

# CULINARY --- TOURISM

EDITED BY LUCY M. LONG

THE UNIVERSITY PRESS OF KENTUCKY

## From Culinary Other to Mainstream America

### *Meanings and Uses of Southwestern Cuisine*

Amy Bentley

ity of tourism and the ways it can turn inward as well as lead outward. Liz Wilson writes about the adaptation of Asian foodways by the '60s generation—"aging baby boomers"—tying this movement to specific historical and cultural trends. She explores the changing status of a set of foods from exotic to familiar as well as the incorporation of culinary tourism into an everyday norm for eating. In the final essay, Barbara Shortridge examines a number of public and commercial venues for ethnic food tourism in the Midwestern United States. Restaurants, souvenir shops, and festivals all frame particular foods as representing ethnicity and heritage, and therefore available for tourism. All of these essays demonstrate that culinary tourism manipulates the meaning of food, and that otherness can be a bridge that takes a tourist back home to the familiar as well as to new tastes and experiences.

The United States is in the midst of a culinary love affair with what is generally known as Southwestern cuisine. From the elite echelons of haute cuisine, to party and recipe ideas in women's magazines, to fast-food conglomerates, Americans can scarcely escape (nor would they want to) ingesting various combinations of tortillas, chiles, beans, cheese, tomatoes, and corn. Witness the following phenomena: for the last several years salsa has outsold ketchup in the United States; Doritos and Tostitos tortilla chips are the second and third most popular-selling snack chips in the country (behind Lay's Potato Chips); nachos are common, popular snacks at football and baseball games; and New Mexico adopted as its state motto "Red or Green?"—in homage to the thousands of times a day restaurant servers ask which kind of chile their customers prefer smothering their burritos and enchiladas (Collins 1997; PepsiCo 1993; *Daily Camera* 1995). Such restaurants as the Coyote Cafe in Santa Fe, Mesa Grill in New York City, and the Frontera Grill in Chicago are the hot dining spots; meanwhile, Taco Bell is rapidly expanding both its number of restaurants worldwide and its volume of business per unit. We have indeed come a long way from the Green Giant canned "Mexicorn" of the 1950s and 1960s, with its indecipherable slivers of red and green intermixed with corn kernels.

When examined through the lens of culinary tourism—understanding "food as other" as a dynamic process running along three axes: from exotic to familiar, inedible to edible, and unpalatable to palatable—most Americans regard mainstream interpretations of Southwestern cuisine as

highly familiar and appetizing. Indeed, so familiar has the commercialized “Tex-Mex” version of Southwestern cuisine become that it has been dubbed “Gingco food” by some in the food industry (Collins 1997). Such an assessment is significant given that not too long ago Texas Anglos considered Mexican food unfit for human consumption, even to the point, folklorist Mario Montaño notes, “that Anglos considered Mexican food so bad that they said wild animals did not scavenge on Mexican dead bodies” (1992:108). Similarly, the elite class in Mexico, historian Jeffrey Pilcher explains, considered tamales, enchiladas, and quesadillas “the food of the lower orders” (1998:46).

The entry of Southwestern cuisine into mainstream American foodways is a fascinating and important way to understand how the same cuisine has different meanings to different groups of people depending, among other things, on ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and openness to culinary exploration. On a more concrete level, it is also an important way to examine the place and status of Mexican Americans within the larger cultural milieu. A product of the U.S.–Mexico borderlands region, Southwestern cuisine contains multiple meanings resulting in a “text” replete with cultural contradictions. There are at least three possible ways to think about the nature and function of Southwestern cuisine, and while contradictory in some respects, all three seem valid. First, mainstream Americans’ embracing of the cuisine juxtaposed with an intense current national hostility toward Mexico and Mexican Americans indicates a culinary neutralization and cultural domination of borderlands foodways. Second, despite this cultural hegemony, for many Mexican Americans elements of Southwestern cuisine can provide a means of ownership and self-identity. Such events as tamale and tortilla making can be sites of resistance to the dominant culture through which Chicanos and Chicanas can retain and strengthen cultural identity. However, the popularity and even the creation of Southwestern cuisine are not only about appropriation and resistance. Cuisines are never static, but are constantly evolving and are reshaped much like culture in general. Southwestern cuisine, while different from and many would say inferior to its western counterpart, has nonetheless attained legitimacy and positive acceptance, with the potential to function for many Americans as a foray to increased understanding of Latino cultural, economic, and social issues.<sup>1</sup>

Southwestern cuisine is the offspring of Native American and Mexican foodstuffs (chiles, pinto beans, pork, cornmeal, cumín, onions, tomatoes), flavor principles, and cooking techniques, combined with European

