OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

A GLOBAL HISTORY OF MEXICAN FOOD

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Planet Taco

A TALE OF TWO TACOS

INTRODUCTION

As a historian of Mexican food, I have eaten my fair share of tacos. In Mexico City, I am always on the lookout for *tacos al pastor*, slices of pork from a vertical rotisserie served on small corn tortillas with bits of pineapple and *guajillo* chile salsa. Sitting on the beaches of Cancún, I have tasted sublime fish tacos with succulent white flesh, delicately fried batter, and a splash of lime and *pico de gallo*. At home in Minneapolis, while shopping at the Mercado Central on Lake Street, I often grab some *tacos de barbacoa*, shreds of tender meat enlivened by a fresh tomatillo salsa. But feeling that I had not truly experienced *carne asada*, the grilled beef that is the centerpiece of *norteño* (northern) cuisine, I recently traveled to Hermosillo, 250 miles south of Tucson, Arizona, in the heart of Sonora's cattle country. Getting there was no easy task, for although it is a state capital, it is poorly served even by Mexican airlines. Once I arrived, however, I had no trouble enlisting a local guide for the city's fine dining.

Miguel Angel Rascón is a librarian at the Colegio de Sonora, Hermosillo's elite postgraduate institution, but his real love is teaching cooking classes to neighborhood children, including his young son, Miguelito. When he offered to take me to the best tacos in town, he started at a Chinese restaurant. That may sound strange, but chop suey has been a local favorite since the late nineteenth century, when it was brought by Asian migrants, who were headed for the

United States but took a detour through northwestern Mexico to evade customs officials enforcing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. We also stopped for coffee—drive-through Starbucks was all the rage in Hermosillo—but still no tacos. Finally, we headed down the main tourist boulevard and approached an outdoor restaurant crowded with fashionable young people. Having eaten there the night before, I felt smugly satisfied about my instinct for Mexican food, that is, until Miguel downshifted and turned the corner. He drove for another five minutes, through a maze of dark side streets, before stopping in front of a taco cart, operated by a young couple and illuminated by a street lamp. After introducing me to the chef and his wife, Miguel ordered tacos of carne asada for both of us.

There are two theories on carne asada: the thick and the thin. Some cooks use large slabs of meat, perhaps chuck roast, called *diezmillo* in Spanish, while others prefer the thinnest of butterflied steaks, known as *sábana*, literally, sheets. Neither are fancy cuts, the kind reserved for restaurants and the export market, but they are always fresh and flavorful. Regardless of size, the meat is grilled over a very hot fire until beads of juice appear on the surface. It is then salted, turned once, and when the drops begin to form again, it is finished. Our host came from the thin school. As he placed the marinated strips of beef down to sizzle on the hot grill, I glanced at my watch. It was 9:45, still quite early for a Mexican supper. Scarcely a minute later, the tell-tale sweat began to appear, and he turned the meat, revealing a nicely browned surface. At this point, he placed some flour tortillas to warm on the other side of the grill. He chopped the meat directly on the metal surface, and assembled the tacos on Styrofoam plates. With a sprinkling of diced onion and cilantro, he handed them over. I checked my watch again. Elapsed time: about two minutes. That was fast food.

Our chef did not drive a fancy taco truck, like the polished chrome models that frequent street corners and work sites in the United States, but he had transformed his simple cart into a comfortable restaurant with a circle of lawn chairs. His wife handed us each a beer from the ice chest located on one side of the cart, and we proceeded to the well-equipped salsa bar on the other side. I opted for a smooth avocado sauce, not the rustic guacamole made in a mortar, with bits of tomato, onion, and chile, but the taco-shop version, creamy and pale green. Miguel liked to mix his own salsa, adding pico de gallo and a bit of guajillo to the guacamole and topping it off with a garnish of radish and pickled chiles—a baroque feast of tacos. We spent nearly as much time saucing the

tacos as it took to make them, but we ate them very quickly. I cannot say if it was the best carne asada in Hermosillo, but it was definitely worth the trip.

