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# Food as the Migrants' Voice: Mexicans' Food Businesses In the United States and Canada

## Introduction

In migrant-receiving cities, food links the production of signifiers and consumption and socialization practices that allow migrants and their affiliation groups to construct a history for themselves and for others.<sup>1</sup> As Manuel Calvo has written, immigrants in the process of establishing a new destination try to maintain eating habits from their places of origin, little by little combining new practices of sharing food together with the creation of a food system with new and old elements.<sup>2</sup>

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In this process, the immigrant compares, legitimizes, affirms, and assigns new meanings to the act of eating, placing a high value on and exhibiting loyalty to the nutritional system of their place of origin. Therefore, the preparation, supply, and consumption of food in contexts of transnational migration are central to the construction of a "transmigratory consciousness" and in the configuration of the identity of the migrant collective.<sup>3</sup>

Considering the importance of food in transnational contexts, restaurants are strategic spaces for observing both the practices of eating together and the signifiers surrounding eating.<sup>4</sup> That is why in this article, my purpose is to examine the values and signifiers surrounding Mexican food prepared and sold in family restaurants owned

by Mexican immigrants in two contexts: the city of Passaic, New Jersey, and in Montreal, Quebec. I chose these two cities because that is where I did ethnographic fieldwork, in the former during my doctoral research from 2014 to 2018, and in the latter, as a post-doctoral fellow from 2018 to 2020.

In addition, this comparison will allow me to reflect about immigrants' economic activities in food related businesses, as well as their positioning as a collective in their destinations. In both spaces, Mexicans with businesses of this type manage to overcome the stereotypes and clichés about the food of their country prepared outside it, images linked to a marginalized rural Mexico.

Also, entrepreneurial activity breaks with the overrepresentation of Mexican immigrants as rural workers by recognizing the creativity and risks taken by business owners. This suggests that food is perhaps the sphere in which those who face exclusion both in the United States and Canada are most highly publicly recognized and positively valued. It is also the economic niche that has given them relative autonomy and a voice of their own in a labor market that usually marginalizes and stigmatizes them.

### “Passaic Is a Second Puebla”

“Mexican businesses are prosperous and the city is growing thanks to them,” says an Internet article I found when looking for information about Mexican migrants, and specifically about people from Puebla living in that city.<sup>5</sup> The allusion to the city as “Puebla abroad” supposes the presence of migrants from Puebla who have carved out a migratory landscape where businesses for sending remittances, night clubs, and mini-marts are very visible (selling groceries, candy, baked goods, and, above all, restaurants selling Mexican food).

The information gathered in my fieldwork showed that Passaic was a destination for pioneering Puebla-born migrants during the 1960s, who fed a massive flow of migrants in the following decades. The Mexican community increasingly demanded food products and places to eat, provided by migrants who were able to invest in commercial establishments selling tortillas, chili peppers, and other perishable foodstuffs brought from Mexico, in addition to restaurants, bakeries, and taco places where regional and Poblano dishes were prepared.

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The development of this area must be situated in its relationship to Manhattan, only twenty-four kilometers away, since many migrants found the rents and living costs here more accessible for them. Passaic acted as a refuge where people from Puebla gradually settled through family networks and compatriotism. The city allowed them to have dynamics and practices like those they were accustomed to in their places of origin, such as religious celebrations and neighborhood dances. Therefore, some of Passaic's residential areas can be considered enclaves, since their businesses prospered and allowed for the emergence of a growing nostalgia market.<sup>6</sup>

Migrants from Puebla formed a distribution center for Mexican food products from Passaic to businesses and restaurants in nearby cities. Thus, they positioned themselves as a racialized space where other immigrant groups such as Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, vied with them for political control of the city.

Passaic's Poblano restaurants are very diverse, but they all serve the regional dishes, considering that they have a relatively secure clientele among their co-ethnic networks. In addition to the traditional and most common dishes these Mexican restaurants usually serve, the restaurant owners and cooks from Puebla sell specialized products valued as traditional and representative of certain places in their state. This is how the migrants construct practices that strengthen their links to their places of origin and legitimize notions of authenticity that they themselves have determined.

