

Capiztahan 2011

By Josie Dizon Henson



Panay, is roughly triangular in shape and is an island in the Philippines located in the western part of the Visayas. Politically, it is divided into five provinces: Aklan, Antique, Capiz, Iloilo, and Guimaras, all in the Western Visayas Region. It is southeast of the island of Mindoro and northwest of Negros, separated by Guimaras Strait. Between Negros and Panay Island lie the island-province of Guimaras. To the north is the Sibuyan Sea and the islands of Romblon; to the southwest is the Sulu Sea and the Panay Gulf.

Roxas City is the capital of Capiz, it is located at the northeastern tip of Panay Island. The landscape is dotted with verdant hills on mostly flat land, intertwined with a network of brackish waters abundant with marine wildlife, the very reason why this paradise is dubbed as the seafood capital of the Philippines. A laid-back atmosphere prevails in the City imbuing it with the sense of timelessness. Each day begins with the people involving themselves in various economic jobs and sundry tasks. Everyone tries to get everything done before sunset. Roxas City has basically an agri-based economy. Farming and fishing are the major activities and the city's land area are devoted to these activities. The Roxas city is now moving forwards it is the center trade of commerce not only in the Province of Capiz but also in some other places. The main products are palay, sugar, corn, oysters, dried and fresh fish, crabs, shrimps and other various shells.

Their most awaited annual festival the "Sinadya sa Halaran", which means "joy in sharing", held in the month of December to commemorate the feast of our lady of Immaculate Conception. There also have a dancing contest of every group they called it "Tribu", and there is also a live band in the night and amateur contest. This various activities that showcase the true capizeño spirits are held for the benefit of everyone whether they are residents or visitors to the city. The highlights of the celebrations are the Grand Dancing Parade, Prosesyon sa Suba and fireworks. There also have another festival the Diwal Festival celebrated in the month of July, promotes the exotic shellfish that is now found only in the province of Capiz. In terms of the place where people want to relax themselves there is a beach in Baybay where you can play, picnic with your families and friends. And theirs a new "People's Park" where you can stay and make yourself fine and feel the joy of watching the sunset. Inside of Roxas City there are also lots of Hotels where you could stay, like President's Inn (where we stayed), Midtown Hotel, Image Palace, MVW Hotel, etc.

From the headline of The Philippine Daily Inquirer April 15, 2011, as written by Marla Yotoko Chorenge, MANILA, Philippines—Sixty-three years ago today, President Manuel Acuña Roxas suffered a fatal heart attack while delivering an impassioned speech on Philippine freedom and democracy at the then Clark Air Base in Pampanga province. He was a young 56 and barely two years in office as the first President of the new republic and the last President of the Commonwealth government. He was obsessed to serve, uplift his people, and reconstruct and rehabilitate the country he inherited from the ruins of World War II. Sadly, the "now generation" hardly knows the man beyond the handsome portrait on the P100 bill, the bayside boulevard named after him, or his grandson and namesake, former Sen. Manuel "Mar" Roxas II. Coincidentally, today also marks the 110th year of the province of Capiz, where Roxas was born and a fiesta dubbed "Capiztahan" is being held in Roxas City starting Friday, April 16, 2011 until Sunday to mark the two milestones.

This morning, church bells in Capiz's 16 districts and one city will ring simultaneously in honor of Roxas and the province's founding day. Masses will be celebrated after a wreath-laying ceremony at the statue of Roxas, which has been declared a national monument by the National Historical Commission. The highlight of the evening festivities will be a parade of lights with some 30 floats supervised by architect-designer Terry Gavino will illumine the evening. Later, a fireworks display that will last 30 minutes will be held at the People's Park.