Back in the United States, I decided to continue my comparative taco experiment with a visit to Taco Bell. I headed for not just any neighborhood franchise, but East Los Angeles. That might sound a little perverse. Cruising down Whittier Boulevard, under the landmark steel arch, I had my choice of places serving *birria* (braised goat) from Guadalajara, Ensenada fish tacos, Salvadoran *pupusas*, and a dozen other regional specialties. My friend María Muñoz insisted that I was wasting my time. There was no Taco Bell in her hometown, the Chicana capital of East L.A. It must have been across the border, in Boyle Heights. But I found it, several blocks from the city center, on a corner facing a beauty salon, a travel agency, and a strip mall. The restaurant shared a menu with Pizza Hut Express—both are subsidiaries of the Yum! Corporation—and pizza seemed to be the favorite of the predominantly middle-aged women on lunch break.

A Mexican American teenager greeted me at the counter. Behind her, the Taco Bell side of the menu listed several options: hard tacos, soft tacos, even the double decker, a hard taco wrapped in a soft taco. I wondered briefly what Miguel would make of that. Then, in the interests of scientific comparison, I ordered two soft, grilled steak tacos. The cashier touched the screen of her computer, and the order flashed up on a monitor above the stainless steel production line. As another young woman in latex gloves started to work on my tacos, I recalled a description of the chain's kitchen routine given to a journalist from *The New Yorker* by an anonymous employee: "My job is I, like, basically make the tacos! The meat comes in boxes that have bags inside, and those bags you boil to heat up the meat. That's how you make tacos."[1]

I missed that step, watching from across the counter, because the meat was already waiting in a steam tray, far from any grill. I did see the young woman place the flour tortillas in a small overhead oven, about the size of a microwave. A short time later, she pulled them out and positioned them on sheets of paper laid out on the grooved work surface designed to support either hard tacos upright or soft tacos laid flat. She arranged the meat on top and slid the tacos down the line to the next station, which was equipped with various trays of prepared condiments. Presumably, the kitchen was designed for maximum efficiency through a division of labor, but they seemed to be understaffed, and the poor woman was moving back and forth along the line. She added lettuce, tomato, and cheese. Then for a final flourish, she pulled out a caulking gun and

squirted "creamy lime sauce" on my tacos. Meanwhile, the cashier had offered me little foil-wrapped packets of hot sauce. Instead of Mexican salsas like pico de gallo, guajillo, or guacamole, the "flavors" were mild, hot, and fire. When the harried employee set the tray with two paper-wrapped tacos on the counter and called my number, I checked my watch. Elapsed time: a little less than two minutes.

So which was the fast food, the carne asada from Hermosillo or the grilled steak from Taco Bell? Both delivered a quick meal for about the same price. Yet the labor that produced them—not to mention the experience of dining—could hardly have been more different. The industrial taco, mass-produced in a central commissary and served under a fiberglass mission bell, seemed worlds away from the taco grilled to order and eaten under the open skies of Mexico.

It is the ersatz version that has shaped the global image of Mexican cuisine. The sociologist George Ritzer has attributed this outcome to the technological rationalization of kitchen labor, a corporate logic of standardization and efficiency that he dubbed "McDonaldization."[2] Or in the words of Taco Bell's founder, Glen Bell, a former hot-dog vendor who had first sampled tacos in Mexican-owned restaurants in California: "If you wanted a dozen . . . you were in for a wait. They stuffed them first, quickly fried them and stuck them together with a toothpick. I thought they were delicious, but something had to be done about the method of preparation."[3] That something was the creation of the "taco shell," a prefried tortilla that could be stored indefinitely in plastic wrap and filled on demand for waiting customers.

Yet there are problems with this interpretation of Yankee ingenuity transforming a Mexican peasant tradition. As connoisseurs of global street cuisine can attest—and as my experiment readily confirmed—fast food in the United States is not particularly fast. Street vendors can prepare elaborate dumplings, noodles, sandwiches, and, of course, tacos as quickly as any chain restaurant can serve a nondescript hamburger, never mind the time spent waiting in line at the drive-through window. Moreover, this contrast between North American modernity and non-Western tradition assumes an authentic taco that has existed unchanged from time immemorial, a dubious historical claim. Once I began researching, I found to my surprise that the taco was as much a modern phenomenon in Mexico as it was in the United States.

The unexpected novelty of the taco raises larger questions about the nature of globalization. The growth of global interconnection is often described as a contemporary trend, historically unprecedented, and brought about by the latest technologies of communication and transportation. The nation appears, by contrast, as a historic entity whose boundaries and traditional cultures may be threatened by new forms of global exchange. The competition between these two versions of tacos provides a textbook example of this recent conflict between globalization and the nation. As late as the 1960s, tacos were virtually unknown outside of Mexico and its former territories in the Southwest. Fifty years later, U.S. corporations had shipped taco shells everywhere from Alaska to Australia and from Morocco to Mongolia. NASA had even blasted soft tacos into orbit to feed astronauts on the International Space Station. But if the taco shop is new to Mexico as well, then the sharp distinction between authentic national cuisines and modern globalized food begins to break down.

