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Free Market Flavor

BY STEVE ZEITLIN

"I am the accumulated memory and waistline of the dead restaurants of New York," writes the poet Bob Hershon, "and the dishes that will never be set before us again, the snow pea leaves in garlic at the Ocean Palace, the blini and caviar at the Russian Tea Room, the osso buco at the New Port Alba, the kasha varnishkes at the Second Avenue Deli, the veal ragout at C'ent Anni." I'm with Hershon—for where but in memory can I ever again find the spicy taste of the prah prig sod at Siam Square, with its unique mix of lemon grass and spiced peppers? Ingested into our very beings, these tastes play a part in our social gatherings and, later, can define our fondest memories.

Whenever my wife, Amanda, and our children, Ben and Eliza, ate at Ubol's Kitchen, a Thai restaurant on Steinway Street in Astoria, Queens, the owner, perhaps prodding us to try something new, joked that she should put in our order as soon as we walked through the door. We celebrated every birthday and special occasion with their spicy barbeque beef, flaming chicken, and pad thai—we finally did try something new and added Pork in the Garden. Ubol's was what my daughter Eliza calls a "re-creatable good experience," like riding the Cyclone on Coney Island. Re-creatable until the sad day we sat down to eat, a little disconcerted not to see the familiar staff. We tasted the pork only to realize that the chef had left the garden.

In the mid-1960s changes in the immigration law, as well as subsequent events in world history like the end of the war in Vietnam and the breakup of the Soviet Union, ushered in a wave of immigrants and new tastes. Culinary entrepreneurs contend with the marketability of their heritage—their cuisine as currency—as they try to compete against the longstanding Chinese, Greek, and Italian restaurants and the newer ones from Asia, South America, and Africa in the vast open marketplace of New York.

Our family first heard of Cendrillon from the Chinese scholar Jack Tchen, who brought a friend of ours to the Filipino restaurant on Mercer in Manhattan. "I am going to order a dessert," he told her. "It's called the mango tart. It's big enough for four people—but do not ask me to share. If you want some, you'll have to order your own ." When we first ate there, well, we made the same mistake: ordered one for the table to split it four ways, then promptly ordered another.

A few weeks ago, I sat in a booth at Cendrillon with Romy Dorotan, the owner and head chef, whose unusual story speaks to the unique qualities of each immigrant experience. He came to New York in the '70s to study economics at Temple. He and his wife Amy were activists, organizing against the Marcos dictatorship. He started out as a dishwasher, moved on to cook, then moved to New York. He opened Cendrillon in 1995. A strong advocate of using fresh, local ingredients, he built the menu around his own unique cooking style when he opened. But as critics visited, "they started calling us a Filipino restaurant," he said, "so we added more Filipino dishes."

I asked about the origin of our family's favorite appetizer, the goat curry. "Where in the Philippines does that come from?"

Romy laughs. "The origin of the goat curry is that we lived in Flatbush, Brooklyn, and it's a West Indian community. So that's my own take on the goat roti. I used a scallion pancake instead of the roti—the bread. It's what I call 'fusion confusion.'"

"Filipino restaurants," he continues, "have lagged behind the other Asian foods. We have been here since the ninteenth century, but there are not many Filipino restaurants. For one, the Filipino restaurants mostly cater to other Filipinos; secondly, a lot of Filipinos are not entrepreneurs, and they can get jobs because they speak English. They can go into nursing and other services." The Cambodian, Thai, and Vietnamese restaurants, he said, "use a tremendous amount of sweetness, which always attracts people—it's the most accessible taste, sweetness—far more than in their home countries. Filipino is different from the other Asian cuisines. We love anything sour—tamarind, vinegar, citrus. Sweetness is not a big thing, but it's starting to encroach."

Cendrillon, too, is moving. Now that his SoHo neighborhood attracts mostly tourists—who, unlike the priced-out artists, are looking for more standard fare—he is seeking more hospitable environs in Brooklyn. The city's eateries are in perpetual motion. In the vast culinary marketplace of New York, the spring rolls faces off against the empanada. The Brazilian caipirinha takes on the Mexican margarita. The Puerto Rican piragua water ice cart takes to the streets against Mr. Softee. Yonah Schimmel's adjusts to the competition by inventing the cheddar and jalapeño knish. Chinese restaurants serve fried chicken in African American neighborhoods. The Koreans," says Romy, "now serve a hot dog smothered with bulgogi."

World history, immigrant history, and shifting New York City demographics create an ever-changing range of eateries offering a panoply of tastes, often concocting new flavors by mixing ingredients like the colors of an artist's palette. In the Zeitlin fold, our deepest shared family memories waft back to a tangle of lemongrass, peppers and fish sauce, or goat curry, combined in dishes cooked from half remembered, reimagined, and reconstituted recipes from Thailand, other parts of Asia, or the Caribbean via the Philippines, by immigrant cooks and entrepreneurs trying to match home country and American ingredients, Asian and American tastes, in a flavorful combination for New York City's global palate. As we tuck the goat curry into the scallion pancake, bringing it to our lips, currents of world and immigrant history seem to swirl around a single point on the tip of our tongues, the taste ineffable.

Steve Zeitlin is the founding director of City Lore in New York City.

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