The Meanings of Marrow

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“What would be your last meal on earth?”
“Roast bone marrow with parsley and caper salad, with a few toasted slices of baguette and some good sea salt.”
– Anthony Bourdain, interviewed in Melanie Dunea’s blog, My Last Supper, March 27, 2012

*Bulalo* is the Filipino word for bone marrow soup. In the Philippines, it refers to *sabaw* or a Filipino soup-stew made with chunks of beef marrow with vegetables (cabbage and/or bok choy) laced with black peppercorn and *patis* [fish sauce]. It isn’t a pretty dish, just as most peasant dishes are not and is more a testament to Filipino frugality and invention (use and eat everything) than aesthetics. When you are served bulalo in a bowl, pieces of cut bone with the prized marrow float alongside chunks of beef shank, green vegetables, and a corncob for sweetness. The sight of floating bone in a beige soup might not be visually appealing, but the dish is beloved by Filipinos. With a spoon, you scoop out the fatty, gelatinous goodness from the bone, sprinkle the marrow clumps with fish sauce, *calamansi* [Philippine lemon], and chopped hot peppers or *sili*, and eat the bulalo with steamed white rice. I do not
know the etymology of the word bulalo, though food writers say the soup originated from Batangas, a province in southern Luzon where cattle were grown.

In the Philippines, in many bulalohan, or eateries specializing in bulalo soup, it is perfectly acceptable to suck the marrow directly from the bone, and you hear slurping sounds from different tables. For Filipinos who grew up eating this dish, bulalo is home cooking, not high cuisine that you eat in restaurants with white linen napkins and silverware. But with the waves of Filipino migrant workers returning to Manila and to other urban areas for retirement, “modern Filipino” restaurants now serve bulalo alongside traditional Filipino dishes. But its peasant background and appearance still remain.

The soup does not appear in any Filipino or Filipino American novel, to my knowledge. Chicken tinola, or chicken soup in clear ginger broth, on the other hand, appears in Jose Rizal’s 1887 anti-colonial novel, Noli Me Tangere. The Noli was written in Spanish and published in Berlin, Germany. In the novel’s first chapter, a lavish feast is prepared for the homecoming of the young Crisostomo Ibarra who returns to Manila after his grand tour of Europe, the heteronormative colonial ritual enjoyed by Filipino men of the privileged class who visit the cultural treasures of Mother Spain and nearby European countries. Tinola is served in a fancy tureen to the sophisticated Crisostomo and another esteemed guest, Padre Damaso, a lecherous Spanish priest and the antagonist in the novel. Tinola’s literary reference in the earliest Philippine novel—and one that incited the 1896 Philippine Revolution against Spain—highlights the chicken soup’s pedigree. Bulalo, however, is a country
soup for commoners, certainly not for Filipino *ilustrados* (elites) or Spanish friars. While no Filipino novel mentions it, the rich and the poor all over the world enjoy bulalo. A blogger on the food site *The Kitchn* mentions a story of Queen Victoria, who supposedly ate bone marrow everyday and lived to the ripe age of eighty-one. The article includes the celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain’s recipe for roast bone marrow and parsley salad [http://www.thekitchn.com/on-eating-bone-marrow-70200].

Bulalo love in Tumblr.

On the micro-blogging site Tumblr, bulalo appears as a hashtag with many photographs of the soup. Filipinos who post images of bulalo describe the soup as comfort food, the perfect meal for a long day or for an unusually cool evening. Lovers enjoy a bowl of bulalo on a romantic date, or a good daughter prepares this to impress her parents.
Bulalo is also a Filipino queer colloquial expression, for men who are not physically attractive but are intelligent or “nerdy,” men of substance, since the marrow is also called utak or “brains” in Filipino. A man who might be described as a bulalo is “pangit ang mukha [a man with an ugly face], pangit din ang katawan [with an ugly body], pero masebo at mataba ang utak [but with a rich mind and imagination].” This Filipino queer taxonomy of men includes other kinds of Filipino food. Hipon, or shrimp, are men with beautiful bodies but with unattractive faces, referencing the practice of eating the body of the shrimp but not the head. “Shrimp: Patapon ang ulo [man with an ugly face]. Maganda ang katawan [great body]. Nagkalat sa Malate, Cubao at sa palengke.” The latter phrase refers to male prostitutes in Malate, Cubao or in working-class places like fish markets or palengke. A lollipop is a man who is the reverse of the shrimp, a man with a beautiful face and ugly body. “Lollipop: Ulo lang ang mapapakinabangan dahil hindi maganda ang katawan [a man with a handsome face but an ugly body].” And a buko, or a coconut, is a man who is physically unattractive and not very bright but is
kind and virtuous, like the sweet, white meat of a coconut. “Coconut: Hindi na nga
gwapo [not handsome]. Pangit pa katawan [with an ugly body]. Wala pang laman ang
utak [dumb]. Pero malinis ang kalooban [but kind-hearted].”