American elements (more beef, a variety of cheeses, including cheddar; sour cream; sausage; fewer “variety” meats and dishes) originally imported to the region through the Spanish conquest and later through nineteenth-century German and Anglo settlers, cowboys, and the transcontinental railroad’s Harvey Restaurants. Southwestern cuisine extends primarily throughout the states bordering Mexico, California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, with variation among the different regions. Californian Southwestern cuisine, for example, is thought to use more avocado, sprouts, and sour cream; Arizona or Sonoran versions often incorporate Native American influences such as fry bread and mutton stew and employ more often the use of cactus fruits; New Mexican or Santa Fe-style cuisine emphasizes green chiles, blue corn, and *pozole* (hominy or corn kernels soaked in lye); while the Texas “Tex-Mex” version boasts chili con carne, nachos, and barbecue as its most prominent legacies (DeWitt and Gerlach 1995:6). The greatest common denominator for all is the chile. It is important that the basic components of this cuisine—chile, beans, tomatoes, and corn—are native to the Americas, with pork and beef adopted early on from the Spanish colonists (Crosby 1972:114–21; Meier and Ribera 1993:11–15). Chile (spelled with an “r”) is perhaps for most Americans the best known and loved Southwestern dish, as indicated by chili enthusiasts’ attempt to declare chili con carne “America’s Official Food” (DeWitt and Gerlach 1995:122). In fact, so common is its presence in Americans’ diets that many may not even regard it as indigenous to the Southwest. There are chili festivals in such non-Southwestern states as Virginia and Vermont. Hot-dog vendors in most urban metropolises offer chili along with relish and sauerkraut as condiments. The cities of Memphis and Cincinnati stage elaborate chili cook offs, where chili aficionados fiercely debate the authenticity of chili with or without beans, the proper assortment of spices, the heat level, and so on. Cincinnati chili is a good example of Southwestern fare gone completely regional, where there one simply orders a “three-way”—mild chili served on a bed of spaghetti and topped with cheddar cheese—or a “four-way,” topped with onions as well (Lloyd 1981:28–30).

The relatively recent popularity and general acceptance in the United States of Southwestern cuisine can be explained through several phenomena. First, late-twentieth-century immigration patterns, featuring immigration from Mexico and other Latin American countries, as well as Asia and the Caribbean, are all places where chiles feature prominently in native cuisines. A higher-than-average birthrate also contributes to the growing Latino population, and as a result Latin tastes and preferences are

beginning to wield more influence in mainstream American cuisine (Robbins 1992:42). Moreover, changing demographics, combined with the deheroing of French cuisine as the pinnacle of culinary trendsetting, have gradually loosened the rigidity of Americans' diets, allowing greater exploration and acceptance of more complex, spicier foods. The increasing prominence of California as an arbiter of American tastes, for example, accompanied by the rise in so-called celebrity chefs, including many in the West, has allowed Southwestern cuisine and ingredients a prominence and a legitimacy not seen until recently.

Second, Southwestern fare is a relatively inexpensive, palatable, nutritious, and pleasing combination of flavors and ingredients adapted to an "American" palate; that is, an overall acclimation to food often more bland than traditional Latino tastes. In short, it tastes good. Its components are similar to Italian American basics (meat, cheese, tomatoes, and grain products), a cuisine thoroughly accepted by Americans, which provide nutrition, calories, satisfaction, and pleasure. Despite the more mainstream American tendency to turn down the heat, not to be disregarded when considering Southwestern fare's growth in popularity is the allure of the chile pepper. Researchers have hinted at chiles' potentially additive quality stemming from the heat-generating element capsaicin, which may be a factor in its growing popularity. According to researchers, capsaicin triggers the release of pleasure-producing endorphins in the human brain, thought to be a natural pain reliever and mood elevator, and just like a runner's high, humans can crave and search out this endorphin release (DeWitt and Gerlach 1995:129).

Third, Southwestern cuisine has found such wide acceptance because of its constructed masculine identity allowing for broader general appeal. While the general preparation of this kind of food has been part of the traditional female domain, and specific elements such as tamales and tortilla making are distinctly regarded as "female," the greater emphasis on meat, the outdoors grilling option, the potential high fat and protein content, and especially the chiles give it a masculine edge. Chiles are, as a food writer recently punned, "hot." Self-described "chileheads" get high on the heat; an entire magazine, *Chile Pepper*, with a large readership, is devoted to the topic; and more and more Americans are exploring the merits of the chile pepper. Mark Miller, owner and chef of Santa Fe's Coyote Cafe, observes: "Chiles are a lifestyle. It's an urban cowboy idea of bravado. You have a sense of machismo without running around with a gun rack in the back of your truck. There's got to be a way of proving one's bravado. Chiles are a way of doing that" (DeWitt and Gerlach 1995:41). A

recent issue of *Modern Dad* magazine, for example, saw fit to include a feature on the Tex-Mex cookout. Chili and barbecue contests all over the country are comprised of mostly male participants. For example, the father of a former student of mine belongs to not one but two such barbecue teams. Her mother, who never touches the meat or the sauce, is relegated to making the side dishes of coleslaw and cornbread. Finally, what Superbowl gathering of men would be complete without huge plates of nachos? The "maleness" of the cuisine allows a greater variety and number of Americans access to Southwestern fare. People are not afraid of it the way some are of ethnic dishes featuring raw fish or unfamiliar ingredients (Bourdieu 1984:190-94).

