



A Cuisine of Nostalgia

The Role of Food in Senna Fernandes's *A Trança Feiticeira*

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In Goa, there is a well-known restaurant called Nostalgia, which is famed for its traditional Goan food, including, according to its website, 'bolo sansrival', a dessert that 'is practically non-existent in Goa anymore'.¹ This little reference seems to vindicate the restaurant's name, and therefore its mission: to preserve a cuisine, elements of which have been lost and, by implication, are under threat of possible disappearance. If Goans had little or no chance to proclaim a culinary identity to the world, such was the speed with which Goa was absorbed into India in 1961, the Macanese, further East, had more time; a full twelve years between the signing of the Luso-Chinese accord in 1987, and the handover of the territory to Beijing in 1999. During this period, restaurants advertising Macanese food

proliferated. Yet before going on to consider the role of food and cuisine in the fiction of Henrique de Senna Fernandes, Macao's most iconic prose writer, it would be appropriate to spend a few moments discussing the general characteristics of Macanese cuisine and, in particular, the way it is presented to the many visitors who flock to the now Special Administrative Region to savour its delights in the city's restaurants.

Macanese cuisine, or to use Cecília Jorge's term 'Cozinhaçã',² derived from the local 'patois', in many ways reflects the evolution of the Macanese as an ethnic group, or at least a frontier ethnicity occupying the ambivalent world between western and eastern cultures, absorbing influences from Malay, Indian, African, as well as Chinese and Portuguese roots, but also open to other influences as well. It is no coincidence, for example, that one of the most widely known Macanese dishes, 'minchi', is derived from the English word 'mince', and is a dish based on minced, or ground, meat. If there is an origin to Macanese cuisine, then it is commonly assumed to have begun with the adaptation of Portuguese dishes to different ingredients, depending on what was available as a substitute to the original components of a dish, and on the interpretation given to it by the cook or chef. Thus, the Macanese 'tacho' is arguably a kind of local evolution of the Portuguese 'cozido', while a regional Portuguese dish such as 'sarrabulho' reappears in Macanese cuisine. Given the early historical links between Macao and Malacca, and the presence of Malay women accompanying the first Portuguese settlers in Macao, it is not surprising that some signature dishes of Macao cuisine bear a close resemblance to those produced in Malacca and even in Goa. 'Lacassá' soup is none other than Malay/Singapore 'laksa', consumed nowadays in any number of Thai and Asian fusion chains across Europe and North America, while the use of 'balichão', or shrimp paste, in a number of Macanese dishes echoes influences of 'balchan' in Malay cooking. Then there is the ubiquitous piri-piri chicken, often termed in Macao 'galinha africana', and served as part of a lunch deal to day trippers to the territory. If the term 'Luso-Tropical' could be applied to any dish, it is likely that 'galinha africana',



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or 'African chicken', would take first prize. According to Jorge (2004), the Macanese dish is derived from Mozambican 'galinha à cafre', popular among soldiers from that territory who were regularly stationed in Macao up until the 1950s. Here, it was adapted to local tastes by Américo Ângelo, a Macanese chef at the Pousada de Macao. Mozambican 'cafre' therefore accumulated more sauce, thus conforming to the tastes of the local Chinese, who found the original too dry, and was re-born as 'African Chicken' some time



'Caldo verde' (Portuguese green soup). All photos courtesy Graça Pacheco Borges.

during the 1950s/1960s. The fact that one of the basic ingredients for this dish was chilli pepper, originating in South America, merely underlines the pan-continental evolution of the dish, which, for all its popularity, is still considered a 'new kid on the block' in the long history of Macanese cuisine.

It is probably true to say that when people are placed in a position in which they have to define identity, or what they think is authentic about their identity, they are forced into a degree of self-consciousness that in turn produces confusion and disagreement. One of the oldest restaurants in Macao, Fat Siu Lau, established at the beginning of the 20th century by a Chinese entrepreneur, happily served Portuguese and local dishes for many decades and, as we shall see, is part of Macao's culinary topography in Fernandes's novels. Nowadays, its signature dish is roast pigeon, prepared in a secret marinade, and it is advertised as being typically Macanese. But pigeon is also associated

with Cantonese cuisine, so it is obvious that the delicacy is a highly localised variant of a more generally regional dish, unless, of course, the cooking of pigeon spread from Macao into the adjacent province of Guangdong. It is significant that roast pigeon is absent from Jorge's recipes, while Annabel Jackson claims that the dish is not truly Macanese, having 'grown up in the broader, multi-cuisine restaurant scene, not from within the Macanese domestic kitchen' (Jackson: 2003, 7), thus suggesting too, as does Jorge herself, that the most representative dishes of Macanese cuisine have evolved within family life, and are intimately linked to family gatherings and religious occasions.

