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A Menu and its Implications on Filipino and American Culture

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A Menu and its Implications on Filipino and American Culture

SOURCE Explore: Finding Yourself in the Archives with SCRC

Caitlyn Begosa



Selection of Materials

Initially, scrolling through the vast collections of SCRC was overwhelming. With so many choices, it was hard to decide which material to spend time with since I could pick a collection that relates to my career, that connects to my identity, that sparked my interest, or that I thought was interesting. Luckily, I found a collection that hit all four criteria for me. Currently, I am a Magazine, News, and Digital Journalism major, and my dream job is writing for a food magazine while traveling the world. I am a big foodie and always interested in trying dishes from different cultures. As well, I am Filipino and love the cuisine of my heritage. When I found the SCRC's Kay Shaw Nelson Papers had a menu from the Philippines, I knew exactly what I wanted to be the base of my archival research.

Kay Shaw Nelson

Kay Shaw Nelson was a Syracuse University student, majoring in journalism. Both her and her husband were intelligence officers for the CIA and spent many years overseas in Africa, Europe, South America, etc. After her time at the CIA, she became a cookbook writer, columnist, and culinary historian, using her experiences from her time abroad as a focal point in her writing. These papers are Nelson's personal collection and include menus, personal papers, recipes, and research materials. Sadly, she passed away in 2019, but her legacy lives on in her writings and collection.



Photo of Kay Shaw Nelson from Electric Scotland

Fiesta Filipina Menu Close-up

Front Cover



Menu Content



Back Cover

The Menu

This menu is from Fiesta Filipina, a restaurant and cocktail lounge that is a part of Sulo Hotel in Makati, Rizal, Philippines. This hotel still exists today, but the restaurant is no longer open. This was the only Filipino menu included in Nelson's collection. The exact time this menu is made is unknown, but the collection description assumes Nelson's menus were collected during her time working for the CIA, which started in 1951 and ended sometime in the 1960s as this is when her writing career was taking off.

Graphics

The menu has red details on the front and back. In the Philippines, red represents good luck, and the flower sampaguita featured on the front represents purity, fidelity, and hope. Moreover, there is imagery of dances and people wearing traditional clothing. The women are shown wearing Filipiniana style of clothing, which is indicated from the 'butterfly' sleeves or broad shoulder pads. The designer chose a swirly, organic serif typeface to give off a tropical, carefree vibe to the customers from the restaurant.

Content

This menu contains descriptions of the dishes, performances that happen during the meal, and the amenities the hotel has. The Menu only contains English descriptions and lacks languages native to the Philippines besides the names of food and dances. Although this restaurant serves Filipino food in the Philippines, the menu uses words like "native" and "exotic" to describe the food and dances.

Conclusions

This menu is made for a tourism audience, specifically American or English-speaking people. This menu represents the restaurant within the hotel and uses English to help tourists with the language barrier. Moreover, the menu perpetuates the stereotype that certain countries are not modern or advanced compared to the United States. For example, the back of the menu describes the hotel as “modern with a touch of the exotic” and specifies that the rooms are “air-conditioned.” As well, using words like “native” and “exotic” appeals to an audience that did not grow up around this culture, instead of the local people of the country. In addition, this menu only conveys the highlights or niceties of the Philippines by emphasizing the country’s values of hospitality, dances, music, and food. Even the menu’s food choices seem to cater to a tourist audience and does not contain dishes that Americans would be repelled by because of the cultural difference. Thus, this menu is catered for a tourism audience and is a prime example of the Philippine’s xenocentrism, the belief that other cultures and countries are better than its own and the desire to engage with different cultures instead of its own. Because of the Philippine’s long history of colonization, cultural inferiority and xenocentrism was rooted into Filipino culture because of its oppressors.



