



Taquería Diana, East Village, Manhattan, NYC.

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## The Mexican Food Entrepreneurs And Workers Who Made New York A More Exciting Place to Eat<sup>1</sup>

“Amigos: The city is gripped by Mexican madness. Never before has there been such passion for Mexican food, or so many places to enjoy it,” declared *New York Magazine* in 1983. On both a citywide and national scale, this fascination with Mexican food had taken time to develop. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class and elite diners in the United States and Mexico had circulated negative stereotypes of Mexican food as unhealthily spicy, the cuisine of poor indigenous peoples, or unhygienically prepared. During the mid-twentieth century, however, more US citizens were visiting Mexico for tourism and bringing home cravings for the cuisine. Mexican food eventually became part of the “TV dinner” revolution, with enchilada and taco kits and plates debuting in Texas and California and then spreading across the Southwest and Midwest by the early 1960s.

Those who consider New York City ahead of the culinary curve might be surprised that by the early 1980s

Mexican food was still hard to find there. It lagged behind other cities like Chicago, San Antonio, and Los Angeles, which had larger Mexican-origin populations and a longer history of Mexican restaurants. Of course, New York was already a “Latino” city. Spaniards had settled there centuries prior and were followed by Cuban and Puerto Rican political exiles in the 1800s and 1900s. Mexicanos migrated to New York in the early twentieth century, arriving directly from Mexico by ship or train, or after previous work stints in the cotton fields of Texas, the stockyards and factories of Chicago, or the auto assembly lines of Detroit. By 1930 about 3,000 people of Mexican origin (three-quarters born in Mexico, the rest second-generation Mexican Americans) lived in New York City’s boroughs.

When it comes to recognizing those who brought Mexican cuisine to 1980s and 1990s New York, we have to pay attention to both haute and humble foodmakers. One example of a chef in the fine dining world was Zarela Martínez, an immigrant Mexicana chef who—in the words of *Bon Appétit*—“single-handedly changed New York’s Mexican food scene” during the late 1980s and 1990s by

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focusing on regional dishes. Meanwhile, this period marked huge waves of migration from Mexico to Manhattan and the wider United States. Many Latin American immigrants fleeing political and economic chaos in their home countries arrived in New York City and opened food businesses, including bodegas, bakeries, taco trucks, and tortilla factories. Together, these entrepreneurs constituted a blossoming Mexican culinary landscape.

## Zarela Martínez's Place in New York City's Foodscape

Maria Zarela Martínez Gabilondo was born in 1952 in Agua Prieta, Sonora. After obtaining a university degree in communications, she moved to El Paso in the early 1970s, where she became a social worker, got married, and experienced the financial strain of a growing family. To make extra money she began baking for friends and family, cooking for private dinner parties, and establishing her own catering business. A few years later, her marriage dissolved, and Zarela began traveling with her mother Aida to take cooking classes around the United States. In New Orleans, the pair met Paul Prudhomme, who was immediately charmed by the women and invited them to cook in his kitchen for the rest of their stay. He educated them on Cajun cuisine, and they taught him Mexican dishes in exchange. Soon after this encounter, *New York Times* food critic Craig Claiborne asked Prudhomme to recommend a Tex-Mex chef for an April 1981 event hosting 130 French chefs at Tavern on the Green. Prudhomme promptly suggested Zarela and Aida, and flew to El Paso to help the shocked pair plan their menu and ingredient transport. They ultimately decided to serve crab enchiladas, ropa vieja, and picadillo on Mexican ceramic dishes adorned with crepe paper and flowers. At the end of the dinner, they received a standing ovation.

The exposure that Zarela gained was career-launching. Claiborne profiled her for the *Times* as a rising star, and this feature won her more catering clients; Zarela began flying back and forth between El Paso and New York. Of the 2,500 Mexican restaurants that existed in the United States by the early 1980s, only 150 were located in the Northeast. It was the perfect time for Zarela to carve out her niche in Manhattan as a chef who focused on regional Mexican dishes. In 1983 Martínez moved to Manhattan

with her two sons, and her catering impressed celebrities including Paul Newman, Glenn Close, and Meryl Streep. Through Claiborne's recommendation she also cooked for President Ronald Reagan at a 1983 economic summit in Williamsburg, Virginia.

At this time, successful Latina food entrepreneurs were very rare in the United States. In Los Angeles, Mexican immigrant single mother Natalia Barraza became known for her restaurant El Nayarit, which offered regional western Mexican cuisine and drew working-class Latinos and Hollywood celebrities alike during the 1950s and 1960s. In the Northeast, Josefina Howard (of Cuban and Spanish roots and the owner of Rosa Mexicano) stood alongside Zarela Martínez as high-profile women in New York's Mexican food scene.