The sale of *mole* sauce from the Mixtec region of southern Puebla, both when served on site and when packaged for future use, is one example of the commercialization and scope of trans-local Mexican cuisine in Passaic. *Mole* has made it possible to develop a business niche for many women cooks who have migrated and settled there. It is of note that they have had to adapt their kitchens and homes to prepare the *mole*, which requires a large

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number of ingredients, special pots, and grindstones, necessary for making it smooth.

These women cooks from Puebla told me how their businesses have grown and allowed them to construct a history of self-improvement and autonomous activity as they have moved ahead in their process of adapting and building an identity in their destinations. In addition, their entrepreneurship has provided them with a decent income. This is the case of Doña Guillermina, originally from the community of Axutla, Puebla, who began selling her *mole* to her relatives and clients from the same community residing in Passaic. Her business prospered so much that packages of her *mole* can be found in the city's Mexican supermarkets.<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that the Passaic women cooks and restaurateurs have forged a supply network of Mexican food products, utensils, cooking tools, spices, and multiple inputs that sustain the U.S. East Coast "nostalgia market." Food and eating therefore create practices that make visible aspects of production, distribution, consumption, and exchange both of Mexican food and its signifiers. The Mexican men and women in this city have positioned themselves as businesspeople: restaurateurs, cooks, distributors of Mexican products, shop owners, etc. They are all activities that situate them as immigrants who contribute to and have their own place in a society that tends to exclude them.

### Montreal Paradise<sup>8</sup>

Montreal is the eastern Canadian province of Quebec's largest, most cosmopolitan city. Its inhabitants have diverse national origins, and it is a progressive, multicultural city, reflected in its culinary offering of niche restaurants. Canada's 2021 census cites the Mexican-origin population as the largest of the Latin American inhabitants; however, if the demographic composition of the Latin Amer-



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ican population is analyzed by nationality, we find that the percentages are not drastically different. This leads one to think that, in contrast with the United States, people's way of integrating and presenting themselves in the receiving society is done with a feeling of harmonizing a shared experience as Latin Americans. If in Passaic we observe the formation of enclaves, in Montreal, both Mexican immigrants and restaurants and businesses are spread around the city. Therefore, we cannot argue that ethnic or segregated minority neighborhoods are formed based on patterns of settlement or economic activity.

For the Mexican immigrants, the restaurants are a prosperous economic niche that allows them certain autonomy as self-employed workers and make them feel pro-active in a competitive labor market. Although we do not have precise data, we know that only a few Latinos own their own businesses or are leaders in the Canadian labor market. According to Víctor Armony's research, even in recent years, Latinos had the lowest incomes among ethnic minorities and exhibited the greatest poverty gap between immigrants and non-immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Despite this, Mexican restaurants have multiplied in Montreal since immigrants have taken advantage of the cuisine's popularity in the global restaurant industry, which has emphasized its ethnic character.

The cooks and restaurateurs are proud of their businesses, since they situate them as possessing a culinary heritage with a good reputation. During my fieldwork, many restaurant owners mentioned how initially it was difficult to compete with Tex-Mex food, which encouraged certain stereotypes about Mexican food abroad, such as that it was spicy with little variety or creativity.

Alma, a cook in Montreal, told me how she could teach customers and both visiting and local immigrants through her work that Mexican cuisine is diverse, very creative, and is not reduced to typical tacos made with tortillas. Alma thinks it is very important that Mexican cooks are developing fusions of culinary traditions. The talent and inventiveness of those who use practices and knowledge from their homes in Mexico, then, to adapt them to new contexts is noteworthy. This is how immigrant restaurant owners in Montreal are building new images of Mexican food, in a city where the gastronomic experience is highly regarded; they also contribute to gaining more respect among Canadian natives and other immigrant groups in the city.

