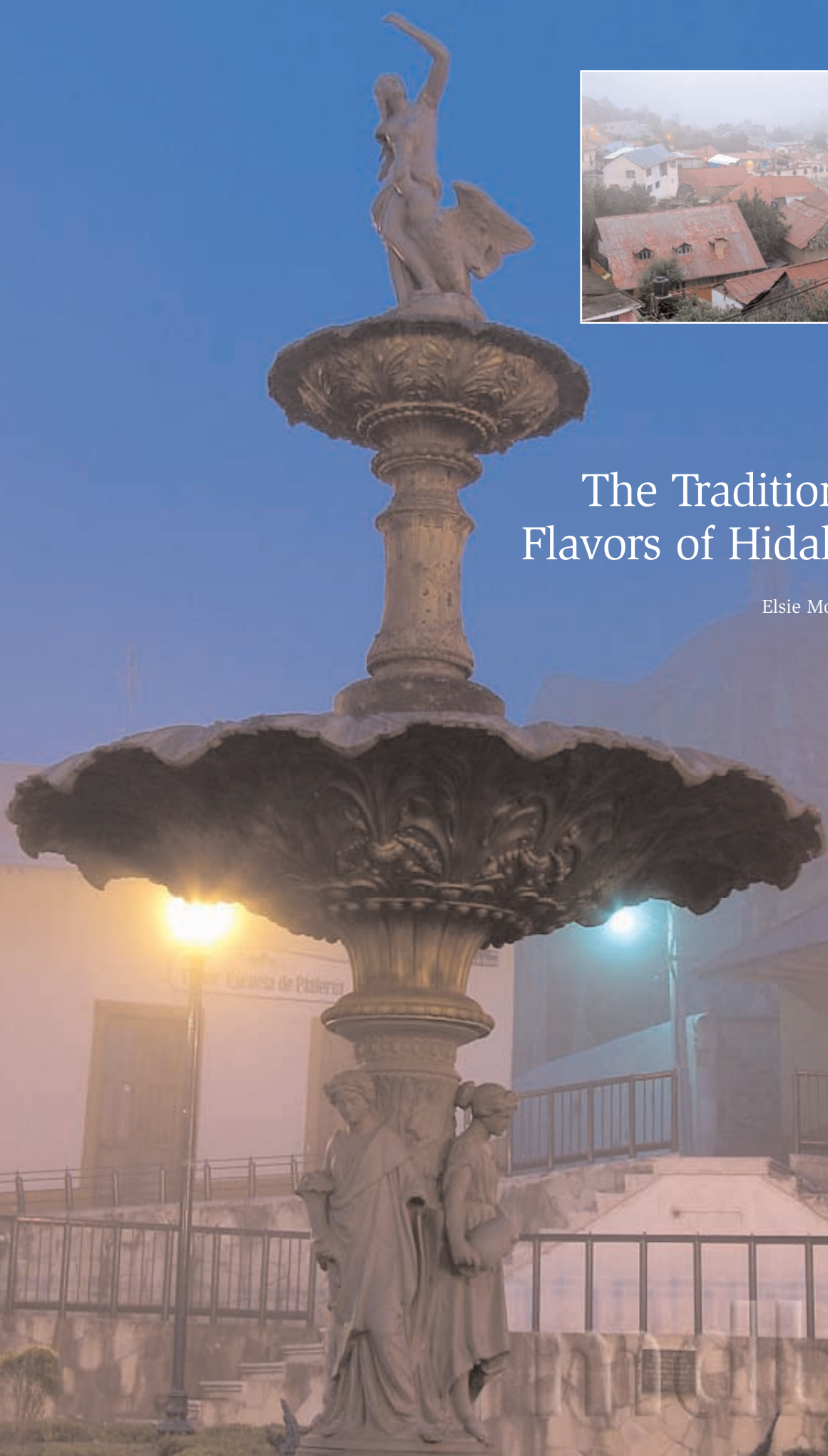




The Traditional Flavors of Hidalgo

Elsie Montiel*





Pasties, a miner's meal *par excellence* for working in the bowels of the earth, was adopted by Real del Monte residents when the English left and today is the typical regional food.



