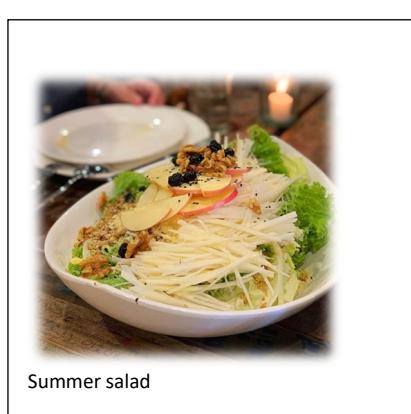
We met Chef Den Lim and his 3-assistants. It was so interesting to see the restaurant walls covered with signatures of the people who had visited the place, and food-related posters on the walls. One long table can comfortably accommodate 20 to 30 people. It's an ideal place for a family and friends gathering or even a unique business lunch.



Chef Den Lim in Denlim's Kitchen, San Fernando, Pampanga



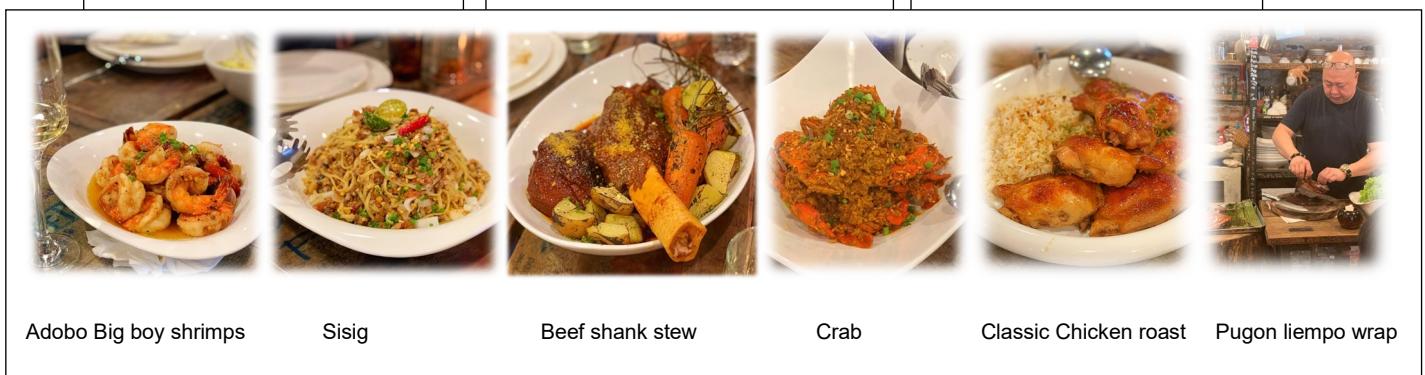
Bangus (Milk fish) caper plate served with cornmeal baguette.



Summer salad



Chef Den Lim preparing the summer salad



Adobo Big boy shrimps

Sisig

Beef shank stew

Crab

Classic Chicken roast

Pugon liempo wrap

The menu included nine different varieties of dishes and different styles of cooking, reflecting a noticeable Spanish influence. The dishes included *Bangus* (*Milk fish*) *Caper Pate served with Cornmeal Baguette*, *Summer Salad*, *Adobo Big Boy Shrimps*, *Sisig*, *Crab and Beef Shank Stew* and more. All dishes were cooked and finished in front of your eyes, creating a great meal experience in a typical Filipino style.

After lunch, our tour continued with 'merienda' at the **Hizon-Singian Heritage House**. This is the ancestral home of the Rodriguez family, rarely open to the public.



