

## REDISCOVERING CUBAO

When it comes to world-class entertainment, shopping or dining, the Araneta Center in Cubao still reigns supreme for most Filipinos in Metro Manila. I still recall all the holidays, family gatherings and school shopping stops my family spent in this historic part of Quezon City.

It is not hard to realize what makes Cubao appealing. The answer lies in its accessibility and variety of choices. Armed with a limited Pinoy's budget, I set out to test my case — that is, to see if Cubao is still the place it was meant to be, a family destination.

A typical weekend in Cubao begins at the movie theaters, so I called in to book seats in the 3D theater at the posh Gateway Mall — a two-hour spectacle with Shrek that entailed a late afternoon luncheon. The renovated Ali Mall offers the cheaper 2D theater option, so people now have the choice of watching movies there or at Araneta Coliseum's Gateway Mall.

With seven restaurants in my itinerary, I decided to check out the watering holes occupying the circular façade of the Big Dome. I took the traditional 15-minute walk within the mall, but prepared myself for the fact that the choices of places to dine out here have doubled. Our first stop was the Japanese restaurant Sachi, which allowed us to preview their specialty sea urchin soup dish, which I found delicately appetizing paired with rice wine or sweet Spanish wine. Served traditionally warm with glass noodles cooked al dente, the dish's sweet-salty broth brought back memories of Kunming in Yunnan province, China, where a local there served us for Christmas this wonderful charcoal-steamed stingray stewed dish with fermented black tofu.

While Sachi does connote a snobbish Japanese character, it offers set menus well within your pocket's reach, a healthy menu alternative to fatty fast food to reenergize yourself for the next shopping leg.

With my appetite perked up, we headed toward Gloria Maris, which is famous for its shabu-shabu seafood and meat set menus. Instead of going for the usual "cook it yourself" gastronomic grind, we agreed instead on the restaurant's specialty dimsum seafood-meat platter served with tasty tossed seaweed salad with chili soy based sauces, whose sticky salty aftertaste was quickly dissolved by the restaurant's delicious homemade tropical fresh fruit blend. Gloria Maris introduced this writer's palate to its famed warm prawn fruit salad, which is fried prawns quickly marinated in a tasty homemade mayonnaise dressing, which practically melts in your mouth while releasing its exquisitely subdued cherry or pineapple flavors. I thought this was the perfect summer side dish that would go well with chilled Cabernet Sauvignon, which was optional at that point. The restaurant's preference to serve only fresh ingredients (meat, poultry and seafood) turned it into a popular destination for dignitaries and government

officials such as former First Lady Imelda Marcos or even Sen. Mar Roxas, who likes steamed seafood viands like his uncle Jorge Araneta. Korina Sanchez-Roxas is equally a big fan of the Big Dome's concept restaurants. Korina, however, prefers the more casual Italian dining restaurant Café Bola, where she is said to be a fan of chef Margarita Fores' light bola bola pasta dishes.

Chef Fores was not around to meet us, but she made sure we got the same gastronomic experience as Korina with a preview of her famed bola bola curry rice. This particular dish brought back my memories of Northern Chiangmai, which is widely praised in Southeast Asia for its chili-heavy curry pork, seafood and vegetable medicinal cuisines.

Rasa, the only Singaporean restaurant on my list, is said to be a favorite choice of the senior Araneta, and offers authentic laksa, the red noodle soup dish traditionally cooked in herbs, red curry and lemongrass, which is similar to the Thai's spicy tom yum pla Northern dish. The spicy, earthy herb aftertaste of this heavy Malay-Indian dish takes a little getting used to, especially with the combination of coconut milk with curry and chili flakes.

Halfway through our gastronomic agenda, we settled for Café Adriatico, a famed after-party watering hole frequented for its brewed coffee, sweets and quiet ambience. We never got close to anything sweet or any beverage laced with caffeine that afternoon as Café Adriatico's chef insisted that we try first their bagnet size adobo, a tasty pork fiesta dish typical of those warm Sunday family gatherings in the province. The meat dish, served traditionally with fried rice, is special because it comes with a special citrus beverage reflecting the outcome of the last presidential elections, something that could elicit a lively social discussion after a long night spent bar-hopping.

With three more restaurants on our list, we headed toward the open food gallery at the third floor of the Gateway Mall by 6 p.m. Our first stop was Davao's Grilled Tuna, which immediately served us their famous grilled tuna fish head, a meal that could turn any diabetic happy. At Lydia's Lechon, we tried their less than P150 lechon-topped seafood paella, another filling dish that was tasty and affordable. For dessert, we had ice cream topped blue cheese crepes, a perfect "sweet tooth" alternative to the usual pies or ice cream.

Seven restaurants, where I spent nearly P3,000 only for a group of four people, are certainly not bad for an unscheduled weekend family treat. Cubao, with its numerous entertainment and still growing shopping options, indeed remains the practical weekend destination for the family.