In fact, Mexican food has been globalized from the very beginning. As historians have pointed out, there have been earlier eras of global interconnection, beginning in 1492 with Columbus and the rise of oceanic navigation, then again in the nineteenth century with steamships and telegraphs. One such episode of globalization, the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, initiated dramatic culinary changes through the introduction of Mediterranean crops and livestock to the Americas. Globalization continued to exert a powerful influence on Mexicans seeking to forge a national cuisine after independence in 1821, although the international food of the nineteenth century was French haute cuisine rather than North American fast food. The present-day battle over the meaning of authentic Mexican food has high economic stakes because taco-shell stereotypes confound efforts by Mexican tourism and agriculture to gain international distinction and raise the value of their exports. Yet, as a French historian has observed, a national cuisine is "a mirror question, a question of how [a people] and others see themselves and their cuisine."[4] For Mexicans, the fast-food taco must seem like a funhouse mirror, distorting their cuisine beyond all recognition. *Planet Taco* examines this conflict between globalization and the nation as a battle of images between how foreigners think about Mexican food and how Mexicans understand their own national cuisine. In particular, it seeks to show how Mexicans imagined a version of pre-Hispanic authenticity in order to heighten the contrast with globalized industrial dishes from the United States.

The importance of a global perspective becomes apparent when tracing the history of the taco. People have been eating corn tortillas with bits of meat or beans rolled up inside for more than a millennium, but the taco achieved national hegemony only in the twentieth century. Traditionally, every region

in Mexico had its own distinctive snack foods, collectively known as *antojitos* (little whimsies), made of corn dough, formed in countless ingenious shapes, and given a wide variety of local names. The now ubiquitous "taco" label is a modern usage, probably deriving from a Spanish root, in contrast to such dishes as tamales and pozole that have a clear lineage to indigenous languages.[5] European meats, including beef, pork, and chicken, are the most common taco fillings, which would seem to make the taco part of Mexico's mestizo or mixed Spanish-Indian heritage, a central tenet of modern nationalist ideology. Indeed, Salvador Novo's national history of Mexican food imagined that this process of culinary mixing began with the first taco, a combination of Spanish pork and Indian corn—"*carnitas* in taco, with hot tortillas"—served to the conquistador Cortés.[6] Novo could only imagine this scene because documentary references to edible tacos are nonexistent for the three centuries of colonial rule. To understand the historical emergence of the taco, it is necessary to step outside the Mexican nation and consider evidence from Europe.

The Spanish word "taco," like the English "tack," is common to most Romantic and Germanic languages. The first known reference, from 1607, appeared in French and signified a cloth plug used to hold in place the ball of an *arquebus*, an early firearm.[7] Eighteenth-century Spanish dictionaries also defined "taco" as a ramrod, a billiard cue, a carpenter's hammer, and a gulp of wine—a combination recalling the English colloquialism, a "shot" of liquor. Only in the mid-nineteenth century did the Spanish Royal Academy expand the meaning to encompass a small bite of food. The specific Mexican version was not acknowledged until well into the twentieth century.[8] Nor did tacos appear in early Mexican dictionaries, most notably Melchor Ocampo's vernacular work of 1844, wryly entitled "Idiotismos Hispano-Mexicanos" (Hispano-Mexican idiocies).[9]