This maleness combined with stereotyped notions of Mexican and Latin culture indeed instill a machismo into the cuisine—a sort of dangerousness that the media plays upon, a prime example being the enduring advertising image of the Frito Bandito of a generation ago. The Frito Bandito, as offensive then as today for many, infused an aura of exoticism and dangerousness to Fritos corn chips—inviting consumers to see them as something truly different from other salty snack foods, more daring, more macho. Taco Bell's 1998 advertising campaign featuring a Chihuahua, who stares intently at the viewer and declares, "Yo quiero Taco Bell," plays on some of the same stereotypes, although this time alluding to the cartoon character Speedy Gonzales. Many Mexican Americans, regarding the figure as racist and offensive, staged a national boycott of Taco Bell. Others viewed the advertising character in more complicated terms. Folklorist José Limón, for example, confesses that the "little guy . . . cracks [him] up." At the same time, however, Limón notes: "[T]alking full advantage of the semantic registers of the Spanish word *quiere*, [the dog] wants, desires, loves Taco Bell, arch commodity of American 'Mexicanness,' even as he sits there in all his own evident, though 'small' Mexicanness" (Limón 1998:1).

Finally, Americans embrace Southwestern cuisine in part because of its evocation of a romantic, sanitized version of the American Southwest and understanding of the West in general. This is largely due to the centrality of the chile, resulting in what can be called the icon of the chile pepper. The decorative, bright red strings of dried chiles called *ristras* that are often strung in both private and public spaces symbolize hospitality, evoke a certain ambience, and are part of the hipness of Southwestern architecture and décor. *Ristras*, for instance, hang in abundance in one upscale restaurant in my former hometown of Boulder, Colorado, whose menu has very little Southwestern influence, simply to appropriate the

ambiance of Santa Fe. The chile pepper evokes nostalgic, half-fantasy images of a slower, simpler, less cluttered time, evoking a Western spirit that nicely complements the idealized images Americans hold about the West. In short, the chile pepper, along with its cousins the howling coyote and sprightly mischievous *Kokopelli* (the flute-playing ancient Hopi god of fertility), have replaced the sleepy Mexican under a huge sombrero taking a siesta in the shade of a cactus as icons of the region. The net effect contributes to the exorcising of the actual people and complexities of the region—American Indians, Mexican Americans, and Mexican nationals—and what remains is a warm, romantic feeling connected to the Southwest.

The process by which Southwestern cuisine has evolved from exotic other to familiar favorite is yet another matter. Southwestern cuisine attracts a broad population primarily through a reframing of the food's context and presentation, and through recipe adaptation (Long 1998). First, to ensure the widest and most efficient distribution possible it has been reconfigured to adhere to the priorities of the fast-food industry. When people enter a fast-food eatery such as Taco Bell, they expect efficiency (quick service); calculability (an emphasis on quantity over quality); predictability (a reliable sameness); cleanliness (sanitation over taste); and low cost (Ritzer 1996:1–45). Obviously, these priorities diminish room for creativity, experimentation, substitution, use of seasonal and more expensive ingredients, as well as dishes requiring labor-intensive preparation and extended cooking times. The rapid proliferation of Taco Bells and other Tex-Mex fast-food joints means that for most Americans, Taco Bell equals Southwestern cuisine. Similarly, Southwestern recipes have been “Americanized” to include a greater emphasis on animal protein—more meat (and more expensive cuts of meat), American and cheddar cheese, sour cream—and most prominently, reducing the heat level. Thus, fajitas are made with the tenderloin rather than the traditional skirt steak; one fast-food taco includes bacon (“The Taco Bell BLT”); soft, white-wheat tortillas outsell the more traditional cornmeal version; and the Pace Company has developed a heatless jalapeño for its “cool” salsa (Verhovek 1996).