When Ben told me that Mr. Geoffrey Martinez, President of Caritas Health Shield invited us to join him in hosting a lunch for Secretary of Health Enrique Ona, M.D. in Roxas City, we never thought it would be the 3-day Capiztahan Celebration, which would be graced by numerous political, TV, and media personalities. We left Angeles at 5:30 A.M. to catch a Cebu Pacific flight at 10 A.M. As soon as we landed from a 45-minute Cebu Pacific flight from NAIA Terminal 3, we were met at the Roxas City Airport by Mr. Martinez and were given unique leis made of shells. We were whisked to President's Inn and after checking-in, we drove right away to People's Park and since it was almost high noon, I decided to seek shelter in one of the canopies. To my surprise, Miss Jessica Soho was there with the GMA 7 TV crew. They were there to shoot a live cooking demo from my idol, Ms. Gaita Fores of CIBO fame. So, I took it upon myself to get step-by-step photos of the whole demonstration...a sort of Linguini a la vongole using fresh tomatoes, prawns and baby Diwal.



Above left: With famous TV Anchor Miss Jessica Soho; Above right: Jessica assists Gaita Fores by slicing the tomatoes; Gaita shows us how to cook pasta...by placing the uncut pasta when the water is really and adding a fair amount of salt (to simulate sea water).



Gaita adds chopped garlic to the olive oil, careful not to brown them and salt to the coarsely cut tomatoes. Red tomatoes are preferred, then some dried chilly is added to the prawns and Diwal, which are stirred once in a while till the prawns turn pink and the Diwal open up.



The wine is added and reduced a little. Gaité drains the pasta cooked al dente and lets a little water remain and puts the pasta in the prawn-diwal mixture and stirs it occasionally. Then the Diwal is tested for doneness. A little pepper is added to complement the dried chillies earlier. Jessica adds the fresh basil cut by hand (not by a knife). After the last stir, the taste test began



Above left: This is how the Diwal looks when they are in season; Above right: Close-up of Diwals when open

Diwal is an Ilonggo word which means “to stick your tongue out” because part of its tail extends out of the shell like a tongue; Often referred to as “Angel Wing Clam” or “Cyrtopleura costata”, these seem very similar, though smaller, than their western relatives. There isn’t much information about our local species, but according to Market Manila all he can say is they taste heavenly (pun intended). Thrown on a grill or stuck in a hot oven they open up and reveal sweet meat. These are still considered a seasonal delicacy, and not many folks know about them unless you have visited these parts and been lucky enough to taste them... I understand Margarita “Gaita” Fores sometimes serves them at Cafe Bola so if you get a chance, try them there.



We reached the roomy hut at the San Juan Beach Resort where Health Secretary Enrique Ona and Ma'am Judy Araneta were waiting. We could view Mantalinga Island in the distance as the breeze which came from the nearby Baybay beach was cool and refreshing after the hot sun at the People's Park. We heard that Mantalinga Island is a favorite swimming hole of native Capizenos and tourists alike. We spotted a table laden with a lechon, crabs, different fishes and each one of us was given a small bowl of Chicken Binakol cooked in bamboo and also a bowl of chicken sinigang with some Ubad (heart of a Banana stalk). To cap it all we also had the freshest-tasting shrimp kinilao and oysters we've ever tasted. We had sweet caimito, bananas and mangoes for dessert. Dr. Ike and Ben had fun reminiscing about their stay in New York City in different hospitals many years before. Just like Ben, Dr. Ona opted to come back to the Philippines. He was the head of the Kidney Center for many years.



Upper left photo: Ben and Ma'am Judy listening to Health Secretary Enrique "Ike" Ona stressing a point regarding Philhealth in the Philippines, while Pres. Geoffrey smiles for the camera on the right. Above left: Judy explaining how the Chicken Binakol was cooked in bamboo tubes, while Gaita Fores enjoys the Shrimp Kinilao. Above right: Capiz Governor Victor Tanco with Dr. Ike Ona and a friend, Dr. Abundio Balgos.