National histories offer little insight on the taco until the late nineteenth century. Cookbooks reflected the elite preference for Spanish and French cuisine over indigenous dishes, although *El cocinero mexicano* (*The Mexican chef*, 1831) provided a long list of street foods, including quesadillas and *chalupas* (canoes), enchiladas and their rustic kin *chilaquiles*, and *envueltos*. The envuelto (Spanish for "wrap") comes closest to what would now be called a taco, but it is crossed with an enchilada, with chile sauce poured over the fried tortilla. Most extravagant were the *envueltos de Nana Rosa* (Granny Rosa's wraps), stuffed with *picadillo* (chopped meat) and garnished profusely.[10] Mexico's *costumbrista* literature of social manners provides additional information about nineteenth-century street foods. The first national novel, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi's *El periquillo sarniento* (*The mangy parrot*, 1816), likewise made no mention of tacos but did describe a lunch cooked by Nana Rosa "consisting of envueltos, chicken stew, *adobo* [marinated meat], and *pulque* [a native wine made of fermented maguey] flavored with prickly pears and pineapple."[11] Tacos gained widespread attention only in 1891, with the publication of Manuel Payno's masterpiece, *Los bandidos de Río Frío* (*The bandits of Cold River*). In an early scene in the novel, set during the festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a group of Indians danced in honor of the national saint, while feasting on "*chito* [fried goat] with tortillas, drunken salsa, and very good pulque . . . and the children skipping, with tacos of tortillas and avocado in their hand."[12] Although this culinary meaning of taco had certainly been in popular use for some time, with Payno's benediction, it quickly received official recognition in Feliz Ramos I. Duarte's 1895 *Diccionario de mejicanismos*, which attributed the geographical origin of the term to Mexico City.[13]

To understand how a Spanish word, newly used for a generic snack, became associated with a particular form of rolled tortilla requires a shift to the silver mines that connected colonial Mexico with the global economy. Mexican and Peruvian silver formed the lifeblood not just for the Spanish empire but for world trade in the early modern era. Endless chests of treasure passed successively from the Spanish crown to German and Genoese bankers, Dutch and Portuguese merchants, and finally Indian and Chinese workshops. The fabled Manila galleon also shipped Mexican silver pesos directly across the Pacific from Acapulco. Although the early boomtowns of Zacatecas and Potosí had gone bust by the mid-seventeenth century, the newly installed Bourbon dynasty mobilized technicians and workers from Europe and the Americas to revive the industry in the late eighteenth century. Real del Monte, the greatest of these new mines, was discovered near the town of Pachuca, sixty miles north of Mexico City. By linguistic chance, mine workers called their explosive charges of gunpowder wrapped in paper "tacos," a reference that derived both from the specific usage of a powder charge for a firearm and from the more general meaning of plug, because they prepared the blast by carving a hole in the rock before inserting the explosive taco.[14] In retrospect, it is easy to see the similarity between a chicken taquito with hot sauce and a stick of dynamite.

The national struggle for independence of the 1810s and subsequent civil wars and economic unrest struck the silver districts particularly hard, forcing many to migrate in search of work. Unemployed miners brought their tacos

with them to Mexico City, where urban workers found them a portable and convenient lunch, just as the miners did. One of the first visual records of the taco, a photo from the early 1920s, shows a woman selling *tacos sudados* ("sweaty tacos") to a group of paperboys. These foods were made by frying tortillas briefly, stuffing them with a simple mixture, often just potatoes and salsa, and keeping them warm in their own steam in a basket, thus, *tacos de canasta* ("tacos from a basket"). The chronicler Jesús Flores y Escalante confirmed the mining connection by pointing out that tacos sudados originally carried the sobriquet *tacos de minero*. The latter was a common phrase among the taco stands that first proliferated on Mexico City street corners at the beginning of the twentieth century. Once it was established among the working classes of the capital, the taco spread across the country and up the social ladder. The taco thus emerged as a new and modern variety of antojito, with a distinctive culture of its own, embodied in the taquería and associated with Mexico City. Its twentieth-century spread around the country, at times displacing regional antojitos, exemplified the emerging cultural dominance of the capital over the national life.[15]

Long before the taco became a street-corner icon, Mexican food had its origins in the mestizo blending of Native American and Spanish foods, but this colonial encounter has been hopelessly romanticized by modern nationalist ideology. The fairy tale of *mole de guajolote*, for example, celebrates the invention of a turkey and chile sauce dish in the colonial convents of Puebla as a mixture of Old World spices with New World chiles and chocolate. The history of colonial *mestizaje*, however, was not a romantic marriage but rather a racial hierarchy that separated urban Spaniards who ate wheat bread from rural Indians subsisting on corn tortillas. The mestizo castes themselves, including people of mixed race, African slaves, and some Asian migrants as well, inhabited a social limbo of urban slums and sweatshops. Creoles derived status from their European heritage and acknowledged neither the authenticity of indigenous culture nor the social blending of mestizaje.

