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Beyond the Border: The Transformation of Mexican Cuisine in the United States Post-War Era

Ivy A. Stark

A Thesis in the Field of History

for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

This thesis examines the history of the progress of Mexican food in the United States during the post-war era of the twentieth century and its path from little-known to the mainstream from small mom-and-pop restaurants along the border in the early 1900s, to the post WWII era of frozen TV dinners, fast food, grocery store food products, cookbooks and glossy food magazines, to the explosion into the late twentieth century into fine dining. I look at how Mexican cuisine has become an essential part of the American culinary landscape. This paper explores this metamorphosis and some of its contributing factors, including migration, changing American tastes, dining habits and marketing efforts that answer the questions, how has Mexican cuisine changed during the post-World War II period in the United States and what brought about these changes?

Frontispiece



Postcard from Manuel's Restaurant: Diners Enjoy Mexican Food in Post-War San Diego. Image: Author's Personal Collection.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Ivy Stark found her passion for food as a child growing up in Boulder, Colorado, reading cookbooks for fun. After earning her bachelor's degree in history at UCLA, she attended the Institute for Culinary Education in New York City, graduating in the professional studies program. After, she took a position at award-winning Mexican restaurant Border Grill in Los Angeles, where she worked with Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger who pioneered upscale Mexican dining in the United States.Stark returned New York City to work in some of the city's best restaurants with renowned chefs to hone her culinary and hospitality skills including becoming a level one sommelier.

Stark has written several cookbooks including: *Dos Caminos Mexican Street Food: 120 Authentic Recipes to Make at Home*, 2011, *Dos Caminos Tacos*, 2014, *Whole Food Vegetarian Cooking*, 2020 and *Vegan High-Protein Cooking for Athletes*, 2021. She was nominated for the Golden Whisk Award by the Women Chefs and Restaurateurs in 2015.

When she's not in the kitchen, Stark devotes her time to various culinary boards and charities such as the New York City Hospitality Alliance and City Harvest.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to every Mexican cook who came to the United States and shared the beauty of their food heritage with us, contributing so much to our own food culture here and offered me a lifelong passion for study.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I'd like to give thanks to my employees and colleagues who allowed me the time and space to further my education, even when it sometimes meant more work for you. I am extremely grateful to have such a talented and loyal staff and you made this possible for me. Secondly, I'd like to thank my family for the constant support, you never let me down when I need a push to keep it alive.

I would like to express my deep appreciation for those professors at Harvard who have changed my life with the knowledge I've gained. Dr. David Carrasco, whose courses in Mexican history enlarged my world in indefinable ways and his TF Pedro Morales, who helped me interpret Professor Carrasco's work in a way mere mortals can understand. I'd also like to thank Dr. Maria Luisa Parra, my first professor at Harvard for her in-depth look at Frida Kahlo and for introducing me to Gloria Andalzua's "borderlands" theory which is an extremely helpful lens through which to view my life and career, and studies.

Finally, I'd like to thank my advisors, Dr. Ariane Liazos for her infinite patience with me and my messy writing and helping me climb a real mountain (sometimes self-inflicted) to a completed thesis proposal with my last-century undergraduate education and the long gap between studies. Your generous feedback was invaluable.

Dr. Zachary Nowak for your stoicism and guidance through this arduous process and the insight to understand the type of help I needed most with my limited

understanding of updated research and writing tools and providing the structure and basics that I needed so badly.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

The quest for food has led from basic human evolution to the adoption of food preferences, food and drink choices and the means to produce them.[1] Global cuisines are now produced everywhere, and one can have a cultural experience from distant countries in their own hometown. The US has long embraced the cuisines of the world, with Chinese and Italian foods being the quintessential favorites of American diners, but according to a recent study,[2] younger Americans are moving on from their parents' food preferences in favor of Mexican cuisine. The food that we know has gone through a transformation from the original dishes brought to the US by migrants, border dwellers and tourists into something quite different from its origins, this paper aims to look at how these changes were brought about in the period straddling World War II and beyond to the 1960s.

The history of Mexican food in this country is full of contradictions. From Mexican dishes began to filter across the border, it was thought of in the US as dangerous, junk food, high in calories and fat; and the subject of countless indigestion jokes and warnings of "Montezuma's revenge," derided as cheap and made with poor

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[1] Angelo Camillo, et al., "A Model of Historical Development and Future Trends of Italian Cuisine in America," *International Journal of Hospitality Management* 29, no. 4 (2010): 549, https://www.academia.edu/15495781/A_model_of_historical_development_and_future_trends_of_Italian_cuisine_in_America.

[2] Dora Mekouar, "More Americans Interested in 'Bold' Food Tastes."" VOA, June 23, 2023, https://www.voanews.com/a/ciao-italian-these-are-young-america-s-favorite-new-ethnic-foods-/7135664.html.

quality ingredients.[3] Yet, we love it. According to *New Food Magazine*, the Mexican food service sector was poised for a 100-billion-dollar revenue growth in 2023.[4] It shares the honor of being listed along with French food on UNESCO'S list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity[5] yet negative view shadowed the perception of one of the world's most complex, innovative, and globally beloved cuisines. Mexican food is one of the most popular cuisines in the US and our adoration it exploded into the American food culture in the post-World War II period.

How was Mexican food changed by our adoption of this complex cuisine that has become an inextricable part of American culture? Has the growth and appreciation of Mexican food affected the societal attitudes toward people who created it and how did this develop historically in mid-twentieth century US? Does our discourse about food affect the way we think about Mexicans and were changes to the cuisine made with that discourse in mind? Food is an emotional language and one that represents the long histories of entire cultures and of derogatory inferences about the cuisine can reflect a prejudiced view of the people themselves.

Academic research supports this kind of conclusion. In the search for quality food, historian Dylan Gottlieb suggests that diners will dismiss upscale or designer Mexican restaurants as too dressy to be "real" as one yelper states in their review of a Philadelphia Mexican restaurant "this is the place people will go if they're afraid to be in

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[3] Gustavo Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 7.
[4] "Mexican Food Sector in Store for $100 Billion Period of Growth," *New Food Magazine*, June 13, 2022. https://www.newfoodmagazine.com/news/165736/mexican-food-sector-in-store-for-100-billion-period-of-growth/.
[5] "UNESCO - Traditional Mexican Cuisine - Ancestral, Ongoing Community Culture, the Michoacán Paradigm," https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/traditional-mexican-cuisine-ancestral-ongoing-community-culture-the-michoacan-paradigm-00400.

an authentic Mexican restaurant."[6] When describing another restaurant deemed to be a fine quality representation of the cuisine, another Yelper claims, "It's a virtual sh*thole, but the food is so good and fresh, you won't care how dirty everything else is" as if this is what we want and expect from a Mexican restaurant.[7] Therefore, Gottlieb continues to note, the food that Mexicans prepare to represent their culinary heritage must be prepared in a "hole in the wall…a good sign of quality as the common wisdom goes."[8] While the small mom and pop food stands that began to pop-up in the 1940s were generally makeshift, as their popularity grew so did the variety of eating establishments that served Mexican food. This desire for Mexican flavors extended to the home cook during this period as well, and by the 1960s anyone in America could access them, even in the smallest towns.

I explore how negative stereotypes of Mexican people and ingredients influenced the path of the cuisine in the US as Mexican restaurants became popular and how Mexican restaurant cuisine has progressed to from food carts along the border in the 1940s to nationwide chains by the 1960s. I look at this progress in the areas of both restaurant and home cuisine, which followed a similar trajectory over these three decades.

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[6] Dylan Gottlieb, "'Dirty, Authentic…Delicious' Yelp, Mexican Restaurants and the Appetites Philadelphia's New Middle Class." *Gastronomica* 15, no. 2 (2015): 39–48, https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2015.15.2.39.
[7] Gottlieb, 41.
[8] Gottlieb, 42.

Definition of Terms

America: We know America by definition[9] to be a land mass consisting of the continents of North America and to contain many countries. In this paper America refers to the commonly used abbreviated version of "The United States of America" and does not imply that the United States is not a small part of the greater land mass.

Borderlands: Borderlands history studies the lines beyond the geographical that we exist in. According to a recent definition for contemporary academics, the term "borderlands" refers to "spaces of encounter between different peoples and political entities" as well as cultures and social groups. "As an interpretative framework, borderlands can help practitioners of world history better understand circulations, connections, exchanges, …and cross-cultural interactions on the edges of empires and nations."[10] For the purpose of this paper the terms "border" and "borderlands" refer to the US/Mexico border.

The Columbian Exchange: A term developed in the 1970's to describe the transfer of biological, philosophical, and technological ways between the "Old World of Europe and Africa and the New World of the Americas." The exchange began as a result of transatlantic voyages of explorers in the fifteenth century and continuing with the

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[9] "America, n. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," accessed February 11, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/america_n?tab=etymology&partOfSpeech=noun.
[10] Barry McCarron, "Primer: Borderlands History," World History Commons, accessed October 29, 2022, https://worldhistorycommons.org/primer-borderlands-history.

colonization of the Americas.[11] The word Columbian refers to Christopher Columbus and his voyage in 1492 in which he brought back samples of native plants and animals to Spain, most notably corn, a plant first hybridized by Mexicans.[12]

Cuisine: (Borrowed from French) Kitchen; culinary department or establishment; manner or style of cooking; kitchen arrangements.[13] Cuisine appears frequently in this paper and refers to a specific style of cooking, the traditions and practices of the Mexican kitchen. Mexican cuisine is characterized by its use of chiles, complex sauces and bold flavors. The primary ingredients found in Mexican cuisine are avocado, corn, beans and squash. Fast Food: Food which is kept hot or partially prepared by a snack bar or restaurant, so that it can be served as a quick meal or taken away[14]. Drive through service is often a feature of fast-food restaurants.

Ethnic Cuisine: A style of cooking which blends ingredients, traditions and methods of preparation from a group of people with the same origin and history, often geographically determined. Sometimes regional and influenced by specific ingredients native to those regions. Some ethnic groups are defined by religious affiliation and practice and have specific rules about cooking methods, ie the *kosher* cooking of the Jewish community.

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[11] John Horgan, "Columbian Exchange," World History Encyclopedia, Accessed December 11, 2022, https://www.worldhistory.org.
[12] Christopher Columbus, *The Diario of Christopher Columbus's First Voyage to America, 1492-1493*, 1st pbk. print, 1991, American Exploration and Travel Series (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991),14.
[13] "Cuisine, n. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," accessed February 8, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/cuisine_n?tab=meaning_and_use#7727049.
[14] "Fast Food, Adj. & n.[2] Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary," accessed February 8, 2024, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fast-food_adj?tab=meaning_and_use#4809081.

Nixtamalization: Is the ancient process of preparation of *maiz* (corn), whereby the corn is soaked and cooked in an alkali, such as limewater, washed, and the tough outer skin removed. The corn is then dried and milled into *masa*, an all-purpose dough for making tortillas and other Mexican corn-based dishes.[15] Corn *masa* is the foundation of Mexican cooking, and most dishes are served with tortillas made from it.

