

## *Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine*

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Residents of the United States often have a peculiar view of Mexican food, drawn more from Mexican American restaurants or from fast food simulations than from actual experience south of the border. While the combination plates at local restaurants offer little of the rich complexity of Mexico's regional cuisines, they do have a history of their own, one that reflects the ongoing struggle of Mexican Americans to gain acceptance and citizenship in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

The cooking of the Southwest, like Mexican cooking in general, embodies a fusion of Native American and Hispanic influences, the legacy of three centuries of first Spanish and then Mexican rule. As examples of a common regional style, *norteño* cooking, the dishes from different parts of the borderlands—resemble each other more than they do the foods of other parts of Mexico. One distinctive characteristic of northern Mexican cooking is the use of wheat flour instead of corn in making tortillas. The great herds of livestock raised along the frontier made *norteños* more carnivorous, in particular more fond of beef, than Mexicans farther south. On the other hand, the grassy plains and arid deserts of the north, well suited to cattle ranching and irrigated wheat farming, offered less variety in vegetables, herbs, and chiles, limiting the potential for complex sauces and soups. These common elements notwithstanding, considerable variety also exists within Southwestern cooking. Cheryl Alters Jamison and Bill Jamison, in their authoritative work *The Border Cookbook*, define four broad regions straddling the U.S.–Mexican border: Texas and northeastern Mexico, New Mexico, Sonora, and California. This essay will describe these differing cooking styles from a historical and geographical perspective.<sup>2</sup>

Native Americans and Hispanics in the Southwest already had long-established culinary traditions in 1848, when Mexico surrendered California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas to the United States in the

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Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The predominantly male fortune seekers who migrated to the region alternately looked down on the racially mixed residents and married into the more European-appearing elite, while grabbing land and wealth on an equal-opportunity basis. A peculiar gender dynamic emerged in which Anglo newcomers feminized the male inhabitants—think of stereotypes of passive Mexican men in dress-like serapes and big, gaudy sombreros—and sexualized the women as “hot tamales” and “chili queens.” In this contentious environment, the women’s work of cooking and the traditionally male task of grilling meat became sites of cultural conflict and accommodation. Simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the piquant stews of Hispanic women in San Antonio, Anglo males ultimately appropriated chili by taming the hot peppers into a mass-produced and easily regulated powder. Outsiders found some Mexican American dishes simply repulsive, most notably menudo (tripe), thereby making them powerful symbols of ethnic identity. Between these two extremes, most Southwestern dishes gradually entered the mestizo stew that makes up the cuisine of the United States, acquiring new tastes and forms but maintaining clear links to their ethnic origins.<sup>3</sup>

### CORN MOTHERS AND ANIMAL SPIRITS

For more than a thousand years, cooks of the Southwest have taken inspiration from the civilizations of Mesoamerica. The agricultural complex of maize, beans, and squash, domesticated in central Mexico, gradually diffused through much of North America in the first millennium of the Common Era. The staple tortilla—made by simmering maize in mineral lime (CaO) grinding it into *masa* (dough) on a *metate* (grinding stone), patting it into a flat round shape, and cooking it briefly on a griddle—had also begun to arrive in the Southwest before the Spaniards, as had the more elaborate tamales, dumplings made of the same dough steamed in cornhusks. Justifiably proud of their elaborate cuisine, the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico dismissed their northern neighbors contemptuously as Chichimecas (dog-people) for their scavenging ways. Nevertheless, the lack of large domesticated animals reduced even the haughty warriors of the Aztec Empire to considerable hunting and gathering to supplement their basically vegetarian diet, thus belying some of their claims to superiority over cooks from the northern frontier.

An assortment of wild plants and animals formed the common basis for human subsistence in the Southwest. With its large size and savory meat, the deer stood out as the favorite game animal for much of North America, although Indians hunted smaller game as well, including peccaries, rabbits, mice, rats, and snakes. Edible desert plants such as the prickly pear, mesquite bean pods, maguey, and a variety of roots, herbs, and *quelites* (greens) supplemented the hunt. In some areas nature provided so abundantly that the inhabitants had little incentive to undertake agriculture and instead could wander freely. For example, in the coastal regions of present-day California, acorns fell so profusely from the trees that the Indians could gather them as a daily staple, along with the plentiful fruits, berries, and game animals (see figure 1). The Seri Indians, living in what is now the Mexican state of Sonora, caught enough fish and sea turtles in the Gulf of California to feed themselves without agriculture. The Gulf of Mexico, particularly around the Rio Grande delta, yielded a similarly rich catch, although maize agriculture had begun to make inroads in this region when the Spaniards arrived. Even some inland areas, such as the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Rio Conchos, offered plentiful freshwater mussels and fish, but again not to the exclusion of floodplain agriculture.<sup>4</sup>