Meanwhile, a parallel history of early globalization, the travels of maize and other indigenous crops around the world, further muddled the image of Mexican food. Although prolific and versatile, maize has significant nutritional defects, particularly the lack of niacin, a B vitamin essential for human health. Native cooks learned to overcome this flaw through the technology of *nixtamal*, a method of alkaline processing that magnified the plant's nutritional value while also yielding dough for tortillas and tamales. Because the seeds traveled

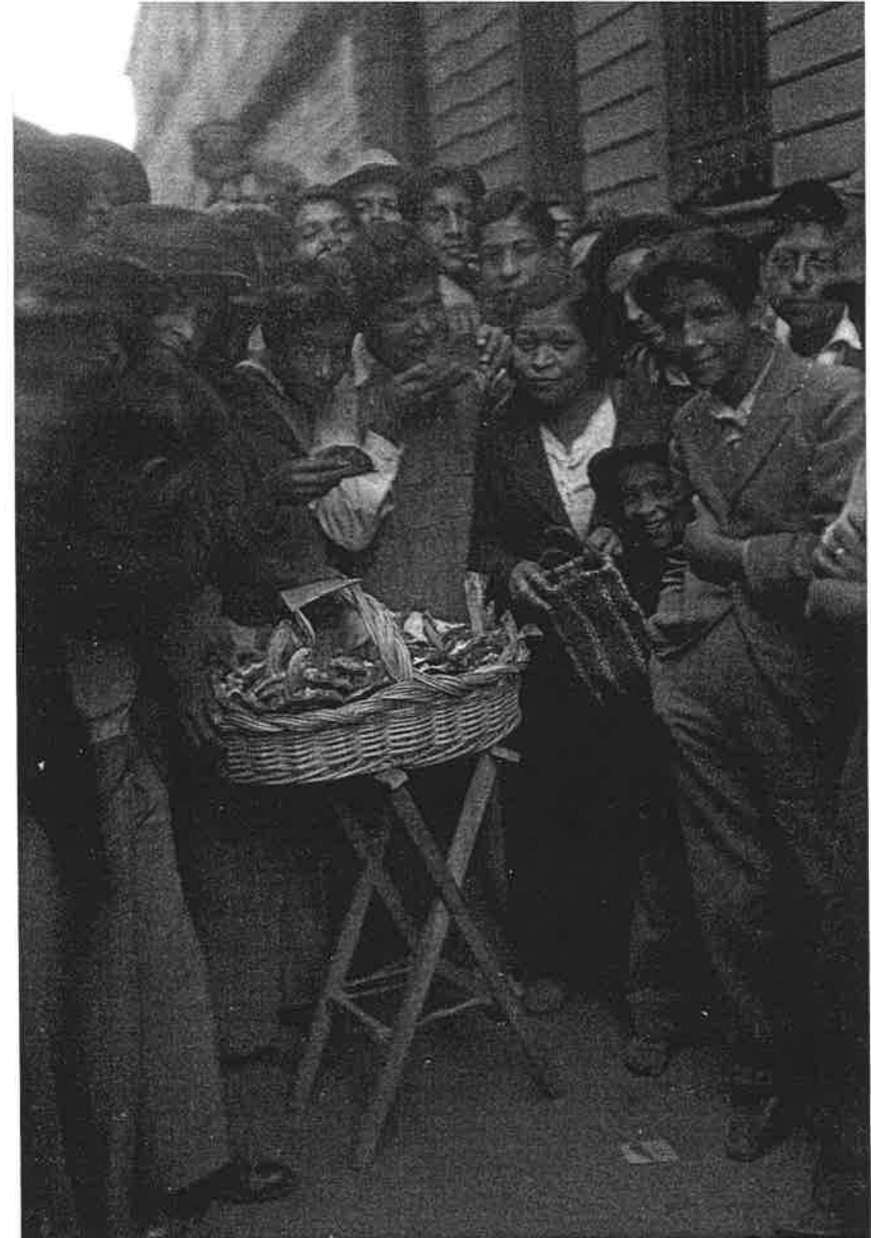

Figure I.1. An early image of Mexico City paperboys eating tacos for brunch, c. 1920. Col. SINAFO-INAH. Inventory number 155025. Courtesy of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.

globally without the local knowledge of vitamin fortification, epidemics of pellagra followed the spread of maize in the centuries after 1492. Mexican food came to be seen in Europe not only as plebeian but also as a potential menace to human health.

