

FILIPINO TASTE IN ICELAND

words by Jennifer Fergesen | Iceland



Matstofan on the main street of Borgarnes

The oldest Filipino restaurant in Iceland does not have a Filipino name.

The sign outside says “Matstofan,” a generic term with the same lowbrow connotation as “carinderia.” The only hint at a foreign presence is written in fine, slim letters, barely visible from across the street: “Filipino taste.”

Those two words brought me to Borgarnes, a sleepy coastal town 70 km north of the capital city Reykjavík. Though Filipinos comprise the largest Asian population in Iceland — some 2,000 people in a country of 330,000 — Filipino restaurants are all but nonexistent. The tight-knit community trades tales of businesses that failed to gain a foothold. Filipino Restaurant floundered despite its sumptuous lamb sisig; Philippine Islands Grocery Store sold bagoong and dried kamias for over a decade before folding. One might conclude that the average Icelander has no appetite for the funky, acerbic flavors of the tropics.

Despite the apparent difficulties of selling Filipino food in Iceland, Matstofan has managed to operate for over two decades in a town with fewer than 1,500 residents. It also holds the obscure claim of being the northernmost Filipino restaurant in the world. On a 10°C day in June, I took a bus from Reykjavík to learn how “Filipino taste” and ingenuity have helped this restaurant survive.

The interior of Matstofan has few of the markers that one might associate with restaurants of the Filipino diaspora. Instead of

teleseryes on DVD, the flat-screen broadcasts Icelandic news. Framed maps of Iceland, not the Philippines, hang on the walls. Inside the snack case at the bar, though, bags of kropek share space with potato crisps; the condiment shelf offers both ketchup and Mang Tomas.

The menu is similarly subtle. Only a handful of dishes are obviously Filipino: lumpia, of course, and pancit canton, which the menu calls “stir-fried chicken noodles.” The rest of the offerings chart a freewheeling course across Europe and Asia, from Russian beef stroganoff to Thai curry. The pancit comes with triangles of white bread, but it’s as good as any you’ll find in a neighborhood fiesta, thrumming with patis and lime. Even the stroganoff carries a garlicky warmth that recalls lola’s kitchen more than babushka’s.

“That’s the Filipino taste,” says Maria Socorro Villanueva Grönfeldt, better known as Cora, who runs Matstofan with her husband, Dússi. She emerged from the kitchen to share the history of her restaurant, which became the story of her life — a story that typifies the experiences of many Filipino immigrants in Iceland and other far-flung corners of the diaspora.

A native of Cebu, Cora moved to Iceland in 1987 as part of the exodus surrounding the volatile final years of Ferdinand Marcos’ rule. An Icelandic friend, whose children she had taught, told Cora that she might find a job

in a school there. She arrived to a nighttime blizzard. “I thought we were in the middle of a bamboo forest,” she says of the drive from the airport to the city, when the snow rushed past the windshield like long white stalks.

The man who drove Cora through that blizzard was a friend of the Iclander she had known in Cebu. “He had wanted to meet a Filipina woman,” she explains demurely. After three months — the extent of her tourist visa — she asked him to marry her. She was then 29, he 47. They moved to a tiny village in the sparsely-populated north, where Dússi worked as an electrician. Within a year, they had their first child; a second came in 1990.

Cora and Dússi spent nine years in the countryside before buying the restaurant in Borgarnes. The locals were slow to accept the new business. First, there was Dússi’s reputation as a rural laborer; few believed he could transition into the urbane role of a restaurant owner. Then there was the reputation of Asian food. Cora padded her menu with Western standbys such as stews and pastas, but even these were viewed with suspicion. “They said it was dog food,” says Cora. “They didn’t try the taste.”

Despite initial prejudice, Cora figured out how to make the restaurant self-sustaining. A lifelong teetotaler, she nevertheless picked

up the profitable trick of emphasizing alcohol sales over food. “For the foreigners,” she says — referring to the tourists who pass through Borgarnes en route to elsewhere — “drink is the supplement to food. But for the natives, food is the supplement to drink. And so they supplemented my business.”

Cora’s business also allowed her to sponsor relatives who wanted to make a life in Iceland. In 2000, she brought over her uncle, an accomplished chef trained at five-star hotels in Qatar. He taught her how to make many of the more technique-heavy items on her menu, including Swiss-inspired chicken rolls, and ran a brisk business in frozen siopao. “We were selling in bulk, for the Filipinos who worked in the geothermal plants,” she says. “They took one for baon each day, to have the Filipino taste at work.”

Many Filipinos in Iceland still work in the geothermal industry, but the community now includes many students, skilled workers, and second-generation Filipino-Icelanders like Cora’s children. The growing community is part of the country’s slow but definite shift away from its historically stark homogeneity.

Iceland’s changing restaurant culture illustrates this shift towards cosmopolitanism. In the capital city, one can hardly walk a block without running into a kebab shop or a curry house, and every Reykjavíker has her favorite Thai spot. Cora has noticed these changing attitudes in her own clientele. The people who sniffed at stew two decades ago still prefer fish and potatoes, but their children happily eat stir-fried noodles.



Matstofan's pancit canton, served with a side of white bread

Matstofan’s pancit canton, served with a side of white bread.

Iceland may be poised to jump on the trend for sisig (sizzling chopped pork and liver) and lumpia that is currently sweeping America. Creative underground cooks are already beginning to introduce Icelanders to the intricacies of this complex cuisine. One of the most creative is Marvi Ablaza Gil, a writer, psychiatric nurse, and amateur chef who hosts supper clubs with a side of Filipino history. She explains the Dutch influences in lumpia and the deep pre-colonial roots of sinigang (sour soup), then rounds out the meal with tsokolata poured from her grandfather’s heirloom pot. “Food is the first point of entry through which many people start to learn

about Asian culture,” she says.

Marvi and others will take on the role of monitoring that point of entry when Matstofan finally closes. Cora owns a house in Cebu where she plans to live out her days with Dússi — not necessarily in retirement. They are entertaining the idea of starting an Icelandic restaurant for curious Cebuanos. “A restaurant is really the best business,” she says. “Everyone needs to eat. And many like to try new tastes.”

As the world continues to globalize, a sign advertising “Filipino taste” in the middle of small-town Iceland may eventually seem less surreal. For now, though, Matstofan’s presence in Borgarnes is a minor miracle, and one that will be missed.