Hizon-Singian Heritage House in San Fernando

We met **Louie Torres**, widow of the late **Des Rodriguez-Torres**, and his daughters **KitKat Rodriguez-Torres** and **Carmela Rodriguez Torres-Singian**. The Hizon-Singian House is a grand 'Bahay na Bato' house built in 1870 by the couple **Don Anacleto Hizon**, gobernadorcillo of San Fernando from 1877-1879 and 1886-1887, and **Victoria Singian de Miranda y de Ocampo**. The Rodriguez family are their direct descendants and still use the house as a home. It was amazing to see and learn about the interior decor and architecture of the house.

'It is such a privilege to be invited for a merienda at the Hizon-Singian Heritage House as it is very rarely shown to the public.' - Bhumika

The Rodriguez family were very welcoming and they kindly showed us around. They served us *merienda* which basically means 'snack'. They served a few different snack and fruits but the ones we loved the most were local speciality *ensaymada*, and the frozen coconut and lychee type of sorbet. Nice and refreshing!

Once again, we experienced the finest Filipino hospitality. We learnt that in the Philippines, every guest must leave with food of some sort. We were each given boxes of *ensaymada*, made from our hosts' family recipe.

Day Four: Wednesday, 10th April - Tour and Stage at Fairmont and Raffles Makati

'Around lunchtime, chef invited us to mingle with his team at Mirèio. We exchanged ideas with local chefs who were very passionate about their work and taught us their signature dishes. In particular the starters, using local produce such as king prawns and coconut.' - Marian

After having breakfast, we were honoured to finally meet the executive chef of Fairmont and Raffles Hotel, **Chef Anne-Cecile Degenne**. It was amazing to see the Fairmont Makati kitchens and the way the kitchens are operated. As hospitality culinary students, it was a golden opportunity and an honour for us.

After introducing ourselves, Chef Anne-Cecile gave us a tour and showed us around the Fairmont and also Raffles hotel. We got to learn and cook *Pâté en croute* with **Chef Herve Clair** who was very kind to teach us, and to share his own recipe. During the demonstration, we were able learn the role of each ingredient including how best to use *foie gras*. He also showed us around the rooftop terrace bar - what a view!

Around lunch time, we went to **Mirèio** restaurant and met the chefs there. We were able to work alongside them and managed to have a little chat here and there. It was a good experience being in their kitchen and seeing how they work together as a team. It was definitely a privilege meeting Chef Anne-Cecile and Chef Herve.



With Chef Herve Clair



Lunch with Chef Anne-Cecile Degenne



A few dishes we learnt with Chef Anne-Cecile and Chef Herve

Day Five: Thursday, 11th April - Training session with Chef Ric Ramos

It's our second day working alongside the Fairmont Makati chefs and this time it is with **Sous Chef Ric Ramos**. We briefly exchanged greetings yesterday and today got to talk to him more. After Chef quickly summarised our itinerary, we hopped into the hotel car and went to **Cubao Farmers Market!** Lovely drive (with a bit of traffic, of course; we're in Philippines after all!) as we talk about cooking and our experiences so far in the Philippines and at the hotel.

First to greet us were the market vendors and a wide range of colourful fruits! Our minds were already telling us to remember every single fruit or snack we had to buy while we were there. We walked around the market and looked at the fresh produce.



'I really enjoyed this day and I couldn't stop smiling as I reminisced the days when I would come and visit my family here in Philippines and go to the market and buy fresh ingredients.' - Mika

Chef Ric introduced us to “**Dampa**” where we got to pick and shop our own fresh seafood and choose a restaurant to cook it for us! It was a feast! You can directly ask the chefs how you want it cooked, method and flavour-wise. We had *stuffed grilled squid*, *steamed fish*, *prawn & squash curry (ginataan)* and *Halaan soup (clam & razor clam soup)*.



With Chef Ric Ramos and his Filipino dishes

Later in the afternoon, Chef Ric kindly gave us a Filipino cooking demonstration. He was able to demonstrate a Filipino dish called *Sinigang* with prawns and vegetables. He also cooked *Halaan* which we'd also eaten at the market. It was quite cool as we got to compare the same dish in a day. The afternoon was filled with the fun cooking session and the chance to taste more Filipino food! Also, we got to taste our first *Ube* (purple yam) ice cream here in the Philippines, with ‘*turon*’ (deep fried banana & jackfruit rolls) as a bonus!