At the other, western end of the spectrum, tourists are encouraged to try the typically Macanese soup called 'caldo verde', suggesting that the tourist authorities often cannot distinguish between Portuguese and Macanese culinary traditions. In sum, it is important to see Macanese cuisine as being situated on a kind of culinary continuum between Portugal and China, with inputs from traditions in between, that is, from along the old oceanic trading routes pioneered by Portuguese navigators, or with additions brought in from the Macanese diasporas around the world, or from other diasporas within Macao itself. Like any cuisine, it is subject to change and re-invention, as old recipes are lost, often along with the availability of ingredients, and new ones evolve and, like many cuisines associated with an ethnic minority, such as the Macanese, food and the nostalgia for 'home-town' cooking are woven into the group's cultural expression. In literature, the fiction of Henrique de Senna Fernandes is full of culinary references. They feature as markers of a strongly expressed concern with preserving Macao's unique culture, so much a part of this writer's work, but food references also reflect the author's lament at the passing of an age. Food is therefore woven into the author's memory and his sense of identity and nowhere is this revealed more clearly than in his most well-known work of fiction, the novel *A Trança Feiticeira* (1993).³

The novel's plot is simple. It is in the details of everyday life in Macao as it affects the hero and the heroine that *A Trança Feiticeira* shines a torch into the apparent



'Peixe "cucus"' (steamed fish).

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confusion of what it means to be Macanese, above all for an author originating in one of the territory's older mixed families. Adozindo is the only son of a well-to-do Macanese family that is nevertheless not as rich as it once was. He is the product of considerable mixture down the centuries, with Dutch, Portuguese and a hint of Oriental ancestry. His father, Aurélio, hopes that he will carry on the family's import/export firm, but injected with new capital that the wealthy young widow, Lucrécia might bring through marriage to his son. Lucrécia is not the ideal partner envisaged by Adozindo's family given her widow's status, and the fact that she is the daughter of a lowly Portuguese soldier and a local peasant woman, but the capital she has inherited from Santerra, her late husband,

suggests that this is a major factor in papering over her past. Adozindo is, however, a playboy, and Lucrécia is only one of his conquests among many others. One of these is the impoverished water-seller, A-Leng, to whose 'trança feiticeira' Adozindo is inexplicably attracted. A-Leng repudiates the advances of Adozindo, who is regarded as a foreigner, or 'kwai', in the Chinese quarter of town, but she eventually succumbs to him and the two embark on an affair that eventually sees both of them banished from their respective communities. Much of the novel, set during the 1930s, focuses on their adaptation to each other's culture, their eventual rehabilitation into their communities and Adozindo's final reconciliation with his family. It is a novel that, through Adozindo and A-Leng, evokes the hybrid culture of Macao, in which food is often alluded to. Indeed, the importance of food at certain seminal points in the story seems to illustrate the shifting identities of both main characters, in particular Adozindo.

In the beginning, Adozindo is the spoilt, relatively privileged gadabout, protected by his indulgent family,



'Tacho' ('chou-chau de pele', stew made with ingredients stewed in lard).

secure in a Macanese patriarchy that is as yet still unthreatened by the forces of history gathering on the horizon in the form of the Japanese occupation of large parts of China and the War of the Pacific. His father is a generous entertainer and giver of dinner parties, which we assume broadly consist of dishes that the family consider Portuguese (but are more essentially Macanese). Adozindo's hobbies are those of his class, and consist of fishing trips and picnics around the bay of Macao. He speaks Cantonese, and he does not hesitate to refresh himself at the stalls and bars selling 'to fu', in the same way that the local Chinese might do. So he has inevitably adopted some of the eating habits of the Chinese, not to mention other cultural mores, without assuming for one moment that he is Chinese. Indeed, the Chinese area of the city, the notorious Cheok Chai Un, is a strange and hostile place to him, much as the so-called Christian city is to A-Leng initially. From this, we can conclude that Chinese food is not what isolates Adozindo so much, as the social ambience in which it is partaken.

