

# Food and Herbal Remedies Consumed in Manila, The Philippines

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## Introduction

The over 7000 Philippine islands sprawl above the Equator, from 4° to 21° North, and in total area they are larger than Britain. Manila is a warm tropical capital city that presents two contrasting seasons; it is located in the western coast of Luzon (14° N) island, considered the rice granary of the Philippines.

The hypothesis of research was that European colonisation had beneficial effects in the diffusion of staples and generated new approaches to nutrition, in the Philippines, promoting altogether the cultivation and consumption of exotic plant species used to heal.



## Material and Methods

The research process was twofold: i) examination of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century manuscripts in European and Philippine archives and libraries, in 2014 and 2015, so as to identify the food, spices and medicinal flora consumed in Manila in the early days of European colonisation; ii) application of surveys in Manila, in the first half of 2015, to three categories of informants, in order to evaluate and identify current food and medicinal flora consumption. Fifty semi-structured interviews were gathered by the author, at the service of the Portuguese Tropical Institute (IICT), now integrated in the University of Lisbon (UL): 1) Food and health gardeners from the Public Schools; 2) Formal and informal fruit, spices, tubers, roots, and herbal remedies traders; 3) Massage therapists that applied oils, creams and herbal preparations to external ailments.

## Results

**First Result:** The old manuscripts examined gave way to a total of 15 distinctive vernaculars, two thirds of which were consumed as food, as follows: i) six (6) were staples and sweeteners, like sugar cane, rice, bamboos, sweet potatoes, wheat and corn; ii) five (5) were fruits, such as soursop (*Annona muricata*), coconut, shaddock, banana and sweet oranges; iii) one was a spice called dabdad (*Erythrina indica*); iv) another was a valued medicine, the native cinnamon (*Cinnamomum cassia*); v) one other was used to make clothes (cotton); vi) and the last was a large ornamental tree, balete (*Ficus urostigima*).



**Second Result:** The 2015 survey permitted the botanical identification of 134 different vernaculars. More than half of these plants (69 species) have medicinal uses as herbal remedies; about 42% of the identified plants are consumed as food; of these, 27% are fruits, mostly native Asian species. A quick reading of the data shows that it is difficult to separate food from medicinal consumptions, as staples like sweet potato (9 occurrences) and corn (8) are both food and medicines, meaning, they are nutraceuticals. Stress should go to the fact that they have American origin, and were introduced by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Spaniard settlers as they kept their vernacular in this idiom, respectively *camote* (or *kamote*) and *mais*.

## Conclusion

The results confirm the hypothesis of the research, as it was found that European settlers effectively and beneficially contributed to the diffusion of exotic plant species in the Philippines. Hope is further research will be conducted in Manila on the issue of medicinal flora consumption.