It is important to acknowledge class dynamics while celebrating Martínez's success as a Mexican chef and cuisine "expert" in the United States, since she owed much to lower-income women food makers in Mexico. At Mexican markets and festivals, Zarela persuaded local women—from market sellers to restaurant owners—to share their recipes and techniques. These women not only influenced her restaurant menus, but the cookbooks Martínez went on to publish. Her first cookbook was heavily influenced by women she knew while attending school in Texas, California, and Guadalajara, and her next two cookbooks were shaped by friends, cooking instructors, and market vendors in Oaxaca and Veracruz.

After serving as executive chef for a Latin restaurant owned by another person, Zarela opened her own restaurant on October 1, 1987 in Manhattan's Midtown East, near the United Nations building. The menu of "Zarela" focused on regional dishes and educating diners about the diversity of Mexican cuisine. Powered by Mexican, Dominican, Italian, and Bangladeshi waitstaff and kitchen workers in the back of the house, the restaurant attracted an enthusiastic and wide range of customers. Young midtown professionals, curious foodies, international visitors associated with the United Nations, and celebrities including Mick Jagger, Salman Rushdie, Brooke Shields, Diane Sawyer, Joan Didion, and Linda Ronstadt were frequent patrons.

The restaurant's ingredient procurement also crossed boundaries. Martínez and her managers often shipped in tortillas from Texas or California because tortilla producers in New York were quite scattered. Casa Moneo, a

store in Chelsea owned by Spanish immigrants since 1929, was reputedly the only place in Manhattan where one could find tortillas, chiles, and other Mexican ingredients alongside other Latin American items. Cousins Félix and Fernando Sánchez, who migrated together from the Mexican state of Puebla to New York in the 1970s, opened their own tortilla businesses—Félix founded Puebla Foods in Passaic, New Jersey, in 1978 and Fernando opened El Gordo Tortillas in Bushwick in 1986. These places were likely too far away for daily pickup and delivery, and a lack of geographically convenient suppliers surely frustrated Martínez and other Manhattan chefs.

### Immigration and the Devaluation of Latino Food and Labor

The next decade, however, changed everything. Along with Central Americans fleeing civil wars in their home countries, Mexican migrants began settling in the US and Northeast in even greater numbers during the late 1980s and 1990s. The peso had suffered devaluation, a 1985 earthquake devastated Mexico City and other places around the nation like Michoacán and Guerrero, and the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) bestowed a path to citizenship and permanent legal status to certain categories of undocumented immigrants in the United States, which gave more people the freedom to move about the nation. Finally, in 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) flooded the Mexican market with US agricultural surplus crops, which sunk the price of Mexican foodstuffs so low that 2 million Mexicans working in agriculture felt compelled to migrate north for their economic survival. In particular, migrants from Puebla moved to New York through word-of-mouth and chain migration. Whereas the US Census counted 23,761 Mexican New Yorkers in 1980, there were 61,722 by 1990, making Mexicans the fastest-growing Latinx population across all five boroughs.

Some Mexican migrants decided to go into business for themselves as food makers and sellers. They opened taco trucks and tamale pushcarts in Brooklyn and Queens, panaderías and bodegas in East Harlem and the Bronx, and hole-in-the-wall restaurants in Midtown Manhattan. Additionally, a tortilla “boom” occurred between 1990 and 1993 as more than twenty new tortillerías were estab-

lished. The neighborhood of Bushwick, Brooklyn became known as the “Tortilla Triangle” for its three major factories (Buena Vista, Chinantla, and Piaxtla—all named after towns in Puebla), which churned out millions of tortillas a week. Meanwhile, street food sellers roved with their pushcarts and big steaming aluminum pots, enticing passersby with one-or-two-dollar tacos, elotes, tamales, and paletas and fruit cups in the summertime.

More and more Mexican restaurants became fixtures in unexpected places. In East or “Spanish” Harlem, a long-time Puerto Rican neighborhood, Mario Olmedo opened a taco stand in 1987 followed by a bodega and taquería in the 1990s. Mario and Estella Ramírez opened their restaurant Rinconcito Mexicano in Manhattan’s midtown Garment District in July 1993, drawing in workers from nearby sweatshops. In Sunset Park, Brooklyn—a neighborhood known for its mix of Scandinavian, Irish, Chinese, and Vietnamese residents—Puebla immigrant Jaime Oliván opened Tequilita’s taquería, which still exists today. The proliferation of Mexican food establishments in the 1990s not only excited New York’s dining public but brought comfort to Mexicans living in a metropolis that did not always feel comfortable.

