time, generation, and culture. Samson Yi’s essay delineates the meticulous care of a busy mother whose jewel-like *kim bop* embodied a wealth of feeling. Studying the ideas and practices surrounding food offers insights into family, history and community, spurring us to see afresh the daily bread/rice/noodles/protein bars that we consume, seeking sustenance for body and spirit.

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**Sally’s Lechon:**

An Outpost of Eating in Ethnic America

Precious Grace Singson

It was a cold and wet Sunday when I went to interview Marlyn Rosete, owner of “Sally’s Lechon, BBQ, and Catering,” in Los Angeles’ San Fernando Valley. I was grateful to step inside the restaurant, welcomed by a familiar stench of steam from burning oil, a smell that clings to clothes days after an encounter. I sat on one of the six chairs in the small restaurant yet no one served or took my order. Marlyn was busy deep-frying *turon* while taking a phone order. Sally and Rex, Marlyn’s children, were involved with cutting *tumpia* sticks and chopping *lechon kawali*. After several minutes, Marlyn’s husband, Gerry, finally left his bookkeeping and took over Marlyn’s phone order and cooking. Marlyn approached, took my order, and told me that she couldn’t do the day’s interview appointment. She had to cook for the rest of the day because of last minute party catering. After checking her busy schedule, we decided to settle for a phone interview at another time. Weekends for the Rosete family usually mean cooking and working without a week’s break and rest. Indeed, food business occupies much of their lives here in the United States.

The food industry plays a major role in the culture, economy, and society of Filipino immigrants. Filipino-Americans see restaurant ownership, catering, and employment as opportunities to succeed in their adopted country. However, the success of Filipino owners like Marlyn is limited and disguised; a restaurant’s success entails the sacrifices of Filipino women and families. By analyzing the food and restaurant choices of Marlyn’s clients, I also argue that foodways reflects the changing lifestyle and demands of Filipinos with busy and fast-paced lives in America. By analyzing foodways as symbolic means of maintaining and

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changing community identities, I show the process of assimilation and cultural change in an ethnic community.

Although my essay is limited to one ethnic restaurant and its clients in Los Angeles, I append an important dimension to Harvey Levenstein’s comprehensive historical study. Levenstein shows the social and cultural effects of ethnic food in the dominant society (i.e., white, middle-class consumers) only in a limited scale. Challenging Levenstein’s argument that the history of food in America moved from plurality toward standardization and blandness, I contend that the existence and success of Filipino restaurants like Sally’s Lechon demonstrate the current plurality of food culture.

In Los Angeles, the cluster of Filipino restaurants, supermarkets, and convenience stores along the streets of Van Nuys, Roscoe, Woodman, and Plummer along with scattered restaurants throughout the San Fernando Valley visibly demonstrate the growing demand for Filipino food and services. Marlyn and Gerry recognized this opportunity when they took over Jerry’s Lechon in 2001. On the corner plaza of Woodman and Chase streets, Sally’s Lechon takes advantage of Filipino consumers who go to Access Video, a Filipino video-rental store, and World Travel Services, a travel agency that mainly serves Filipino clients. The restaurant’s site is a few blocks away from other well-known Filipino restaurants such as Chowking, Kalesa Grill, DJ’s, and Goldilocks and large Asian supermarkets such as Seafood City and Island Pacific. Despite the competition, Marlyn receives enough customers who work in a nearby Kaiser Hospital and other Filipino consumers who work and live around the Central San Fernando Valley (Van Nuys, Panorama City, Arleta, and Northridge).

For the Rosete family, as with many Filipino immigrants involved in the food services, the food industry plays a central role in fulfilling their American dream. Marlyn and Gerry are among the relatively few unskilled laborers who rode the wave of Filipino immigration after the 1965 Immigration Act, a law that opened gates to skilled and unskilled laborers of occupations in demand in the United States. The high need for highly skilled professionals from the Philippines (especially for nurses) leaves fewer chances for low-skilled immigrants. But by 1990, the food industry in Los Angeles provided one of few available sectors for seventeen percent of low-skilled Asian immigrants, to come to the United States. Despite a prestigious position in a five-star hotel in Manila, Gerry decided to bring his wife along to chase the American dream through the ethnic food sector in Los Angeles. From 1988 to 1998, they worked from one Filipino restaurant to another, following low-wage work and unsuccessful immigration petitions. Meanwhile, the couple furthered their economic situation and supplemented their income by buying a lechon to roast and sell lechon. In an outdoor “dirty kitchen” constructed in their backyard, they catered to special party orders and to many Filipino restaurants that did not want to invest in such a time-consuming and specialized dish. Foodways also provided creative outlet for Marlyn and Gerry. Marlyn enjoyed her work as a dispatcher in “Tito Rey of the Islands,” the first restaurant that attempted to petition working visas for the couple. The couple expressed creativity and love for food when Sally decorated a la carte orders while Gerry carved ice sculptures, fruits, and vegetables. Indeed, foodways not only provided economic means for an undocumented couple; it also allowed them some creative expression and escape from potentially harsh working conditions.