Regional differentiation has been yet another historical source of confusion about the nature of Mexican food. Mexicans generally trace their national history to the Indian societies of Mesoamerica, a broad cultural region stretching from present-day central Mexico through the Yucatán to the highlands of Central America, and in particular to Tenochtitlán, the island capital of the Aztec Empire. Nevertheless, the Mexica, who founded the Aztec Empire, were themselves migrants, "barbarians" who settled in the Valley of Anáhuac just a few centuries before Cortés. There was an ongoing exchange of goods and people between the self-styled "civilized" people of Mesoamerica and their northern rivals, the "Chichimecas." This term, meaning "children of dogs," was applied to diverse nomadic and semisedentary peoples as well as to agrarian societies in what is now the U.S. Southwest. The Ancestral Pueblos, for example, borrowed the Mesoamerican technology of nixtamal, but local cooks improvised their own recipes, preparing it as piki bread instead of tortillas. With the coming of the Spaniards, this northern frontier retained its culinary distinctiveness through the invention of the wheat flour tortilla, blending Spanish and Indian cultures in new ways. Although the Southwest was only briefly part of the Mexican nation, from independence in 1821 until it was annexed by the United States in 1848, its local cuisines eventually became the model for a globalized version of Mexican food.

In the nineteenth century, Mexicans tried to make sense of their conflicted national cuisine in opposition to the global culinary hegemony of France. This struggle ran from the "Pastry War" of 1838, a gunboat action to collect debts, to the French invasion of 1862–67 and the Imperial court of Maximilian and Carlota, and culminated in the fin de siècle dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, who feasted on French food and champagne. This period was also when tacos first appeared as a subversive symbol of a popular national cuisine. Francophile Porfirians have been denounced for their unpatriotic tastes, but diplomats and bankers used knowledge of continental cuisine to claim a seat at the banquet table of "civilized nations," even while privately longing for street foods that were unfashionable at home.

The nostalgia of exile also shaped reactions to the regional Mexican cuisine prepared in the United States after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

Wealthy Mexican visitors to San Antonio, Texas, expressed a sharp aversion to the local favorite, chili con carne, which they wrongly associated with the Americanization of their compatriots. Condescension toward the working classes also surely influenced the elite Mexicans' image of street foods. Anglo tourists and settlers created their own, equally negative stereotypes of Mexican vendors. Dubbed the "Chili Queens of San Antonio," these vendors were depicted as sirens of the Old Southwest, seducing unwary visitors with hot tamales and rapacious sexuality, thereby spreading "Montezuma's Revenge" and racial contamination. Such ambivalent images, dangerous and alluring, spurred the industrialization of Mexican food by non-Mexican businessmen, who made fortunes selling chili powder, canned chili, and other purportedly hygienic knockoffs as novelties for a mass market. By the 1920s, parallel commercial networks crossed the continent to supply two distinct markets: canned chili and tamales for mainstream housewives eager for something new, and dried chiles and chocolate for migrant workers hungry for a taste of home.

The quest for authentic food acquired new meaning in the mid-twentieth century as industrial foods began replacing home-cooked meals. Packaged foods were originally developed in part to supply migrant workers, who had the cash to purchase goods unavailable to peasants back home. Mexico's rural, subsistence society was drawn into commercial networks by the Green Revolution of industrial agriculture and by the invention of tortilla factories and dehydrated tortilla flour. The commodification of maize caused an upheaval in gendered labor, because women did the hard work of making tortillas, while also encouraging the gentrification of peasant foods among a self-styled revolutionary, mestizo middle class. As workers shifted to mass-produced industrial tortillas, artisanal versions patted out by hand acquired new cachet in Mexico City restaurants. Middle-class Mexican American restaurateurs and cookbook authors meanwhile codified particular versions of Tex-Mex and Cal-Mex regional cuisines around midcentury. Glen Bell actually borrowed technologies from Mexican entrepreneurs and made his fortune catering to Anglos who were curious about Mexican food but may not have wanted to enter Mexican neighborhoods.