The results are quite interesting. Old El Paso Products owner, Pillsbury, Inc., located in the decidedly non-Southwestern city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, is now the top producer of Mexican fare in the United States. Moreover, none of Old El Paso’s twenty-member development team is of Latino background. Pillsbury executives are eminently aware that its products are not authentic. “We’re interested in mainstream America,” one is quoted in a newspaper article. “Internally, in our memos, we always put the word Mexican in quotes.” Now that Old El Paso’s booming sales fig-

ures indicate that Pillsbury has captured the attention of mainstream America, the corporation is focusing on narrower segments of the population, specifically Hispanic Americans who see Old El Paso as a “mainstream American food” (Collins 1997).

### Multiple Meanings

We know that food conveys meaning as well as calories and nutrients. Thus not only the food, but the preparation, the rituals, the smells, the social conditions and seasons of the year under which the food is sown, gathered, prepared, and eaten are all forms of cultural expression and identity. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai explains, “In its tangible and material forms, food presupposes and refines technological arrangements, relations of production and exchange, conditions of field and market, and realities of plenty and want” (1981:494). Because food is an extraordinarily powerful way to transmit ideas, power, and social status, the popularity of Southwestern cuisine can be convincingly interpreted as an act of cultural hegemony, an appropriation of borderlands foods in the hopes of neutralizing the power and voice of people, particularly Latinos, in the region.

The popularity of Southwestern cuisine, in light of the historically negative political climate regarding Mexico and hostility toward Mexican American citizens, indicates a cultural and political blindness. One only needs to think of the overwhelmingly negative construction of Mexico in the U.S. media and thus in the minds of many if not most Americans: the 1990s NAFTA debate and passage and more recent negotiations over fair trade agreements; 1996 Republican presidential candidate Pat Buchanan’s defiant and unapologetic use of “José” to refer to all Mexican immigrants, not to mention his pledge to build a “Berlin Wall” on the border; the “us against them” rhetoric contained in nearly all debates over immigration; California’s passage of Proposition 187? English-only measures on state ballots; and recent battles over water rights to the Rio Grande River all indicate a national anxiety and prejudice.

In light of this hostility, the mainstreaming and elevation of Southwestern cuisine evinces a cultural amnesia of sorts. Americans embrace, enjoy, and explore literally the fruits of this region, but seem to easily sever the food from the people and region of its origin. While not the only ones in history to do so, in an imperialist fashion enacted repeatedly over the decades, Americans have taken what is compelling (foods, land, other natural resources), altered it to their own tastes, and left the dirty mess behind for someone else to deal with. The Pace Company’s heatless

jalapeño may be the most interesting, and startling, evidence of this cultural appropriation.

Folklorist Mario Montaña forcefully argues this view in his compelling study of south Texas folk foodways. Food that Anglo Texans used to consider inedible is now all the rage. "How can a food considered repulsive, and unfit for human consumption, and associated with poor working-class people reach the level of acceptance by the dominant culture?" he asks (Montaña 1992:222). In fact, Montaña sees the very name "Tex-Mex" as evidence of this cultural appropriation. "Restaurateurs and food promoters labeled their version of Mexican food as 'Tex-Mex' food, resulting in some of the most alienating and adulterated Mexican food forms ever imagined by a native of the lower Rio Grande Border Region," he exclaims. Montaña observes, "In many of these urban Mexican restaurants the food is classified as ethnic and serves as another form of experiencing the foreign culture without having to deal with the people" (Montaña 1992:224, 237).

Indeed, the process need not be merely part of the political unconscious, but can also exist as an overtly political act. Historian George Sanchez writes that in the early twentieth century there existed a deliberate attempt in the Southwest to rid Mexican Americans of their traditional foods under the guise of making them more American, and perhaps more pliable, easier to control and predict. Sanchez writes: "Reformers encouraged Mexican women to give up their penchant for fried foods, their too frequent consumption of rice and beans, and their custom of serving all members of the family—from infants to grandparents—the same meal. According to proponents of Americanization, the modern Mexican woman should replace tortillas with bread, serve lettuce instead of beans, and broil instead of fry. . . . Within the rubric of Americanization efforts, food and diet management became yet another tool in a system of social control intended to construct a well-behaved, productive citizenry" (1995:102).

An example of this culinary neutralization and cultural domination is Taco Bell's 1997 advertising campaign featuring the slogan "Run to the Border." While no doubt playing on the notion of the borderland as a "dangerous haven" harboring outlaws, Taco Bell advertising executives surely did not intend to evoke any reference to the prevalent "running to the border" debates (of Mexican nationals "running" south to north). Evidently they launched this multimillion-dollar campaign feeling confident that this slogan would not conjure any association with current anti-immigration sentiment and NAFTA debates, an assumption that exposes a

remarkable disjuncture between media advertising of Tex-Mex fast food and current political and cultural issues. Moreover, American fast-food restaurants, Taco Bell included, are making their own run across the border. That activists in Mexico City ransacked a McDonald's to protest California Proposition 187 clearly indicates McDonald's function as a symbol of American culture. As the current trend of Tex-Mex fast-food eateries setting up shop in Mexico and other Latin American countries continues—a phenomenon worthy of its own study—it will be interesting to observe any similar markers of resistance to appropriation of Southwestern cuisine ("Protesters in Mexico City" 1994).