Southwest: Refers to the southwestern states Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and the Southern part of California. Native American cooks of the Southwest had long traded culinary traditions with Mesoamerica with the tortilla arriving in North America long before the Spanish. It was from these states, once part of Mexico before being surrendered to the US in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, that Mexican cuisine diffused to the rest of North America.[16]

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[15] Diana Kennedy, *The Cuisines of Mexico*, [1st ed.]. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:RAD.SCHL:37059938, 5.
[16] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001): 659–79, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40170174.

Historiography

Food historians have written extensively on Mexican food, the origins in Mexico, the global influences that occurred with the Columbian Exchange, and its natural expansion across the border into the United States because of migration. Jeffrey Pilcher traces the story in several books and many journal articles and often discusses the question of authenticity but rarely addresses the cuisine progress as a cuisine itself in terms of improvements in ingredients, style and flavors. In the same manner Gustavo Arellano and José R. Ralat, study the growth of the cuisine's popularity in the US, but touch very little on the changes that have occurred because of this growth in popularity.[17]

Food is an emotional language and one that represents the long histories of entire cultures. How did this iconic cuisine with an extraordinary depth of history, influenced by so many cultures move from the border to most beloved in the US? Much like other ethnic cuisines in the United States, Mexican food had suffered from attitudes that it had to be cheap. Pete Wells, the *New York Times* food critic sums up the idea in his review of Café China,

For a certain kind of food enthusiast, there is a deeply felt but little examined belief that immigrant-run restaurant, like presidential candidates, should not pay too much attention to their appearance. "Just as a $400 haircut can spell days of bad press for a politician, a dining room outfitted with anything that might be termed design can raise

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[17] José R. Ralat, *American Tacos: A History and Guide*, First edition (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020).

suspicions of misplaced priorities."[18] Academic research supports this kind of conclusion. Food historian Jeffrey Pilcher argues, "Very few Mexican restaurants can command prices comparable to those of French restaurants, even when using the same fresh ingredients and, in many cases, the same Mexican workers. Customers have simply refused to consider the two cuisines as equals."[19] Pilcher goes on to say that much of the current scholarship on Mexican food concerns authenticity and who gets to prepare it. There is not a lot of historical study of the progression of a cuisine that has become a staple of American culture. Authentic Mexican cuisine is often considered a fusion of indigenous with the European ingredients brought to Mexico during the conquest, but this was not a happy accident. It was the result of the labor and creativity of native and immigrant cooks.[20]

The general consensus among current scholarship questions ideas of authenticity, representation, and appropriation from a point of view that the "Mexican" food we serve in the US is not really a good example of how Mexican cuisine exists in Mexico. Rather they are examples of "commemorative" or "performative" authenticity according to Marie Sarita Gaytán. The "self-assertions that affirm and appropriate the cultural expressions of people from different ethnic backgrounds." [21]

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[18] Pete Wells, "Showing the Chile Who's Boss," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/02/dining/reviews/cafe-china-in-midtown.html.
[19] Emily DeRuy, "Mexican Food Enters the Fine-Dining Realm," *The Atlantic*, April 18, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/04/mexican-food-enters-the-fine-dining-realm/478341/.
[20] Jeffrey Pilcher, "Taste, Smell, and Flavor in Mexico," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History,* 2016, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.260.
[21] Marie Sarita Gaytán, "From Sombreros to Sincronizadas." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 37, no. 3 (2008): 314–41, https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241607309621.

While these are important ideas, there are few examples of scholarship outlining the historical changes in the food from the simple dishes brought across the border to the creative output coming from both Mexican and non-Mexican chefs, who often set aside the notion of authenticity out of necessity due to lack of availability of ingredients, as well as appease the palates of American customers and in search of novel expressions of the cuisine being seen currently in Mexican restaurants[22].

Lind and Barham put forward the idea that the feelings we associate with food are not preconceived notions, these ideas are part of a cultural history, created and learned through time and association with social and political events of the time.[23] They cite Harriet Friedmann's description[24] of "how patterns of food practices change over time in response to political and economic changes at regional, national, and international levels. She demonstrates how the "traditions" that we associate with the way we grow, process, distribute, prepare, and eat our food were in large measure constructed through the larger social processes of colonialism, development, and globalization."[25]

Margath A. Walker studies the hybrid (i.e., border) nature of Mexican restaurants and observes that *alta cocina Mexicana* dates back approximately 35 years (written in 2013), through the blending of Old-World techniques with New World ingredients."[26]

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[22] DeRuy, "Mexican Food Enters the Fine-Dining Realm."
[23] D. Lind and E. Barham, "The social life of the tortilla: Food, cultural politics, and contested commodification," *Agriculture and Human Values* 21 (2004): 47-60, https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.1023/B:AHUM.0000014018.76118.06 .
[24] H. Friedmann. (1999). "Remaking 'Traditions': How we eat, what we eat and the changing political economy of food," In *Food and Culture*, 4th ed., 283–99. Routledge, 2019. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315680347-20.
[25] Lind and Barham, "The social life of the tortilla."
[26] Margath A. Walker, "Border Food and Food on the Border: Meaning and Practice in Mexican Haute Cuisine," *Social & Cultural Geography* 14, no. 6 (2013): 649–67, https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2013.800223.

While this is a generally accepted view of the cuisine, questions remain as to its origin. According to Walker, the answers are found somewhere between myth and history, "but indisputable is the binding element of the European ingredients to prepare indigenous ingredients."[27] Gustavo Arellano's *Taco USA* addresses the question of what exactly constitutes "Mexican" food in the United States, debates what is authentic and what is not and brings up the question, "why do Americans love Mexican food so darn much?" He argues that the perpetuation of a colonial, racist, classist belief that the quality of the food is representative of who created it, who makes it and where it is sold persists, when in fact what we know of Mexican food is not authentic at all. He concludes. "The grand dichotomy of Mexican food, that so many so many people who cannot stand Mexicans, let alone Mexican Migration, love the cuisine.[28] Arellano gets to the core of the issue I intend to research, but doesn't explore the historical influences in play.

In his fascinating travel essay for *Saveur*, Gustavo Arellano describes childhood road trips with his parents from California to Zacatecas, MX and the liminal nature of the border town of Ahumada, burrito heaven for the Arellano children and to his parents, "where America became Mexico and Mexico became America" in the form of a burrito, which embodied the in-between place in which Mexican food in America exists.[29] This borderland marriage of Mexican flavors with American ingredients is a cuisine that is as foreign to Arellano's parents as a "Korean taco." The American obsession with food like burritos is conspicuous as a "transnational cuisine experience that both constitutes and

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[27] Walker, 652.
[28] Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*, 2013.
[29] Gustavo Arellano, "Burritos Unwrapped," *Saveur*, August 10, 2012, https://www.saveur.com/article/Travels/Mexico-American-Burritos/.

conveys broader processes of economic and cultural globalization," as Lind and Barham would describe it. Food itself softens the margins between humans and commodities, it connects nature, humans, culture, and commerce.[30]

The question of authenticity and gatekeeping has been a flashpoint of discussion among foodies and scholars for the past 10 years or so and can be found everywhere from menu headnotes exclaiming the legitimacy of the chef/chef's grandmother/recipes/ ingredients to restaurant reviews both professional and amateur. The question I would like to look at is how Mexican food has changed in America from the mom-and-pop shops with dirt floors on the Texas border in the 1940s through the boom of the ubiquitous fast food restaurants serving food that is wholly American and only mariginally Mexican in the 1960s. What are the influences that caused these changes? One possible conclusion would be that increased exposure to Mexican cuisine that was preceded by acceptance of other ethnic cuisines such as Chinese and Italian allowed chefs, food manufacturers, journalists, cookbook authors and home cooks to experiment with less familiar foods.

Chapter Summary

Chapter II focuses on the 1940s and the origins of the commercialization of Mexican food in the US , how it filtered into the States, who brought it, and why and how Americans began to adopt it as part of our food culture. This chapter looks at small mom and pop style food establishments in the Southwest and how they were able to turn their

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[30] Philip McMichael, "The power of food," *Agriculture and Human Values* 17 (2000): 21-33, 10.1023/A:1007684827140.

small businesses into larger enterprises with Americans growing appreciation of their food. The Bracero movement's impact is covered and how it brought Mexican food along with workers to the border states and beyond. How these guest workers influenced the availability of Mexican ingredients in the areas where they settled and opportunities they created for themselves in the food industry are also introduced. Manufactured Mexican foods also got their start in the 1940s and are an important element in the changes that took place in the flavors we associate with Mexican food in the US.

Chapter III looks at the 1950s and the rise in American entrepreneurs finding financial opportunities with Mexican cuisine capitalizing on it and creating further growth in popularity. This chapter includes a discussion of ingredients and the challenges faced when trying to reproduce the cuisine to both serve a large number of customers and to please American palates that where unfamiliar with the often spicy dishes. The 1950s was a huge time of change in the US and it dramatically affected food culture, modern appliances, working women, travel and the automobile are all presented as factors creating change in the Mexican cuisine being produced. Cookbooks were also beginning to appear in the 1950s, written by both Mexican and American cooks and the content and audience for these books, as well as food magazines, are included as being influential in the transformation of Mexican cuisine as realized in the US. This chapter also reviews the beginnings of fast food and its substantial affect on the dissemination of the cuisine nationwide and also how the cuisine is prepared as a result.

Chapter IV concentrates on the explosion in popularity of Mexican cuisine that occurred during the 1960s. It is during this period that most people in this country discovered Mexican food through fast food restaurants, the growing number of chain

restaurants, frozen TV dinners and manufactured foods like make-your-own taco kits. These forms of presentation of the cuisine demanded many changes in ingredients and production methods resulting in a cuisine that is far distanced from its origins in Mexico. This chapter shows how, despite these changes, Americans embraced it heartily and during the 1960s what had transformed into American style Mexican food became a permanent fixture in our food culture.

Chapter II.

The 1940s and the Birth of Tex-Mex in America

American dining habits were transformed in the 1940s by modern farming, World War II, refrigeration and the automobile, which all coincided with Mexican food beginning to emerge as an important facet of our food culture. The growth in Mexican migration through the *bracero* program, the ready availability of quality ingredients, modern food manufacturing technology, American tourism to Mexico and the expansion across the country of iconic Mexican dishes like enchiladas via small Mexican-owned restaurants led to a dramatic rise in the popularity of Mexican cuisine.