Though the US was obsessed with Mexican food by the 1990s, it was clear that assumptions about “authentic” Mexican food and immigrant labor were resulting in a monetary devaluation of the cuisine. As more Mexican people migrated north and took jobs on US farms and in factories, restaurant kitchens, and street vending, their food-related labor became coded as “immigrant” and low-wage work. Consumers began buying into ideas that Mexican food was inherently casual, fast, and low-priced. The already low pay that Latino workers were receiving in various industries in the United States decreased even more as consumers equated immigrant labor and food service with cheaper wages.

If we look at 1990s New York, for instance, the average Mexican man (who tended to work in food service/retail,

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construction, or manufacturing) earned \$15,631 annually, about half of the typical male New Yorker (\$29,155). Mexican women, for whom domestic service and factory work were common occupations, earned on average \$11,731 a year, less than half of female New Yorkers (\$24,469). These lower earnings could be partially explained by lower educational attainment levels and a lack of proficiency in English, but anti-immigrant discrimination was surely a factor. Employers who preyed on the desperation and vulnerability of undocumented workers saved thousands of dollars by paying them subminimum wages and counting on their silence and fear of deportation. In essence, US consumers began believing that the price of Mexican food should match the price of the people. Thus, Latino food and Latino labor suffered a devaluation together.

Between 1990 and 2000, New York City underwent a striking “Latinization.” In the Bronx, Mexican immigrant residents increased by 180 percent and the overall number of Latinos increased by 21.3 percent. Manhattan’s Mexican population increased by 178 percent. On Staten Island, a longtime Italian or “ethnic white” borough, the Mexican population shot up by 566 percent, mostly consisting of migrants from Puebla and Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl. In Brooklyn, Mexicans increased by 218 percent and in Queens, Mexican residents increased by 334 percent. By 2010 the greater New York City metropolitan region was home to over half a million people of Mexican origin (and 3.4 million Latinos in total), with significant numbers of Mexican-origin people living in Westchester and other Hudson Valley counties. Poughkeepsie had even been termed a “little Oaxaca” for its Mexican immigrant demographic that infused a deteriorating downtown with new businesses, shops, and restaurants.

of competitive (and cheaper) street food and taquerías nearby. Though there was sadness in shutting down after almost twenty-five years, this was a rare milestone for any New York restaurant to reach. Zarela’s legacy would be the flourishing of more Mexican restaurants around the country—an estimated 40,000 by the 2010s.

Of course, the other lasting but problematic legacy has been continued assumptions about Mexican food, and Mexican food labor, through a rhetoric of “authenticity.” Much like Chinese food, Mexican food has been unable to escape the idea that it should be cheap. A textual analysis of 2016–17 Yelp reviews for the top twenty Mexican restaurants in New York City revealed that commenters considered cheap prices, dirty floors, plastic chairs, and Latino customers as proof of a restaurant’s “authenticity.” Meanwhile, it is often the case that “elevated” or “trendy” Mexican cuisine can exist unquestioned in the hands of white chefs, who rarely have to justify their decisions to charge a certain price for their labor or ingredients. The inequality of customer and media treatment of a Mexican food establishment is often clear if the chef identifies or presents as Latino themselves.

Over the last decade, the tide has been changing in the food media sphere—some high-end Mexican chefs and restaurateurs like Enrique Olvera, Daniela Soto-Innes, and Carlos Gaytán have gained fame in the United States, while worker-owned restaurants like Cosecha in Oakland or South Philly Barbacoa in Philadelphia have gained cult followings on social media. While buzz around Mexican cuisine may not seem like anything new, the longer history of when and how Mexican chefs and restaurateurs earned recognition in the United States remains spotty. What is clear is that over the course of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, restaurateurs like Zarela Martínez and her lesser-known food entrepreneur counterparts were pioneering figures in US food and business history. They are collectively responsible for creating the “multiple Mexicos” that people happily ingest on a daily basis in New York and the wider United States. **NM**

## Legacies and Multiple Mexicos

In February 2011, Zarela’s restaurant finally had to close its doors because of skyrocketing rent and the presence

## Notes

**1** Excerpted from the book *Awaiting Their Feast* by Lori A. Flores (UNC Press, 2025).