Montaña also points out, however, that this cultural appropriation of Mexican cuisine is never airtight, but pockets of resistance always exist, challenges to the dominant cultural forms that provide alternatives for Latinos and others. Intricately tied up with Southwestern cuisine, especially for those of Mexican descent, are meanings of culture and sense of self. Writer Gloria Anzaldúa explains: "For me food and certain smells are tied to my identity, to my homeland. . . . Homemade white cheese sizzling in a pan, melting inside a folded *tortilla*. My sister Hilda's hot, spicy *menudo*, *chile colorado* making it deep red, pieces of panza and hominy floating on top. My brother Carlos barbecuing *fajitas* in the backyard. Even now and 3000 miles away, I can see my mother spicing the ground beef, pork and venison with chile. My mouth salivates at the thought of the hot steaming *tamales* I would be eating if I were home" (1987:61). Sociologist Teresa Martinez similarly writes of her mother's tortilla making: "[M]y most happy images are memories of my mother making tortillas. She was truly a master of this fine art as she worked with a steady, polished rhythm throughout. And I helped her. . . . For me, these were her most delicious creations, and they came to symbolize my culture, my family, and especially my mother" (1996:14).

Tamale making ("tamal" in Spanish) can contain not only powerful, ethnic meaning, but feminist identity as well. Anthropologist Brett Williams argues that for many Chicanas, tamale making is a community ritual, a female-centered, role-affirming process that actually empowers women in their own families and in the public world at large. Educator M.H. de la Peña Brown agrees. The *tamaleada* (tamale making and consuming event) in which Brown participated created shared experience among women, helped develop a sense of unity and community, was important for many of the women who spoke no English or who had only recently arrived in the States, and earned them important recognition for their domestic skills, awarding them dignity and respect (Williams 1984; Brown 1981).

While such identity-affirming food making is traditionally women's work, there are some male-dominated food events that also impart a sense of cultural empowerment and identity. José Limon describes the *carne asada*, the southern Texas all-male ritualistic roasting and consumption of barbecued meat in which bawdy, sexual humor pervades. *Carne*, the word for meat, is closely linked to *carnales*, Limon explains, a kinship term used among brothers or close male friends. Here Mexican-American men can gather, contribute items for the meat and marinade, joke and laugh with friends—in effect, socially bond—in an atmosphere far away from the harsh realities of life as a Chicano in late-capitalist society with seemingly few avenues out of poverty (Limon 1994:137). Limon employs Fredric Jameson's notion of the political unconscious to describe “the socially produced, narratively mediated, and relatively unconscious ideological responses of people . . . to a history of race and class domination” (1994:14). The *carne asada*, with its bawdy humor, is a form of cultural resistance to the (Anglo) capitalist status quo—a flaunting, if you will, of middle-class respectability as a way to protest against it and protest their marginal place in it. I quote Limon at length:

What kind of meat is this socially, and what, if anything, is its message, its gastropolitics? These men are preparing and consuming those parts of a steer—the internal organs and the *faja*, or skirt steak—that are clearly undervalued, low-prestige meats in the larger social economy, and, given their economic resources, that is not unexpected. . . . What interests me is the way in which such meat parts—the discards of capitalist cattle ranching—are culturally mediated to convert them from low-prestige, rather rough and stringy protein into tasty, valued, social food. . . . The felt result is another discourse of power, but a power that does not dominate; rather and if only for brief moments, it liberates them from the context of alienation beyond [the scene] where race and class still prevail (1994:136–37).

Similarly, Mario Montañó has explored the cultural meanings of the *barbacoa de cabeza*, the beef-head barbecues popular among borderlands Mexican Americans. While Montañó sees much of popular Southwestern cuisine as an aggressive appropriation of Mexican cuisine by European Americans, it is doubtful that such events as the beef-head barbecues will be subsumed because of the aversion to offal in mainstream American cuisine, largely because the general public can afford to discard the entrails and other less desirable, though no less nutritious and flavorful, parts of an animal. For this reason Taco Bell will never include in its menu *fritada*, a goat stew prepared from the offal meats and blood valued by

many borderlands families, and some elements of borderlands cuisine will continue to be solely owned by its originators.