After Marlyn and Gerry received their petition in 1998, they stayed with the food industry. Marlyn moved up to work as a cook in “Kalesa Grill.” Gerry worked in Park Hyatt Hotel at the Los Angeles Avenue of the Stars. Marlyn took great pride in her promotion and in the social prestige her husband achieves by cooking for mainstream Americans. But best of all, their visas will finally enable them to petition their three younger children to America after ten long years of separation.

While Marlyn and Gerry’s experiences show the accomplishments of immigrants through the food industry, the above episodes disclose survival strategies used by Filipino immigrants that have unfortunately pitted workers against their Filipino employers. Many waiters and cooks take advantage of their employers by leaving their jobs after receiving visas and learning methods of the industry. Indeed, Marlyn left her job at Kalesa Grill after apprenticeship to establish her own business, “Sally’s Lechon.” Marlyn also expressed her fears of employing new Filipino immigrant wait staffs because of the expenses of petition and the dangers of those who could potentially steal her cooking techniques and business model. Marlyn thus employs her eldest son and she plans to petition her relatives from the Philippines when she expands her business.

While the food industry affected immigrants’ financial and
social status in America, it also plays a major role in the families of business owners. Literary authors such as David Wong Louie and Jade Snow Wong allude to the reliance of Asian American business owners on the contributions and commitment of each family member.\textsuperscript{14} To succeed, Asian American entrepreneurs work very long hours and employ their relatives for low wages (or at times, for no cost).\textsuperscript{15} The Rosete family members sacrifice their time and energy for the business. Rex and Sally, Marilyn’s older children, are co-owners of the restaurant; hence they receive a percentage of business profits in return for their work. Mylene, Marilyn’s third child, works at the restaurant during her days off from a regular job. Marilyn confesses that she does not give Mylene permanent wage but intermittently hands her small amounts of stipend for her help. Hence, Mylene finds it necessary to work for minimum wage at Seafood City, an Asian supermarket a few blocks away from Sally’s Lechon. Gerry helps the business by doing some bookkeeping and by taking days off from work during busy catering seasons. The two younger children also help by doing household chores when Marilyn attends to the restaurant. Rest is especially rare for Marilyn who is expected to fulfill her duties as a woman and a mother. Marilyn continues her domestic duties by doing the laundry and cleaning the house when Sally’s Lechon closes on Mondays. Marilyn maintains the time-consuming traditional roles of a Filipina mother and consciously limits her agency as a woman who has achieved status by restaurant ownership.

Nonetheless, foodways do not only reflect the economic and social characteristics of ethnic immigrants directly involved in the business. The existence of ethnic restaurants depends on the choices, culture, and lifestyle of its clients. Ethnic restaurants like Sally’s Lechon reflect the process wherein ethnic communities maintain and change their culture to adapt to the larger society. As Susan Kalckik argues, foodways manifest dual motives for ethnic immigrants: “one provides a continuation of the old lifestyle and makes the break less abrupt; the other process speeds acculturation.”\textsuperscript{16}

Sally’s Lechon serves ethnic foods that are difficult to cook and that are not normally found in other Filipino restaurants. Asian supermarkets enable Filipino-Americans to buy ingredients for cooking traditional food at home. Hence, Sally’s Lechon serves dishes like *papaitan*, *caldereta*, and *kilawin* that use *kanibing* (goat meat), a type of meat rarely found in Asian supermarkets.\textsuperscript{17}

Marilyn also makes dishes that are time-consuming and elaborately cooked. For example, a customer can easily buy *sisig* from Sally’s Lechon without having to cut and chop a number of rare ingredients such as pig snout, pork brain, pork skin, and others.\textsuperscript{18} By serving these comfort foods, Sally’s Lechon allow Filipino-Americans to taste dishes that are difficult to cook or that are rarely found in Filipino-American homes.