The contemporary globalization of Mexican food began during the Cold War, when people familiar with Tex-Mex and Cal-Mex food began to travel the world, taking their taco shells and burritos with them. Two groups in particular had the knowledge and opportunity to initiate this global migration: U.S. military personnel who had been stationed in the Southwest, and surfers

Figure I.2. Artisanal crafts create social distinctions in a nascent age of industrial tortillas. Women making tortillas in a restaurant, c. 1957. Col. SINAFO-INAH. Inventory number 170840. Courtesy of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico.

who ate tacos and drank Corona longnecks on Baja beaches. Taco Bell, Old El Paso, and other corporate brands followed a trail that these two groups blazed, and profited from stereotypes that they established. Moreover, the Mexican companies most successful in global marketing have been those that adopted an Americanized image, most notably Corona beer and Cuervo tequila, which advertised Mexico as a Spring Break destination. The increasing sophistication of Mexican tourism markets provoked a backlash, beginning in the 1980s with the rise of the "nueva cocina mexicana," a contemporary gourmet movement that sought to reimagine the authenticity of Aztec and Maya cuisines using the professional techniques of continental chefs. Yet even this self-consciously nationalist project was part of a larger transnational phenomenon. Tourists were an initial market, as the Mexican middle classes had been forced to tighten their belts during a painful economic crisis in the 1980s. Meanwhile, chefs in the United States were creating their own version of upscale Mexican dishes as "New Southwestern," ironically appropriating foods they had once disdained as part of a broader search for authentic "American regional cuisines."

These trends would seem to herald a dim future for Mexican cuisine on a global stage: gentrified peasant cooking for a sophisticated, international elite; factory-made tortillas or Taco Bell for the masses, both in Mexico and abroad. Yet there remains a basic problem with the theory of McDonaldization, its ahistorical focus on "the highest stage of fast food," to quote one acute observer.[16] By ignoring the industry's uncertain early history, and by discounting the revolutionary potential of future technological change and global migration, fast-food corporations appear as invincible titans, gobbling up world markets and Americanizing everything in their path. Nevertheless, globalization is not only a top-down phenomenon, imposed from above by political and corporate bosses. Globalization can also transform societies from the bottom up, by way of human migration and social movements. One consequence of the great proletarian migration from Latin America, beginning with the regional crisis of the 1980s and seemingly ending with the financial crash of 2008, was a renaissance for family restaurants serving Mexican regional cooking throughout the United States. Moreover, peasant farmers have begun to mobilize and challenge corporate control over agriculture and to demand democratic governance and food sovereignty. It is hard to predict the outcome of these movements at a time of virulent anti-immigrant politics and widespread food shortages. But at least the era of the taco shell may be waning. Although this invention was essential for creating international markets for Mexican food, it is increasingly being replaced by soft corn tortillas, even if made with dehydrated tortilla flour.[17]

Understanding Mexican food requires not only global and local perspectives but also ethnic and business histories. The postwar association of Mexican food with the taco shell was determined as much by material considerations as by ethnic stereotypes. Making tortillas by hand involves skilled labor, even with the assistance of mechanical nixtamal mills and folding presses. Moreover, tortillas, like donuts, are best eaten fresh, preferably within a few hours off the griddle. In Mexico, tortilla factories have been largely a cottage industry, conveniently located on any street corner, and operating sporadically throughout the day for customers who line up before breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This just-in-time business model, however, fit poorly in the postwar "Fordist" era of giant factories pursuing economies of scale. Mass production was needed to achieve profits on low-value commodities, and there are few consumer goods cheaper than a corn tortilla. Commercial supplies of fresh tortillas were simply uneconomical in markets without regular demand from knowledgeable

consumers, which basically meant everywhere except Mexico, Central America, and a few cities in the United States. By contrast, taco shells could be produced in bulk, wrapped in plastic, stored in warehouses, and shipped around the world, albeit with some breakage. They were also easier to eat than fresh corn tortillas, at least for consumers unpracticed in the deft art of rolling their own tacos.

These considerations of technological efficiency and gendered labor suggest the usefulness of approaching Mexican food from a commodity-chain analysis, with its comprehensive perspective on production, distribution, and consumption.[18] Of course, Mexican food requires many ingredients with different material properties and cultural associations. Maize, the economic foundation for ancient Mesoamerican societies, had spread from its site of domestication in southwestern Mexico across the tropics of South America and the temperate woodlands of North America before Columbus arrived. After 1492, its high productivity and pioneering ability to grow on rugged slopes made it a valuable crop for marginal farmers everywhere from southern Europe to the foothills of the Himalayas. Other ingredients in the Mexican kitchen grow only in limited climates, and elaborate commodity chains were needed to convey them to market. Chocolate was so valuable that the Aztec Empire conquered the distant province of Soconusco to ensure reliable supplies. Spanish conquistadors, who navigated the Pacific Ocean to satisfy their taste for Asian spices, carried chocolate with them to Manila. In the history of globalization, the difference between products like maize that travel as cultivars and trade goods such as spices and chocolate turns out to be highly significant.

