

Filipino Bakery in Toronto

by MARITES SISON SPECIAL TO THE STAR
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It is Monday afternoon, what Melchor Galeon refers to as the slowest day in a usually breakneck week. He offers a tour. The 2,000-square-foot space that he and his partner rent is on Manville, a lonely stretch of road dotted by food production houses and auto parts shops in Scarborough.

In the kitchen, two bakers are kneading dough and forming it into small balls for the pan de monay (sweet bread). One tops ensaymada (a brioche-like pastry with butter and sugar) with grated cheese. Another removes bibingka (sweet rice cakes) from tin pans to help them cool. Another packs dozens of kutsinta (brown rice cakes).

At the storefront, there is brisk business as a predominantly Filipino clientele basks in the familiar scents and stocks up on comfort foods that conjure memories of places they once called home. There is cassava (yucca or manioc) cake, haleyang ube (sweetened purple yam), pastillas de leche (milk pastry), polvoron (toasted milk and flour pastry), brazo de mercedes (crème-filled log cake) and leche flan (custard flan).

Galeon makes about 50 traditional Filipino desserts, breads and snacks. They're mostly sold wholesale in 53 Filipino and Asian stores across Greater Toronto and in Ajax, Windsor, Hamilton, Brampton and Winnipeg. Due to popular demand from Filipinos who dread the drive to Scarborough to get their pastry fix, Galeon and business partner Flor Vendiola opened an 800-square-foot retail outlet in Mississauga last month.

Just eight years ago, Galeon was a one-man crew who cooked his pastillas de leche on a tiny stove in the garage of a relative in Mississauga.

"In winter, I would wear a thick jacket and cook there," he recalls. Each day he made about \$60 worth of pastillas. The melt-in-the-mouth milk and sugar pastry is rolled into tiny cylinders and wrapped in Japanese paper that originated in the Philippines' northern town of Bulacan. Galeon delivered the goodies by TTC to a Filipino restaurant in Scarborough.

He got the idea to sell baked goods after joining a Filipino trade and tourism exhibit at the CNE in 1998. He had brought some pastries that were native to his hometown of Sariaya in Quezon, a province south of the capital, Manila, that is famous for its sweets and sausages.

"I saw how Filipinos here were so excited to see pastries from back home. No one was making them here and that gave me an idea," Galeon says. Back in Quezon province, he already had about four small food stores, including a bakery, and was confident he could pull off a new business here.

An unassuming man, Galeon is a registered nurse who never practised nursing because, he says, his mind was always on business. "When I was 12, I rented out comics. In high school, I sold sweets, and in nursing school, I sold longganisa (pork sausages)."

With the help of business partner Vendiola, whom he met at the CNE, Galeon found a market for his pastries and formed the company FV Foods.

In 1999, he rented a bachelor apartment and cooked all day on a tiny stove. At night, he packaged the goods. "You won't believe what we went through," recalls Vendiola, who was then working as a medical technologist. "After work, we would load the pastries in my tiny Honda Civic to make the deliveries. The car was almost filled up to our heads with pastries."

By mid-1999, another Filipino invited them to share the rent of a kitchen space on Manville Rd. Six months later, they moved to a bigger space, which they occupy now. From a staff of three in 2000, FV Foods now employs 10 people (not all of them Filipino).

"Our goal then was just to do wholesale business. The storefront now was just a showroom for our clients. But we opened it to the public in 2003 because there was so much demand, not just from Filipinos but other Canadians," says Vendiola.

To get an idea of how popular their ensaymada is, they sell about 200 dozen a week.

Ensaymada — eaten any time of the day, either as breakfast fare or a snack, and sometimes topped with shredded cheese — is the Filipinized version of the Ensaymada de Mallorca. Culinary historians often say that about 80 per cent of Filipino food has Spanish influences.

Another popular treat is Food for the Gods. These moist, chewy bars often make their appearance at Christmas time in the Philippines, when Filipinos — who are known for their sweet teeth — splurge on walnuts and dates, which are imported and therefore expensive.

As the name implies, it's a dessert that not everyone can afford to make or buy in this Southeast Asian nation. Often individually wrapped in gold foil and festive cellophane, the bars are also given as holiday gifts. This dessert, which is more popular in urban areas, may be a product of the Filipino diaspora. Filipinos who travel, work or live abroad often bring home food from far away as presents to their loved ones. Filipino cuisine has traditionally been a blend of the east and west (specifically, Chinese, Spanish and American) and this dessert reflects these influences.

Vendiola credits the company's success to Galeon's drive to constantly improve his products and his attitude of not settling for less.

Galeon agrees. "Our puto (steamed rice cake) and kutsinta are made from scratch. Others use flour; we grind the rice ourselves. I want people to say it tastes just like home."

He has asked a sister to take culinary courses in the Philippines so that he's aware of the latest trends there. And he listens to feedback from clients, some of whom offer their own recipes.

Galeon and Vendiola's next goal is to make Filipino pastries and breads available to the wider Canadian market.

"We've had some clients who are not Filipinos and they come back. What it says is that our products also cater to other tastes," says Vendiola.

Some Filipinos have referred to FV Foods as "The Filipino's Dufflet" — an homage to Dufflet Pastries, a Toronto institution. Like Dufflet's, Vendiola hopes FV's pastries might be sold in cafés, food shops and high-end supermarkets.

Products that have become popular among non-Filipino customers include Sans Rival, a rich, Napoleon-like dessert with four to five layers of meringue sandwiched with buttercream and sprinkled with chopped cashews. Another favourite is the brazo de mercedes, a soft meringue roll with a creamy custard filling.

Says Vendiola: "Not many Canadians are familiar with Filipino sweets and it's about time we let them know that our desserts are delicious, too."

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