

Bangus Banter

TAGALOG, CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN LUZON ISLAND, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES. *The culturing of bangus – a versatile fish that can thrive in salty, fresh or brackish water – has spawned a fish-pond culture, complete with social systems, even a vocabulary.*



A stack of bangus in a market stall.

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A wide net, pangaboy, in nurturing hands.

KAWAG IS WHAT bangus fry are called. The counting of the wee *kawag* is done by 100s; each century mark is a *palyo* (10,000 is a *laksa*; 100,000, a *yuta*). One hundred small *sigay* (cowrie shells, *Cypraea annulus* or *C. Moneta*) were once used as counting markers. Kawag are gathered by a *sudsud*, a fine net passed along seashore waters of Ilocos, Zambales, Batangas, Quezon, Mindoro and some areas in the Visayas and Mindanao. Bangus eggs, deposited in the sea, hatch and appear from April to July, although there are kawag that occur in February. Called *isdang aga*, literally “early fish”, these are said to be the best fry.

Purchased kawag are transported either in *palayok* (clay pots, the old method) or plastic bags pumped with oxygen. Upon arrival in the pond area, these are placed in the *bagsakan*, a small “reception” box.

The sewing-needle sized kawag grow into: *ga-dampalit* (the size of a leaf of the paddy weed dampalit which is edible as achara [pickled vegetables], and is fast disappearing); *hatirin* (fingerlings which are the length of

the width of forefinger and middle finger put side by side); *lagpusan* (a size determined by grasping the fish by its body; head and tail should jut out at either end); *ga-baluktot* (slightly smaller than the distance between the tips of the thumb and an extended crooked forefinger); *manicure* (as long as the distance between a fully extended thumb and forefinger); *mandangkal* (a length equivalent to the maximum stretch between extended thumb and middle finger).

As the fish grow, it becomes necessary to transfer them from pond to pond within the pond complex. The transfer is called *likas* or *bulos*. Sometimes fingerlings are kept in a box called *bansutan* (from *bansot*, stunted). Fish-pond operatives say that bangus kept in the *bansutan*, even for a year, do not grow big.

Bangus earmarked for growing out are transferred from the *bansutan* to the *kaluwangan* to grow there until harvest time. The harvest is one in the *kulungan* or catching pond, to which the fish are driven from the *kaluwangan* by a lambat called *pangaboy*, a wide net. In the catching pond, the fish are gathered in another seine called *duyan* (also known as *panagap* or *saklet*).

The harvest is called *patay* (dead), probably because the netted bangus, after allowing them 20 to 30 minutes to disgorge, are suffocated by drawing the *duyan* tighter and tighter until the fish lose their breath.

The bangus answers to a formal name, *Chanos chanos*, and an anglicized one, milkfish, because of the color of its belly. From this last, it might be presumed, comes the taunt or tease hurled at fair skinned or mixed-descent persons: *mestisong bangus*, *madaling maubos!*