‘Chef Ric took the classic and beloved Filipino dishes such as Adobo, Kare-Kare, Sinigang, and Turon and elevated them to Michelin standard. The careful way in which he chose the ingredients from the farmer’s market, prepared them with great love, and presented the final dish really shows his passion and enthusiasm for Filipino cuisine. Using crispy pork belly for the Kare-Kare instead of the traditional ox tongue or ox tripe really proves how versatile and adaptable Filipino cuisine can be.’ - Marian



Day Six: Friday, 12th April - Charity event at Romulo Café Makati



Chef Cyrus Todiwala's main dish, a version of the Filipino 'Binagoongan Baboy'

Today was the big day, our main event during our stay at Makati: a dinner fundraiser for Zest Quest Asia and the Philippine-based **Foundation for Professional Training** (FPTI). **Sandie Romulo-Squillantini** and **Enzo Squillantini**, the owners of Romulo Café picked us up from our hotel. When our team, along with Chef Cyrus, arrived at Romulo Café, we were greeted by the very excited **Head Chef Aone Rebueno**. We were shown around the kitchen and introduced to their brigade.



At Romulo Café Makati



Soon, we started prepping for the big event. Chef Cyrus demonstrated for us a take on the classic lemon curd. He used *calamansi*, also known as Philippine Lime, which are predominantly cultivated in the Philippines. The night was a big success. We were also fortunate enough to meet **Mr. Ricardo Romulo** and **His Excellency Daniel Pruce, the British Ambassador to the Philippines**.



Resting between the prep Sessions



Prepping



A few dishes from the event at Romulo Café



With Head Chef Aone Rebueno of Romulo Café and students from FPTI

What an amazing experience being able to work with chef Cyrus Cyrus Todiwala and the Romulo Cafe kitchen team! It is always nice meeting chefs in a different kitchen. Definitely a pleasure meeting Chef Aone who guided us throughout the day. For lunch, he served us a range of local dishes that we (except Mika) had never tasted before. Some of us won't forget a master class from Chef Cyrus on slicing onions as well as eating *halo-halo*!

Day Seven: Saturday, 13th April - Trip to Salcedo Community Market & Private Dinner



With the organisers of Salcedo Community Market

If you want to experience the new and the traditional, the innovative and the classic, **Salcedo Community Market** is the place to go. Philippine culture is defined by their endearing hospitality, and this is the local community market that brings the 'pinoy' (endearing slang for Filipinos) together through their common love of food. Salcedo Community Market provides a platform for the locals to share their flair via their cooking.



Discovering Filipino and international delicacies

We were given a tour around the market by **Patricia Lichauco** and **Mia Villanueva**, two of the organisers of the market. The market provides a truly eye-opening opportunity to experience the wonderful mix and culinary melting pot that Philippine cuisine has to offer.

The market is also known to host various stalls with international cuisines. From freshly-baked Japanese pancakes to *Ginataang Puso Ng Saging*, which is banana heart

flower cooked in coconut sauce, there is something for everyone to try. The hot weather was made bearable by the varieties of readily available fresh juices. There was also a stall selling butter beers and ginger ale, which was a welcoming treat. We also tried one of the best *Ube* ice creams in one of the stalls. We were lucky enough to visit **Tita Ope's** stall. **Tita Ope Ledesma** is the top seller in the market and has been known to serve her homemade cooking in the market since 2006.



Some of the delicious food that Salcedo Market has to offer

Once everyone had their fill of strolling around the market looking at various stalls, we headed back to the hotel. After resting for a few hours, we headed out to **Ayala Alabang Village** for dinner where we were so generously invited to dinner by Bong, Gina's older brother, and his wife Maribel. This was a wonderful opportunity to once again witness the Filipinos' endearing hospitality and to partake of a mouth-watering, home cooked spread!