## Final Thoughts

I have reflected here on the positive value placed on Mexican food as an economic niche that provides a creative, original voice to migrants in two contexts with different levels and kinds of exclusion: the city of Passaic, with a tradition of vying for dominance among Latin American immigrant groups (Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans), and the city of Montreal, where the restaurant niche demands higher standards of competitiveness and quality. In the U.S. context, these Mexicans have consolidated distribution networks of foodstuffs that maintain family restaurants. In Canada, the cooks and restaurants show creativity and autonomy when they foster Mexican cuisine as sophisticated, with worldwide prestige.

With these examples, I underline the contributions of immigrant communities and transnational food practices in their destination cities. Men and women Mexican immigrants in the food business construct narratives that magnify a voice that demands a place for themselves and in the face of others. Along these same lines, their work establishes a firm basis for inserting and developing their life projects in their destinations, “serving as a model for recently arrived immigrants, to show them other ways of

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experiencing migration.”<sup>10</sup> The Mexican diaspora positions itself positively by contributing a creative voice to its destination societies. ■■■

## Notes

- 1 See F. Parasecoli, “Food, Identity, and Cultural Reproduction in Immigrant Communities,” *Social Research*, vol. 81, no. 2, 2014, pp. 415-439.
- 2 Manuel Calvo, “Migration et alimentation,” *Information sur les Sciences Sociales* (SAGE), vol. 21, no. 3, 1982, pp. 383-446.
- 3 José Antonio Vázquez-Medina, “No es comida para güeros’: Resistencia alimentaria e identidad transmigrante en establecimientos de comida mexicana en Estados Unidos,” in F. Xavier Medina, ed., *Alimentación y migración en Iberoamérica* (Barcelona: UOC, 2014), pp. 91-109.
- 4 See I. Vázquez Zúñiga, “Desde cómo comer un taco hasta cómo comer un mole: Experiencia migratoria y difusión de la cocina mexicana en los restaurantes étnicos de Montreal,” *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2023, pp. 32-56.
- 5 See I. Vázquez Zúñiga, “Desde cómo comer un taco hasta cómo comer un mole: Experiencia migratoria y difusión de la cocina mexicana en los restaurantes étnicos de Montreal,” *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2023, pp. 32-56.
- 6 For more about the formation of nostalgia markets, see Shinji Hirai, *Economía política de la nostalgia: Un estudio sobre la transformación del paisaje urbano en la migración transnacional entre México y Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: UAM-Casa Juan Pablos, 2009); and, for more about ethnic enclaves, see Min Zhou, “Revisiting Ethnic Entrepreneurship: Convergencies, Controversies, and Conceptual Advancements,” *International Migration Review*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2004, pp. 1040-1074.
- 7 A similar case is explained by E. Maceda Rodríguez and J. D. Vázquez Vázquez: the life of Doña Juana, from Piaxtla, Puebla, who has a company that makes artisanal mole paste to supply restaurants and businesses in New York. See “La Reina del Mole en el contexto transnacional. El cambio cultural y las remesas sociales: De Piaxtla a Nueva York,” *Contraste Regional*, vol. 5, no. 10, 2017, pp. 113-133.
- 8 This subtitle alludes to a Mexican restaurant in Montreal. The owner defines Montreal as a paradise destination, a multicultural city offering recent immigrants opportunities.
- 9 Víctor Armony, “Inmigrantes bienvenidos, pero relegados: crecimiento de la población latinoamericana en la provincia de Quebec y obstáculos a su integración económica,” in Sara María Lara Flores, Jorge Pantaleón, and Patricia Martín, eds., *Las nuevas políticas migratorias canadienses. Gobierno neoliberal y manejo de la otredad* (Mexico City: UNAM-Universidad de Montreal, 2019), pp. 91-111, [http://ru.iis.sociales.unam.mx/jspui/bitstream/IIS/5721/2/las\\_nuevas\\_politicas\\_migratorias\\_canadienses.pdf](http://ru.iis.sociales.unam.mx/jspui/bitstream/IIS/5721/2/las_nuevas_politicas_migratorias_canadienses.pdf).
- 10 H. J. Martínez Arbolea, “El emprendimiento de los inmigrantes mexicanos en Quebec: hacia una teoría fundamentada,” *Innovación y Desarrollo*, vol. vii, no. 17, 2018, p. 115.