

Lilia Martínez y Torres*

Food as Voice, Song, and Sayings: Hens, Chickens, And Turkeys

*Teresa, go set the table;
Panchito, Luis, and Felipe
Pedrito, Enrique, and Juan
And Pulgarcito, pop and mom
Are gonna have breakfast.*



Freepikes

References to food are common in Mexican culture; we find them in literature, music, and painting. The country's nutritional system stems from a complex matrix of concepts, persons, policies, territories, products, and culinary techniques. Since its foundation, Mexico has received many forms of wisdom and flavors. In addition to the local products maize, chili peppers, beans, squash, tomatoes, chocolate, and vanilla, unknown ingredients and unexpected sensations on the tongue arrived from Europe. Also, from Asia came the Manila Galleon, full not only of spices and condiments, but also a different, millennia-old culinary tradition. Ranches and haciendas grew wheat and vegetables, as well as fruit in their orchards; they raised pigs, cattle, wild and barnyard fowl; and, add to that game and fish from the rivers, lakes, and lagoons, and we have a self-sufficient food economy. Plus, pulque, strong spirits, and wine. This incorporation of European foodstuffs to the Western Hemisphere diet took place gradually, spawning a mixture that created a new cuisine that gave rise to mestizo food.

* Lilia is an independent researcher and is the director of the collection on culinary culture *Cocina Cinco Fuegos*; you can contact her at liliapue@hotmail.com.

This article deals with manifestations of all this in Mexican folk music, with a brief collection of lines from different songs and sayings about different ideas about local food. I decided to refer to hens, chickens, and turkeys, all barnyard fowl, because they belong to a group that is raised for its meat, and to talk about the ingredients, culinary techniques, dishes, and times they are eaten.

Music and food have been present since humans began living together, which is why, as I said, I gathered texts to sing and recite that are part of the age-old tradition that is part of our unofficial history. All parts of the Mexican republic have produced works in the three main kinds of folk music: the *jarabe*, the *son*, and the *corrido* ballad, whose simple melodies make their messages understandable and singable.

Sayings and Food

We Mexicans wait for the right moment to use ordinary language to insert sayings spontaneously and simply, since we are prone to pepper our conversations with them when talking to those who can understand this way of

expressing ourselves and particularly, those with a sense of humor. We pick up these sayings along the way in our lives and store them in our memories; over time, and depending on the region, they change, adapt to new situations, put down roots wherever they want, and, since they are learned by rote, they know no frontiers.

For this article, I have explored written sources such as songbooks and collections of sayings that touch on food. Most are by authors and collectors like Guadalupe Appendini, Aline Desentis Otálora, Chava Flores, Margit Frenk Alatorre, María Elsa Hernández Martínez, Magú, José Pérez, Herón Pérez Martínez, Mario Arturo Ramos, Alfonso Reyes, and Paco Ignacio Taíbo I.

I decided to organize these texts by first presenting the songs and sayings that mention fowl. Then, I analyze the central issue of this article and other culinary concepts, in addition to commenting on some childhood memories and others about cooking and kitchens, since that is why I have decided to speak about fowl specifically.

Childhood Memories

When I was a little girl, I liked very much to listen to music on the radio, particularly the XECD station, which broadcasted the *Ranchero Dawn* program Monday through Friday at 6 a.m. That's where my interest in Mexican folk music was born. Years later, Radio BUAP used to broadcast *Land of the Mestizo* at 7 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, and I used to enjoy listening to it. Also, when I was a little girl, four women (my mother Arabela, Grandmother Aurora and Grandmother Dolores, and my neighbor Juanita) taught me all manner of sayings to scold me for any of my behavior they didn't like; I disliked this very much as they usually ended up being right.

Memories of the Kitchen

In the old days, families used to have little coops in their backyards to raise poultry for eggs and to eat, and they were relatively easy to keep up. The birds were reserved for certain celebrations like baptisms, birthdays, weddings, and Christmas dinner. My Grandmother Aurora, who was a great cook, had a very large house and way out the back she had a pen with chickens, hens, and

turkeys for the dishes she would serve us in her home for big celebrations.

I remember perfectly the whole ritual for getting the birds' flesh: you had to wring their necks, hang them by their feet, deplume them, cut them up to take the innards out, wash them thoroughly, and boil them, usually with garlic, onion, and herbs. When you did that, the kitchen filled up with the delicious aromas that foretold of succulent dishes. Turkeys were boiled and stewed or oven roasted, depending on the occasion.

Songs about Hens

This little hen is a great layer
And she's also a great planner.
She lays fried eggs and eggs with tortillas
And, if pushed, even ham'n'eggs.
Ham'n'eggs, though, that I'm not sure of.

I fell in love with a young girl
Named Cristina,
Who loved me so much
That she'd go into the kitchen
To give me five hens' legs
For dinner.

In the backyard, with my hen
She'll have all she needs to eat,
An old hen makes no broth,
I want a chicken you see.

How sweet are oranges!
How bitter are limes!
If you want to have your farm,
Get a hen.

I'll make a pen
For a hen;
Tomorrow this ranch
Will be my fortune.

Sayings about Hens

"Men and hens don't last long in the kitchen."
"A chicken in the pot is the best medicine."

“A hen who roosts in the rafters will come down for corn.” (You can get a lot in exchange for gifts, or, You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.)

“Don’t refuse the wing to someone who gave you a hen.” (Give as you have been given.)

“A hen who eats eggs, even if you burn her beak.” (A leopard doesn’t change its spots.)

“An old hen makes for good broth.” (With age comes wisdom.)

