

CLIPPINGS FOR TODAY, MARCH 29, 2024

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MANILA BULLETIN

The sweet potatoes of our Asian neighbors and the value of research

D. FOREIGN STORY

MANILA BULLETIN

Bird flu detected in US dairy cattle



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The sweet potatoes of our Asian neighbors and the value of research



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A blessed Good Friday, everyone! There are two main activities that Filipinos engage in during Holy Week. One is religious observance, and the other is going on vacation. It is in the spirit of the latter that I write this column.

Ask almost anyone who's worked in the local agriculture industry and they will, oftentimes wistfully, talk about how envious they are of our Asian neighbors such as Thailand, Vietnam, Taiwan, Korea, and Japan.

It's easy to experience any time you visit one of these places. The last time I went to Taiwan, I fell in love with their sweet potato (kamote), which I found out was a variety so secret that it's not allowed to leave the country uncooked, to avoid transplanting. In the Philippines, kamote is generally thought of as a lowly root crop, something only the poor eat, unless of course it's thought of as

a delicacy from another country.

I'm talking about the Japanese sweet potato varieties that have been flooding the market. Sweet potatoes are considered an ideal snack in Japan, and they have engineered their kamotes to provide optimum flavor with little to no fiber. And because Filipinos are a sucker for anything foreign, the formerly humble kamote has suddenly reached elite status, with online groceries selling it by the kilo at premium prices.

And with good reason, too. The Japanese variety really does taste better than the local ones available in the market. But that doesn't mean the Philippines doesn't have a premium sweet potato variety of its own. I've heard enough about languishing local research to at least suspect that somewhere

out there, a Filipino scientist has developed a sweet potato variety that can compete with Taiwan's and Japan's, except that it's never seen the light of day for whatever reason – too expensive to rollout, not enough demand, etc.. Or if this hasn't happened yet, I'm pretty sure that someone has at least wanted to do the research but was turned down for whatever reason – that nobody eats kamote, that root crops aren't marketable, etc.

I would be a hypocrite if I gave the blanket statement that we should buy our own crops in this case, because I have been buying local sweet potatoes and ignoring the imported ones and they haven't been making me happy at all. It's hard to say "support our farmers" when the crops that they are encouraged to grow pale in comparison to imported ones. I still haven't bought imported kamote and will continue to buy local ones, but I'm not going to judge anyone for choosing otherwise because the Japanese ones really are more pleasurable to eat.

I know it's not as simple as local farmers simply choosing to plant a different variety. There are many factors involved that encompass cultural, environmental, political, and market forces. Nor am I saying that other countries have better varieties than we do. They're different, and it so happens that one has traits that are desired in this era.

We have a small but eager scientific community whose research, if properly considered and funded,

could greatly enhance our agriculture industry. Unfortunately, there's an anti-intellectual streak running through most of the country, so that scientists are underfunded, forcing some of our brightest minds to seek employment where they will be appreciated and well-compensated.

This column was supposed to be about produce from our neighbors but, as writing sometimes does, it's segued into something on the need to utilize local research. I am reminded of the time I interviewed the co-founder of a coconut farm in Palawan and he narrated how, before the farm was set up, he and his team searched the globe for research on the best practices for planting coconut and they ended up finding their information at the Philippine Coconut Authority.

Yes, it's sad that there's much clamor for a foreign variety of a crop that's grown locally, but at the same time, maybe it's a wake-up call for us to put even more value in our research and the people who engage in it.

Though it may be good for certain politicians, we have to stop encouraging anti-intellectualism because it's the whole country that suffers from its encouragement.

As we reflect on Jesus' sacrifice for our souls this Good Friday, may we also reflect on the things that we can physically do in this world to make it a better place.



Bird flu detected in US dairy cattle

HOUSTON, United States (AFP) – Cows at dairy farms in Texas and Kansas tested positive for a contagious strain of bird flu in an “unprecedented development,” Texan farming authorities said Wednesday.

The Texas Department of Agriculture and with other state and national agencies “are working around the clock to ensure the safety of our food supply,” said Texas agriculture commissioner Sid Miller in a statement.

But Miller added, “While troubling, this outbreak is not currently expected to threaten our nation’s commercial dairy supply.”

Texas is among the five largest milk-producing states in the United States, according to data from the US

Department of Agriculture.

The press release said that tests had found no alterations to the virus that would make it more transmissible to humans and that the risk to the public “remains minimal.”

“Further efforts to continue epidemiological investigations are underway to ensure a complete picture of the situation can be evaluated,” it added.

The TDA said positive samples were retrieved from unpasteurized milk collected from two dairy farms in Kansas and one in Texas, with analysis confirming the results on March 25.

It added that HPAI had not been detected in any beef cattle but urged all farmers to implement “enhanced biosecurity measures on their farms and ranches to protect their herds.”

The TRA said it was working alongside the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other agencies to evaluate symptoms among primarily older dairy cows in Texas, Kansas and New Mexico.