Immigration from Mexico experienced dramatic growth this period, and along with the migrants came their foodways. In the first half of the twentieth century, Mexican immigrants were a small fraction of the foreign-born population in the US, but the violence of the Mexican Revolution and a stable US economy tripled the number of Mexican immigrants from 200,000 to 600,000 from 1910 to 1930. By 1940 it was estimated that 3.5 million Mexicans were living in the US.[31] Mexican laborers settled into communities and worked in agriculture and industrial jobs throughout the country, very heavily in the Southwest but also in the Midwest and Northeast. From Detroit to New York, produce growers and manufacturers all hired Mexican laborers to pick their fields

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[31] Richard Steele, "Mexican Americans in 1940: Perceptions and Conditions," in *World War II and Mexican American Civil Rights*, ed. Richard Griswold del Castillo (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 71-8, https://doi.org/10.7560/717381-002.

and work production lines.[32] Settling into communities with other Mexicans provided an opportunity to pool resources to help each other like sharing childcare and domestic chores that allowed women to join the men in working outside the home. One route Mexicans took toward economic progress was through selling food, usually prepared by women who used their domestic skills to contribute to the family economy. These foods were often initially sold from the home or ad hoc food stands at local fairs or sporting events. These pop-ups were created anywhere a table could be set up and customers were found to sell tortillas, tamales or tacos. The increasing interest in Mexican food helped these micro businesses grow beyond part-time side work. Many women used the profits they made from these domestic ventures to trade up to full-service restaurants involving the whole family.[33]

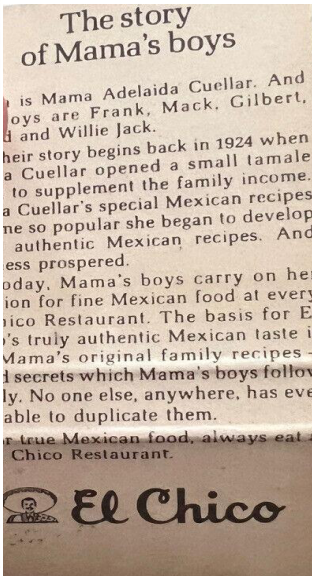
One example of how Mexican integration into the American mainstream in the 1940s began small in Dallas, Texas. Early Mexican restaurants tended to be simple affairs, some started as home businesses decorated with things brought with them from Mexico and often helmed by Mexican women, who traditionally did the cooking in the home.[34] These enterprising women often opened the doors to their home or set a few tables outdoors and offered set meals at a very reasonable price. Like many female migrants looking to help support a family, Adelaida Cuellar took a vendor stand at the Kaufman County (Dallas, TX) Fairgrounds selling tamales and chili. Word soon spread

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[32] Victor Garcia, "Mexican Enclaves in the U.S. Northeast: Immigrant and Migrant Mushroom Workers in Southern Chester County, Pennsylvania," *Migration Dialogue UC Davis* 4, no. 9 (August 1997): 14, https://migration.ucdavis.edu/cf/more.php?id=202.
[33] Meredith E. Abarca, "Charlas Culinarias: Mexican Women Speak from Their Public Kitchens," *Food and Foodways* 15, no. 3–4 (October 26, 2007): 183, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710701620094.
[34] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, *Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 36.

of her cooking and Adelaida's success was so great that it allowed her sons to come together to create El Chico Restaurant in Dallas in 1940 and expand locally. Franchise chains were just getting their start in the mid-1940s, and this provided a route to expansion without a large financial investment.[35] With the smart move of adding canned Mexican foods to their restaurant model by the end of the decade, the brothers brought Tex-Mex to the masses. The El Chico example is one of incredible financial success, but the pattern was repeated over and over by Mexican migrants in the 1940s and gave rise to what is now commonly known as Tex-Mex cuisine.




The story
of Mama's boys

is Mama Adelaida Cuellar. And
oys are Frank, Mack, Gilbert,
and Willie Jack.
heir story begins back in 1924 when
a Cuellar opened a small tamale
to supplement the family income.
a Cuellar's special Mexican recipes
ne so popular she began to develop
authentic Mexican recipes. And
ess prospered.
oday, Mama's boys carry on he
ion for fine Mexican food at every
ico Restaurant. The basis for E
's truly authentic Mexican taste
Mama's original family recipes
secrets which Mama's boys follo
ly. No one else, anywhere, has eve
able to duplicate them.
true Mexican food, always eat
Chico Restaurant.

El Chico

[35] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001): 672, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40170174.

Figure 1. The Beginnings of a Tex-Mex Empire, the Cuellar Family Created the El Chico Brand in the 1940s, Now a Global Chain.[36]

El Chico Matchbook, 1960, author's personal collection.

One way this cuisine found its way to American tables in the 1940s was through curious travelers to both the border and the resorts and cities of Mexico.[37] Travel by Americans to Mexico became increasingly more common. A 1940 article for *New Horizons* magazine describes Mexico as "a treasure house of the past, Mexico City has become a favorite for the American foreign traveler due in large measure to the easy access from all parts of the US."[38] A travelogue written in 1940 for Balzer's department store's monthly circular recounts the foods of Mexico being "unexpectedly interesting," of dining on enchiladas and candied squash at Café Tacuba in Mexico City, and of also enjoying tacos and Carta Blanca beer. The candied squash was so novel to the author, he recounted it as "a delicious dessert, which until explained, puzzled us to the point of asking for help." He went on to describe how it was made, knowing it would be of interest to his customers and "regrets not being able to give you a recipe for it."[39] Balzer's inclusion of this description indicates that his customers would be very

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[36] "[El Chico Exterior]," Photograph, The Portal to Texas History, 1945, United States, https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc850671/m1/1/.
[37] Dina Michele Berger, *Pyramids by Day, Martinis by Night: The Development and Promotion of Mexico's Tourism Industry, 1928-1946* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002),112.
[38] "Mexico," *New Horizons: The Magazine of American's Merchant Marine of the Air* 11, no. 2 (November 1940), https://digitalcollections.library.miami.edu/digital/collection/asm0341/id/48814/.
[39] Robert Balzer, "Highlights Column," *Balzer's Department Store Circular*, Self-Published, November 1940, Robert Balzer Papers, Collection no. 0014, Special Collections and Archives, University Library, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona.

interested in trying unfamiliar but very typical Mexican dishes at home. Travelogues like Balzer's and other forms of travel writing contributed to the popularization of Mexican food for Americans.



Figure 2. Tour Ad. Image: Diamond Tours, Chicago, IL, 1944.
Mexico Tour Brochure; 1944 Mexican Ephemera Collection, Tour Companies Box, Call no. 2; Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

Advertisements for exotic destinations glamorized Mexican food with images of chic couples enjoying dinner while serenaded by mariachi, or lounging by a swimming pool with a margarita. Colorful advertisements for travel to Mexico were placed by Pan American Airlines in magazines like the S*aturday Evening Post* promising "there ARE

no distant lands…by flying clipper."[40] Establishments like The Ritz Bar and Restaurant advertised their culinary offerings to incoming travelers in the Pan American on board magazine *New Horizons*. Resorts were developed along the Mexican coast to attract American tourists, while the Mexico Tourism Board published books in English like *Sunshine Over the Border: Useful Information for Travelers to Mexico* to pump up the American traveler's enthusiasm for Mexico.[41] Written by David Oakes from a traveler's point of view, the book includes practical information like rail schedules, maps and how to stay healthy. Oakes also describes in detail, highlighted with illustrations, the beauty of the Mexican landscape and outlines interesting places to visit like archeological sites and coastal areas and includes the magical wonders of Mexican food. In the forward to her *Genuine Spanish and American Cookery for American Homes*, Myrtle Richardson notes the "irresistible flavor and 'tang' of Mexican cooking that lingers long in those who have tasted it." She explains the growing fascination with Mexican cooking as a result of travel to Mexico:

> In recent years the automobile and good roads has [*sic*] afforded thousands the chance to visit Old Mexico and the border, where they have tasted some of the dishes of the country. Many have returned to their homes with the desire to duplicate these dishes, causing them to assume a prominent place on the American menu.[42]

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[40] "There Are No Distant Lands…, Pan American World Airways Advertisement," *The Saturday Evening Post,* December 28,1940, Duke Digital Repository Duke Digital Collections, https://repository.duke.edu/dc/panam/jwtca002002.

[41] David S. Oakes, *Sunshine Over the Border: Useful Information for Travelers to Mexico* (Chicago: Tourism Department of the Government of Mexico, Mexico City, 1940). *Reproduction:* Microfilm. New York, NY: New York Public Library, 2000. 1 microfilm reel ; 35 mm. (MN: *ZZ-37017).

[42] Myrtle Richardson, *Genuine Mexican and Spanish Cookery Recipes for American Homes* (Kansas City, MO: Putnam Printing Co., 1942), 2, https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/010745621.

Through advertising and literature geared toward travelers, Americans were enticed to travel to Mexico and brought their love of the flavors of Mexico back with them as souvenirs, at the same time Mexican guest workers in the US who came to help agriculture and industry during WWII, were bringing the dishes from home to their newly adopted country.

This new cuisine traveled from the Southwest nationwide with the help not only of American travelers but Mexican guest farm workers who established communities in urban areas in the 1940s. With labor shortages during World War II, the Bracero Program (Mexican Farm Labor Program) was created in 1942 to assist the agricultural industry and recruited Mexican-born workers to work in the US.[43] A 1943 telegram produced by the Yuma, Arizona Water Users Association to Earl G. Harrison, the commissioner of Immigration and Naturalization (1942-1944) expresses the shortage of agricultural labor farmers faced during World War II, asking for stays of deportation for Mexican workers until "legal entry could be secured."[44] By the time the program ended, five million Mexican guest workers had come to America. Many of these guest workers were drawn to the US influenced by the steady incomes and higher wages working agricultural jobs in the West and manufacturing jobs in the Midwest.[45] Having created small communities in urban areas like Los Angeles and Chicago, they brought food specialties from their home regions in Mexico, which eventually became staples in these Mexican enclaves. These

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[43] US Congress, "Bracero Program Public Law 45 1943," April 29, 1943, https://web.archive.org/web/20070203013418/http://www.ccrh.org/comm/moses/primary/bracero.html.
[44] Telegram to Earl G. Harrison 1943, "National Archives NextGen Catalog," https://catalog.archives.gov/id/7459462.
[45] Jose Hernandez Alvarez, "A Demographic Profile of the Mexican Immigration to the United States, 1910-1950," *Journal of Inter-American Studies* 8, no. 3 (1966): 471–96, https://doi.org/10.2307/165263.

men, not having women to cook for them as was traditional at home in Mexico, often cooked for themselves and other braceros and sometimes even for their employers.[46] Evaristo Guerro, in an interview with his granddaughter, described one of his favorite assignments as a bracero was working for a Japanese American family in Southern California where he became close to the farm owner Howard Takahashi. Evaristo often shared the food that he cooked for himself and the other men, recounting that Howard especially liked his rice and beans.[47] The necessity for the guest workers to cook for themselves brought about a need to seek out Mexican ingredients, finding little to offer at local stores, the braceros sought products from their country from other migrants.