Even given these pockets of resistance and elements of ownership in the mainstreaming of Southwestern cuisine, its evolution is more than just a one-way cultural appropriation of borderlands foodways. As stated earlier, cuisine, like culture, is never static but is in a constant state of change, adding and subtracting elements, creating and being shaped by new boundaries. In this sense, Southwestern fare is not just a crass commercial hijacking, but in a real sense is a legitimate cuisine that is indeed different from Mexican borderlands foodways. In fact, as a product of the place where Mexico and the United States intersect and influence each other, the hyphenated “Tex-Mex” may be the most symbolically accurate that can be found. Moreover, as Sylvia Ferrero points out, the “transnational consumption” of Mexican food through Tex-Mex and other Southwestern cuisines empowers people economically in a very real sense. Ferrero explains, “Mexican food is powerful enough to present Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and new immigrants with a social opportunity that becomes the bedrock upon which they improve their social position. . . . [It lays the ground for new immigrant arrivals and new workforces [and allows them] to gain better positions within the dominant system” (2002:215).

An informal survey of two dozen mostly middle-class Mexican citizens and Mexican immigrants to the United States bears these contradictory meanings and uses out, though gives special credence to the food-as-appropriation premise. When asked about their feelings toward Southwestern, specifically “Tex-Mex” food, many interviewees’ comments were emphatically negative: “It seems that it is made out of plastic and very artificial. Everything tastes the same.” “It is a very bad adaptation of Mexican food made just for Americans.” “It is a reflection of a confused culture.” Most resented Tex-Mex’s appropriation of Mexican food names. That the word “taco”—in Mexico a meal item consisting of meat and a bit of salsa wrapped in a soft corn tortilla—would be used so ubiquitously for the hard, U-shaped shell filled with not only meat, but also lettuce, cheddar cheese, sour cream, or even other more “exotic” items such as bacon, was an insult. For most the two items had nothing in common. The greatest wrath was reserved for the food served at Taco Bell. “Taco Bell tacos are a corruptive version of the original taco.” “Taco Bell is the worst imitation of Mexican food that exists.” One person volunteered: “Of Taco Bell: I love it, but I wouldn’t consider it Mexican food; it is simply fast food.” Yet most respondents’ comments were less generous:

"It is not Tex-Mex and it is not Mexican." "It gives a very bad name to our nation." "As a Mexican I think it has no flavor." Some, however, described Tex-Mex in more organic terms: "It is the type of food that was created to satisfy the Chicano needs of Mexican food. Of course it's authentic. It is authentically Tex-Mex food." "The fact that Tex-Mex food is part of two cultures doesn't mean that it is not authentic. . . . [I]t is valid that this type of food exists and that it satisfies a specific group of people." "Tex-Mex is an option but I rarely feel like eating it. I don't find it particularly sophisticated or interesting; it is food by itself with its own traditions, techniques, and very specific flavors. It is the encounter of different cultures and worlds, sometimes with a good result and sometimes not. But after all it has helped to support the creativity of Mexican and American cuisine."<sup>8</sup>

### La Frontera

The Mexican-American border, an artificially determined political boundary since the mid-1840s when the United States colonized northern Mexico proper, is the site of the greatest economic disparity between any two nations in the world (Hansen 1981:11). Called by some the Tortilla Curtain, it functions simultaneously to "divide and unite, repel and attract, separate and integrate" (1981:25). While there exists a definite political boundary between Mexico and the United States, upon closer examination it is clear that the borderlands area holds more continuity than distinction between north and south and, in fact, can be divided into four transborder geographical subregions. The Southern California-Baja California region is characterized by the cosmopolitanism of Los Angeles, San Diego, and Tijuana, as well as exoticism of the Baja. The Arizona-Sonora borderlands are shaped by the harshness of the Sonoran Desert, by isolation, and by dominant industries such as copper mining and ranching. The New Mexico/West Texas/Chihuahua region exhibits patterns characteristic of an isolated high-desert zone and a population heavily dependent on the major rivers (Rio Grande, Pecos, Rio Conchos). A major corridor for centuries, migration has been particularly influential. Finally, the southern Texas-northeastern Mexico region has been influenced by the subtropical climate, the large agricultural/ranching societies, and the strong mix of Texas Anglo culture and Mexican Norteño culture (1981:54-55).

The border not only artificially divides, but also actually helps create a country of its own, *la frontera*, as Mexicans call it (Arreola and Curtis 1993:7). The distinctive region is the product of an industrialized country

adjacent to a developing country, a so-called Fourth World, producing an economic and cultural in-betweenness, as is evident from the *maquiladoras*, American factories on the Mexican side where mostly Mexican women, desperate for jobs, assemble goods for a pittance of what American workers would be paid. As Anzaldúa eloquently observes, "The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [is an open wound] where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (1987:3). Borderlanders are perceived from both sides as the "illegitimate children" of a larger social system. A popular sentiment, for example, holds that the Mexican border communities are more Americanized because of their proximity to the United States; thus, they are not the *real* Mexico (Arreola and Curtis 1993:7-8). "Above all," borderlands scholar Oscar Martinez explains, "the distinctiveness of border Mexicans and Anglos is embedded in the long-term incorporation of many traits from each other's culture, inducing cross-borrowing of such things as language, religion, values, customs, traditions, holidays, foods, clothing, and architecture" (1994:53).