The nomadic life of the California and Seri Indians contrasted sharply with the lifestyle in the Pueblo villages along the Rio Grande and the Little Colorado and Pecos Rivers. Irrigated maize agriculture supported large communities, in some cases numbering in the thousands and living in multistory mud-brick apartment houses. The Pueblo Indians consumed the staple corn in a variety of ways: toasted, boiled, and as gruel. In addition, the Spanish conquistadors described the making of tortillas and tamales; indeed, Coronado praised the Zuni tortillas as the best he had ever eaten. Nevertheless, the Spaniards did not mention the use of chiles, the principal flavoring of central Mexico. The Pueblo people also raised domesticated turkeys, but their sedentary life and advanced agriculture did not preclude hunting and gathering. Piñón nuts, gathered in the fall, added greatly to the Pueblo diet, and the Pecos Indians even ventured out onto the Great Plains to hunt bison. The people at Pecos may also have caught large amounts of trout, while the Zuni considered fish taboo.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the Southwestern Indians were semi-sedentary, growing maize while still depending heavily on hunting and gathering. Called *ranchería* people by the Spaniards, they generally lived in bands numbering two or three hundred, spread out over considerable distances, and often migrating during the course of the year. The *ranchería* people comprised the Tarahumara and Conchos of the western Sierra Madre (Chihuahua); the Yaqui and Mayo, inhabiting river valleys of the same names; as well as their northern neighbors, the Lower Pima and Opata (Sonora), the Yuma in the Colorado River valley, and the Upper Pima and Tohono O'odham along various rivers in the Sonoran Desert (northwestern Sonora and southern Arizona). In addition, the Athabaskan-speaking people later known as Navajos and Apaches had recently migrated into the region from the north and were beginning to cultivate maize when the Spaniards arrived. While much of their harvest of corn, beans, and squash was simply roasted along with any game they may have caught, the *ranchería* people made *pinole* by adding toasted and ground maize seeds to water, and baked loaves of corn and mesquite bread. Some also drank a mildly alcoholic beverage of fermented cactus fruit.<sup>6</sup>

A common theme unified the lives of these otherwise disparate peoples, that of constant movement. Even the most settled Puebloans had to relocate regularly, rebuilding their adobe homes in the process, in order to find more fertile land in the arid climate. The agricultural Pueblo societies were matrilineal, and some authors have suggested

that women may have fared better there than in the patriarchal hunter-gatherer societies of California. Moreover, the Pueblo Indians worshipped Corn Mothers as fertility symbols at the heart of their religious beliefs, while the *ranchería* peoples, who had adopted agriculture more recently, attached less religious significance to corn. But regardless whether the Native Americans believed in animal spirits or corn goddesses, their encounter with Spanish priests changed their diet as well as their religion.<sup>7</sup>

### FRONTIER FOODS OF NEW SPAIN

The conquistadors' mission of Europeanizing the Americas—literally founding a New Spain—required the simultaneous introduction of Old World plants and animals and the extirpation of native foods associated with heathen religious practices. Father Bernardino de Sahagún instructed the Indians to eat “that which the Castilian people eat, because it is good food, that with which they are raised, they are strong and pure and wise. . . . You will become the same way if you eat their food.”<sup>8</sup> Yet his nutritional advice, like much of the Catholic doctrine, was accepted only halfway. Native Americans embraced some new foods, particularly livestock, while clinging stubbornly to their staple crops of maize, beans, squash, and chiles. A *mestizo* cuisine eventually emerged, combining foods from the Old World and the New, just as intermarriage between Spaniards and Indians produced Mexico's *mestizo* nation. These mixtures spread to the northern provinces as well, and on that distant frontier, *mestizo* society and culture were often mistaken for Spanish originals.

Catholic priests, whose evangelical mission to the Indians served to justify Spain's empire in the Americas, demanded radical changes in the lives of the new initiates. The European belief that civilization required permanent settlements brought an end to the nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle of many *ranchería* peoples, although the introduction of livestock compensated in part for the decline in hunting. Prohibitions on polygamy, together with the introduction of European diseases against which the natives had little resistance, decimated the indigenous social organization. Natives responded to these changes in different ways; the Yaquis embraced the missions, adopting far more of the newly emerging Mexican culture, including the cooking techniques, than did the neighboring Mayo. Among the Athabaskan people, some settled down

to become sheepherders, blending their culture with that of the Pueblos and taking the name Navajo. Others took only the Spanish horses, and by the 1660s, the Apaches, as they were called, had become a menace to both Spanish and Pueblo settlements. Pacification policies encouraged further acculturation through handouts of food and alcohol to make the Apaches dependent on Spanish officials and the distribution of defective firearms to limit the destruction when they did go on raids.<sup>9</sup>

If the spiritual conquest legitimized the colonies, the prospect of making a quick fortune attracted Spanish settlers. After looting the Aztec Empire, the conquistadors set out for the north in search of the fabled Seven Cities of Cíbola, where legend had it that the streets were paved with gold. The expedition of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado reached the Zuni Pueblos in 1540, discovering the reality to be a more prosaic adobe. The silver bonanza at Zacatecas in 1548 attracted the first permanent European settlement in the north and also led to the construction of presidios to protect the treasure on the Royal Road back to Mexico City. Juan de Oñate, a silver miner made wealthy in Zacatecas, established the colony of New Mexico in 1598, although the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 temporarily forced the Spaniards to withdraw to El Paso del Norte. The rest of the Southwest remained unsettled by Europeans until the eighteenth century, when imperial defense requirements promoted a more active Spanish presence. French incursions from Louisiana into Texas led to the foundation of San Antonio in 1718, while Apache raids in Sonora motivated the construction of a presidio at Tucson in 1776. Finally, the appearance of Russian trappers on the northern Pacific coast prompted the crown to transfer troops from Sonora and Sinaloa to new presidios in California.<sup>10</sup>

The new settlers, although generally mestizos from central Mexico, attempted to construct a Spanish society on the northern frontier. The Iberian Peninsula had a medieval tradition of mounted cattle raising—the vaquero culture later appropriated by Anglo cowboys—but the scrawny range cattle were often butchered for their hides alone, leaving the meat behind to rot. The settlers preferred sheep and goats, especially prizing *cabrito asado* (roast kid) as a delicacy throughout the frontier region. Cooking techniques often amounted to methods of preservation such as making cheese or sausage. The colonists also produced large amounts of *carne seca*, a form of jerky made by cutting beef into long strips and drying it in the desert sun inside a cage to keep the flies out. To preserve pork, they made a vinegar marinade called *adovo*,

heavily spiced with chiles to distinguish it from similar Spanish preparations. Whenever irrigation permitted, the settlers cultivated the European grain wheat, although the expense of mills and ovens often forced women to grind the grain on metates and cook it in the form of tortillas rather than bread. The pervasive use of chiles in stews and salsas likewise demonstrated the Native American influence on Spanish cuisine. The rich agricultural land of California allowed the production of those Mediterranean staples, wine and olives, unavailable elsewhere in New Spain, but even the wealthiest settlers ate a generally Spartan diet with only an occasional luxury such as imported chocolate. Those sturdy frontier foods later became the foundation for Southwestern cuisine and a bulwark of Mexican American identity.<sup>11</sup>

