

FROM THE FRONT PAGE

Pinay chef feasts on Obamas' healthy...

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 days later her boss would share a private lunch with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, shared her reaction about staying on as the executive chef: "It is a great honor."

The yellow-hued room was just steps away from the State Dining Room, where Comerford's dishes had been served to the world's prominent leaders. Speaking in a calm, collected manner and wearing a crisp, white chef jacket, with her name embroidered on it, she said, "This place is so awesome. To be a part of history and the beginning of the [Obama era] is an awesome thing."

Best career move

Comerford, who had to quit her food technology studies at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City, when she immigrated with her family to the United States in the 1980s, started honing her culinary skills in Chicago. Heading to DC proved to be her best career move. After working as a chef in two restaurants and a six-month stint in Vienna, she was hired in 1995 by the Clintons' executive chef, Walter Scheib, as his assistant.

When Scheib quit in 2005, First Lady Laura Bush appointed Comerford to the position. The appointment marked several firsts—the Manila Science High School alumna became the first woman, the first Filipino and the first minority to land the post that hundreds of chefs had applied for.

Asked to describe her duties, Comerford answered, "My responsibilities are to take care of the [First] Family in their daily meals from breakfast, lunch and dinner, and of course, taking care of their guests. Beyond that, we also take care of social events which could be a state event plus the daily family affairs."

Most memorable

While she has cooked for the world's top leaders, dignitaries and personalities, which one does she consider most memorable?

"What's more memorable for us is what we do for the First Family ... because it is an insight that nobody else has but us," Comerford said. "For example, it could be a dinner for just the two of them (the President and the First Lady), not a big thing. But just seeing the two of them eat is cool. For me, that is more memorable."

She elaborated: "With the Obamas, they want to utilize most of the produce from our vegetable garden. They also prefer grass-fed beef and natural-fed chicken. We are really focusing on health issues more than anything else."

Michelle Obama recently praised Comerford's creamed spinach that contains no cream, as part of the White House's drive for healthy meals. But like his predecessors, Obama has food idiosyncrasies. He reportedly loves Chicago-style pizza and has no fondness for beets. Both former Presidents Clinton and Bush had a passion for barbecued meats. Clinton's love for cheeseburgers and sweets and Bush's distaste for broccoli were well-chronicled.

First Filipina

On being the first female White House executive chef, an appointment that was lauded by groups of women chefs since females reportedly make up more than 50 percent of food service workers but only less than 4 percent occupy top positions, Comerford said, "Just to be a woman chef—that is a big thing. I remember when I went to Austria where I worked for six months, one of the apprentices there approached me and said I was the first female sous chef she has ever met. But of course, it's not like I was the first one. You have the likes of Julia Child and all the other women chef predecessors whom I look up to. It is a great feeling."

As for being the first Filipina and the first minority to land the position, she said, "It is a great honor bestowed on me. It is also a big responsibility. It is something that I take very seriously on a day-to-day basis. You

want to make sure you are doing the right thing and be the best you can be."

No two days are the same when you are in charge of the meals at the No. 1 residence in the United States. "There is really no typical day," Comerford declared with a laugh. "Every day is different. But you have the usual routine—prepare breakfast, then do lunch for the First Lady, and then maybe later on, snacks in between. But when we have events, like the other day, we prepared food for artists for a poetry jam. The East Room was turned into an awesome place. We had James Earl Jones and some artists reading poetry and playing music. The beauty of working in the White House is you look forward to what you will do tomorrow and be a part of history."

Why she loves her job

Asked what advice she would give to aspiring chefs, Comerford said, "Take responsibility seriously. Anything that is given to you is a chance to do something really good. It could be the most menial task—like chopping onions—but as long as you enjoy doing it and you do it from the heart, it's going to show in whatever you do and whatever you cook."

She shared her plans for the day when she hangs up her professional toque and apron for good. "My husband and I want to put up a bed and breakfast," Comerford said. "I would also like to help the underprivileged kids in the community. In Europe, kids with chef aspirations start learning how to cook at 16. Maybe I could help underprivileged kids and train them in cooking. We'll see what happens."

But these days, she cannot imagine doing anything else. "I really love what I am doing right now," she said.

After the interview, she gave the Inquirer a personal tour of the White House. At one point during the tour, Michelle Obama waved at Comerford and her visitors.

What's not to love about her job?

SWS survey puts Villar...

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 even in a scenario with only four candidates. He was followed by De Castro 24 percent; Escudero with 23 percent; and Legarda with 18 percent.

If the 2010 presidential race would be a three-way contest among Escudero, De Castro and Villar, the latter would still win the election with 37 percent compared to De Castro's 30 percent and Escudero's 27 percent.

If it's a three-way contest with De Castro and Legarda, Villar would still win the presidency with 39 percent with De Castro getting only 30 percent and Legarda, 24 percent.

