

Dipping into the Art of Condiment Sauces

Balaw-Balaw Foods Inc.

It takes passion to produce the condiment balaw-balaw—which requires fermenting its ingredients in an earthen jar for seven days—for a share of the world’s growing consumption of condiment sauces.

The family of the late painter Perdigon Vocalan in the country’s art capital of Angono is eyeing the Middle East and Europe for the export of his “masterpieces.”

A huge volume of those works of art has been exported to the United States since 2013 and the sale continues up to now in increasing numbers.

Being exported, however, are Vocalan’s works, not in the field of visual arts, but in culinary, for which Angono’s homemade balaw-balaw is gaining international acclaim.

Traditionally made in the kitchens of old Angono homes, balaw-balaw is a native sauce emanating from days of fermentation in earthen jars.

The balaw-balaw version of Vocalan is among Angono’s best and a specialty and attraction in his family’s restaurant and art gallery, which carries the same name.

The various pastas (buro) of the Balaw-Balaw Restaurant and Art Gallery include a frozen version for balikbayans (visiting foreign-based Filipinos). It all began in the 1980s.

Today, its bottled exports to the United States include burong talangka (fermented Asian shore crab), ginisang alamang (scuttled shrimp paste), burong deleg (fermented mudfish), and burong hito (fermented catfish). Locally, these products are sold by a chain of supermarkets and retail outlets.

The bold venture into exports, however, had its birth pains until professional help came about from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

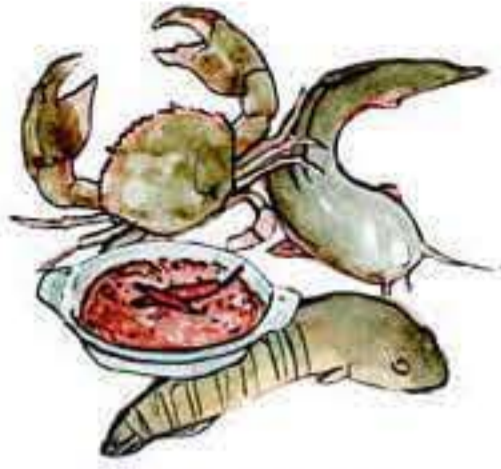
“Without [DTI]’s support, we’ll probably be still selling from our kitchen,” says Vocalan’s son Andre, who manages the operations of Balaw-Balaw Foods’ micro-plant and the marketing of its bottled products.

The condiments used to be bottled in the restaurant’s kitchen, with its limited space, safety hazards, and poor ventilation.

“DTI was a bridge to the market, providing consultation, ope for product packaging, grants for label designs, pretty much everything you need to become a successful business,” Andre explains.



THE ART IN BUSINESS
Andre Vocalan is the son of the late sculptor and painter Perdigon Vocalan. He now co-manages the family business with his brother Rembrandt. The Balaw-Balaw art gallery is filled with about 100 items of Perdigon’s works which are inspired by Angono’s cultural traditions.



DID YOU KNOW?

Catfish (*hito*) can grow from as small as less than an inch to as big as 180 inches depending on the species. Some Filipinos do not eat mudfish (*dalag*) because of its snake-like feature. A crab's teeth are in its stomach. The liquid from *alamang* is called *patis* and is used separately as a condiment.

CELEBRITY CUSTOMER

American chef and TV personality Anthony Bourdain is among Balaw-Balaw's prominent foreign visitors, all lured by the culinary adventure of exotic offerings of *itik* (native duck), fried *kamero* (cricket), *ginataang kuhol* (snails in coconut milk), *knitaw na puso ng saging* (banana flower cooked in vinegar), *minaluto* (a collection of rice dishes), *sinabawang balut* (soup of duck embryo), and native food preparations featuring Angono's various indigenous freshwater fish species like *kanduli*, *hito*, and *dalag*.

It was in 2003 when Vocalan's wife Luzvimin, a former high school teacher who was in charge of the company's finances, got in touch with DTI for assistance.

Since then, DTI has been guiding their way, introducing them to other government agencies such as the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) for product development, and DTI's Export Marketing Bureau and Center for International Trade Exhibitions and Missions for trade and export promotion, placing Balaw-Balaw in the International Food Exhibitions Philippines in 2007.

Today, Balaw-Balaw joins three trade fairs a year in the United States, after finding a distributor introduced to them by the DTI.

"Patience is key when developing a business," says Andre of Balaw-Balaw's success in its first trade show in San Francisco, California, in 2011 and his mother's appearance in Andrew Zimmern's show. Their bottled products got sold out in just two days. "It had taken [us] three to four years before we finally got to professional bottling."

The breakthrough came when the DTI's trade attaché in the United States introduced Balaw-Balaw to American distributors. Since 2013, they have been exporting to the United States.

Preceding Balaw-Balaw's entry into the United States market, however, were lots of paper work, laboratory and food technology requirements, and other regulatory procedures involving mechanization of production.

Through DTI and DOST, Balaw-Balaw moved production to a full-blown micro-plant after only eight years in the business.

Now, Balaw-Balaw is eyeing other foreign markets outside North America.

"We want to reach Filipino communities in the Middle East and Europe. That's what we're working on for the future," says Andre confidently, knowing that DTI and its network of trade offices overseas are there for budding Filipino businesses like Balaw-Balaw's.



THE PRODUCTION

Andre and his employees get busy in making the company's main product. *Balaw-balaw* is made of small shrimps mixed with rice gruel and "angkak", or red mold rice. This is preserved and fermented in a closed container for 3 days. After bottling, Balaw-balaw products are ready for export.



A VIEW FROM OUTSIDE BALAW-BALAW RESTAURANT AND ART GALLERY
The art gallery also features collections from Andre and Rembrandt, together with other local artists.



HOW DTI HELPED

Andre Vocalan was able to meet local and international distributors through the DTI-sponsored *Sikat Pinoy* as well as the International Food Exhibition (IFEK).