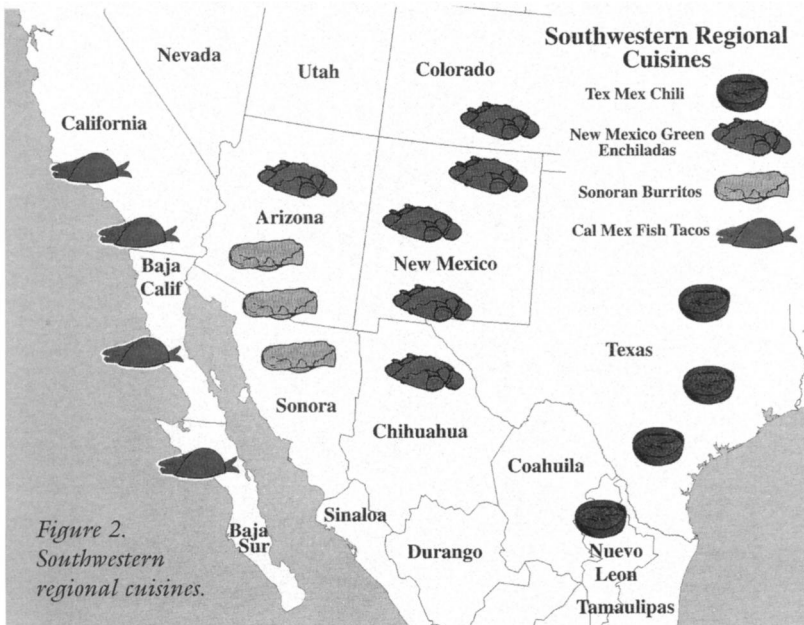
### DECONSTRUCTING CHILI/E

Chili or chile? Chili con carne or carne con chile? Chile verde or carne verde? Southwestern cuisine often seems as baffling as it is intimidating to newcomers who have not yet developed a tolerance for spicy foods. The confusion derives from both regional and temporal differences; for example, a person who asks, “Red or green?” is now answering the question, “Where are you? New Mexico.” Prior to refrigeration, the color question was seasonal, had the fresh green chiles ripened and turned red while drying on the *ristra*? But however varied their cooking styles, Hispanics in the Southwest faced a common question that struck to the heart of their identity: were they Mexican or Spanish? For more than a century after the United States annexed the region, former Mexican citizens, accustomed to fluid racial boundaries, struggled to find a place in a society that saw only black and white. They claimed Spanish descent in an attempt to gain equal status as Europeans, but in doing so, often shunned their fellow Mexicans who had migrated north more recently. The permutations of chile reflect the diverse experiences of Hispanics as they encountered Anglo society and established their citizenship in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

New Mexico, the oldest European settlement in North America, also has the most firmly established cuisine in the Southwest. Centered around the capital, Santa Fe, this cooking style extends beyond the geographical confines of the state to include the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado, the mountains around Flagstaff in northern Ari-

zona, and parts of Chihuahua, Mexico (see figure 2). The soul of Mexican cuisine has always been the chile pepper, but while the cooks of Old Mexico experimented with blending different chiles to make their renowned *mole* sauces, in New Mexico they perfected the cultivation and cooking of a single chile. The state's eponymous pepper forms the basic ingredient for both chile verde and chile colorado, which can be served thick as a sauce or with broth and vegetables as a stew, although in the latter case the green is more common, sometimes with the name *carne con chile verde* or *chile verde caldo* to distinguish it from the sauce. For those unable to choose between the two sauces, restaurants in New Mexico offer a combination of red and green known as Christmas. Unlike Mexican moles, which gain their taste and texture from freshly ground peppers, chile colorado is often simply a mixture of chile powder and water, perhaps thickened by a roux, with garlic, oregano, and salt to taste. As Santa Fe cooking authority Huntley Dent explains, red chile "savors of mystique, not so much for its own taste, which is earthy and fairly musty, as for its ability to combine with corn tortillas, meat, and cheese."<sup>13</sup>

The traditional cooking of New Mexico comprises a variety of dishes, often made with distinctive local twists. The celebrated blue corn and





the little-known *chicos* (roasted green ears) are both hallmarks of the state, which is also the only place cooks serve the hominy dish *posole* as a vegetable side order rather than a meaty stew. Pork rather than beef came to replace kid and mutton as the most common meat, used both for chile stews and the colonial dish *carne adovada*, which remains a favorite in New Mexico. Meals end with such distinctive desserts as the fried-bread *sopaipillas* and *buñuelos* or the enigmatic sprouted-wheat pudding *panocha*. Moreover, different cooking styles appear within New Mexico, particularly in the rivalry between north and south. The residents of Chimayó and Española take pride in the intense flavor their diminutive chiles develop while shivering in the shadows of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. “Down there in the south,” explained farmer Orlando Casados, Sr., “a lot of those chiles are as big as a banana, but they taste like cardboard, no flavor at all. This is the best place for growing chile in the whole world.” Nevertheless, people down south in the “Chile Capital” of Hatch, New Mexico, feel equally proud of the *relenos* (stuffed chiles) served at their annual Chile Festival. Hispanics in Colorado meanwhile consider their chile verde superior because of the quality of the local pork.<sup>14</sup>