The catering menu produced by Sally’s Lechon also reflects how a restaurant helps Filipino immigrants resist cultural changes in America. The menu mainly appeals to Filipino clientele who patronize the restaurant because of familiarity and adherence to old ways. Sally’s Lechon assumes that clients know the traditional dishes she serves. Marilyn ignores Leslie Komaiko’s argument that descriptions in menus are vital. Marilyn lists ethnic foods such as *Bicol Express*, *Pinakbet*, and *Reylewong Manok* without feeling the need to explain how the dish is made.\textsuperscript{19} Customers unfamiliar with the names of the dishes (whose linguistic roots are mainly Tagalog, Spanish, or South East Asian) receive clues only by the menu’s categorization of dishes to pork, chicken, vegetables, seafood, etc. Furthermore, by neglecting descriptions, the menu encourages customers to call or visit Marilyn when they wish to know more information about the food. Customers may be disappointed to find out that Marilyn speaks little English. In other words, restaurants like Sally’s Lechon mainly attract Filipino clientele who seek to see and taste the familiar and traditional.

More importantly, Sally’s Lechon prides itself on a specialty dish that symbolizes Filipino identity and culture. *Lechon*, a whole roast pig cooked in an open fire pit, exemplifies what Susan Kalckik argues about the role of food in the process of creating an ethnic identity: “symbolic foodways may strengthen the group’s internal ties...and help mark existing social boundaries.”\textsuperscript{20} *Lechon*, like other cultural symbols such as the *barang tala*gol, *sarimanok*, and the Philippine National Flag, represents a sense of nationalism and sense of identity for Filipinos.\textsuperscript{21} In the Philippines, *fiestas* that honor religious saints and national celebrations feature *lechon* at wealthy households who open their houses for all to come. The dish, symbolizing wealth, generosity, and social ranking, allows wealthy Filipinos to display extravagance and power during fiestas. Filipinos also serve it in more intimate celebrations such as Christmas and birthdays, when specific guests are invited and the house is not open for unin-
vited strangers. In the United States, Filipino-Americans carry the lechon tradition in intimate celebrations as well as large ethnic festivals. For example, the “Philippine Fiesta” held at The Meadowlands Exposition Center in New Jersey featured lechon to display Philippine culture. Filipino-Americans also order whole lechon from Sally’s Lechon to affirm their ethnic identity, traditions, and memories during private celebrations. By serving lechon to guests and paying a large amount of $165-185, Filipino-American families show generosity and commitment to tradition.

On the other hand, Sally’s Lechon also reflects food habits and changing demands of Filipino-Americans as they acculturate to new ways in America. As seen in the menu, the restaurant serves Filipino-Americans who can now afford to pay $550.00 and throw parties for fifty to seventy guests because of their highly skilled jobs in America. The fact that Sally’s Lechon advertises itself as a “catering” business rather than a sit-down restaurant also demonstrates that the restaurant gears its services to clients who are too busy to make their own food. Marilyn confirms that most of her clients are Filipino-American nurses and other highly paid professionals who not only order for catering. Marilyn attends to customers who buy small orders of dishes or dinner combination plates to take home after tiring hours of work.

In many ways, Sally’s Lechon also demonstrates that Filipino-Americans do not isolate themselves from the larger community. Sally’s Lechon participates in the process of ethnic acculturation by becoming a limited “cultural outpost” to mainstream society. Imogene Lima and John Eng-Wong explains that Chinese restaurants have become “cultural outposts” as they “served as agents of change in [mainstream American] diet, as well as fixing notions of ethnicity.” In Chinese restaurants, non-Chinese customers who do not have other cross-cultural sites learn some perceptions that may not be necessarily true of all Chinese people. This results in an introduction of ethnic cuisine to mainstream America (a sign of tolerance to the ethnic group) or a potential creation of stereotypes against the ethnic group.

