



## Dinner Time Customs in the Philippines

By: Michael Salvador

Much has been written about Filipino foods, the recipes, the cooking techniques and the ingredients, but those not from the Philippines may ask, “What if I go there? What are the customs? What is the etiquette when it comes time to sit down and eat?” This article will attempt to explain some of the customs of the Dinner Table in the typical Philippine home and we invite you to share your own personal customs and traditions that you grew up with in the Philippines.



Image from WorldNews

Food culture in the Philippines has a long and varied history. Recipes, customs and traditions were brought in by the Malays, Chinese, Vietnamese and the Spanish and added to the already existing food culture that has thrived on the islands for thousands of years and since there are over 7,000 islands in the Philippines, you may find many different customs at the dinner table, depending on where exactly you are.

Filipinos love and appreciate food. Food is everywhere you go in the Philippines and it's hard to believe that anyone could starve in that country. Food is sold in Carinderias, small café-like stands spaced every few feet on a busy street, some of which serve some of the best food ever!



Image from The Longest Way Home Travel Blog

Prepared food is sometimes made at home by part-time cooks who make special orders and hand deliver or cater meals to homes and businesses for a fee, of course. There are restaurants on every corner, mobile vendors sell everything from Pandesal bread to Balut to purple ice cream. And

wherever people can be found, food can be found. In busy cities, lining the streets are the bar-b-ques. Pork, Chicken, Fish, Intestines, Chicken Feet and Squid can all be found cooked on a stick or deep fried for only a few pesos. Food is everywhere and the Filipinos celebrate everything with it. Whenever possible, Filipinos find a good reason to have a feast, such as Birthdays, Anniversaries, Weddings, Reunions, and Graduations – you name it, they'll have a feast for it and if you are lucky enough to attend a feast in the Philippines, here's what you need to know:

First, it is important to understand that most of the customs and traditions valued at the Philippine dinner table were passed down over thousands of years and like everything else, there were good reasons to do the things they do. An example would be the arrangement of food in the center. In the past when a family's very survival might rest on the small carcass of a monkey or one small Tuna, the small amount of food, whatever it was, had to be shared fairly and efficiently. Reaching in to take more than your share meant that someone else had to go even hungrier, so having the food in the middle for all to see ensured that no one took more than their share.



Image from Momoy Punzalan

Now, no one is going to sit there and watch how much you eat, it's just a tradition, passed down over the years because food has not always been abundant. This is why visitors are asked if they have eaten (Kumain ka na ba?) when they arrive at someone's home, as it is a gesture of welcome that recognizes the fact that if you need food, some will be given to you because no one likes to be hungry.

However, in some places, lack of food is still a problem and it's considered very bad manners to eat all the best and largest pieces of food. So, if you are from a country that has an abundance of food, be thoughtful of your hosts if they cannot provide the amount of food you are used to. For most families, being susceptible to starvation is only a small risk but it is still a risk. Today, though the numbers are disputed, a large portion of the population of the Philippines lives under economic conditions good enough to ensure that the risk of starvation is minimal but for others, they live in poverty so severe that it absolutely precludes the luxury of unlimited, ubiquitous, all you can eat food or even shelter or clothing for that matter. In fact a typical family of four will struggle to put enough calories in their bodies in a month's time just to stay healthy which is why so many Filipinos are slim and small in stature. You'll never see a food fight in a Philippine school because food is too scarce and appreciated to be wasted on such nonsense.



The lack of good quality, nutrient rich food, or at least the money to buy it, is one of the biggest problems in the Philippines and has been for decades and every Filipino knows that the competition for this basic resource is high. It also explains why dinner is served and eaten the way it is. In a typical home out in the Province for example, a family may sit down to eat dinner (Hapunan) on the floor because either they don't have a table big enough for everyone to sit at, or they don't have a table at all! So don't be surprised by this. Like everyone else in the house, you will probably have already removed your shoes as they are not worn inside the house, just like in Japan. If you've been wearing sandals and have been out hiking all day, you will have dirty feet. Find the wash room and clean up your dirty, stinky feet before you sit down with everyone else. Filipinos are a very clean people and they truly believe that cleanliness is next to Godliness. Also, wash your hands before eating. Once it is known that visitors have arrived and that a big meal is being prepared, don't be surprised if some unexpected guests arrive also! This will give you a chance to meet new people and hear lots of gossip.