The regional cooking of Sonora, encompassing both the Mexican state and the southern half of Arizona, gave much less emphasis to the heat of the chile pepper. The classic New Mexico stew *carne con chile verde* changed so radically when made with mild Anaheim peppers that some Arizona cooks dropped the word “chile” entirely and referred to it simply as “carne verde.” The dish also featured beef instead of pork, a tribute to the herds of cattle raised in the valleys of the Sonoran Desert. Even after the advent of refrigeration, one of the most common methods of preparing beef remained the colonial style of jerky, sometimes called *machaca*, for the pounding needed to reconstitute it. Cookbook author Diana Kennedy noted that cooks throughout the state of Sonora kept a large black pebble for this purpose. Flour tortillas, while common throughout the Southwest, also reached the peak of artistry in Sonora, where cooks often roll them out to perfectly round, paper-thin disks a foot and a half in diameter. When wrapped around beef or bean fillings to make burritos, they became “possibly the single heaviest fast-food item in the world,” which in turn took the name *chimichanga* (basically meaning “thingamajig”) when deep fried.<sup>15</sup>

New Mexico and Arizona shared a common isolation, which kept the territories from reaching full statehood in the nineteenth century and also allowed the Mexican communities to retain their cultural integrity. Of

course, Anglos came to dominate politics and most Hispanics remained strictly working class; nevertheless, a substantial Mexican American middle class preserved its economic position and cultural heritage by renaming it Spanish. Eventually, the same rugged mountains and stark desert landscapes that had repelled immigrants in the nineteenth century attracted them when air conditioning and ski lifts arrived following World War II, leading to a real estate boom that drove increasing numbers of Hispanics from their land around Santa Fe, Taos, and Tucson. By contrast, Mexicans in Texas and California did not have a century of isolation to consolidate their social position, for the dispossession of land followed immediately on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.<sup>16</sup>

While the origins of Texas's chili con carne remain shrouded in culinary legend, the subsequent development of the dish reveals a process of both racial stereotyping and cultural appropriation. The dish probably began as a stew, made of goat or deer meat as often as beef, and spiced with red chiles, cumin, and oregano, which remain the distinctive flavors of Tex-Mex cooking as cooking expert Marilyn Tausend has observed. Subtleties of taste were lost on Anglo visitors to nineteenth-century San Antonio, who rarely made it past the initial shock of the chile peppers. In 1874, for example, Edward King described "fat, swarthy Mexican mater-familias" offering "various savory compounds, swimming in fiery pepper, which biteth like a serpent." The imagined dangers, both culinary and sexual, of the so-called chili queens on Military Plaza enticed countless tourists, who remembered the city "because of the Chili Stands, the Menger Hotel, and the Alamo." But the Hispanic cooks did not share in the profits from mass-marketing their dish; in 1896, a German immigrant, William Gebhardt, formulated the chili powder known as Tampico Dust, which helped spread the taste for chili across the country. Already tamed down for timid palates, chili underwent other alterations, the side order of beans was unceremoniously dumped into the pot, and it was added to hot dogs and, in Cincinnati, even to spaghetti. Meanwhile, back in San Antonio, after a long struggle with city inspectors, the original chili stands closed down as supposed health hazards in the 1930s.<sup>17</sup>

Chili had been stripped of its ethnicity to become the state dish of Texas, but Mexican Americans retained a repertoire of other foods that affirmed their identity precisely because of the scorn they attracted from the Anglo elite. Although it had lost favor in New Mexico and California, *cabrito asado* remained as popular in south Texas as in northeastern Mexico, particularly Monterrey, where it attained legendary status.

Anglos had little use for goat, but the only beef that poor Mexican Americans could afford was the viscera. One such castoff cut, the diaphragm muscle (*arrachera*), lost its tough texture in a marinade of lime juice and garlic and became quite delicious when grilled on an open fire and served with salsa on hot, fresh tortillas. Perhaps the most beloved dish of working-class Mexican Americans, and the most repulsive one to outsiders, was the pit-barbecued bull head (*barbacoa de cabeza*). The two-day process of preparing the pit, cooking the meat, and serving it up messily as tacos invited communal celebrations, drinking, and dancing among Hispanics.<sup>18</sup>

Legends of Texas chili notwithstanding, the most mysterious branch of Southwestern cuisine is the original art of California ranch cooking. Unlike the thriving Hispanic cultures of New Mexico, Arizona, and south Texas, Californio society now exists only as a memory, distorted by the assimilation of a small elite into Anglo society and by more recent Mexican migrants, who far outnumber the descendants of the original settlers. Nevertheless, a few tastes of that pastoral era can be gleaned from the first Spanish-language cookbook published in the state, *El cocinero español* (1898) by Encarnación Pinedo. An heiress to one of the most prominent Californio families, the Berreyesa clan, she was born in the tragic year of 1848, as a swarm of Anglo fortune hunters descended to swindle away the family estates and to lynch eight of her uncles and cousins. Determined to maintain the dignity of Hispanic culture, Pinedo gave a stinging rebuke to the barbarous Yankee invaders, describing their food as “the most insipid and tasteless that one can imagine.” Her own recipes, written in a lively literary style, derived from classical Mexican dishes such as moles, tamales, chiles rellenos, and barbacoa de cabeza, even though she disguised them with Spanish titles. As Victor Valle has observed, “The Mexican roots of [modern] California cuisine can also be detected in her liberal use of fruits and vegetables, fresh edible flowers and herbs, her aggressive spicing, and grilling over native wood fires.”<sup>19</sup>