The ability to source ingredients came as a challenge for these men, finding much of what was available to them like the bland *queso amarillo* "yellow cheese" and *pan bimbo* (Mexican Wonder Bread) sandwiches in the camps unappetizing. They longed for beans, tortillas and chiles and small stores opened by other Mexican immigrants began to stock these basic items as the demand grew along with the influx of workers.[48] Speaking little English, many not able to read, and having little money, these little bodegas opened by other migrants filled their need for a taste of home. As shown in the images below, the braceros mostly ate beans with tortillas that they prepared themselves. In the image on the right, the braceros are making what are clearly wheat flour tortillas, wheat flour tortillas gained popularity in the US largely due to the inexpensive grade of wheat flour

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[46] Pilcher, *Que Vivan Los Tamales*, 65.

[47] Ernesto Galarza, *Merchants of Labor: The Mexican Bracero Story:An Account of the Managed Migration of Mexican Farm Workers in California, 1942-1960* (Charlotte, CA: McNally and Loftin, 1964), 37.

[48] California Office of Historic Preservation, "Latinos in Twentieth Century California: National Register of Historic Places Context Statement" (California State Parks, 2015), 80, www.ohp.parks.ca.gov.

easily available and provided to border markets.[49] It was a source of pride for Evaristo to cook food from his home for his American boss and share the flavors of Mexico with him; these types of exchanges created an environment for Mexicans to showcase their home and potentially contribute economically to the communities they were forming.

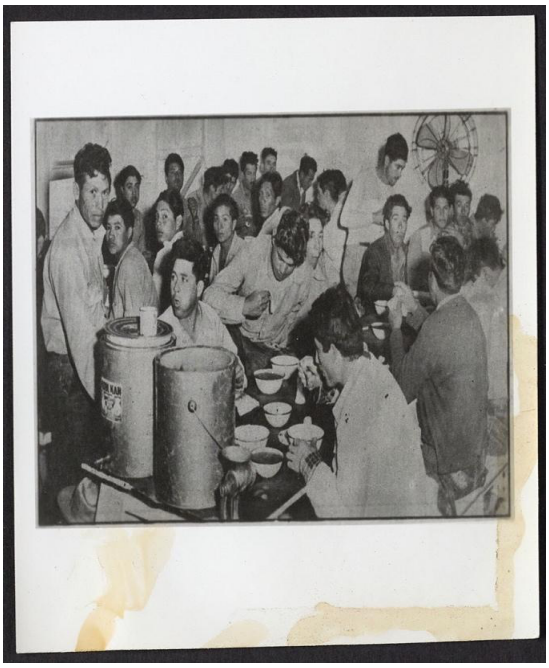


Figure 3. Braceros at a Mess Hall in Imperial Valley, CA, ca.1946.

Photos by Henry P. Anderson. Henry P. Anderson Papers, San Francisco State University Library, Labor Archives and Research Center, Series 8.

[49] Bertha Haffner-Ginger, *California Mexican-Spanish CookBook* (Los Angeles, California: Self-Published, 1938), scan from UCLA Library Digital Archive, accessed Feb 22, 2024, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/39586/39586-h/39586-h.htm#Page_43.

As migrants came from Mexico to the US in the 1940s and stayed hoping to build families and lives here, an important part of maintaining their communities was by reproducing food traditions.[50] Like immigrant communities from other parts of the world, Mexican immigrants saw this as a way of creating potential economic opportunities for them and their families.[51] In an interview former bracero Rigoberto Garcia Perez who started a small grocery store in California, talks about what coming to the US meant for his family: "I went to the United States, and when I got my papers fixed, I brought part of my family here, and then another part, and then I bought a house in Ventura County, in Oxnard."[52]

The braceros came to the US in order to make a better wage than was offered for similar work in Mexico, though many returned home to Mexico to continue their lives there, many migrants like Perez found a home and economic stability for himself and his family in the US. By starting small businesses like stores, cantinas and restaurants in the US, Mexican migrants brought their foodways and Americans took notice and responded. Historian Donna Gabbacia notes that "as food consumers, Americans seem as interested in idiosyncratic and individualistic affiliations to the foodways of their neighbors as they are in their own ethnic and regional roots."[53] Mexican entrepreneurs in the 1940s saw that not only did their fellow migrants long for the food of home, Anglos were also interested

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[50] Francisco Arturo Rosales and Daniel T. Simon, "Mexican Immigrant Experience in the Urban Midwest: East Chicago, Indiana, 1919-1945," *Indiana Magazine of History* 77, no. 4 (1981): 333–57, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27790561.
[51] Fabio Parasecoli, "Food, Identity, and Cultural Reproduction in Immigrant Communities," *Social Research* 81, no. 2 (2014): 415–39, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26549625.
[52] David Bacon, Interview with Rigoberto Garcia Perez, "Braceros: The Story of a Bracero," accessed March 12, 2024, http://dbacon.igc.org/TWC/b01_Bracero.htm.
[53] Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9.

in trying the unique dishes of Mexico, which opened up a new clientele for their small businesses. Bringing a cuisine with many foreign and sometimes unattainable ingredients presented challenges for these Mexican hospitality ventures in the US, which required some creativity and innovation in representing "true" Mexican cuisine.

Like other ethnic groups who came to America in the 1940s and wanted to keep their foodways alive, Mexicans had to make do with what ingredients were available to close the gap between the home they left behind and their newly adopted country. Restaurant cooks were no exception, as much as they wanted to recreate the dishes of their home country, immigrants found it nearly impossible to do so exactly, they were usually unable to find the exact ingredients that they had once used to cook those dishes.[54] This led to improvisation, substitutions for ingredients not easily available to them were made, which led to changes in their cuisine. Americans, finding that they wanted to reproduce these Mexican dishes followed suit and used ingredients and methods at hand to prepare them. Although Richardson describes the recipes in her cookbook *Genuine Mexican and Spanish Cookery* as being "genuinely Mexican" and the same as used by the great chefs in Mexico, most of the recipes call for ingredients that are not used in Mexico such as grated cheese and hamburger meat with the primary ingredient in nearly all of the dishes being "Mexican hot sauce."[55] With restaurateurs and cookbook authors presenting Americanized "Tex-Mex" versions of Mexican recipes as

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[54] Hasia Diner, "Introduction," *Social Research* 81, no. 2 Food and Immigrant Life (2014): 411–14, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26549624, 412.
[55] Myrtle Richardson, *Genuine Mexican and Spanish Cookery Recipes for American Homes* (Kansas City, Mo.: Putnam Printing Co., 1947), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/010745621.

the real thing, Americans learned about this cuisine through interpretations created out of readily available products.

Whether well-intended or opportunistic, American entrepreneurs viewed Americans' newfound love of Mexican food as something to capitalize on. William Gebhardt, a German immigrant, also hoped to "capture the glamour and romance of Old Mexico and carry it right into the American kitchen" with his spice blends and 1942 cookbook.[56] He started experimenting with Mexican cuisine when he opened a café in the rear of a saloon in San Antonio, Texas. His experiments blending spices grew into a global business, later known as Gebhardt Mexican Foods Company, selling commercial Mexican spice blends that had never been seen outside the Southwest before to grocery stores worldwide. In order to promote his spices, Gebhardt came up with the idea of producing pamphlets using his ingredients, a novel idea at the time; as the company grew, the pamphlets grew into cookbooks. In the 1942 edition of *Mexican Cookery for American Homes*, there were two recipes for Enchiladas—Enchiladas, Mexican Style and Enchiladas, American Style.[57] Neither recipe was particularly Mexican: the only notable difference between the two is that the Mexican version calls for a fried egg to be placed on top before serving. The remaining ingredients consisted of tortillas, fat, onion, which would be found in Mexico, with the additions of grated cheese and various Gebhardt products such as chile sauce, chile powder and canned chile con carne, which would not be found in Mexico. While the Gebhardt cookbooks describe the recipes as Mexican

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[56] William Gebhardt, *Gebhardt's Mexican Cookery for American Homes* (San Antonio, TX: Gebhardt Chili Powder Company, 1942), 3.
[57] Gebhardt, 16.

cooking, it's unlikely that Mexicans would be familiar with many of the dishes or describe them as Mexican home cooking. Although the ever-popular enchiladas are represented, other recipes include ideas that would appeal specifically to the American housewife who might like to prepare something exotic for entertaining like the very American piquant deviled eggs, or beans in tomato cups, dishes that are inspired by Mexican cooking using chile and beans but are not Mexican cookery.

English language cookbooks geared toward American housewives began to appear in the 1940s and are one place where one began to see American and cheddar cheese replacing the *queso fresco* and sour cream replacing *crema fresca*. The "yellow cheese" and sour cream were readily available to purchase in the US, and while it was possible to make the *crema* and *queso* by hand, preparing them was too time consuming for a commercial venture like a restaurant. More than anything, melted cheese and sour cream became essential ingredients in American Mexican food, although they were not used for dishes in Mexico. Elena Zelayeta, one of the US' first widely known Mexican American chefs, published one of the first English language cookbooks that included both dishes she brought with her when she migrated from Mexico and American adaptations of Mexican recipes. As she describes in her introduction: "The recipes in this book represent my conception of Mexican food as we like it best here in the United States, as observed during my years of experience in the restaurant business. In other words, along with giving recipes for traditional Mexican dishes, I have included many American adaptations—easy to prepare, easy to serve."[58] Zelayeta's recipes relate

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[58] Elena Emilia Zelayeta, *Elena's Famous Mexican and Spanish Recipes* (San Francisco: Dettners Printing House, 1944), 7.

commentary of her experiences as a Mexican restaurateur serving Americans and most contain ingredients that are not Mexican: "typical Mexican enchiladas are not served with a great deal of sauce; however, in my experience in cooking for American people, I have found that they like plenty of sauce and somewhat thicker."[59] Although Zelayeta's enchilada recipe is fairly pure by traditional standards, it did contain shredded cheese (which would not be found in Mexico) and the notes about how to adjust to suit the American palate. Zelayeta unapologetically pivoted toward the American palate in her San Francisco restaurant in order to find success, rather than rigidly sticking with the Mexican preferences, a true hospitalitarian. Mid Century Mexican restaurateurs like Zelayeta recognized quickly that the Americanized versions of Mexican foods were appealing to a customer base beyond their own communities as adventurous Anglos trickled into Mexican *barrios* to try these exotic dishes.

[59] Zelayeta, 37.



Figure 4. Photo by Unknown Photographer, 1948.

Private collection of Carolina's Mexican Restaurant.