Image from Goodstuff\_Pinoy

When you hear: "Kain Tayo!" that means, "Let's Eat!" Don't be shy, sit down, and eat! In the center of the gathering, the meal may be served in any serving dish that is available and indeed every dish they have might be used. Many homes just don't have extravagant tableware or kitchen ware in the Philippines. In a poorer home, a few old worn out pots and pans, a wok, a few plates, some glasses and some spoons and forks might be found and that's it. You might even find that your "plate" is actually a banana leaf! The use of banana leaves as food plates can be traced all the way back through Malaysia to India. They're clean, large, water proof and best of all, free. So, sitting cross legged on the floor, or at a table, eat off of the banana leaf like you do anything else. If you are married, or are eating with a date, the two of you will eat off the same banana leaf, which is considered a very romantic gesture. If you have a bad back or some other reason that prevents you from getting on the floor, just say so. I have a bad back and can get on the floor fine, I just can't get back up again! Due to my advanced age, I may be offered a chair to sit in while I eat. In a more modern home, you can expect the table and the settings to be similar to those found in Europe or the United States and if a feast is very large, the food is likely to be server buffet style.

Remember to give honor to the man of the house by letting him always sit at the head of the table or wherever he wants. In most cases, the main dish and all the side dishes will be set in the middle of the floor or table and the diners will sit around the food, sometimes on pillows and use a fork and a spoon to take a portion to put on their own plate. Thus, the food becomes like a central buffet for all to take part of. Take only what you can eat. Waste nothing.



Image from Market Manila

Much of the food is eaten by hand, in fact, if you can eat it with your hand, do so. Rice, which is a part of every meal, is particularly eaten this way as it is sticky and when a bunch is balled together with the fingers, it can be dragged through gravy or sauce and eaten like a fish ball. Meat is eaten much like the way westerners do with a knife and fork, but instead, a fork and spoon are used. Spearing a piece of meat with fork, a person will cut off the meat with the edge of the spoon. It actually makes more sense to eat with a spoon and fork than a knife and fork as you will not waste as much food when you scrape up as much as you can with your spoon.

You are encouraged to try everything offered but be sure to eat it all, whether you like it or not so as not to insult the cook but there will be few things you won't like. Just remember, if you're not sure, take a small bite first. Many sauces and condiments will probably be available such as ketchup, banana sauce or soy sauce. Feel free to use these to your taste. It is good manners to let someone else have the best or largest pieces of meat.

Not all homes will have napkins handy, in fact, you probably shouldn't expect there to be any napkins to use because they are considered a luxury so eat as cleanly as you can and if you make yourself a mess, you can always go to the well and wash up later. You won't be the only one with sauce on your chin, believe me.

Proper manners are universal so chewing with your mouth open would be very rude. Dinner time is a time for the family to get together and not only eat but to also catch up on the day's events with everyone else. It is a very social time. Unlike in the big cities where there is never enough time, dinner in the province is a casual, relaxed time and you can take your time eating. Just don't take too much time or you may end up doing the dishes!



Image from Notbuk Ni Lhan

It is custom in some places in the Philippines that the last person eating is the one that cleans up and washes the dishes. This is why you'll see most everyone leave the table at the same time so if it looks like everyone is done, you should get up and leave too! Of course, your help cleaning up would be very much appreciated as it would anywhere else in the world. Here's a commonly found superstition: The table should not be cleared until the last person eating is done or that person won't be able to get married! This applies to singles only obviously!

Eat all of your food. Don't leave any to waste. You'll see your hosts eat every tiny scrap right down to the last drop of sauce or gravy and every bone will be stripped of every edible piece of flesh. Nothing is wasted. If too much food was cooked for a large party or other gathering, the leftovers can be picked on until they are put away and then they will be breakfast the next morning.



It is usually ok to drink beer or other alcoholic beverages with your meal but if in doubt, ask. Smoking at the dinner table is not recommended. Go outside to smoke. For large gatherings of people, it is expected that a covered dish of something will be brought to add to the feast but if you are unable, its ok. If you have a large group and have been invited to dinner, don't be surprised if your host insist that your group eats first and then the host will eat afterwards. If you have to burp, cover your mouth and burp but farting is not acceptable! Go to the bathroom whenever you need to and if the TV is on, its ok to watch it while you eat. Remember, eating is a joy in the Philippines and having a feast is a special time so try to avoid any arguments that might ruin the good time of

others. A prayer of Thanks is common in Christian homes before eating so after that don't be afraid to ask questions and above all, have a good time!

Ref.: <http://www.pinoy-recipes.com/articles/dinner-time-customs-in-the-philippines/>