Pinedo’s cookbook provided an eloquent example of Hispanics’ widespread use of food to affirm their identity against the threat of Anglo encroachment. Jacqueline Higuera McMahan has written a series of nostalgic cookbooks, laden with family history, which describe the culinary encounters of old California. The Yankee newcomers were apparently so astonished to see people eat chiles for breakfast that they attributed to Californios the digestive system of ostriches. The Higueras meanwhile repeated the fiction that they had lost their Santa Clara ranch

to finance the legendary 1865 wedding festival of Don Valentín's favorite daughter, María. Although declining in society, the family at least took comfort from the belief that they had a more civilized lifestyle than the Anglo land grabbers around them. Twentieth-century migrants brought their own regional dishes with them from Mexico and often used these foods to defend themselves against racial discrimination. Victor Villaseñor, in his best-selling family memoir, *Rain of Gold*, recalled his grandmother's words, "Don't worry about the police. One day we'll feed them tacos with so much old chile that they'll get diarrhea and their assholes will burn for weeks!"<sup>20</sup>

Encounters between ethnic foods and mainstream consumers have remained sites of cultural contention throughout the twentieth century, as Mexicans faced the contradictory impulses to preserve their culture intact or to profit from adapting the foods for a general audience. Enclave restaurants sprang up wherever large numbers of Mexicans settled more or less permanently to work. By the beginning of the century, such small-time establishments existed all along the border as well as in more distant urban areas such as Chicago, St. Louis, and Kansas City. Moreover, many restaurants acquired a Mexican character when Anglo owners discovered the profits they could make by allowing their Hispanic kitchen staff to cook their own foods. One such successful restaurateur, who had started out with just a shack selling hamburgers and barbecue in Tucson and was facing ruin when his Mexican cook quit, begged her to write down the formulas. "Oh no," Esperanza Montoya Padilla replied, "I'm dumb enough to work for you, but I'm not dumb enough to give you my recipes!"<sup>21</sup>

The combination plate, rarely seen in Mexico but one of the mainstays of Mexican American restaurants, may have originated in Texas early in the twentieth century as an adaptation to Anglo customers. Tacos, enchiladas, tostadas, and burritos, known collectively as *antojitos* (little whimsies), had long provided quick meals to working-class Mexicans, who often ate them standing on a street corner. Mainstream diners required a more formal meal, including a plate and silverware, so Hispanic cooks complied, perhaps spreading quantities of red chili sauce on top because the customers were using forks anyway. Anglo expectations for a quick plate full of food, as opposed to the Mexican preference for separate, smaller courses, encouraged cooks to combine the main dish with rice (usually eaten prior to the main course) and beans (eaten after). Numbering the combination plates relieved non-

Spanish speakers of the need to pronounce what they were eating, a strategy also adopted by Chinese cooks seeking a crossover clientele. About 1940, the combination plate even made its way back to Mexico when flamboyant restaurateur José Inés Loredó created his signature dish, *carne asada a la tampiqueña*. This butterflied and grilled filet, served with poblano chile strips, two green enchiladas, a bowl of frijoles, and a piece of grilled cheese, introduced the regional foods of Loredó's hometown, Tampico, to residents of Mexico City.<sup>22</sup>

Small restaurants have a high mortality rate, and Mexican American establishments are no exception; nevertheless a few have survived through the years to attain the status of enduring monuments. The names of these restaurants have become local legends: in Los Angeles, El Cholo, founded in 1923 as the Sonora Café; Tucson's El Charro Café, dating back to 1922; La Posta, which opened in Mesilla, New Mexico, in 1939; and Mi Tierra, located on San Antonio's Market Square since 1951. Outstanding kitchens provided the common foundation for these culinary monuments, but their fame spread far beyond their ethnic enclave in part because of celebrity endorsements. El Cholo became a watering hole for Hollywood stars from Clark Gable and Bing Crosby to Jack Nicholson and Madonna. Western movies filmed on location near Tucson in the 1940s gave El Charro an opportunity to bask in Hollywood publicity. More recently, national attention focused on Mi Tierra when a photojournalist caught President Bill Clinton wearing one of their T-shirts while jogging on a beach.<sup>23</sup>

Countless restaurants have sought to lure non-Mexican customers through identification with celebrities, either by decorating their walls with autographed photos or by affixing small plaques to the tables. Such endorsements offered a cheap substitute for advertising in order to build up a brand name as well as a surrogate form of authenticity in a multi-ethnic marketplace. This familiarity may have been particularly valuable when mainstream eaters lacked sufficient knowledge of an ethnic cuisine to distinguish quality food from bowdlerized imitations. A similar purpose was served by culinary legends, endlessly repeated, about which Southwestern restaurateur named Ignacio invented nachos, or who created the original margarita, or the first green enchiladas with chicken and sour cream. These tales often reveal a desire for acceptance of ethnic foods by the broader society; for example, the owners of El Charro Café recall a visit, in 1946, by Thomas E. Dewey in which the presidential candidate supposedly mistook one of the soft, thin flour tortillas

for a napkin and tucked it into his collar. The Dewey Napkin exhibited the same characteristics as the legendary origins of Mexican mole, created by colonial nuns out of a mixture of Old World spices and New World chiles—just like the mestizo nation—and served up for the approval of the Spanish viceroy. In the Southwest, these urban legends gently chide Anglos for their unfamiliarity with Mexican food and by extension their society. Perhaps the most famous tells of President Gerald Ford eating a tamale without taking off the husk.<sup>24</sup>