Food Tourism & Choice Between European and Asia Tourism

According to the University of Central Florida, food tourism “is engaged in by individuals who seek out culinary experiences to broaden their understanding of a culture or lifestyle while traveling.” The Philippines is a big proponent of food tourism as these vacationers have a big impact on their economy. In general, tourism flourished in the Philippines in the late 1800s and early 1900s but declined after World War II. During this time, the country earned the nickname of “Pearl of the Orient Seas” for its exotic cuisine and natural beauty. However, a second wave of tourism arose in the Philippines as its landscapes and economy began to recover post WWII, which is around the same time Kay Shaw Nelson would have visited. Since tourism was a big factor in the Philippine’s economic restoration in the 1950s, many restaurants catered to a tourist audience, which is evident in the menu from Nelson’s collections. To garner more attraction, many restaurants would also provide performances along with meals. Dances accompanied by meals was a common factor of other Asian countries Nelson visited. For example, Nelson visited Thailand and added a menu from Sala Norasingh, an “air-conditioned theatre-restaurant,” to her collection, which was filled with descriptions of traditional Thai songs and dances.



Thai Menu

As I went through Nelson’s entire collection of menus, I noticed the majority of her menus came from European countries while her selection from Asian countries were small in comparison. I am not certain of the time span of Nelson’s travels to Europe and Asia, but the large quantity of menus from Ireland, Italy, etc. compared to the singular menus from Thailand and Philippines made me ponder was European tourism more popular than Asian tourism to

Americans in the 1950s? The answer is yes. With Asia and Europe’s economies both shattered after WWII, American tourists and their money was a big boost to both continent’s financial worries. However, Americans were more focused on traveling to Europe than Asia. This trend is due to the United States having better relations with certain European countries in the war, similar cultures, and more accessible transportation and hotel systems. Another observation I made looking at Nelson’s menus was that Nelson mostly had tourist restaurant menus from Asia but had more local restaurants from Europe. This could be due to Nelson’s comfort levels with Europe as both continents have similar etiquette, language, and culture.



Nelson’s Collection of Asian Menus

Asian Food and American Culture

After Nelson's time in the CIA, she wrote articles revolving around food and her travels. While publications such as loved her adventures in Europe, they were quite hesitant about stories related to Asian cuisine. For example, Nelson tried to pitch an article about kimchi to Gourmet Magazine, but the editor denied the story and said she would "feel differently if it were a more appetizing dish." However, the 1970s saw a switch from shunning foods from other cultures to embracing them. According to Associate Professor of Sociology at SUNY Brockport Amy Guptill, "The ethnic food boom emerged from the ethnic revival of the 1970s, when Americans sought to reclaim their ethnic heritage as a response to the hegemonic process, the way dominant cultural forms incorporate and thereby erase cultural distinctions." As a result, there was a rise of "Americanized" ethnic food instead of traditional cuisine. Chinese chop suey joints are a big example of this phenomena as Americans put their twist on classic dishes from China in order to appeal to the general population. Furthermore, more publications became accepting of Asian foods into stories and cookbooks. From a note Nelson received from a renown cookbook competition in the 1980s, "The Tastemaker awards have truly reflected America's growing interest in cuisines of every kind." However, not every countries' dishes became mainstream in America. The Philippines is an example of this as even in the 2020s, Filipino cuisine is not considered mainstream, and restaurants featuring this food are not easily accessible compared to Indian, Chinese, and Thai restaurants. Although, the rise of Filipino flavors are being introduced to American society as of recently. Ube, a purple sweet potato and a common flavor in Filipino desserts, is being commercialized at chain restaurants and grocery stores such as Trader Joe's.



Letter from Gourmet Magazine



Letter from R.T. French Company

Takeaways from this Experience

This was my first time doing archival research and actually doing a research project. It was a great experience because I think, as a journalist major, I am always so focused in the present and reporting on current issues. However, this experience let me take a step back and observe historical documents and analyze the implications of these archives and how they affect us today. Moreover, I loved how personal this experience was for me. I am so glad I got to research something that I am passionate about it because it really made a difference in my work ethic and attitude towards this project. Finally, it was awesome seeing how Kay Shaw Nelson collected every document from her travels and her journey from a writer. From editor letters, magazine clippings, and failed attempts, she collected everything that reflected her work experience, and I hope to do the same in the future.

Work Cited

Kay Shaw Nelson Papers from SCRC

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