Southwestern food, then, is a product of this borderlands milieu. As the eminent folklorist Américo Paredes observed, Tex-Mex cuisine, with its own versions of tamales, tacos, enchiladas, chalupas, nachos, tostadas, frioles, and refritos, would be as exotic to many Mexicans as Mexican food is (or was) to many WASP Americans, supporting the assertion that such fare is a hybrid product (1993:20). Thus, in addition to food, the term "Tex-Mex" can apply to many products of the regional culture. Anzaldúa describes a hybrid language of Spanish and English as "Tex-Mex," and the term is also used to describe the North-Mexican border music, or *cantina* [bar] music, featuring the button accordion borrowed from the German immigrants settling Central Texas and Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century (1987:56, 60-61).

While there is distinct evidence of culinary neutralization and cultural domination of Mexican borderlands folk foodways, food is a site of enormous capacity for expression and communication, not necessarily negative. In one sense such events as cultural foods nights and ethnic food fairs sponsored by schools, churches, and civic groups can be regarded as contributing to this culinary neutralization and cultural domination; they can also function as just the opposite. Such food events can be and are sites for positive and constructive communication.

A recent personal experience illustrates how food and the sharing of it

can provide moments of cultural and political connectedness. At my former place of employment, the University of Colorado, the housekeeping staff invited the faculty in our building to a lunch they would prepare, while we pitched in to provide the basic ingredients. This was an important social event, as there existed many barriers of ethnicity, education, language, and class between the faculty, who were all Caucasian and Asian-American, and housekeeping staff, all Latino and Latina. Rosa, the housekeeping supervisor, served the delicious bean burritos smothered with two kinds of homemade *chile verde* to all, joking that “we’ll do it the way they do in Mexico, serve the men first,” perhaps to make her male supervisees feel more comfortable. Despite the language and cultural barriers, there ended up a wonderful exchange of goodwill over the food. We learned more about each other’s personal lives, enabling each to regard the others as distinct individuals. While the political and economic structures of power did not change, at least from that time on we could call each other by name when exchanging pleasantries—and have more to talk about—because of the shared moment when we broke bread together.

It is perhaps in the realm of language, particularly metaphor, that food has the greatest power to unite and transform. For as the proportion of the U.S. Latina/o population grows greater and greater, North Americans will be forced to sit up and take notice not only culturally but economically as well. The following story from a *National Geographic* article on the borderlands illustrates the potential of food to shape United States language and culture. Robert de la Madrid, a Mexican-American resident of Texas states that inevitably “Mexicans would gradually infuse plainspoken Americans with their humor, their romance, their emotional expressiveness.” “For instance?” asked the journalist. “Americans refer to a very handsome man as a hunk,” de la Madrid replied. “It could be a hunk of cheese or a hunk of rock. Mexicans call a very handsome man a *mango*, because a mango is a really sensual food. It won’t be very long before American women will be referring to Robert Redford as a mango.” The author then tries out this theory on a Texas-reared Cajun woman “with a languid way of drawing out a word into all its potential syllables.” “‘Mango,’ she said, lingering over the word—*maa-yun-go*—and letting a momentarily sublime expression turn up the corners of her mouth. She took a quick pull on her cigarette. ‘Not Robert Redford,’ she said. ‘I don’t like my fruit that ripe!’” (Sartore and Dale 1996:62).

As this woman’s understated but affirmative response indicates, Southwestern cuisine has moved from exotic other to familiar staple, and in so

doing has not only altered American food habits, but has also left its imprint on the culture at large.<sup>4</sup> As Southwestern cuisine has become embedded into the lexicon of mainstream American foodways, other Latin American cuisines have followed its lead, emerging as the newest “others.” Because of Americans’ familiarity with basic ingredients and spices, Brazilian, Caribbean, Cuban, El Salvadorian, and other Latin American cuisines—“Nuevo Latino” or “Floribbean” in their haute cuisine incarnations—are being received positively (“Pan-Latino Cuisine” 1997). Moreover, in an ironic twist, Latin American fast-food chains with stronger, bolder flavors, including Guatemala’s Pollo Campero SA, and Mexico’s El Tizoncito, Gordias Doña, and El Fogoncito, are setting up franchises—to great success—north of the border (Bozza and Sama 2002). While these trends are clearly evident, people’s different points of view determine the meanings of these transformations. Whether as a form of cultural appropriation, a symbol of resistance, or as a true hybrid providing a medium for mutual regard, Southwestern cuisine is replete with contradictions. This is as it should be, for while food can be an intensely personal experience, it is also a political statement, regardless of the eater’s intentions or comprehension. Despite the polite prohibition of political discussions at mealtime, politics is rarely absent at the dinner table—particularly at Taco Bell.