I contend that Sally’s Lechon limits its service as “cultural outpost” for several reasons. First, Sally’s Lechon, located at an area of concentrated Filipino businesses and residents, shows only one facet of Filipino-ness among many Filipino cross-cultural sites. Non-Filipino clients will be surprised to see that Sally’s Lechon uses simple decorations, such as an Office Depot wall cal-

endar, a horseshoe (for good luck), and a large Coca-Cola poster; these have random functions and meanings unrelated to Filipino images and traditions. Non-Filipino clients may find it hard to stereotype by seeing the diversity of Filipino culture found in the many Filipino restaurants, businesses and residents lined up in Panorama City. Secondly, Sally’s Lechon mainly serves Filipino clients who understand and long for specific ethnic foods. Sally’s Lechon does not make an effort to attract non-Filipino customers and Marilyn is satisfied with her business methods that cater mostly to Filipinos. In terms of its location, business strategies, and restaurant appearance, Sally’s Lechon does not fully serve as a “cultural outpost” to reach out to the larger community.

Nevertheless, I argue that Sally’s Lechon becomes a “cultural outpost” only after customers buy its culturally significant ethnic dishes. Many of Marilyn’s customers are Filipino nurses who buy food for work potluck or parties involving non-Filipino guests. The larger American community learns about Sally’s Lechon’s lumpia, lechon, and other Filipino food because of Filipinos who serve the dishes at these multi-cultural gatherings. Marilyn even admits that she has regular African American and Hispanic customers who have heard about her dishes through word of mouth.

Furthermore, subsequent generations of Filipino-Americans learn about their culture through ethnic foods served in family gatherings. I extend the notion of ethnic dishes as “cultural outposts” wherein younger generations can learn many things about their own ethnic identity and culture.

The growth of Filipino restaurants like Sally’s Lechon in the Los Angeles Central San Fernando Valley demonstrate the plurality and importance of ethnic food, entrepreneurship, and employment in American life. Sally’s Lechon is one Filipino American outpost in an evolving, diverse Asian American community.

Notes
1. From hereon, I will refer to the restaurant as “Sally’s Lechon.”
2. Turon is eaten as snack or dessert. Similar to crepe, it uses a few slices of banana and jackfruit, wrapped in a sweetened wrapper before deep-frying.
3. Lumpia and lechon kawali are foods usually found in Filipino parties. Lumpia is similar to the Chinese eggroll but it includes ground meat instead of vegetables. Lechon Kawali is chopped and salted pork, deep-fried until crispy.


7. Incidentally, Access Video and World Travel Services are two different businesses that share a single retail space. Filipino entrepreneurs commonly use this business strategy to save money and help other Filipinos establish new businesses.


10. Lechon is a whole pig traditionally punctured by a long bamboo trunk for roasting in an open fire pit. Lechon is usually served in large parties and important celebrations; hence, lechon is strongly associated with fiestas, wealth, and Filipino identity.


12. Marilyn and Gerry have five kids: Sally and Rex first came to America while the younger children, Mylene, Selma and Ged Miles came after the couple’s visas were approved.

13. Another example is given from an oral interview to Enrique Andres, member of San Fernando Valley Filipino American Chamber of Commerce. He notes that a cook from Kalesa Grill challenged his employers by establishing his own restaurant, Bistro Manila, near Kalesa Grill. Bistro Manila failed after a few months because of competition from Chow King, Toto’s, Sally’s Lechon, and Kalesa Grill. Enrique C. Andres, interview by author, Granada Hills, California, December 8, 2004.


17. Caldereta, papaitan, and kilawin are types of dishes that usually go meat. However, many Filipinos substitute meat with beef and beef intestines. Caldereta has a strong tomato flavor, papaitan uses bile for bitterness, and kilawin offers strong vinegar flavor.

18. Sisig uses different parts of pork, chopped and sautéed in garlic, onion, vinegar and soy sauce.

19. Leslee Komaioko, “Writing Up Menus: It’s a Subtle Art,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 2001. Bicol Express is a spicy vegetable stew cooked with coconut milk and chili. Pinakbet is another vegetable dish cooked with fish or shrimp paste, giving it a very salty flavor. Bataknak Manok is a baked or roasted chicken stuffed with many ingredients, including hard boiled eggs.


21. Barong Tagalog, from the phrase baro ng Tagalog (dress of the Tagalog), is a formal clothing worn by men. It is made from different materials such as pineapple or jusi with elaborate embroidery or hand-painting. For the history and significance of barong Tagalog, see Visitation R. de la Torre, *The Barong Tagalog: The Philippine National Wear* (Manila: A. Bautista press, 1986). Sarimanok is a colorful bird that originally symbolized wealth and prestige in the Philippine Maranao region. Filipinos adopted the image of the bird to symbolize their national identity and culture.