After lunch we went to Mabusao, the hometown of Mr. Geoffrey to look at the Outreach Program of Caritas Health Shield where 20 high school students were taught how to use computers so that when they go to college they would be computer savvy. That night we had another sumptuous dinner at Coco Veranda near the People's Park. The restaurant had a great view of Baybay beach and the breeze was cool and invigorating. Coco Veranda is the most visited and most dined place in Roxas City as it serves fresh seafoods which are without a doubt super delicious. Right at the entrance there's an aquarium that showcases big prawns and fish to choose from and cooked in any way you want. The place is native in design, with a beach front so while waiting for the food to be served, you can walk on the beach for awhile since it will take about 30 minutes or more for them to serve your food. If you're the type who doesn't want to take a stroll on the beach, you can also play billiards whilst waiting. The waiters and staff are very accommodating to all your needs. The place is usually crammed with people so a reservation is always good to save time.

Above: the whole buffet seafood spread with the shellfish, grilled red snappers and bangus; at right: more grilled bangus, with their intestines cooked into abodo; inihaw na baboy and oysters;

Below left: The piping hot red snapper sinigang in native palayoks; Below right: the two lechons with thin, crispy skins, tender meat, and sweet liver sauce.



Above: The guests were treated to an honest to goodness bangus harvest spectacle; Below left Below left: with Suzette del Rosario, Marla Yotoko Chorengel and right, with Cong. Tony Del Rosario;



Above left; With Sen. Mar Roxas; and above right: chatting with Marla Yotoko Chorengel about her article in the Phil. Daily Inquirer. Below: Sne. Mar Roxas surrounded by the press corps headed by Marla Yotoko Chorengel, and my friend, Food Columnist Mickey Fenix

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The next morning, after a leisurely breakfast at President's Inn, we went for a long drive towards the fish ponds of Congressman Tony Del Rosario. We were among the first guests to arrive and we were met by his gracious lady, Suzette who was supervising the well-laden buffet spread. We thought there would be only a few guests but we were amazed when the place swarmed with guests, mostly VIPs from the other Visayan cities and Manila. The visitors came in groups and before we knew it, the mounds of fat crabs, alimasag, grilled red snapper, grilled bangus, inihaw na baboy, fresh oysters, red snapper sinigang, and to complete the buffet, the traditional lechons (whose nice golden and crispy skins smothered with sweet liver sauce) quickly disappeared.





Above left: with bubbky TV Anchor Winnie Cordero; Above right: With my idol Gaita Fores of Cibo and Cafe Bola