## Notes

1. A word on usage: Although there are different nuances to the terms “Chicano/a” and “Mexican American,” for the purposes of this essay I will use the terms interchangeably to mean people of Mexican descent inhabiting the United States, whether citizens or not. I use the terms “Latino” and “Latina” to designate members or elements of larger Latin American culture. Similarly, fully aware that people in Canada, Mexico, and Latin America are also “Americans,” I use this term and “mainstream Americans” when referring to non-Latino/a U.S. citizens, both because they are less cumbersome, and because they seem most appropriate when naming and discussing mainstream eating habits in the United States.

2. Proposition 187 was an initiative passed in California in November 1994 that eliminated some health and social services, including access to public education, for illegal aliens and their children. The initiative was put on “hold” by a federal court.

3. Special thanks to Natalie Kalb for her research assistance and to Joseph Bentley and Jon Deusch for their helpful comments.

4. Octavio Paz magnificently explores North American and Latin American cuisine and character in “Eroticism and Gastrosophy” (1972).

## Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1981. "Castro-Politics in Hindu South Asia." *American Ethnologist* 18: 494-511.
- Arreola, Daniel D., and James R. Curtis. 1993. *The Mexican Border Cities: Landscape Anatomy and Place Personality*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bouza, Teresa, and Gabriel Sama. 2002. "America Adds Salsa to Its Burgers and Fries." *Wall Street Journal*, January 2.
- Brown, M. H. de la Peña. 1981. "Una Tamalada: The Special Event." *Western Folklore* 40: 64-71.
- Collins, Glen. 1997. "The Americanization of Salsa." *New York Times*, January 9.
- Crosby, Alfred, Jr. 1972. *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Daily Camera* (Boulder) 1995. October 19.
- DeWitt, Dave, and Nancy Gerlach, eds. 1995. *Heat Wave! The Best of Chile Pepper Magazine*. Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press.
- Ferrero, Sylvia. 2002. "Comida Sin Par. Consumption of Mexican Food in Los Angeles: 'Foodscapes' in a Transnational Consumer Society." In *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies*. Eds. Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton. New York: Routledge.
- Hansen, Niles. 1981. *The Border Economy: Regional Development in the Southwest*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Limon, José E. 1994. *Dancing with the Devil: Society and Cultural Poetics in Mexican-American South Texas*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. *American Encounters: Greater Mexico, The United States, and the Erotics of Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Lloyd, Timothy Charles. 1981. "The Cincinnati Chili Culinary Complex." *Western Folklore* 40: 28-40.
- Long, Lucy M. 1998. "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Ohemness." *Journal of Southern Folklore* 55(30): 181-203.
- Martínez, Oscar. 1994. *Border People: Life and Society in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Martínez, Theresa A. 1996. "Tortilla-Making as Feminist Action." *Network*, May 11-14.
- Meier, Matt S., and Feliciano Ribera. 1993. *Mexican Americans, American Mexicans: From Conquistadors to Chicanos*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Montañó, Mario. 1992. "The History of Mexican Folk Foodways of South Texas: Street Vendors, Ofal Foods, and Barbaoca de Cabeza." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.
- "Pan-Latino Cuisine Stands Poised to Take American Foodservice by Storm." 1997. *Restaurants and Institutions* 107(7): 58-68.
- Paredes, Américo. 1993. *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Paz, Octavio. 1972. "Eroticism and Gastrosophy." *Daedalus* 101(4): 67-85.
- PepsiCo, Inc. 1993. Annual Report.
- Plicher, Jeffrey M. 1998. *Que Vivan los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- "Protesters in Mexico City Ransack a McDonalds." 1994. *New York Times*, November 9.
- Ritzer, George. 1996. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press.
- Robbins, Jim. 1992. "Care for a Little Hellish Relish?: Or Try a Hotsicle." *Smithsonian Magazine* 22(10): 40-43.
- Sanchez, George. 1995. *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sartore, Joel, and Bruce Dale. 1996. "Tex Mex: The Winding Border along the Rio Grande Both Divides and Unites Two Fast-Changing Worlds." *National Geographic* 189(2): 44-62.
- Verhovek, Sam Howe. 1996. "Making Jalapeños for Tender Tongues." *New York Times*, May 15.
- Williams, Brett. 1984. "Why Migrant Women Feed Their Husbands Tamales: Foodways as a Basis for a Revisionist View of Tejano Family Life." In *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*. Eds. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, 113-26. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.