Another route to financial success for Mexican American restaurants in the postwar era came from the development of franchise chains. The largest of these, El Chico, began in 1931 with Adelaida “Mama” Cuellar’s tamale stand at the Kaufman County Fair. After losing a number of small-town cafes in the depression, the family moved to Dallas and opened the first El Chico in 1940. When the war ended, the Cuellar brothers began expanding, locally at first and eventually throughout the South and Southwest, before selling the restaurants in the 1990s. Another chain based in the Dallas–Fort Worth area, Pulidos, began in the 1950s with an immigrant family from Zacatecas. The Pulidos weathered economic downturns by self-financing new locations, often taking over defunct restaurants, and by expanding into small towns where they faced little competition. Although the menu catered predominantly to Anglo customers, the tamales retained an authentic Mexican taste because they were made by hand every morning by Mrs. Pulido and her two comadres.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the success of culinary monuments and Southwestern chains, Mexican American food did not attain a national presence until it was taken over by non-Mexican corporations such as Taco Bell. Sociologist George Ritzer has described the spread of fast-food restaurants—“McDonaldization” he calls it—as the continuation of Max Weber’s rationalization process whereby technology imposes greater efficiency, predictability, and control on society.<sup>26</sup> This explanation certainly applies to the restaurant chain founded in 1962 by Glen Bell in Downey, California. Rather than compete for the hamburger market with Ray Kroc, in nearby San Bernardino, Bell devised a way to speed up the production of tacos by pre-frying the corn tortillas, thus creating the prototype for the hard taco shell. Mexican-style food was thereby released from the need for fresh tortillas, allowing the chain to expand throughout the country. The corporation went public in 1969, was bought by PepsiCo. in 1978, and then spun off in Tricon Global Restaurants with Pizza Hut and KFC in 1997. With more than 4,600 locations worldwide, and

with look-alike competitors such as Del Taco, Taco Time, and Taco Tico, Taco Bell defined Mexican food for an entire generation in the United States. The mass-market appropriation of Mexican food, which began with Tampico Dust and racial slurs about chili queens, thus culminated in chants of “Viva Gorditas!” by the Taco Bell dog. Nevertheless, as tourism and migration gave consumers a greater awareness of genuine Mexican cuisine, a culinary renaissance became possible.

### THE BLUE CORN BONANZA

Taco Bell had skimmed the surface, or perhaps dredged the bottom, of Mexican American foods, but a wealth of Southwestern dishes awaited discovery by consumers. Santa Fe finally grabbed the nation’s gastronomic imagination in the 1980s, after a lengthy search for authentic regional cuisines from the United States that could compete with those of France, Italy, and China. Once the trend began, Southwestern food quickly became so common that, in 1987, M. F. K. Fisher groaned, “If I hear any more about chic Tex-Mex or blue cornmeal, I’ll throw up.” Nevertheless, her complaints went unheeded, as corporate versions of Mexican food filled supermarkets across the country. That this was not just a temporary fad became clear in 1991, when salsa surpassed catsup as the best-selling condiment in the United States. This rapid success did nothing to diminish but rather heightened the tension between authenticity and adaptation that had so long bedeviled Southwestern cooking.<sup>27</sup>

The birth of a modern, upscale restaurant version of traditional Southwestern cooking had a long gestation period—most notably in the cookbooks, newspaper columns, and ecological awareness of James Beard, Craig Claiborne, and Alice Waters—so that when it finally emerged, it soon became ubiquitous. John Rivera Sedlar, a native of New Mexico who pioneered this new style in 1980, recalled, “When I first began serving tortillas, tamales, and chiles in a fine-dining environment, people gasped.” Shortly thereafter, Robert Del Grande in Houston and Stephan Pyles in Dallas did for Texas cooking what Sedlar had done for New Mexico. In 1987, Mark Miller, a former anthropology student with a deep knowledge of the foods and cultures of Latin America, opened the acclaimed Coyote Café in Santa Fe. Where ethnic restaurants had earlier pursued celebrities as advertisements, the chefs suddenly found themselves to be celebrities—for example, television’s

“Too Hot Tamales,” Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger. As the field grew increasingly crowded, Jay McCarthy sought recognition by proclaiming himself the “Cactus King,” followed by Lenard Rubin, the “Cilantro King.” Of course, much of this nouvelle Southwestern cuisine bore only a superficial resemblance to either Mexican or Mexican American cooking; witness Pyles’s signature dish, a seared foie gras corn pudding tamale with pineapple mole and canela dust. Nevertheless, similar concoctions began to appear in some of the most expensive restaurants in Mexico City.<sup>28</sup>

Supermarket sales of tortillas, chips, salsas, and other Mexican foods meanwhile grew into a three-billion-dollar market by the mid-1990s, although only a small fraction of this revenue went to Hispanic-owned businesses. Indeed, the industry has been dominated by Anglos since Elmer Doolin purchased the formula for Fritos corn chips from a nameless Mexican American in 1932 and Dave Pace began bottling salsa in 1948. Just three corporations controlled more than half the nation’s salsa market: Pace, owned by Campbell Soup Co., Tostitos, a brand of Frito-Lay, and Old El Paso, a subsidiary of Pillsbury. Boutique producers meanwhile contended for a more upscale niche with outlandish claims of authenticity. Fire Roasted Zuni Zalsa attributed its origins to a mythical Mexican past: “The old patron walked down the mountain-side overlooking the jalapeño field. He paused, turned to young José-ito [sic] and said, ‘Make me a salsa, make me a salsa I can’t refuse.’” Local Mexican American manufacturers did better with corn tortillas because of their brief shelf life, but the bulk of sales in the United States went for flour tortillas, often stripped of their original ethnic character by cinnamon or pesto flavoring and marketed as “wraps.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet the search for authenticity, or at least for product differentiation, led back again and again to Mexico. The quintessential dish of modern Tex-Mex, fajitas, started out as the vaquero’s humble arrachera, served up on a fancy grill but eaten in the style of all Mexican tacos, with salsa on hot and, one hopes, fresh tortillas. In the 1980s, the fad drove the price of skirt steak out of the reach of the working-class Hispanics who invented the dish and also led to that oxymoron “chicken fajitas.” One of the hottest items of the 1990s, the fish taco, was discovered by surfers such as Ralph Rubio while vacationing in Baja California and became part of the new Cal-Mex cuisine, especially around San Diego. At the same time, growing numbers of Tex-Mex restaurants in New York City have begun to replace burritos and fajitas with regional Mexican dish-



