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Food: Identity

Food is the eyes to the soul. And if those eyes are served steamed with salt and laurel leaves, accompanied by coriander, lime, and salsa on a tortilla, they don't only reflect who we are, but also where we come from. Food is the echo of our voice as a society, a living testament to our geography and history. Each dish, constructed over time and around the same reinvented ingredients, clearly shows who we are, both as individuals and as a collective.

A corn cob with its kernels cut off is called *elote ranche-ro* in Ciudad Juárez and served with cream, or *chasca* in Aguascalientes (the name derived, some say, from the onomatopoeia created by cutting off the kernels, “*chas cuas*”); or *esquite* (which comes from the Nahuatl *izquitl*) in Mexico City and the southern part of the country, where it is served with mayonnaise and the aromatic herb *epazote*; food tells us a story. Charcoal-grilled meat, like *aguja norteña* cooked over a mesquite or cedar fire in Monterrey; a taco of goat innards in San Luis Potosí; *tacos al pastor* (made of pork roasted on a spit next to an open flame) and Arab tacos (derived from shawarma brought by Lebanese migrants) in Mexico City; or *cochinita pibil* in Mérida, a Yu-

catecan pork dish slow-cooked with annatto seed paste and banana leaves, both ingredients endemic to the area. These are all examples of how we cook what there is and that we are what we cook.

Food, that Mirror

Food reflects how we behave as a society. It is not the same to eat shrimp broth in Veracruz, where most people prepare it or order it “in the shell,” that is, the entire shrimp (including sometimes even the mustache) as to enjoy it in Culiacán, where they peel the shrimp to serve it. The audacity of sticking your fingers into the broth and pulling out the seafood to peel it—a bit savage for some—contrasts with the convenience of just eating it. The very same shrimp broth, cooked with celery in the North, transforms its flavor in the South with a touch of *epazote* herb. North and South: two halves of a whole, as different as they are equal, but not the same.

An anecdote: When I was in my twenties, I turned to researching the *churrascaria*, that way of roasting meat on swords, a symbol of Brazilian restaurants. Its origins go back to the gauchos, who salted their meat in ocean water before roasting it over coal. A technique born of necessity and their surroundings, like so many others in the world.

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Identity Is Cooked with What Surrounds Us

Identity is formed with what we have around us. Another dish is *callos a la gallega*, or “Galician style tripe stew,” which in Galicia is prepared with tomatoes and garbanzo beans, while in the port of Veracruz, it is made with garbanzo beans and *guajillo* chili peppers, almost the same dish, but with the heat of Mexican peppers. In the North of the country, where garbanzo beans were not available, but *cacahuazintle* maize was—the same kind used to make *pozole* soup—we find *menudo norteño*, accompanied by a white roll or *bolillo*. One eats the roots of one’s native land.

Mexico, a Kaleidoscope of Flavors

Mexico is a country where every dish tells a story. *Enchiladas potosinas*, *carnitas* Michoacán-style, lamb barbecue in Hidalgo, *mole* Puebla style, *birria de chivo* (goat stew) in Jalisco, the special seafood *tostada* in La Paz, beef chitlins in Zacatecas, Chihuahua cheese, Oaxaca cheese (*quesillo*), *pozole* soup in Guerrero, dried shrimp ceviche in Nayarit, corn dough tartlets or *sopitos* in Colima, beef broth in Ciudad Juárez, *chile pasado* in Chihuahua.... Every mouthful is a voyage to a region, to an identity.

Even the smallest details tell a story. *Flautas* (deep-fried tacos, or “flutes”) sold in little white carts in Ciudad Juárez, with the word “flautas” hand-painted on the side in red, are another example. Fried in lard, covered with cabbage, slices of tomato, and a thick red or green sauce, they reflect migration and adaptation. As far as I know, the owners of these carts are from Zacatecas, but they have made the streets of Juárez their own. The red salsa tastes like tomato, the green, tart, so the two complement each other, like the cultures that blend on the border.

The Invention of Tradition

Being from Ciudad Juárez is to live in the imaginary of a Mexico that one thinks one knows through movies, articles, or TV series. Tacos Ensenada-style, Mexico City-style *tepache* (a fermented pineapple beverage), Veracruz-style food, Mazatlán-style seafood....The invented nostalgia of an enormous country, where every dish tastes different

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and where people talk differently from you, as though the food influenced them. Right? Right.

Even the *torta de colita de pavo* (turkey tail in a bun), a regional dish from Ciudad Juárez that crossed the order to set up shop in El Paso, Texas, as another “Mexican dish,” has its roots in colonial history. Turkeys, originally from the Americas, were introduced to Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and their consumption adapted to local tradition. Today, this dish is a symbol of how food travels, transforms, and becomes part of a new identity.

Burritos, the Border

And speaking of journeys and transformations, we mustn’t forget the burrito, born in Ciudad Juárez. On the corner of 16 de septiembre Avenue and Las Americas Avenue, there used to be a taco stand that sold tacos made of different stews on wheat tortillas. The owner would send the shoeshine boy a taco with refried beans and some kind of stew and tell his helper, “Take it to that little donkey (*el burrito aquel*).” When people saw that, they began ordering burritos. Another origin story says that, during the Mexican Revolution, an older man used to make tacos out of beans and stew and hang the baskets of them on a burro. When he would wander the streets, people would say, “There comes the guy with the burrito.”

We Are What We Eat

I will finish as I began. We are that amalgam of flavors, including meat, fruit, legumes, and seeds. We are all history, regional history, and family history. We are our millennia-old ancestors, hunters and farmers, who gave us the possibility of a broth, a casserole, a stew, that with time became the basis for tradition. Food not only nourishes; it defines and unites. We are what we eat, and we eat what we are. ■■■