Songs about Chickens

I’m warning all chickens
To proceed carefully
'Cuz I’m gonna make
A chicken stew

They’re giving chickens
attening foods
So they can roast ’em
And eat ’em up.

I’m not asking you for turkey,
Just a little chicken to fricassee;
I want a little fat chicken
From Tennessee.

When my body is battered,
My mood and lack of appetite are boosted by
A walnut-stuffed turkey
And hazelnut-flavored chicken.

I’m gonna marry my little chicken off
To a rooster from Durango
So their chicks can be born
Hearty enough for a fandango.

Of all the pieces of the chicken,
I don’t like just any piece.
I love the legs,
And if you want, if you want,
Lots of potatoes, lots of potatoes.

At weddings and baptisms
And at the banquets of my home,

They serve chicken broth,
And the all-important rice;
After that, there’s a rich dish
Of the best *mole* from Puebla
And some refried beans
And a glass of cantaloupe-flavored *pulque*.

Sayings about Chickens

“If you don’t have beef, chicken with bacon will do.” (Anything will do in a pinch.)

“Whoever raises the chicken will eat it.” (The land belongs to those who work it.)

“If you want chicken, get it from Valentina’s in Guadalajara.”

Songs about Turkeys

On Bonitas Street,
is my thatched hut.
If you have a hankering
For eating turkey.

A greeting to the beans,
Memories to tortillas,
Recollections to the turkeys,
And a little kiss to the tortillas.

The turkey, you see,
Is a mixed blessing;
You can either eat it
Or it can screech at you.

This humble turkey
Salutes you, peacocks!
Why should I sing like a rooster
If I don’t even know how to crow.

Sayings about Turkeys

“You’re just stubborn if you eat turkey when there’s so much red snapper.”

“The wild turkey is the jester of the barnyard.”

“Wild turkey with mole sauce is the *pièce de résistance* of our cuisine.”

“Only wild turkeys die the night before.” (Don’t believe in prophesies: we kill wild turkeys the night before a party.)
“A turkey has two main moments in life: when courting a girl and when he appears roasted on the dining table.”
“Having left the Indies, wild turkeys went everywhere; if they couldn’t arrive alive, they arrived frozen.”

A Reasonable Analysis

The word *comer* is mentioned both in songs and in sayings. It has two meanings: to eat and the midday meal, which we call “mealtime” or “lunchtime,” when Mexicans eat our main meal.

We mention proper names and the places we wander through: “I fell in love with a girl named Cristina,” and “For chickens, get Valentina’s.” Places, like “Tennessee,” “I’m gonna marry my little chicken off to a rooster from Durango,” “Valentina’s in Guadalajara,” “Bonitas Street,” and “Having left the Indies, turkeys went everywhere.” Now, we situate ourselves in parts of the house where the characters’ daily lives take place: “Cristina in her kitchen,” “Men and hens in the kitchen,” “Mole sauce as a *pièce de resistance* in the cuisine” [the word for kitchen and for cuisine are the same in Mexico], “If you want to have your farm,” “In the backyard with my hen...,” “the pen in the ranch,” “my thatched hut,” “I’ll make a coop for my hen,” and “The wild turkey is the jester of the barnyard.”

Ingredients come from two different nutritional systems: that of the Americas and that of Spain. So, we have American products like corn, tortillas, beans, red snappers, and Andean potatoes, and the products of the Old World, such as hens, eggs, bacon, ham, walnuts, and hazelnuts, together with those introduced to Spain by the Arabs, such as rice and citrus fruit like oranges and limes.

In the kitchen, meal preparation has become a complex system of culinary techniques with its own meanings: “fried eggs,” “refried beans,” “chicken dishes,” “chicken stews,” “roast chickens,” “turkey with walnuts,” “grilled wild turkey,” and “the wild turkeys came either alive or frozen.”

What kind of dishes come out of these culinary techniques? “An old hen makes for good broth” (With age comes wisdom.); “At weddings and baptisms and at

Music and food have been present since humans began living together, which is why, as I said, I gathered texts to sing and recite that are part of the age-old tradition that is part of our unofficial history.

banquets in my hometown, people serve chicken broth”; “chicken stew”; “chicken fricassée”; “Wild turkey with mole sauce is the *pièce de résistance* of our cuisine”; “Wild turkeys only meet up in the *pipián* sauce”; and “a pot with a chicken.”

We find the value placed on time in sayings like “Little time in the kitchen,” “Turkeys have two main moments in life,” and “Only wild turkeys die the night before”.

In terms of the healing capacity of food, we have the following stanza:

“When my body is battered/my mood and lack of appetite are boosted by/a walnut-stuffed turkey/and hazelnut-flavored chicken.” We also have the saying that “a chicken in the pot is the best medicine.”

Regarding when times are tough and money scarce, we have, “If you don’t have beef, chicken with bacon will do” (Anything will do in a pinch.)

And song verses work for sending “greetings to the beans/memories to the tortillas/recollections to the turkeys.”

And we mustn’t forget music, mentioned in the stanza:

“I’m gonna marry my little chicken off/To a rooster from Durango/So their chicks can be born/Hearty enough for a fandango.”

As we can see in this brief review of songs and sayings about food, its character almost always belongs to the way Mexicans talk every day and to their collective memory. They are mechanisms for interpreting our thoughts, experiences, and tradition, indicators of the identity of a social group living in a certain territory and with a diet determined by agricultural production and animal husbandry. An identity determined by the dishes, beverages, and rituals consumed and that are the very history of Mexicans. For all these reasons, offering them up to our readers and the new generations unfamiliar with how people speak in our country has been a pleasure. *Buen provecho!* ■■■