Seizing this interest as a possible way to earn a good living without doing the low-paying manual labor they had initially come for; enterprising Mexicans began to open small food businesses in the 1940s, with this increased enthusiasm for ethnic foods they flourished in their new country. Longina Benevides was one of these early Mexican strivers who turned a bond with the local braceros into a business by cooking enchiladas for local farm workers from her home in rural La Mesa, New Mexico. The restaurant later turned into a café with family bedrooms becoming dining rooms and a restaurant kitchen constructed in 1940. According to the application for the National Register of Historic places, at what is now Chope's Town Café and Bar and in its fourth generation of continuous family operation, Longina would hang a kerosene lantern outside the front

door when enchiladas were available.[60] Her son Jose "Chope" Benevides and his wife Lupe inherited the home after his mother's death and added a bar to the café Longina had started, decorated with Benevides memorabilia and occupying the front room of the house. Lupe cooked for the local farmers who were initially the primary clientele at Chope's but when a bracero barracks opened nearby, Lupe started offering a $1 luncheon plate specifically for the workers looking for a good Mexican meal on payday. Chope's daughters still operate the restaurant, which is now known nationally, cooking from Longina's recipes. Initially aimed at other Mexicans and people within their own communities, word spread of their delicious food through truckers, motorcyclists and road trippers passing through on the busy route between Las Cruces and El Paso. Visitors came from throughout the state to try this special cuisine, eventually leading them to national recognition and placement on the National Register of Historic Places, partially due to their importance to the bracero movement.[61]

Another example of migrant small business success was El Nayarit, the original location opened in 1943 in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles and was eventually followed by four additional locations. Doña Natalia Barraza saw her restaurant as a community space to both help lift other immigrants and provide them with a taste of home at the same time.[62] As her namesake granddaughter, historian Natalia Molina describes:

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[60] Sarah M. Stanley, *Voices from Chope's Kitchen: Food, Gender, and Identity in La Mesa, New Mexico* (Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico State University, 2015).
[61] Jeff Pappas, *Chope's Town Bar and Grill National Register for Historic Places Application,* National Register Database and Research - National Register of Historic Places (U.S. National Park Service), accessed February 20, 2024, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/database-research.htm.
[62] Natalia Molina, *A Place at the Nayarit: How a Mexican Restaurant Nourished a Community* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2022), 67.

> The Nayarit was a refuge where working people could speak their own language, eat their own food, and live out identities that went beyond what the workplace usually allowed…The placemaking that went on at the Nayarit was both convivial and political, and as those qualities shaped the atmosphere of Echo Park, they helped make the city worth living in.[63]

Barraza advertised in her hometown Mexico newspapers to draw visiting Mexicans to her restaurant and to recruit employees, "Quando visite usted Los Angeles, California, requerde que los restuarantes El Nayarit! Atendidos por personal netamente Mexicano."[64] ("When visiting Los Angeles, you must visit El Nayarit! Serviced by purely Mexican staff."[65]) Barraza was very interested in serving only the regional cuisine of her state of Nayarit, a coastal state where the cuisine is focused primarily on seafood, but like many Mexican restaurateurs, dishes that appealed to the mostly white neighborhood where El Nayarit operated like the taco/enchilada combo plate were on the menu and eventually became her signature dish.[66] The success of the Mexican restaurants like El Nayarit led restaurateurs in the Midwest and East to open restaurants serving Mexican cuisine. Mexican restaurants were now expanding beyond the Southwest to open in the Midwest and beyond and created a nationwide demand for more Mexican ingredients

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[63] Molina, 68.
[64] Natalia Barraza, "Advertisement for El Nayarit," *El Eco*, August 1965.
[65] Translation by the author.
[66] Molina, *A Place at the Nayarit, 98*.



Figure 5. Photo of El Nayarit by Edward Ruscha.

Edward Ruscha photographs of Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard, 1965-2010, Getty Research Institute, Research Library, Accession no. 2012.M.1.

All of the Mexican restaurants popping up all over America brought heightened demand for products that would shorten production time and increase shelf life in order to create profits. By the late 1940s, the production of convenience versions surged. Post WWII this demand kept Anglo-owned canning companies busy and Valley Canning Company, which produced under the Old El Paso label beginning in the late 1940s saw success from a contract providing canned tortillas, enchilada sauce and beans to US military bases overseas. [67]

[67] Gustavo Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*, (New York: Scribner, 2013), 185-187.



Figure 6. Old El Paso Ad.

El Paso Herald-Post November 4, 1948, 42. https://newspaperarchive.com/el-paso-herald-post-nov-04-1948-p-27/.

Canning also provided restaurants a way to expand their revenue and increase their marketing reach. The Cuellar family of the Dallas El Chico group of restaurants used the additional sales from the canned foods as a boost toward expansion outside the local area and eventually worldwide. These convenience foods hardly reflected real Mexican or even Tex-Mex cooking but were embraced by post war households that often found both heads of household working outside the home. Clementine Paddleford describes the benefits of the new technology in food manufacturing, “the food manufacturer is the busy woman's best friend. There is scarcely a cooking task he doesn't offer to do on short order, whatever you may plan for dinner can be had ready to heat and eat from package

or can." Canned foods were simple, inexpensive time savers that allowed the family to dine together with minimal preparation and they were a hit with American consumers, making way for new food manufacturing technologies and the coming frozen "TV" dinner era of the 1950s.[68]

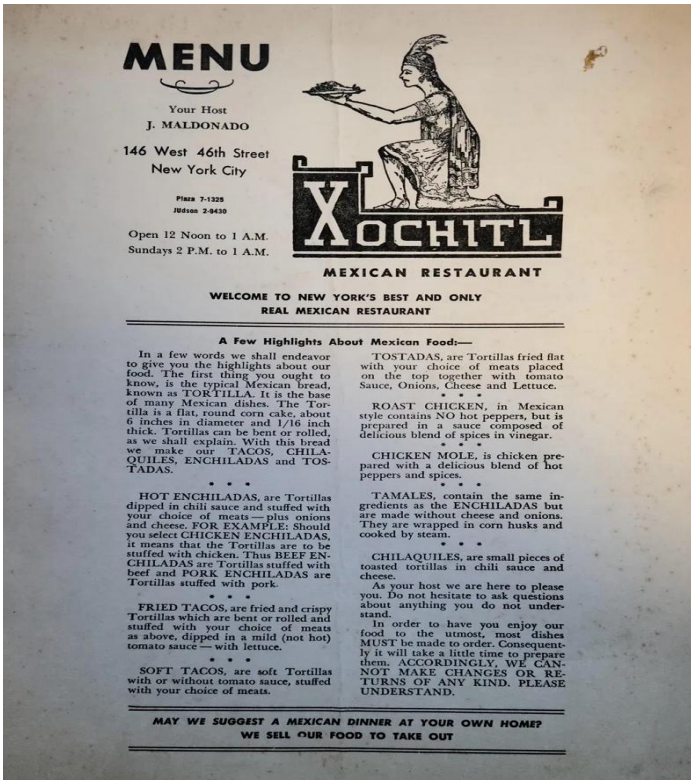
Innovation at the end of the decade also helped facilitate the spread of Mexican food in the US. Like the canneries, creative innovators sought to capitalize on the demands of the new popularity of Mexican food restaurants, entrepreneurs created machines to meet the increased demand for tortillas in the US. In 1947, Mexican inventor Fausto Celorio Mendoza created and patented the first automatic tortilla machine. Improving on a previous manual device, it utilized rollers to shape the tortilla and a system of wires to separate them. Celorio continued to improve upon his device and his technology is still the industry standard, with CELORIO brand tortilla machines still being sold worldwide.[69] Celorio's invention brought mass-produced flour tortillas to the world's homes and restaurants. At around the same time another inventor would be responsible for creating a machine for frying corn tortillas to solve a problem in his restaurant that would quickly find a global audience and change access to Mexican food globally.[70]

Far from its border town origins, American Mexican cuisine finally expanded to the East Coast in the late 1940s. In 1947 Juvencio Maldonado opened one of New York

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[68] Clementine Paddleford, "NEWS from the Food Field," *Parents' Magazine* (Des Moines: Meredith Corporation, 1941).
[69] Miguel Salinas Chávez, "Fausto Celorio Mendoza," OEINM, June 16, 2020, https://oeinm.org/epoca-independiente/fausto-celorio-mendoza/.
[70] Debra Lee Baldwin 1952-, *Taco Titan : The Glen Bell Story* (Arlington, TX.:Summit Publishing Group, c1999., 1999).

City's first Mexican restaurants, Xochitl in the Times Square area. One of the more popular items on the menu was the fried taco made by frying corn tortillas into a U-shape until they were crisp and filling them with stewed meats.



MENU

Your Host
J. MALDONADO

146 West 46th Street
New York City

Plaza 7-1325
JUdson 2-9430

Open 12 Noon to 1 A.M.
Sundays 2 P.M. to 1 A.M.

XOCHITL

MEXICAN RESTAURANT

WELCOME TO NEW YORK'S BEST AND ONLY
REAL MEXICAN RESTAURANT

A Few Highlights About Mexican Food:—

In a few words we shall endeavor to give you the highlights about our food. The first thing you ought to know, is the typical Mexican bread, known as TORTILLA. It is the base of many Mexican dishes. The Tortilla is a flat, round corn cake, about 6 inches in diameter and 1/16 inch thick. Tortillas can be bent or rolled, as we shall explain. With this bread we make our TACOS, CHILAQUILES, ENCHILADAS and TOSTADAS.

• • •

HOT ENCHILADAS, are Tortillas dipped in chili sauce and stuffed with your choice of meats — plus onions and cheese. FOR EXAMPLE: Should you select CHICKEN ENCHILADAS, it means that the Tortillas are to be stuffed with chicken. Thus BEEF ENCHILADAS are Tortillas stuffed with beef and PORK ENCHILADAS are Tortillas stuffed with pork.

• • •

FRIED TACOS, are fried and crispy Tortillas which are bent or rolled and stuffed with your choice of meats as above, dipped in a mild (not hot) tomato sauce — with lettuce.

• • •

SOFT TACOS, are soft Tortillas with or without tomato sauce, stuffed with your choice of meats.

TOSTADAS, are Tortillas fried flat with your choice of meats placed on the top together with tomato Sauce, Onions, Cheese and Lettuce.

• • •

ROAST CHICKEN, in Mexican style contains NO hot peppers, but is prepared in a sauce composed of delicious blend of spices in vinegar.

• • •

CHICKEN MOLE, is chicken prepared with a delicious blend of hot peppers and spices.

• • •

TAMALES, contain the same ingredients as the ENCHILADAS but are made without cheese and onions. They are wrapped in corn husks and cooked by steam.

• • •

CHILAQUILES, are small pieces of toasted tortillas in chili sauce and cheese.

As your host we are here to please you. Do not hesitate to ask questions about anything you do not understand.

In order to have you enjoy our food to the utmost, most dishes MUST be made to order. Consequently it will take a little time to prepare them. ACCORDINGLY, WE CANNOT MAKE CHANGES OR RETURNS OF ANY KIND. PLEASE UNDERSTAND.

MAY WE SUGGEST A MEXICAN DINNER AT YOUR OWN HOME?
WE SELL OUR FOOD TO TAKE OUT

Figure 7. Image: CIA Menu Collection.