Bulalo was featured in film critic Noel Vera’s blog Critic After Dark
[http://criticafterdark.blogspot.com/2008/03/bone-marrow-stew-and-steamed-
rice.html]. Vera delightfully describes the sensuous experience of enjoying bulalo:
“that unctuous fat spread over pillowy rice.” He captures the visual and gustatory
experience of enjoying the “deep-gold butter (with flecks of brown meat) on top of
the rice.” He writes:

And then—the secret, the glory of bulalo: the patis, or fish sauce. English
roasted marrows are traditionally seasoned with salt—sea salt, if you like—but that is a poor substitute for this divine, dark-brown elixir dripped from
unsteady spoon over rice, fat, everything. It’s as if, having decided to excavate
the heart, the very essence of beef flavor, you recklessly throw in the briny
sweetness (oh so slightly corrupted by aging) of the sea. Surf and turf,
fermented and fresh, raised to the level of countryside poetry.

IT professional and home cook Jane Po is a fan of bulalo. She prefers to eat
bone marrow two ways: the classic soup-stew version, or, “split down the middle
lengthwise and roasted.” She jokingly adds that after eating any style of bulalo, she
would quickly follow the meal with “20 milligrams of Lipitor,” a cholesterol-reducing
pill. As a Chinese Filipina, she mentions the reputed health benefits of consuming
The Chinese believe in the healing properties of broth made from animal bones, marrow and cartilage. Bone broth is said to be the perfect winter meal because it promotes strength, tonifies blood, and helps to prevent bone and connective tissue disorders.

Years before I would live in a cold climate, my father decided to take me on a trip to Batangas one afternoon. *Tatay* was a government employee who hated the office politics but enjoyed out-of-town excursions to try local food places. He heard of a bulalohan outside Manila from one of his co-workers. I don’t remember the name of the place, but I recall the plastic tables and chairs, the modest interiors, the heat, and the noisy ceiling fan. And there was the glorious bulalo, served in a plastic bowl with Chinese design, a soup glistening with beef fat and dark green vegetables floating next to the bone chunks. We ate in silence, enjoying the rich, savory soup.

Seasons pass and one summer, in Montreal, Canada, I encountered bulalo again, this time in a French bistro with friends. The bulalo was served the French way: perfectly cut bones, displayed on a white plate, filled with glistening marrow, topped with sea salt, and served with crackers. The marrow dish was a gentrified version of bulalo. Instead of spoons, I had a knife to scrape the marrow and spread it on the crackers. It was strange to eat something so familiar but without the Filipino things I loved about it: marrow minus the soup, the vegetables, the fish sauce with lemon and chili peppers, and the hot white rice. It was like listening to a talented singer whose voice you could barely hear. The marrow was not melodious. No
“unctuous fat spread over pillowy rice,” no “dark-brown elixir dripped from unsteady spoon,” as the film blogger once described it.

More than a year ago, while living in Negros Oriental for the summer (leave it to the Spaniards to use double pejoratives as a name for a gorgeous island), I came across re-runs of Bourdain’s television show, *No Reservations*. In one episode set in Europe, Bourdain enjoyed a bone marrow dish that he describes as the “butter of the gods.” I was delighted by Bourdain’s description of marrow as butter. The sweet and oily goodness of marrow is certainly like butter but not something I enjoyed on crackers when I tried it in Montreal. Days later, Dumaguete journalists Alex and Irma Pal took us to the Royal Inn Suites Restaurant, one of the many Dumaguete restaurants that had a European chef enjoying his retirement in Negros island. That evening, we were served sizzling bulalo. It was a whole shank, uncut, so that the long bone was as large as the serving platter. It was a decadent dish, and the bone looked like the remnants of an ancient monster.