es from Oaxaca and Veracruz, dumping the serapes and mariachi music in the process. Even in the Dallas–Fort Worth area, restaurateur Chris Aparicio reported optimistically, “You used to have to have Tex-Mex food to survive. We serve authentic Mexican and our clientele used to be 80 percent Hispanic. Now it’s 60 percent Anglo and 40 percent Hispanic. People are catching on to the true flavor of Mexican food.”<sup>30</sup>

The real question about the blue corn bonanza remains, who will benefit from it? Mexicans dreamed of finding the legendary Seven Cities of Cibola for three centuries, only to lose their northern provinces in 1848, a year before gold was finally discovered in California. As Victor Valle has explained, too few of the Anglo owners of Mexican restaurants and food-processing companies are willing to give anything back to the communities that made their fortunes, even by paying decent wages and offering equal employment opportunities. But Valle also strikes a more positive note, pointing to the Mexican immigrants and Mexican Americans who have begun to reclaim their foods in upscale restaurants around the country as well as in factories turning out authentic foodstuffs. Joe Sánchez of the New El Rey Chorizo Company did not feel threatened by large corporate competitors: “So we are not going to disappear. We’ll progress. And the big chain stores will have to stock two sections of Mexican food; the tourist food for the Anglos and the real Mexican food for the Mexicans. And then, since many Anglos like real Mexican food, they’ll go over to the Mexican section and buy real ingredients, too.”<sup>31</sup>

### CONCLUSION: WHOSE MEX?

Douglas Monroy titled his study of early California society, “Thrown among Strangers,” evoking the similar experiences of Native Americans forced to work on Spanish missions and Hispanic ranchers displaced by Anglo capitalists. For much the same reason, an account of the foods of the Southwest could easily be called, “Fed to Foreigners.” Native American women of the pueblos cooked tortillas for the Spanish conquistadors, only to have their corn mother deities denounced by Catholic priests in return. Hispanic women in San Antonio served up chili stews to Anglo tourists three hundred years later, losing their businesses to industrial mass producers and city health inspectors in the process. Even their erstwhile compatriots abandoned the Mexican Amer-

icans, denouncing chili con carne as a “detestable food with false Mexican title that is sold in the United States of the North,” in the words of linguist Francisco J. Santamaría.<sup>32</sup>

Despite calumny from all sides, Tejanas continue to treasure their “bowls of red” as a hearty, restorative food, made by hand according to old family recipes and served with pride to friends and relatives. Carne con chile verde holds an equally revered status in the kitchens of New Mexico, as do burritos de carne seca in Arizona and tacos de carntitas in California. Even if only once a year at a holiday tamalada, Mexican Americans reaffirm their connections to family and community, the past and the future, through the ritual preparation and consumption of traditional foods. Neither commercialization, mass production, McDonaldization, Yuppification, nor any other menace of modern life has alienated these foods from cooks, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic, who invest the time to prepare them. The “Mex” thus belongs to anyone willing to embrace it. ✦

#### NOTES

1. For a history of Mexican cuisine, see Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *¡Que Vivan Los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

2. *The Border Cookbook: Authentic Home Cooking of the American Southwest and Northern Mexico* (Boston: The Harvard Common Press, 1995).

3. Victor Valle argues persuasively for the culinary metaphor of the mixed-race mestizo in his scholarly and mouthwatering cookbook, *Recipes of Memory: Five Generations of Mexican Cuisine in Los Angeles* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 175–77. Another insightful treatment is Amy Bentley, “From Culinary Other to Mainstream American: Meanings and Uses of Southwestern Cuisine,” *Southern Folklore* 55, no. 3 (1998): 238–252. On the gendered nature of the frontier, see Fredrick Pike, *The United States and Latin America: Myths and Stereotypes of Civilization and Nature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); and more generally Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979).

4. Douglas Monroy, *Thrown among Strangers: The Making of Mexican Culture in Frontier California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3–18; Edward H. Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico, and the United States on the Indians of the Southwest, 1533–1960* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962), 14–15; Martín Salinas, *Indians of the Rio Grande Delta: Their Role in the History of Southern Texas and Northeastern Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 115–20; Carroll L. Riley, *The Frontier People: The Greater Southwest in the Protohistoric Period* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 298–300.