THE ENGLISH LEGACY

The mining districts of Mineral del Chico, Real del Monte and Pachuca in the state of Hidalgo have a centuries-long history. The richness of the veins, the productiveness of the mines and the impact mining had on the region's economy dates back to shortly after the Spaniards arrived in the Americas. The entire area shows not only architectural, but social and cultural vestiges of what mining has meant over the years. In Real del Monte, a city covered up and down its hill-sides with red roofs, alternating with huge smokestacks, winches and stone and brick buildings, nineteenth-century English participation in mining left more than the introduction of steam engines and large

investments. They also left pasties, a miner's meal *par excellence* for working in the bowels of the earth, adopted by Real del Monte residents when the English left and today, the typical regional food.

The nineteenth century saw innumerable social upheavals sparked by the movement for the independence of New Spain from the Spanish crown. This meant that many Spaniards were in danger, expelled or ran back to Spain, with the resulting capital flight. Later, this made for political instability that affected all kinds of productive activity. In the hands of Spaniards—the most famous and richest of all was Don José Manuel Romero de Terreros, Count of Regla—the district's mines were no longer profitable.

Despite this, in 1824, attracted by Baron Humboldt's grandiose descriptions and publicity by the Mexican owners' agents about the mines' potential, English investors created the Real del Monte Gentlemen Adventurers Society to surpass the Count of Regla's achievements. They mechanized Mexican mining: their baggage consisted mostly of more than 1,500 tons of machinery, transported from Veracruz on a very eventful trip on which many English miners died from yellow fever before they even reached their destination.

* Editor of *Voices of Mexico*.
Photos by Mauricio Degollado.

Superior technology, particularly the steam engine, large capital investments and improvements on amalgamation techniques were the main cards the English played. After all, at that time, England was the world's leader in mining thanks to innovations introduced in places like Cornwall: they built housing for their workers, workshops and warehouses; they repaired mineshafts and processing areas, and built underground tunnels to connect the mines. Nevertheless, none of it was enough for the enterprise to be a success. After a little over 20 years, they gave up, and, without waiting to harvest the fruits of so much effort, left the country. They left behind considerable infrastructure that would later be used by Mexican businessmen and a cultural heritage still visible in Real del Monte and its surrounding areas. We know that the first soccer game played in Mexico took place in Pachuca, hosted by the English. They also left behind their dead, buried in the English cemetery, which still looks out from its hill over Real del Monte, and the famous pasties, which, like soccer, soon took on a national identity.

THE SECRET RECIPE

The pasty is a kind of turnover filled with meat and potatoes, which for many years was the main source of heat and nourishment for miners in the depths of the earth who had nowhere to heat their meals and could not come to the surface to eat. Certainly, on the rainy, foggy afternoons so common in Real del Monte,



The original pasty filling.

a pasty is a very comforting way to warm up and satisfy your hunger. Pasties normally have a rather thick, crimped edge. It is said that this was originally very practical: since the miners had no way of washing their hands to eat, they would hold the pasty by the edge and eat around it.

The pasty is different from other foods because the crust and the filling are cooked together. The English pasty usually has chopped, not ground meat; the vegetables —potatoes, onions and turnips— must be sliced, not chopped. According to the Trades Description Act of 1967, a pasty should contain 12.5 percent meat.¹

With time, pasties became Mexican; chili peppers were added to the filling, and then they began to be made out of beans with chili peppers, *mole* sauce, chicken, potatoes and pineapple; one of today's varieties even includes rice pudding. As the most served dish in all the city's restaurants, both big and small, competition is based on each establishment saying it is the only one with the original recipe. The most common criticism they make of each other is of the crust; they say that if it has the consistency of puff pastry, it cannot be called a pasty. Don Ciro Peralta, who started selling pasties outside schools and today owns two pasty shops in the city, swears that he went to Cornwall to get the original recipe for the crust and to exchange recipes for the fillings with his English counterparts. Don Ciro naturally says that his pasty dough has a secret ingredient, which, of course, he refuses to reveal. "[Our dough] is very special. Only Pastes el Portal has it. It's a completely English re-



Handmade ovens to bake pasties.



Cement oven to prepare *barbacoa*. The Don Horacio restaurant, in Pachuquilla, Hidalgo.