Like all animal-related foods, there is the dark side of eating meat products. YouTube is filled with graphic videos of dirty slaughterhouses and corporate-owned cattle ranches where the abuse and maltreatment of animals can turn your stomach
and possibly convert you to vegetarianism. In recent times, the award-winning documentary *Food Inc.* (Magnolia Pictures, 2008) and the popular documentary *Forks over Knives* (Monica Beach Media, 2011) call for tighter regulations of the US meat industry and even for the end of meat consumption. In Asian American fiction, Ruth L. Ozeki’s novel, *My Year of Meats* (Penguin, 1998), offers a dark and humorous critique of the American meat industry and capitalist consumption as an American way of life. The novel centers on Jane Takagi-Little, a Japanese American documentarian who lands a job producing a television cooking show sponsored by an American meat-exporting business. While filming, she discovers the unpleasant side of the meat industry, which includes force-feeding cattle with hormones to ensure their fertility and size. And of course, there is the novel’s famous scene of horror, when the protagonist enters an abattoir for the first time.

Stepping into the slaughterhouse was like walking through an invisible wall into hell. Sight, sound, smell—every sense I thought I owned, that was mine, the slaughterhouse stripped from me, overpowered and assaulted. Steam hissed, metal screeched against metal, clanging and clamoring, splitting the ear, relentless … Blood was everywhere: bright red, brick red, shades of brown and black; flowing, splattering, encrusting the walls, the men. The floors were graded toward central drains for easy cleaning, yet the place was caked with a deep, rotting filth. And thick with flies.

It’s hard not to think of Ozeki’s fictional American abattoir when you see bone marrow in the grocery aisles. While the package is clean with barely any trace of
blood or flesh, the bones remind you that they once belonged to a tortured living thing. And yet the adage “you are what you eat” makes sense to any immigrant who delights in bone marrow, the cheapest cut in the meat section. The difficult conditions of cattle—forced to live in crowded and filthy pens, exploited and abused beasts, fed cheap and chemically laced food, and slaughtered by the thousands for corporate profit—are familiar realities to many immigrants. We are intimately aware and implicated in the plight of cattle, as the study of Timothy Pachirat shows.

Pachirat’s book, *Every 12 Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (Yale University Press 2011), mentions that immigrants, undocumented workers and refugees from Southeast Asia, as well as East Africa and the Americas, perform the dirty task of slaughtering millions of animals: chickens, turkeys, pigs, ducks, sheep, lambs and calves. In 2009 alone, 33,300,000 cattle were killed for their meat in the United States. As the immigrant laborers of industrial slaughterhouses, we carry out what Pachirat describes as “the killing, skinning, and dismembering of living animals,” the dirty and dangerous work that fattens the profits of the meat industry. The immigrant and refugee laborers live in crowded quarters, with little control of their surroundings and their circumstances. It is perhaps for this reason that when we eat marrow, the cheapest and the most elemental part of the animal, we in essence partake of the sacrifice of the animal. We recognize the humble bond that links us, immigrants and cattle. And for less than six dollars, plus some aromatic vegetables and fish sauce, and a bowl of steamed rice, the lowly bone marrow transforms into comfort food.
The fatty pleasure of marrow in a savory soup or a sizzling platter becomes pronounced when you live in a place with winter. There is something primal and physical when you enjoy a rich stew. You savor the taste of bulalo, a treasure you tuck away for the long nights of winter, for the long days when you miss a loved one, and it is bulalo that you recall when you look out of your window in the middle of February, and all you see is slush and the dirty-white landscape of Long Island or Urbana-Champaign or St. Paul. You try and imagine bulalo stew coating your tongue, the fish sauce with lemon and chili peppers tickling your palate with familiar citrus and spicy flavors. And this alien terrain becomes bearable.

Bulalo is haunted by the horrors of the abattoir, but beatified by immigrant labor, and transformed by humble vegetables and the peasant’s condiment, fish sauce, into a heavenly stew. As immigrants, we all labor in and live through different versions of an industrialized hell. So we might as well suck the marrow, and try to get by, one bone at a time.

And if you can’t find bone marrow in your grocery, here’s an image of bulalo-lover-and-chef Anthony Bourdain holding a beef shank, striking a pose similar to Michaelangelo’s David. Dios mio, that’s one big bulalo.