"In a scenario with De Castro and Villar as candidates, Villar leads over De Castro with a score of 53 percent v. 38 percent. Those undecided, don't know, none comprise 9 percent," said the survey.

"In a scenario with Escudero and Villar as candidates, Villar leads with 36 percent, Escudero with 35 percent. Those undecided,

ed, don't know none, comprise 9 percent," it said.

"In a scenario with Legarda and Villar as candidates, Villar leads over Legarda, with 57 percent vs. 34 percent. Those undecided, don't know, none comprise 9 percent," it further said.

Meanwhile Escudero emerged as the top choice for Villar's running mate with 21 percent, followed by De Castro, 20 percent; Legarda, 19 percent; Roxas, 16 percent; Batangas Governor Vilma Santos and Senator Jose "Jingoy" Estrada 7 percent each, and Susan Roces-Poe with 3 percent.

Reached for comment, former Congressman Gilbert Remulla, spokesman of Villar's Nacionalista Party, admitted that the result was "reflective" of the survey that they had commissioned in the SWS.

"No comment but we find the result accurate and reflective of our own survey," Remulla said over the phone.

"We have our survey done periodically but we do it for internal use," he further said. ■

US assumes RP 2010 polls...

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The shift will represent a more balanced mix of "soft" and "hard" power, he added, with military, diplomatic, economic and humanitarian elements integrated seamlessly, Gates said.

US cool to VFA review

The US is satisfied with the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the Philippines, in the face of calls by critics for a review of the accord.

"I would just say that the US is quite comfortable with the VFA," Gates said.

"We are nations of laws. This agreement provides us with the legal basis for having our people here in partnership with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). We think it works and we are satisfied," he said.

Calls for the termination of the VFA mounted after US Marine Lance Corporal Daniel Smith was charged with rape after a November 2005 incident in Subic.

Smith was convicted and sentenced to life in prison by the Makati Regional Trial Court for raping "Nicole." The Court of Appeals, however, reversed the Makati court's ruling after the victim reher accusations, and ordered the release of Smith, who

is now back in the US.

Sen. Francis Pangilinan had filed a resolution before the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by Sen. Miriam Santiago, questioning the legality of the VFA.

US still hands off Spratlys

Gates said the US government is maintaining a hands-off policy over the disputed Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.

"There are a number of security challenges and obviously concerns on conflicting claims in the South China Sea. The US takes no position on those claims," he said.

He said that the US government is urging all the parties involved in the dispute to try and resolve these issues peacefully.

The claimants include the Philippines, China, Brunei Malaysia, Vietnam, and Taiwan.

Teodoro said Gates also expressed his gratitude to Filipino soldiers who are working hard to combat common security threats such as global terrorism.

Gate, who left at around 3:30 p.m. for the US aboard a 747 E4-B jumbo jet, was able to meet some US soldiers assigned in Mindanao. (With Pia Lee-Brago, James Mananghaya)

Japan apologizes for Bataan...

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Veterans. "Although we accepted the apology, it came too late. It's terrible... they should have done this about 25 years after the war."

"We extend a heartfelt apology [from] our country for having caused tremendous damage and suffering to many people, including prisoners of war, those who have undergone tragic experiences in the Bataan Peninsula, in Corregidor Island in the Philippines and other places," said Fujisaki. "Ladies and gentlemen, taking this opportunity, I would like to express my deepest condolences to all those who have lost their lives in the war, and

after the war, and their family members."

According to the Associated Press, about 73 surviving Bataan Death March veterans of the Army and former Army Air Corps were in attendance.

"Well, we finally got the apology that we wanted," said retired Tech Sgt. Joe Alexander of San Antonio, a two-time former commander of ADBC told the AP. "Now we can rest at ease. We're satisfied."

Whether skeptical or accepting, many veterans are resigned to the fact that this will probably be the only apology they'll ever hear from the Japanese for the Bataan Death March. (Joseph Pimentel/AJPress)

New ID rules...

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US State Department to cross land borders. The card does not work for air travel. At \$45 for first-time applicants, it's a more affordable alternative to the traditional passport, which costs \$100. More than 1 million passport cards have been issued since last year.

Identification documents available under the "Trusted Traveler" programs are also accepted. Those require fees ranging from \$50 to more than \$100. These programs, developed by the US, Canadian and Mexican governments, allow vetted travelers faster access to the border. In some cases, members in these

programs have their own lanes at border crossings.

Enhanced driver's licenses, which use a microchip to store a person's information, also can be used to cross the northern and southern borders. Washington state, Vermont, New York, and Michigan are the only states that offer them so far. An application process and interview are required for these licenses.

There will be some exceptions. Children under 16 traveling with family, people under 19 traveling in youth groups, Native Americans and members of the military will be able to use different forms of identification. Also, travelers in cruises that depart from a US port, sail only within the Western Hemisphere and return the same port do not have to comply. (AP)



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