Sunday mornings ordinary people eat a delicious consommé with coriander, onion and chili peppers and *barbacoa* tacos with really hot sauce for breakfast or brunch.



Specialties of the Don Horacio restaurant, in Pachuquilla, Hidalgo.

cipe; I went all the way to England to see the original dough.”² The pasty is baked at about 200 degrees Celsius for about 20 minutes. Don Ciro bakes his in ovens he designed himself, which are not outfitted with a clock or timer to tell him when the pasties are ready, because they know how to judge the time and they never burn them. Regardless, a visit to Real del Monte is not complete if you don’t stop and have a pasty, whether with the traditional English filling—but don’t forget that the original has chili peppers—or any of the delicious Mexican variations.

SUNDAY BRUNCH: *BARBACOA*³

While pasties are typical of Real del Monte and miners, *barbacoa* is Hidalgo’s traditional dish. There is nowhere in the state it is not prepared. Driving along the

highways, it is common to see signs for both restaurants and roadside tents serving it. They are particularly plentiful on Saturday and Sunday mornings when ordinary people eat a delicious consommé with coriander, onion and chili peppers and *barbacoa* tacos with really hot sauce for breakfast or brunch. By one or two in the afternoon, it’s hard to find a stand with *barbacoa* left. It is also the favorite dish for many family celebrations; and any old Hidalgo family knows how to make it.

This dish is not eaten underground, like the miners originally did with the pasties, but it is traditionally cooked in three-foot deep holes, called earth ovens.

The home-made variety takes a long time to prepare, beginning the day before when the animal is slaughtered, drained of blood and cut into pieces. Lamb is traditional, but there is also beef, goat, chicken and pork *barbacoa*. The hole is usually dug in the patio of the house, where thick logs are placed, making a little vault. Inside it are placed twigs to get the fire going, and on top of that, stones, to absorb all the heat. After several hours when the stones are red hot, a recipient is put on top of them containing vegetables, rice and *guajillo* chili peppers, where the meat drippings fall, to make the famous consommé. Over the recipient the cooks put a grill made of mesquite branches or metal, then a layer of maguey leaves, the salted seasoned meat and a last layer of more leaves, to give the meat its characteristic flavor. Finally, the oven is covered over with dirt, and the meat is left to cook for between six and twelve hours, depending on the amount of meat. It’s a delight.

Today, many homes and restaurants use cement ovens with volcanic rock and a door underneath where the logs are placed to cook the *barbacoa*. In any business where *barbacoa* is a mainstay of the menu, 100 animals a month are cooked. And, while you can have it any day of the week, it’s never as good as for a



Mixiote.



Chicuciles.

weekend breakfast of consommé and tacos made of *barbacoa* fresh from the oven.

OTHER TYPICAL DISHES

Hidalgo has a lot of desert, which means it has lots of maguey plants and all kinds of cacti. Two dishes that come out of that landscape are *escamoles* and *chicuciles*. *Escamoles* are the eggs of the ants that live under the maguey plant, which multiply rapidly in the rainy season. They are prepared with butter or chili peppers on a slow fire, with a little onion, chili pepper and coriander, and eaten in a taco or as an hors-d'oeuvre.

Chicuciles are red worms that live near maguey plants in the rainy season. They are always fried with different condiments and eaten in tacos.

Mixiotes are a dish made from lamb seasoned with *guajillo* sauce and wrapped in a leaf from the maguey plant —each leaf can be opened and separated into

up to nine layers. *Mixiotes* can also be made with chicken or pork and are very popular nationwide. They are usually eaten with fresh tortillas. In places like Pachuquita, very close to the state capital of Pachuca, some restaurants have their own recipes handed down by family tradition (for example, pork or chicken *mixiotes* made with *nopal* cactus leaves cooked in copper pots, giving them a unique taste). **MM**



Barbacoa.

NOTES


¹ Taken from a description of the recipe for the original Cornish pasty posted on the walls of the Mayor's House at the Acosta-Mine Site Museum in Real del Monte, Hidalgo.

² Personal interview, April 27, 2008, in Real del Monte, Hidalgo.

³ We would like to thank the owners of the Don Horacio restaurant for their help with this article.


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600 Hemisfair Park, P.O. Box 830426
San Antonio, Texas 78283-0426 • 210.222.8626
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