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Food plays an important part later in the novel, as the relationship between Adozindo and A-Leng develops to the point when he finds himself invited to her hovel. She has prepared a meal of crab cooked in black bean sauce, and a particularly fragrant tea, which serve as conduits to his seduction and the consummation of their physical attraction to one another (it is, of course, no coincidence that crab, in Chinese cuisine, is appreciated for its assumed aphrodisiac qualities). The food and drink are not foreign to Adozindo, and the relationship between them is one of social distance rather than cultural alienation. Not long after this encounter, Aurélio prevails upon his son to accept Lucrécia's invitation to dinner, as a result of which he hopes an announcement of their engagement will be made. And so we see Adozindo at the other end of town, openly visiting the widow's mansion that he has only entered before in clandestine fashion. Here the food is sumptuous, but of course prepared by Lucrécia's chef. As Adozindo embarks on

the soup course, he recognises its quality, but ponders on his preference for Macanese food: 'O jantar era de 'comida de pão', à europeia. Preferiria 'comida de arroz', isto é, à macaense' (56). But Lucrécia is out to impress him with an array of 'cristais, talheres', and 'pratos', not to mention fine wines from her late husband's cellar, all of which she would confidently assume, were she to know, would wipe the floor with her humble rival's chopsticks, bowls and tea. The fresh sea bass, 'mergulhado num molho que dava um sabor divinal', followed by 'a carne estufada, uma carne vinda de propósito de Hong Kong, da Dairy Farm', are the types of dishes that mark off the highest echelons of the Macanese elite from the middle and lower social orders, food that would not be out of place in the Governor's Palace. In the event, Adozindo's marriage proposal is never proffered, Lucrécia gets drunk, and her lover withdraws after a closing brandy. The affair in effect ends at that point.

When the spoilt young Adozindo and the resourceful A-Leng are thrown together in their exile within Macao, they live from hand to mouth while trying to negotiate a future together. Tensions revolve around cultural difference, one of which is food. Adozindo's resentment is directed towards his companion's frugal cuisine based on rice and vegetables, she ultimately yearns for her former existence in the Chinese quarter. There is a temporary separation when she decides to leave him, during which time Adozindo, as if to reassert his 'Portuguese' identity, comforts himself by spending his last few savings on a steak and chips ('bife com ovo a cavalo') at none other than Fat Siu Lau:

'Nunca lhe souberam tão bem os ovos estrelados, a clara tostadinha nos bordos, o bife grosso e enorme, o monte de cebolas e batatas. Calculou que estivesse a bater os lábios, mas não se importava. Regou tudo com meia-garrafa de tinto que naquela ocasião suplantava qualquer vinho francês de marca elegante da garrafeira de Santerra' (92).

This, therefore, is Adozindo's 'hometown' cooking: middle of the

'Arroz chau-chau' (fried rice).



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'Carne de porco com ananás' (pork meat with pineapple).

road, popular Portuguese, knocked back with half a bottle of 'vinho de mesa'.

After their reconciliation, Adozindo and A-Leng settle down to a life of domesticity. This section of the book, which is in part autobiographical, details the cultural adjustments that both make. Adozindo begins to appreciate the qualities of his wife's cooking, tastes in music, and understanding of Cantonese opera, while she adjusts to eating bread, drinking coffee, and going to the cinema. He never eats with chopsticks, while she finds sugar in tea an alien concept. With regard to Portuguese cuisine, the narrator notes, 'ainda não conseguia o apuramento ideal na comida macaense e na portuguesa. Faltavam-lhe os ensinamentos duma cozinheira de mão cheia' (130). The only Macanese people they socialise with at this stage are poorer ones who were 'muito limitados no mister', a revealing comment, for it suggests that for the narrator, proper Macanese food was that prepared and eaten in the houses of the traditional elite—not, it goes without saying, Lucrecia's nouveau riche cuisine, but that of Adozindo's family and their ilk, food associated with the routine Catholic festivities, the social gatherings, the renowned 'chá gordo' that Fernandes, through his main character, identified as binding the community together. It is the Macanese food of the 'casa-grande' rather than the 'senzala'. But it is also clear that

certain foods are closely associated with Adozindo's nostalgia, and here the Chinese delicacies of the street vendors mingle with the Macanese dishes of his childhood home:

Respondia-lhe, da embocadura duma escadaria, o vendilhão de 'hám-ioc-chong' e de 'kó-cheng-chong', os bolos de catupá, bolos quentes de arroz gomoso, carne de porco e ovo salgado de pata, embrulhados em folhas de bananeira. Eram sons que enchiam de nostalgia a noite e evocavam a infância e as suas delícias (119).

Later, when thinking back to his parental home, time-honoured Macanese dishes are recalled:

Moviam-no saudades dos pratos macaenses que, em casa dos pais, eram uma especialidade: o empadão de massa fina, com a sua chinha de

galinha, cogumelos e nacos de porco, a capela, de sabor a queijo e azeitona preta, o sarrabulho de molho apimentado. Dos condimentos que acompanhavam o arroz, como o missó-cristão, o peixe esmagal, o limão de Timor e o balichão macaense (135-136).