5. Riley, *Frontier People*, 184–87, 232–34, 260–63.
6. Ibid., 114–16, 142; Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest*, 12–14, 541.
7. Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 14–16; Monroy, *Thrown among Strangers*, 8–9; Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest*, 541.
8. Louise M. Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahuatl-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989), 166.
9. David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 92–121, 227–30; Cynthia Radding, *Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces, and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700–1850* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 48–60; Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest*, 542–46, 552; Albert H. Schroeder, “Shifting for Survival in the Spanish Southwest,” in *New Spain’s Far Northern Frontier: Essays on Spain in the American West, 1540–1821*, ed. David J. Weber (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979), 243–44.
10. Oakah L. Jones, Jr., *Los Paisanos: Spanish Settlers on the Northern Frontier of New Spain* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979); Jesús F. de la Teja, *San Antonio de Béxar: A Community on New Spain’s Northern Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995); John L. Kessell, *Kiva, Cross and Crown: The Pecos Indians and New Mexico, 1540–1840* (Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1979); Max L. Moorhead, *The Presidio: Bastion of the Spanish Borderlands* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975).
11. Arthur L. Campa, *Hispanic Culture in the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 277–81; Patricia Preciado Martin, *Songs My Mother Sang to Me: An Oral History of Mexican American Women* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), 11, 16, 28; Jones, *Los Paisanos*, 187, 194, 221.
12. Victor Valle, “A Curse of Tea and Potatoes: Reading a 19th Century Cookbook as a Social Text,” *Latino Studies Journal* 8, no. 3 (fall 1997), 3–18. For a historical discussion that locates Hispanics within U.S. race relations, see Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
13. Dent, *The Feast of Santa Fe: Cooking of the American Southwest* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 73. See also Cleofas M. Jaramillo, *The Genuine New Mexico Tasty Recipes* (Santa Fe: Ancient City Press, [1942] 1981), 4; Regina Romero, *Flora’s Kitchen: Recipes from a New Mexico Family* (Tucson: Treasure Chest Books, 1998), 37–46.
14. Quote from Carmella Padilla, *The Chile Chronicles: Tales of a New Mexico Harvest* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1997), 48. Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert, *The Good Life: New Mexico Traditions and Food* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, [1949] 1982); personal communication from Marco Antonio Abarca, January 25, 2000.
15. Quote from Merrill Shindler, *El Cholo Cookbook: Recipes and Lore from California’s Best-Loved Mexican Kitchen* (Santa Monica: Angel City Press, 1998), 85. See also, Diana Kennedy, *The Cuisines of Mexico* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 244; Martin, *Songs My Mother Sang to Me*, 17, 59, 155; Jay Ann Cox, “Eating the Other” (Ph.D. diss., University of Arizona, 1993).

16. For just a few examples of this voluminous literature, see Richard Griswold del Castillo, *La Familia: The Mexican American Family in the Urban Southwest* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984); idem, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990); Armando C. Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734–1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); Lisbeth Haas, *Conquests and Historical Identities in California, 1769–1936* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Oscar J. Martínez, *Troublesome Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1988); Thomas E. Sheridan, *Los Tucsonenses: The Mexican Community in Tucson, 1854–1941* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986).

17. The best account of the appropriation of ethnic foods is Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Foods and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), quotations are from 108–9; See also Marilyn Tausend, *Cocina de la familia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 66; Mary Ann Noonan Guerra, *The History of San Antonio's Market Square* (San Antonio: The Alamo Press, 1988), 14, 48.

18. Mario Montaña, "The History of Mexican Folk Foodways of South Texas: Street Vendors, Offal Foods, and Barbacoa de Cabeza," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1992); José E. Limón, *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

19. Valle, "A Curse of Tea and Potatoes," quotes from 9, 12. The Pinedo volume has been edited and translated by Dan Strehl as *The Spanish Cook: A Selection of Recipes from Encarnación Pinedo's El cocinero español* (Pasadena: The Weather Bird Press, 1992).

20. Villaseñor, *Rain of Gold* (New York: Delta, 1991), 350. See also Jacqueline Higuera McMahan, *The Mexican Breakfast Cookbook* (Lake Hughes, CA: The Olive Press, 1992), 116; *California Rancho Cooking* (Lake Hughes, CA: The Olive Press, 1988), 130–34.

21. Quoted in Martin, *Songs My Mother Sang to Me*, 116.

22. Jamison and Jamison, *The Border Cookbook*, 10–11.

23. Shindler, *El Cholo Cookbook*, 15; Flores, *El Charro Café*, (Tucson: Fisher Books, 1998), 3.

24. This discussion was inspired by Tracy Poe, "Food Culture and Entrepreneurship among African Americans, Italians, and Swedes in Chicago" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1999). See also Flores, *El Charro Café*, 24.

25. Jeffrey Steele, "Mexican Goes Mainstream," *Restaurante Mexicano* 1, no. 1 (January/February 1997): 6–15; interview with Edward Gámez, chairman of the board of Pulido's Restaurants, Fort Worth, Texas, March 26, 1992.

26. George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1993). See also Warren J. Belasco, "Ethnic Fast Foods: The Corporate Melting Pot," *Food and Foodways* 2 (1987): 1–30.

27. Quote from Sylvia Lovegren, *Fashionable Food: Seven Decades of Food Fads* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 378.

28. Quote from Barbara Pool Fenzl, *Savor the Southwest* (San Francisco: Bay Books, 1999), 14. See also Mark Miller, *Coyote Cafe* (San Francisco: Ten Speed Press, 1989); Mark Miller, Stephan Pyles, and John Sedlar, *Tamales* (New York: Macmillan, 1997); Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger, *Mesa Mexicana* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

29. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 165, 219; "Another Round," *Snack World* 53, no. 6 (June 1996): 32; Margaret Littman, "Wrap Up Profits with Tortillas," *Bakery Production and Marketing* 31, no. 16 (November 15, 1996): 40

30. Mario Montaña, "Appropriation and Counterhegemony in South Texas: Food Slurs, Offal Meats, and Blood," in *Usable Pasts: Traditions and Group Expressions in North America*, ed. Tad Tuleja (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997), 50–67. Quoted in Julia M. Gallo-Torres, "Salud," *El Restaurante Mexicano* 3, no. 3 (May–June 1999): 14. See also Jane and Michael Stern, "Grill of His Dreams," *Gourmet*, January 2000, p. 40; Eric Asimov, "Beyond Tacos: Mexican Food Gets Real," *New York Times*, January 26, 2000, p. B14.

31. Valle made this point eloquently in a presentation at the Culinary Institute of America's Flavors of Mexico Conference, St. Helena, Calif., November 11, 1999, and in his book, *Recipes of Memory*, quotation on 175.

32. *Diccionario de Mejicanismos*, 5th ed. (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1992), 385.