The Culinary Institute of America, Conrad N. Hilton Library, Archives and Special Collections, Menu 41-1755.

These tacos became so popular that in order to keep up with the volume of orders which required that each individual tortilla was fried by hand to order, causing burns for

the cooks and slowing production, Juvencio, a former electrician, created a machine that could automatically fry up to seven shells at one time. He is quoted as saying his invention "restored peace after open mutiny among his own cooks, who dreaded handling the fried taco orders."[71]

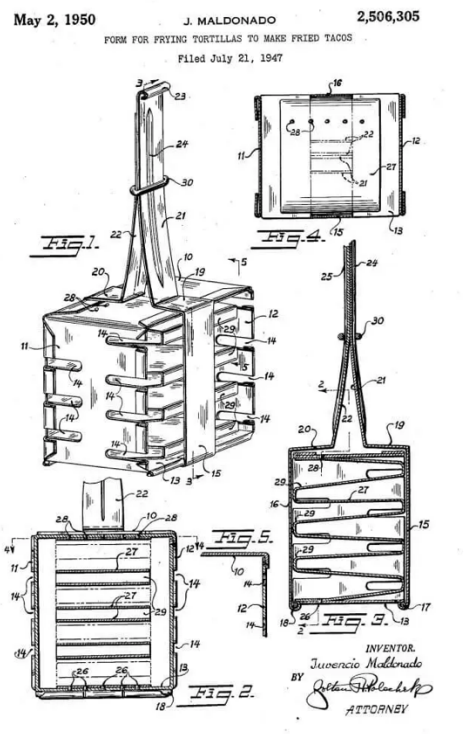


Figure 8. Juvencio Maldonado's Patent Application for his Taco Frying Machine.

[71] "News of Food, Juvencio Maldonado" *The New York Times*, May 3, 1952, http://timesmachine.nytimes.comhttp://timesmachine.content-tagging.us-east-1-01.prd.dvsp.nyt.net/timesmachine/1952/05/03/93566455.html.

Image: United States Trademark and Patent Office. Application US2506305A.

Juvencio would patent his device and change the landscape of Mexican food in the US forever. [72] Entrepreneurs, some Mexican, some Anglo, began to see the money-making potential for Mexican cooking and used inventions like Maldonado's taco shell fryer to open their own restaurants to sell to non-Mexican customers. A pattern of Mexican immigrants bringing their foodways to urban neighborhoods via their small restaurants and sharp businessmen taking the new technology for producing it to open what would become chain restaurants was well established by the close of the 1940s. These restaurants were producing an American version of Mexican food that would eventually explode into worldwide chains serving Tex-Mex food.[73] The next decade would bring an explosion of these chains and "blazed the trail for Mexican cuisine in the US" into the 1950s.[74]

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[72] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "'Old Stock' Tamales and Migrant Tacos: Taste, Authenticity, and the Naturalization of Mexican Food," *Social Research* 81, no. 2 (2014): 441–62, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26549626.
[73] Mariani, *America Eats Out*, 117.
[74] Gustavo Arellano, "In Defense of the Hard Shell Taco," *Los Angeles Magazine Cover Story* "Taco City" Los Angeles, July 22, 2015.

Chapter III.

The 1950s: The Taco Triumphs

Mexican food rapidly became part of the mainstream in America in the 1950s; the expansion and increasing acceptance of the cuisine in the previous decade created a demand that spanned beyond urban areas to suburbia. Through innovation in food manufacturing technology the ability to mass produce items like tortillas that had previously been time consuming and made by hand created a space where the demand could be met and increased. This allowed Mexican cuisine to enter the relatively new market for frozen meals, which exploded in popularity in the post-war years with women participating in the workforce and needing simple solutions for family dinners. Although skepticism that Mexican cuisine was unhealthy and even "dangerous" lingered, subtle changes in the perception of the food occurred in the 1950s and Americans began to embrace it both at home and when dining out.[75] Mexican-themed restaurants and celebrations popped up, allowing Anglo suburbanites to enjoy a night out in exotic Mexico without crossing the border.[76] Fast food restaurants and "TV" dinners meant that Americans could experience a safely watered-down version of Mexican food in their own homes. Mexican cuisine became the new vogue for suburban housewives wanting to experiment with new recipes, and newspaper columns, magazine articles and cookbooks

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[75] Pilcher, *Planet Taco*,107.

[76] "Another Mexican Night Tonight at the Chi Chi," California Digital Newspaper Collection," *Desert Sun*, July 29, 1954, 3A.

published recipes featuring Americanized Mexican dishes. Cooks specializing in Mexican food became celebrity chefs in the nascent medium of food television.[77] The modernization of Mexican food in the 1950s created an environment that was perfect for Anglo and Mexican entrepreneurs to create a new market and step in and profit, placing it firmly in the sphere of American cuisine.

In 1950s southern California, the idea of selling cheap, standardized food to the masses was just beginning to take hold. Brothers Richard and Maurice McDonald were packing their carhop selling fifteen cent hamburgers for which they had devised a system of quick production and service, creating one of the first models of a modern fast-food restaurant. Ray Kroc saw the crowds that the McDonald brothers were attracting and purchased the rights to franchise McDonald's and grew it into a global empire.[78] As the diaspora from Mexico to Southern California grew, so did the proliferation of taco stands selling the delicious, inexpensive and portable food option which became popular with people from all backgrounds. Glen Bell, a hot dog vendor, had a stand in a Mexican neighborhood of San Bernardino across the street from Café Mitla, just one of the ubiquitous rolled taco shops in the area. He tried the Mitla's version of the Mexican taco, enjoyed these hand-rolled, fried tortillas stuffed with meat, and became a regular customer. In an interview with his biographer, Bell describes his thought process as:

> Find the right product, then find a way to mass-produce it…similar takeout stands were spreading all over San Bernardino. If my business was

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[77] "'It's Fun to Eat' with Elena," Bay Area Television Archive, San Francisco State University (San Francisco: KPIX, 1950), https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/189406.
[78] John A. Jakle, *Fast Food: Roadside Restaurants in the Automobile Age*, Road and American Culture (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 87.

> to survive and grow, I would have to apply what I knew about quick service to a different product.[79]

Watching the cooks prepare the labor-intensive fried tacos, Bell thought he could improve upon the speed of the process to make and sell the tacos at high volume. Bell devised his own taco fryer and began selling tacos from his hot dog stand, using pre-fried, corn tortilla shells and chili-dog sauce for salsa. Bell's hot dog stand became Taco Tia, with five menu items all priced at nineteen cents, and he quickly opened three locations in the western suburbs of Los Angeles.[80] The spread of fast-food Mexican restaurants like Bell's to non-Hispanic neighborhoods allowed Anglos to try Mexican cuisine without having to cross segregated neighborhood boundaries. As Americans developed a taste for these delicious and inexpensive Mexican dishes at restaurants, home cooks became interested in preparing them in their own kitchens.

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[79] Baldwin, *Taco Titan : The Glen Bell Story*.
[80] Baldwin.



Figure 9. Ashley's Mexican Menu Magic Cookbook, c. 1950.

Author's Personal Collection.

Dining at home in the 1950s was transformed by the growing variety of processed foods that were available to American cooks, which included prepared Mexican foods like canned enchiladas, tortillas, beans and rice. Housewives' usage of convenience foods increased as a way to supplement their basic ingredients like fruits and vegetables with

canned and frozen items, using them as ingredients to add interest to the evening meal.[81] A 1954 edition of the women's monthly magazine, *The Ladies Home Journal* included the column "Shelf Magic for Short Order Cooks" edited by the staff writers showcasing reader's recipes for dishes created with convenience foods, including the Mexican Style Tampico Crab Soup using canned tomato soup.[82]

Cookbooks were in high demand in the 1950s as home cooks looked for creative inspiration to spice up their weekly menus and avoid the monotony of cooking and serving the same thing day after day. Themed entertaining became fashionable at this time and books like *The General Foods Kitchens Cookbook* encouraged housewives to prepare a "Backyard Hawaiian Luau" or "Alpine Fondue Party."[83] With Mexican food becoming part of the 1950s leisure lifestyle, the fiesta was an enticing addition to the suburban cook's repertoire. A contemporary cookbook, *Discovering Mexican Cooking* emphasized that "Mexican food is fun to eat in a restaurant; it is also fun to serve at home…it is inexpensive and so adaptable to informal entertaining."[84] Mexican food manufacturers produced cooking pamphlets with recipes using their products to bring the fiesta home. Prepared foods had been around since the early part of the century, but the 1950s is when they really became a daily part of the American diet and prepared Mexican

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[81] Joshua Gitelson, "Populox: The Suburban Cuisine of the 1950s," *Journal of American Culture* 15, no. 3 (1992): 73–78, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1992.00073.x, 73.
[82] "Shelf Magic for Short-Order Cooks (Reader Recipes, Francis Meade Square)," *Ladies' Home Journal* (New York, United States: Meredith Corporation, April 1954), 129.
[83] George Lazarnick, Mary Ronin, and General Foods Corporation General Foods Kitchens, *The General Foods Kitchens Cookbook* (New York: Random House, 1959).
[84] Alice Erie Young, *Discovering Mexican Cooking* (San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1958),vii.

items made by Old El Paso and other companies helped make Mexican dishes a staple on the dinner table in the US.



Figure 10. The Kitchen of the Future.

Cartoon by George Clark. National Frozen Food Distributors Frozen Food Yearbook, 1950, 23.

The growth of the burgeoning frozen food industry in the 1950s was another way that American homes were introduced to Mexican foods. In 1954, Swanson introduced the first of its frozen "TV Dinners," a classic turkey thanksgiving dinner and sold ten million plates, not long after followed by the Mexican-style dinner which consisted of

enchiladas, rice and beans.[85] Rosarita Mexican Frozen Mexican foods grew out of the Rosarita brand of prepared foods in 1955, advertising in *Sunset Magazine,* "fresh frozen Mexican dinners, created for American tastes."[86] When women were encouraged to take wartime jobs, the expectation was that they would go back to homemaking when the war was over, however six million women stayed in the workforce. That number grew among white, middle-class women, and by 1953 the number of working women topped eighteen million.[87] Two-income households were allowing families to purchase not only their homes with single-family housing sales soaring in the 1950s but also to invest in the new appliances like refrigerator-freezers that were entering the market.[88] The "Kitchen of the Future" was characterized as having a freezer according to a cartoon in *The Frozen Food Yearbook* produced by the National Wholesale Frozen Food Distributors Association.[89] The older couple in the cartoon with the husband in his suit reading the newspaper and the wife pushing a vacuum cleaner in a house dress, is an example of a traditional domesticity. They are observing a young couple and commenting on the changes taking place in the domestic spaces of the 1950s, the new appliances, televisions and automobiles required two incomes, unlike when they were likely married during the lean times of the Great Depression.