Adozindo's eventual re-admission into the society of the 'Cidade Cristá', along with his wife, who remains proudly Chinese but has herself entered the hybrid world of the Macanese through baptism

Some sauces used in Macanese cuisine.



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'Bolo minino' (cake made with toasted coconut and ground biscuits dusted with icing sugar).

and learning to express herself in Portuguese, is partly engineered by A-Leng herself, who charms the domineering Macanese matriarch, Dona Capitolina, into renting them one of her houses, through her devotion to Saint Anthony, the patron of the parish in which Adozindo was brought up, and this reappearance of the young couple and their family in society eventually leads to Adozindo's reconciliation with his father. This is accompanied by a re-integration into the social life of the community, for Adozindo has already been invited by his landlady's son to go on a fishing trip with him, and to join them in a St. John's Day picnic to partake in the 'tradicional arroz carregado com porco balichão tamarindo' (161), one of the most celebrated dishes of Macanese cuisine.

What then do food references in the novel tell us about Macanese cuisine and culinary tastes? If Adozindo is typical, then he is at home with Chinese food as he is with Portuguese, although the latter is

a comforter and re-statement of an identity at a time when he is in exile from his community. But food, for Fernandes, who occasionally uses his hero to convey his sentiments on this, is intricately linked to the author's overwhelming nostalgia.⁴ Here, it is not always clear what his nostalgia is directed at specifically. Certainly, there is a yearning for the days of his youth, but also there is a lament for the passing of an age, for what he refers to as the 'boa e abundante vida da era patriarcal' (160), when traditional Macanese dishes were eaten in the home. In this sense, Macanese food was about eating in, and not eating out. In this sense too, it is the food of an enclosed circle, a secret food—hence the importance of secret recipes handed down by the women of the house from generation to generation. It is a food you are invited to partake of, and so enter the community, rather than being yours of right. But it is also a food that is threatened by modernity, by growing urbanisation, the loss of the rural space that

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the Macanese elite once ranged over on their hunting and shooting expeditions. Here, Fernandes's nostalgia extends backwards beyond his own lifespan. In the introduction to his collection of stories, *Mong-Há* (1998), he writes:

'Em tempo mais remoto caçavam-se nas várzeas a rola, a narceja, os passarinhos ou pardais do arrozal, os *rice-birds* que a cozinha do Restaurante Fat Sio Lau tornava saborosíssimos e se comiam assados com oleoso pão torrado em forma triangular e pulverizados por uma pimenta especial. O meu pai falava ainda de almoçadas de arroz-de-passarinhos amanteigado, um prato hoje inteiramente defunto da gastronomia ou mesa macaenses' (5).

Maybe the current speciality of Fat Siu Lau, roast pigeon made to a secret recipe, is the last example of a whole variety of wild fowl dishes that the surrounding countryside once provided, proving that cuisines evolve in accordance with both what is available, and what is marketable. But the loss of a rural hinterland is central to the twin props of identity, memory and nostalgia, and Fernandes's evocation of Macanese food is an expression of this lament for a world that has gone forever. The balance between town and country has been lost: Macao is no longer surrounded by hunting grounds, but by urban China, the surrounding

metropolis of Zhuhai, which dwarfs Macao itself. And yet, ironically, Macanese food is probably more readily available than ever before. Any number of restaurants in modern-day Macao may be able to serve 'carne de porco balichão tamarindo', but it is not the dish of Fernandes's youth. It is served, consumed and paid for in another social and cultural context—it has been reduced to a commodity rather than remaining the expression of a community's stability and cohesion. **RC**

'Chilicote frito' (croquet made with mince).



NOTES

- 1 See <http://fernandosnostalgia.wordpress.com/restaurant/>.
- 2 Cecília Jorge, *À Mesa da Diáspora. Viagem Breve pela Cozinha Macaense*, blends the history of cooking in Macao and its principal ingredients with recipes, and is indispensable for anyone pursuing this fascinating field of study.
- 3 An English translation of the novel, *The Bewitching Braid*, was published by the Hong Kong University Press in 2004, but all references in this article are taken from the original Portuguese.

- 4 Nostalgia for food is also a theme in popular song in 'patuá'—see Armando Santos's 'Comizaina', which starts off by listing the well-known Macanese dishes, but then goes on to evoke the Chinese street food that is recalled by the homesick 'filho da terra' from the diaspora.

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