

Maharlika restaurant a new gem in Manhattan

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Maharlika's sizzling sisig.

A newly-opened pop-up restaurant called Maharlika (Filipino word for nobility) that serves Filipino brunch has been making waves at Manhattan's East Village section since it opened mid-January, with mainstream critics and foodies all heaping praises on entrees like arroz caldo (rice porridge, \$11) and longsilog (longganisa, sinangag and itlog, \$11) or tocilog (tocino, sinangag and itlog).

Business partners Nicole Ponseca and Enzo Lim and their chef, Miguel Trinidad, spent two months in the Philippines learning cooking from "moms and grandmothers," as well as a few well-known chefs, to master Filipino breakfast classics and put a New York spin on them.

The result is house specialties like the sizzling sisig (\$13): three types of pig meat grilled and sauteed with bird chiles and kalamansi limes, and served in a cast-iron skillet with an egg on

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top.

“It’s kind of like bibimbap,” Ponseca tells *New York* magazine, which also gave special mention to Filipino-leaning drinks, like a bloody Mary (\$5) with patis (fish sauce) and Philippine root beer called Sarsi (\$5).

Pacquiao’s Punch, a salabat drink (named after boxing champ Manny Pacquiao) that is sure to give one’s brunch a kick, is also a favorite.

Guests, Filipinos and non-Filipinos, rave about Egg Benigno (\$12) — Maharlika’s take on Eggs Benedict — instead of ham, it uses the all-time Pinoy favorite, Spam.

Maharlika’s hot pan de sal and quesong puti are also a hit.

According to Nikki Goldstein of newyork.seriousseats.com, Maharlika’s menu is filled with words likely unfamiliar to the average New Yorker, which adds excitement to the dining experience — not only for what many might find a novelty but for the quality of the cooking and the jovial atmosphere once you’re there.

Goldstein gave a glowing review of arroz caldo, describing it as “nothing but comfort.”

“A rice-based porridge with shredded chicken, garlic and ginger, it’s got the tender chew of oatmeal with the heartiness of chicken stew,” she writes.

“It’s hard to order without asking questions, and since the early crowd consists of both curious eaters and Filipinos looking for a taste of home, the latter become eager educators right along with the staff,” says Goldstein.

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“The dynamic is genuinely convivial — proof that food really can bring people together.”

bradleyhawks.com says “if you happen to be passing by — or landed a highly recommended reservation at this ephemeral gourmet phenomenon — skip the pizza and mac ‘n cheese for some of the most unique, sophisticated and inventive brunch dishes and drinks anywhere in the city.”

“And if you don’t understand something on the menu, anyone on staff is capable and happy to explain,” writes bradleyhawks.com.

“Nicole Ponseca herself will even pull up a chair to show you how to approach eating a balut egg (fertilized duck egg, \$5) if this is your first time, as it was mine. It’s the sort of sincere hospitality you rarely find, and a wonderful energy and eagerness to share that somehow makes already delicious food taste even better.”

And how did bradleyhawks.com rate balut?

“Surprisingly delicious,” it states, “it tasted almost like a smoky chicken stock.”

Almost all reviewers say they are definitely coming back to try other Filipino specialties like tortang talong and avocado tinapay.

Maharlika is preparing to introduce crispy pata and the exotic “dinuguan.”

While some of the moment’s crop of pop-ups are meant to be short-lived, Ponseca tells *New York* magazine she one day hopes to put down permanent brick-and-mortar roots.

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At least until March (but likely longer), Maharlika's hours are 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; e-mail info@maharlikanyc.com ; or text Ponseca at 917.710.5457 to reserve your spot.

Bloggers say reservations aren't just recommended; they're necessary.

Maharlika is located at 351 East 12th Street (between 1st and 2nd Avenues).

Call 212.375.8483.

(Trivia: This not the first time a New York city Filipino restaurant used the name Maharlika. From 1974 to 1982, a fine-dining Filipino restaurant with the same name was housed at the Philippine Center building on Fifth Avenue, where the Philippine Consulate General and the Philippine Mission to the United Nations also maintained offices.)