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[85] Kovie Biakolo, "A Brief History of the TV Dinner," *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 2020.
[86] "A Mexican Meal in Minutes, Rosarita Frozen Mexican Foods Company Advertisement," *Sunset Magazine: The Magazine of Western Living*, (Menlo Park, CA) April 1957, 67.
[87] Lynn Y. Weiner, *From Working Girl to Working Mother: The Female Labor Force in the United States, 1820-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1985), 5-6.
[88] US Census Bureau, "Historical Census of Housing Tables: Homeownership by Selected Demographic and Housing Characteristics," https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/dec/coh-ownerchar.html accessed April 29, 2024.
[89] "The Kitchen of the Future-Cartoon," *The Frozen Food Yearbook*, 1950 (National Wholesale Frozen Food Distributors, Inc. New York, 1950), 23.

The frozen food industry took notice of the increase in working women and published the statistics in industry publications like *Quick Frozen Foods*, connecting women in the workforce, the need for convenience foods and a potential target sales audience.[90] Advertising of the time focused on the woman who was so busy taking care of her family, work and other activities that she had no time to cook. An early Swanson TV Dinner ad for a frozen beef dinner portrays a smartly dressed woman in a suit unpacking a grocery bag full of Swanson dinners. As her husband comes in the door in business attire, she calmly checks her watch and smiles while the tagline declares "I'm late but dinner won't be."[91] The advertisement created an aspirational image for the American woman, nicely dressed in business attire, with bags of purchases on her arm in her comfortable home, handsome husband behind. She's not stressed because she has the conveniences needed to make dinner in a hurry with her Swanson TV dinners and modern kitchen. Mexican restaurants embraced this technology to grow their businesses by producing their own branded meals. Using the slogan "Now! El Chico Genuine Mexican foods at your grocers!" The Cuellar family of Dallas' El Chico chain, added frozen dinners in 1950 to the prepared foods line that already supplemented their restaurant group's income, making "Mama Cuellar's boys" as they were known, millionaires.[92] The heat-and-eat frozen dinner made Mexican food accessible to a whole new segment of American diners, the white, suburban household, who were also able to

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[90] "Working Women." Quick Frozen Foods Magazine, Vol. 15, No. 2 (E.W. Williams Publications, New York, NY) March 1953, 75.
[91] "I'm Late But Dinner Won't Be"Swanson Advertisement, *Life Magazine* (Time, Inc.: New York, April 1956), 32.
[92] United Press International, "Cuellars Put Family and Success Back Into El Chico Chain," *Chicago Tribune (Pre-1997 Fulltext)*, May 17, 1985, sec. Business,7.

dine out at themed restaurants designed to recreate a Mexican experience without leaving the country.

Once Mexican food disseminated beyond its Latino neighborhood boundaries through fast food and grocery store products, Americans were hooked, creating opportunities for full-service restaurant growth. Larry Cano, the son of a Mexican immigrant and World War II veteran, spent a memorable night at a restaurant in Mexico City, where waiters treated him and his fellow veterans like royalty. The memory stuck with him when he returned to his southern California home after the war. He took a bartending job at the Bali Hai tiki restaurant in Encino, a well-off suburb of Los Angeles and bedroom community for the movie industry. When the owner passed away in 1954, his widow offered the bar to Larry.[93] He accepted her offer and considered the long-term viability of the tiki theme that had been popular with veterans. Cano recalled in an interview with Gustavo Arellano for the *OC Weekly*, "There weren't too many Mexican restaurants in the San Fernando Valley at the time, I needed a business to make my name."[94] Cano looked to his family roots and his memory of Mexico City and decided to open a Mexican restaurant, with upscale sensibilities to reflect the neighborhood, the film executives and movie stars came, and the concept succeeded. Larry expanded, focusing on upscale neighborhoods, and decorating with the stucco arches and potted ferns in a romantic, old Mexico style that became iconic for so many Mexican restaurants to follow. This representation of Mexico is what Cano believed Americans would feel

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[93] Arellano, *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*, 78.

[94] Gustavo Arellano, "The Big Enchilada: Does El Torito Founder Larry Cano Have One More Cuisine-Changing Idea in Him?," *OC Weekly*, September 30, 2011, 81.

comfortable in, he offered his guests a trip to the coast without leaving the Valley. The menu included a phonetic pronunciation guide and dictionary describing the dishes on the menu, which was prepared by Mexican chefs.[95] He turned down the heat on the food, making it less spicy for Anglo palates which proved to be a hit with his customers, and by the time he sold his chain he had opened twenty two restaurants.[96] Cano created a prototype of the American Mexican restaurant that would be copied over and over again to great success by others who branched out to affluent, primarily Anglo neighborhoods.

Like the Cuellar brothers before them, the food business was the gateway to success for the children of Mexican immigrants and the 1950s presented a time of tremendous opportunity. Ray Vega's roots go back to Olvera Street, an area in the oldest part of Los Angeles that was developed as a Mexican Marketplace and a nod to old California.[97] Ray's parents, Tijuana residents who crossed the border to give birth to their son and stayed, opened a famous Olvera Street restaurant called Cafe Caliente. Ray grew up in the business, eating his mother's food, learning her recipes and helping in the restaurant. When the Vegas closed their restaurant after eighteen years of success and branched out to Hollywood, their granddaughter recounts in Ray's obituary, "Mexicans were not that welcome outside downtown and the business went under in four years."[98] In 1956, their son Ray decided to take a chance on a space in Sherman Oaks, an upscale,

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[95] Larry Cano, "El Torito Menu," 1956, Author's Personal Collection.
[96] The Associated Press, "Larry J. Cano, El Torito Founder, Dies at 90," *The New York Times*, December 18, 2014, New York edition, sec. Business, 19.
[97] "National Register Database and Research - National Register of Historic Places (U.S. National Park Service)," accessed February 20, 2024, https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/database-research.htm.
[98] Jenn Harris, "Rafael 'Ray' Vega, Who Owned Celebrity Favorite Casa Vega Mexican Restaurant, Dies," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2021, 57.

predominantly Anglo San Fernando Valley neighborhood, serving dishes based on his mother's recipes like *Enchiladas Rancheros* for $1.80. With Ray greeting guests in the dining room, his mother running the kitchen and his father running the bar, this true family business thrived. One of the first restaurants in Los Angeles to serve authentic Mexican food outside Olvera street, its proximity to Burbank's movie studios quickly drew a celebrity crowd, reportedly Marlon Brando was an early regular, making it a success that still draws LA's film crowd 70 years later.[99] With Ray's daughter Christy running it now, it was recently awarded the prestigious James Beard Foundation's America's Classics Award given to restaurants with "timeless appeal and regionally beloved for cuisine that reflects the community."[100] This white suburban embrace of Mexican cuisine in the 1950s, albeit in a form that could only be described as marginally influenced by Mexican recipes adjusted to suit the American palate, further warmed the US to the flavors from the south of the border. Mexican cuisine in the 1950s attracted an affluent and in some cases, famous following which led to legitimacy in terms of greater acceptance by American diners. The pioneers that embraced Mexican food in the 1950s paved the way for Mexican restaurants to open in every corner of the US in the 1960s on its way to being one of the most popular cuisines in America.

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[99] Bill Esparza, "The Los Angeles Restaurant That Sold Hollywood on Mexican Food," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2024, sec. T Magazine,14.
[100] "Announcing the 2022 America's Classics Winners | James Beard Foundation," accessed May 2, 2024, https://www.jamesbeard.org.

Chapter IV.

1960s Mexican Becomes American

Mexican food became widely accepted as American food in the 1960s, most Americans had access to it locally by then and eating Mexican food became a norm rather than a special occasion. The 1960s offered many Americans their first opportunity to try Mexican food whether at a fast food stop or one of the growing numbers of chain restaurants offering it that had now expanded across the US. The Mexican food popularized in the 1960s was a Mexican American hybrid and saw some new dishes like burritos and fajitas gain popularity, not foods that Mexicans would consider representations of their country's cuisine. The spread of fast food outside California helped create a version of Mexican food would have been almost unrecognizable in Mexico.[101] With modifications made to suit the Anglo palate, Mexican food in the 1960s US took on a new Tex-Mex identity by evolving into a separate cuisine rooted in Mexico but vastly removed from its historical food culture.

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[101] Pilcher, *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food*, 158.



Figure 11. "Last Stop Before Zee Border."

Ad: Zee Broilette, The Kingston Daily Freeman, Kingston, NY, November 7, 1960, 32.

The burrito is a prime example of a dish that came to the US from Mexican border towns and became a universally popular dish with Mexican origins that bore little resemblance to the original. A simple tortilla wrapped around a filling of beans or stewed meat was a cheap, easily made portable lunch for fieldworkers from the North of Mexico where the locals had adopted a preference for the flour tortilla:

> Burritos in the northern part of Mexico and in the southwestern part of the United States are quite different. Now a popular dish in many restaurants and taco stands in California and Texas are northern burritos, which are made by folding a flour tortilla around a mound of refried beans, seasoned to taste with chili.[102]

[102] Ruth Mulvey Harmer, *Good Food from Mexico*, Barrows International Cookbook Series (New York: M. Barrows & Co., 1962), 81 .

These “northern” burritos were introduced to the US by the Braceros, Mexican guest workers who were accustomed to eating a meal of a corn tortilla wrapped in a handkerchief in the fields of their own country.[103] Relatively unknown in Mexico outside the border states, workers from central Mexico were not fond of the flour tortilla. When asked by an oral historian about the daily burrito lunch offered to workers by their employer, former bracero Jesus Silva responds “*que malo!”* (how awful!) and when asked whether it was like the food in Mexico, he replied “*nada, no*” (nothing, no).[104] Although the flour tortillas were not a hit with Mexicans initially, Americans were intrigued. Elena Zelayeta describes them in her 1967 cookbook *Elena's Favorite Foods California Style*,

> ‘Little burros' are becoming very popular. Flour tortillas are used for these, with a spoonful of chili-flavored cooked meat, sometimes mixed with beans, placed in the center. The two opposite sides of the tortilla are folded over to cover the edges of filling, then the other sides are folded over to make little packages.[105]

The interest in recipes for burritos is confirmed by a reader of the *Los Angeles Times* “Culinary SOS” column, which provided recipes for popular restaurant dishes on request. The reader writes, “Dear SOS, What are the chances of getting a recipe for burritos?” The SOS writer, Marian Manners, replied, “We are told that burritos, unknown outside the northern part of Mexico and along the border in the

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[103] Susan Shelby Magoffin, *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847*, Yale Western Americana Paperbound YW-3 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 131-132.
[104] Anais Acosta, Interview with Jesus Silva, July 28, 2005, Institute of Oral History, University of Texas at El Paso, https://scholarworks.utep.edu/interviews/1101. Translation by the author.
[105] Elena Emilia Zelayeta, *Elena’s Favorite Foods: California Style* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 174.