At the private dinner hosted by Bong and Maribel Consing

Day Eight: Sunday, 14th April – Free morning and Private Dinner

Today we had a free morning which meant we were able to explore a bit of Makati for ourselves. We went to The **Landmark** department store, where we shopped and bought souvenirs.

In the afternoon, we went to the dinner hosted by Dr and Mrs Manolet Delfin. This was yet another remarkable occasion to witness the Filipinos' immense sense of openness and sincerity. We were welcomed in their homes with open arms and introduced to their friends and families. We were treated like one of them from the moment we stepped into their homes. The environment was riveting and we quickly indulged in conversation -- including our success in the competition and how our experience had gone so far.

From dinner onwards, we were in for a special treat. Mari had prepared *Lechon Baboy*, which is slow roasted pig. This mouth-watering dish has a crispy skin and juicy tender meat. The *Lechon Baboy* was made extra special since Mari had prepared two of them. One was prepared to her family recipe and the second one had been prepared using a special marinade provide by Chef Cyrus and Chef Pervin. We also had the most delicious *Ox tripe (callos)*. One of the memorable events of the evening was trying *Balut*. This is a Philippine delicacy and if eaten in the correct manner, it can be quite delicious.

Mari, being so passionate about food, and her knowledge about the local cuisines made us appreciate her flair even more.



At the dinner hosted by Dr and Mrs Manolet Delfin



Mari carving the Lechon Baboy



The team

On our return to the Fairmont, we visited the rooftop terrace bar again as Chef Herve recommended that the view looks even better at night. He was absolutely right!



Chef Cyrus and Chef Pervin preparing the fish (for the Ambassador's cook-off the next day) with their special marinade!

**Day Nine: Monday, 15th April – Cook-off and Lunch with H.E.
Ambassador Daniel Pruce and Judy Ann Santos
before Departure for London**



In front of the Residence of the British Ambassador to the Philippines

Our last day in Manila. After we had checked out from our rooms, we journeyed to the Residence of **British Ambassador Daniel Pruce** in Forbes Park for an afternoon's 'fun cooking session'. Once there, we were welcomed by the British Ambassador himself. Another special and surprise guest for the day was **Judy Ann Santos**. Judy Ann is a Filipino film and television actress. She is also known for her YouTube channel 'Judy Ann's Kitchen' where she cooks her favourite dishes for the purpose of promoting Filipino cuisine.

We all sat around and Chef Cyrus familiarised everyone there with the origin of the Zest Quest Asia competition. We got to know about the journey Chef Cyrus and Chef Pervin went through in order to reintroduce Asian cuisine to the British and get young chefs interested in learning about Asian cuisines. We also briefly spoke about our experience so far throughout the competition, our week in the Philippines and about what we were taking back from this cultural exposure. Judy Ann also stated her views about Filipino cuisine and the ways it could be made more fascinating to new palates.



During the fun cooking session, Chef Cyrus prepared *Stuffed Tilapia* for us. **Chef Jomar Siador** (coincidentally an alumnus of University of West London) then showed us how to prepare the traditional Filipino *Bibingka*. Judy Ann also got involved and showed us her culinary skills by preparing the *Tarte Tartin* created by Chef Jomar. It was such an honour being invited and meeting the British Ambassador and Judy Ann. Definitely couldn't ask for a better way to end our once in a lifetime trip!

Then realised it was the time to say goodbye to our hosts and the Philippines...
We got into the cars waiting to take us to the airport...

We've had a once in a life time gastronomical, cultural and educational experience indeed! *Thank you, Zest Quest Asia!*



With Judy Ann Santos and British Ambassador Daniel Pruce



Judy Ann Santos, Ambassador Daniel Pruce and Chef Cyrus partaking in the fun cooking session.