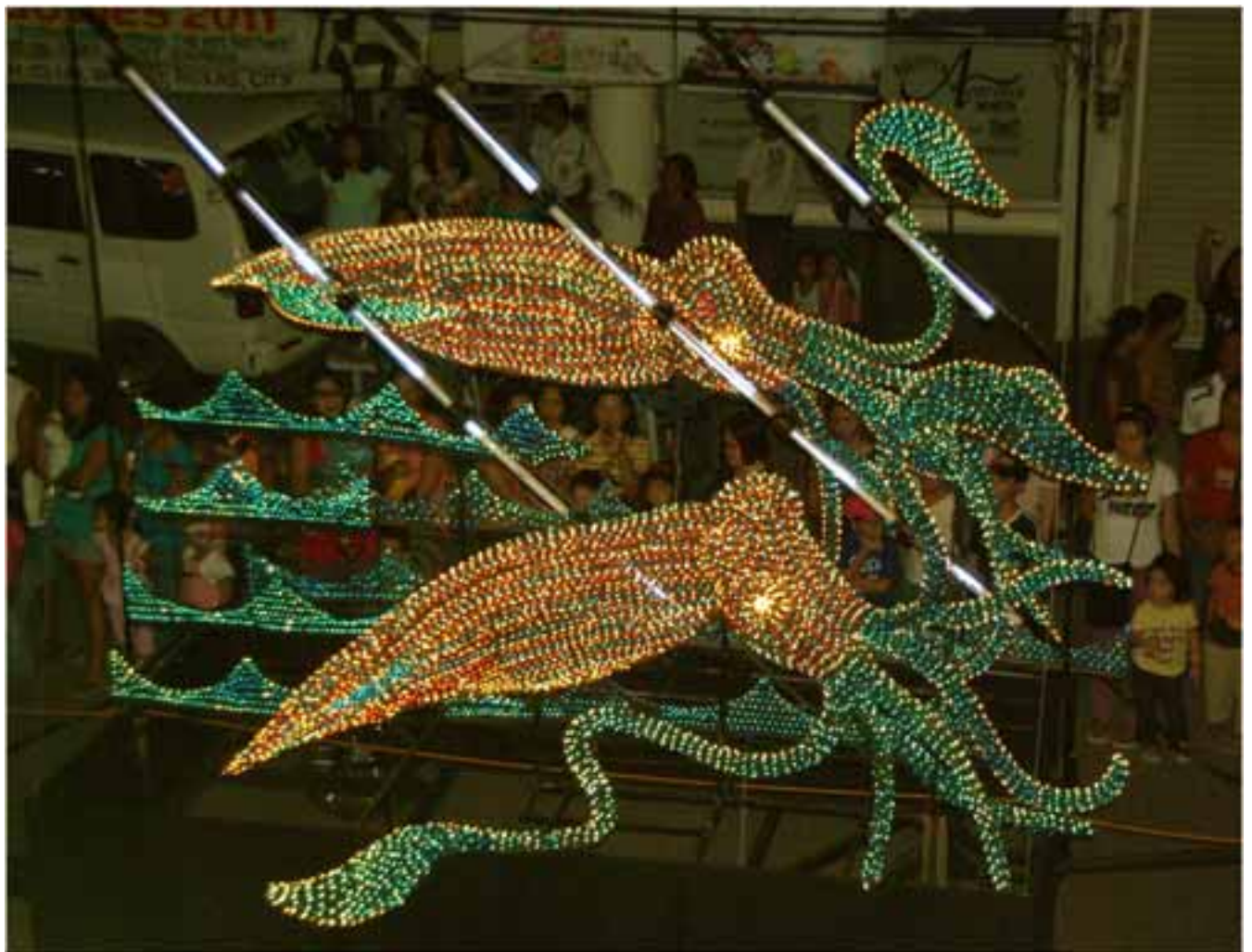


Above left: with Lu Antonino, erstwhile representative of Cotabato's 1st district; and at Right: with Tourism Sec. Alberto Lim

After the sumptuous lunch we headed for the hotel to rest for a while to wait for late afternoon as the Parade of colorful lights would have to be held at night. We then went to visit the Roxas City Caritas Branch located at the corner of the plaza right behind the city hall. We met the branch officers and group managers and waited for dusk so that the lighted floats could be seen better. Caritas Health Shield was one of the few private floats to join the parade. The rest were from government entities and towns. Some of the colorful floats that took my fancy were of course the Caritas Health Shield float representing Mambusao. The rest were so colorful and unique, I had a field day taking photos. There were around 25 floats and I have selected the best below...













We thought that the Float Parade was the best and most colorful we have ever seen for its uniqueness and creativity, however, there was still the much-awaited fireworks to culminate everyone's excitement. As our car inched its way to the People's Park, traffic was almost at a standstill. What normally took us 10 minutes to negotiate from our hotel took nearly 2 hours as all the vehicles led towards the People's Park for the crowd to view the most spectacular fireworks I've ever seen! It lasted for more than 30 minutes. Unfortunately, my camera's battery gave out.

When it was over, the crowds quietly dissipated without any jostling and were the most well-behaved crowd I've ever seen. The New Year's Eve fireworks in Angeles City will now pale in comparison to what the Capiztahan Fiesta Committee has displayed to all natives and tourists alike. I was told that this was the first ever celebration of such magnitude in Roxas City... will there be a repeat next year?