States, are becoming very popular in our taco stands."[106] The SOS column notes that they welcome recipe requests but only publish those of widest general interest. This is just one example of how a dish that has no historical context in Mexico became known in the 1960s US as Mexican food.

Tacos are another dish with distant, murky historical origins in Mexico beloved by Americans that achieved legendary status and became an intrinsic part of our food culture in the 1960s. According to Jeffrey Pilcher tacos were first mentioned around the turn of the twentieth century in American newspapers, but it wasn't until the 1960s that most Americans tried their first taco.[107] The crispy fried version of the taco is an American invention made popular by the growth of Southern California style fast food restaurants, most notably Taco Bell and its many spinoff copycats. From Glen Bell's original location in 1962 to 100 stores by 1967 and eventually going public with over 300 stores across the US in 1969. Like Taco Bell which was renamed from Taco Tia when Bell expanded widely, many of the copycats took on Anglo names in order to appeal to the American consumer, first with small groups in Southern California like Ernie's Taco House, Alice's Taco Terrace and Taco Kid further distancing themselves from Mexican roots and implying the assurance of American cleanliness and furthering the idea of accessible exoticism. Taco John's "Potato Ole", a spiced-up version of the all-American tater tot drove it to become a national chain. Del Taco, and Taco Cabana, all Southern California Taco bell imitators spread the Mexican American taco story nationwide and for Americans it was love at first bite. These chains were the gateway to widespread

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[106] Marian Manners, "Burritos Gaining Foothold in US," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1964, sec. Dining, 2.
[107] Pilcher, *Planet Taco, 6*.

interest in what Americans thought of as Mexican food in the 1960s and marked the period when its popularity flourished.

The process of the adoption of the Mexican American style into America's favorite food was evidenced in comparisons like this in newspaper food sections, "Tacos and Mexicali Salad, Equals America's Burger Deluxe!" The article goes on to describe tacos as an "exciting idea for an informal supper party" and that "if you like to be the first with such things, better read on and serve it soon", indicating the growing trendiness of tacos in the 1960s as the next big thing. Recipes soon included ingredients that could be found in a typical fast food taco like "packaged taco shells" ground beef and lettuce and described in a Louisiana newspaper article as "a Mexican sandwich that rivals pizza in popularity."[108] Sandwich was an apt comparison to a dish that evolved from a tortilla wrapped in a handkerchief to carry in the fields to a distantly Mexican dish made with anything wrapped in a tortilla, flour or corn, hard or soft. An early glossy promotor of Mexican cuisine to the home cook, *Sunset Magazine* published articles like "The Versatile Enchilada."[109] Others like *Gourmet* followed, even featuring Mexican dishes on their cover of a 1961 issue. Features like this made their way into American homes everywhere and solidified the idea that Mexican dishes that were fashioned by American tastes belonged in the melting pot that is American cuisine.

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[108] Editor, "Beef Tacos Super Snacks-Try Them on Your Friends," *The Advocate*, May 23, 1961.
[109] Karen Huffans, "The Versatile Enchilada," *Sunset Magazine of Western Living*, March 1960, Box 99, Folder 3, Department of Stanford University Library Special Collections and University Archives.

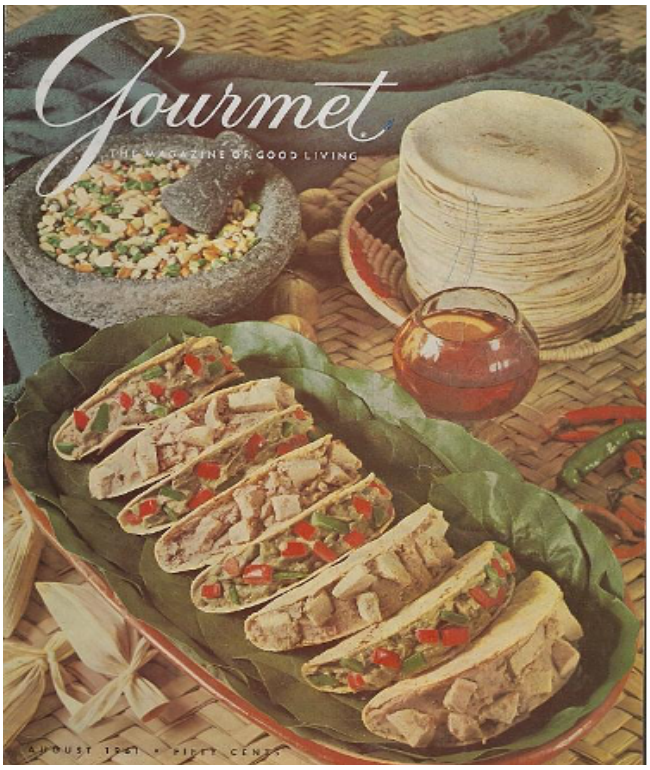


Figure 12. *Gourmet Magazine*; Cover August 1961, Featuring Tacos and Tequila. *Image: Gourmet Archives gourmet.com.*

Many of the foods that we call Mexican food are really American inventions, along with the fast-food style taco and burrito, fajitas, chimichangas, sopaipillas and queso dip all have very distant roots in Mexican cuisine. They were created in the US Southwest border states and compromised a cuisine of their own. Tex-Mex and Cal-Mex food are legitimate regional cuisines of the US that borrowed heavily from Mexican foodways brought by migrants. Once adjusted by both Mexican and Anglo cooks to suit the American palate, these regional cuisines resembled each other more than they did

Mexican food.[110] This was done by necessity due to lack of ingredient sources and also with commerce in mind which has led many Americans to have a misinformed view of Mexican cuisine. Fajitas, another 1960s invention did not necessarily reflect the rich culinary traditions of Mexico, but they do have their place in culinary history that references a legacy of several centuries of Spanish and Mexican influences in the border regions, along with the cooking of the indigenous people already living there.[111] Mexican food had evolved from questionable and potentially dangerous in the 1940s, to the beginnings of acceptance and increased curiosity about it in the 1950s, and in the 1960s with the many modifications incurred, becoming a universally approved facet of the American foodscape although. The widely known version of Mexican food in the US that had developed between 1940 and 1970 was far from its origins in Mexico and had become what became known as a Tex-Mex cuisine and was really the American version of Mexican cuisine, not the true cuisine of Mexico.

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[110] Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex? Notes on the Historical Geography of Southwestern Cuisine," *Journal of the Southwest* 43, no. 4 (2001): 659–79,

[111] Adán Medrano, *Truly Texas Mexican: A Native Culinary Heritage in Recipes*, Grover E. Murray Studies in the American Southwest (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 2014), 15.

Chapter V.

Conclusions

Mexican food in the US is a perennial favorite cuisine and has taken over other ethnic cuisines as the top choice for Americans over previous picks like Chinese and Italian. Like Chinese and Italian food, Mexican food was subjected to many changes from its original dishes and flavors once it reached the US and became popular with Americans. Beginning in the 1940s Mexican food moved into the awareness of the American public filtering from the border states of the Southwest where it first became popular eastward to large cities and eventually nationwide. The dissemination of the foods of Mexico through the US began in the twentieth century with migrants from Mexico coming North for work and naturally wanting the comforting flavors of home. Those who came before them and had settled provided many of the ingredients by growing chiles and corn. Other ingredients like Mexican cheeses were more difficult to obtain creating the one of the initial conditions, necessity, which caused early changes to the cuisine.

As people learned of the exotic cuisine coming from South of the border, they began to travel to places like San Antonio to try it in the safe setting of their home country. Small food businesses run by Mexican women popped up in an ad hoc manner in homes, street fairs and at sporting events, as more and more Americans frequented these businesses they began to grow and expand. The Bracero program of guest workers from Mexico working in the fields and factories of California and the Midwest beginning

in the late 1940s also fired the spread of the cuisine in the US with these workers wanting to eat the food of their home and also providing them with entrepreneurial opportunities of their own in the US. The growth of this new clientele created another condition for change as the Mexican cooks created dishes made with ingredients familiar to the American palate, replacing shaved cabbage with iceberg lettuce, toning down the heat of the chiles and making the dishes generally less flavorful. As the 1940s progressed, convenience foods like spice blends and canned beans and salsas started appearing in grocery stores giving the home cook more access to ingredients and the opportunity to try Mexican food at home. Without many English language cookbooks to refer to, both restaurant chefs and hone cooks took great liberties with dishes attributing them with Mexican connections without any actual origins in Mexico. Increased travel to Mexico in the 1940s also enchanced Americans exposure to and desire for these foods, when returning home the ability to replicate them was limited by the lack of authentic ingredients and guidance from recipes in the form of cookbooks. These conditions improved as the decade turned to the 1950s, with the demand creating a space for grocers to stock new items imported from Mexico, magazines to run feature articles with recipes for Mexican dishes and cookbook authors to popularize Mexican food cookbooks.

By the 1950s Mexican food gained wide audience in the United States, and restaurants operated by both Mexican and American entrepreneurs opened serving this hybrid Mexican American food. The door to embracing world cuisnes was opened by returning GI from WWII who had experienced exotic foods in Japan and Europe, and sparked curiosity about dishes from our closer, yet equally exotic neighbors in Mexico. The 1950s also saw women remaining in the workforce leading to frozen meals surge in

popularity and further altering the flavors and appearance of Mexican food with many people experiencing it for the first time in the form of a TV dinner. Dishes like fajitas which had no history in Mexico showed up on menus around this time with both Mexican and American entrepreneurs coming up with new ideas to attract new customers which in turn became known as Mexican food. By the time the 1960s came around, Americans viewed this Tex-Mex hybrid cuisine as Mexican cuisine itself, leading to the spread of an American Mexican style of cooking that led to a boom in popularity.

The 1960s saw a rapid expansion of the availability of Mexican foods across the country and globally caused by the rise of fast food restaurants which multiplied dramatically during this period. Two income households, and the increasing mobility of a nation with automobile ownership fostered the rapid growth of fast food in the US. Fast food created even further changes with restauranteurs changing the methods of preparation in order to serve more customers faster. In this way the familiar fried, u-shaped taco shell that we know now, was created and is forever associated with Mexican cuisine, though it was never seen in this form in Mexico. The conditions that fed the fast food restaurant industry also influenced the frozen and ready to made foods industries. It was in one of these forms, whether at a drive-thru restaurant, frozen TV dinner or make-your-own taco kit that most people experienced what was considered Mexican food. In a few short decades, Mexican food was transformed in America into a Mexican American version of itself, and not one that would be recognized in Mexico.

Mexican food continued to change in the following decades and there has been movement by many chefs to return to the notion of using original recipes and better sourced ingredients. There is further opportunity to study this circular route back to

Mexican cuisine's origins which is a growing current trend in the US. Further areas of study could include a study of the dichotomy between our great love of Mexican food in the US and generally negative attitudes toward Mexican by a sizeable and growing percentage of Americans. Do we really love Mexican food as it exists in Mexico or do we love what we have turned it into in American?

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