Commodity chains have become still more lengthy and contentious today. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), implemented in 1994, allowed the free entry of subsidized maize from the Midwestern United States, undermining family farms in Mexico and forcing many to migrate north in search of work. Then, in 2007, a rush to convert corn into biofuel caused sudden inflation in the cost of tortillas for the poorest Mexican consumers.[19] In a tragic irony of global capitalism, the loss of food security in Mexico coincided with the increasing presence of fresh corn tortillas in markets around the world.

Changing fashions for Mexican food within the international food service industry—for example, corn tortillas in place of taco shells—reflect shifting notions of Mexican ethnicity. Anthropologists now conceptualize group

identities, whether ethnic, racial, national, or otherwise, as a process that is constantly evolving, and foods provide tangible collective representations of these affiliations. Cuisines can serve to police group boundaries either through the rules created by insiders such as Jewish dietary laws or through stereotypes ascribed by outsiders, for example, "frogs," "krauts," and "beaners." Nevertheless, foods can also offer enticing bridges between societies, encouraging outsiders to sample an unfamiliar culture in a relatively risk-free situation. Culinary tourism, the intentional exploration of the foods of another group, has become a rapidly growing industry. The ideal of authenticity, of getting food prepared the way it is supposed to be, is central to the experience.[20]

The differences between "inside" and "outside" meanings invariably reflect unequal relations of power.[21] Corporate advertisements often sell ethnic food to mainstream consumers by using exotic and demeaning images such as the Frito Bandito and the Taco Bell dog, conveying images of Mexicans as outlaws or animals. Even when popular culture representations are more respectful, well-financed corporate chains may crowd out ethnic entrepreneurs to the edges of the market.[22] National cuisines, which are also imagined through a process of culinary tourism, likewise manipulate the foods of regional and ethnic minorities for ideological and commercial purposes. In the nineteenth century, Indian foods were largely excluded from notions of proper Mexican cuisine. Today, ancient Aztec and Maya images provide authenticity for the national cuisine, although the foods of living Indians are often kept at a distance. Ethnic distinctions also intersect with notions of class and gender, compounding inequalities. Anglos equated the chili queens' food with deviant sexuality; elite Mexicans' views of Indian food are colored by pervasive rural poverty. Nevertheless, minorities often resist efforts to appropriate and denigrate their cooking. As early as the 1930s, for example, New Mexico matrons Cleofas Jaramillo and Fabiola Cabeza de Vaca wrote cookbooks to refute distorted images of their foods that were appearing in recipes of North American mass-market women's magazines.[23] The belief that people have the right to determine their own identities and manners of expressing themselves is basic to the ideal of cultural citizenship.[24]

But is authenticity obligatory? Are ethnic entrepreneurs "selling out" if they change a recipe to market food to a wider audience? And can ethnicity be acquired secondhand? After all, the postwar travels of Mexican food around the world offer a classic immigrant story. The cooks just happened

not to be, for the most part, Mexican. To answer these questions, one must first remember that iconic recipes exist only on the pages of cookbooks; in practice, they are adapted constantly to suit available ingredients. What cultural groups share is a general idea of the appropriate flavors, proportions, and combinations that belong in any particular dish, say, the traditional spices in a *recado negro* (Yucatecan spice mixture), or the proper balance of meat to tortilla for tacos al pastor, or the right variety of cheese for marketplace enchiladas.[25] These opinions vary among regions, social classes, families, and even with the particular *sazón*, or taste, of an individual cook. One woman's secret ingredient ruins the entire dish for another. Working-class Mexican and Mexican American women are often uninterested in notions of authenticity. That concept is more useful for claiming social distinction or for marketing restaurants and cookbooks than for getting dinner on the table.[26]

The Mexican poet Octavio Paz famously declared, "the melting pot is a social idea that, when applied to culinary art, produces abominations."[27] In exalting Mexican regional cuisine as authentic and scorning Tex-Mex foods as a bastardization, he denounced the Mexican Americans who blended two cultures in their everyday lives. By contrast, the Chicana poet Gloria Anzaldúa called for an awareness of people who live between or across the borders that separate nations, races, and genders.[28] "Tex-Mex," which has been used to denote any form of inauthentic Mexican food, more properly describes a regional variant of Mexican culture from Texas, with Anglo Saxon and Central European influences, just as Veracruz is a melting pot of Afro-Mexican culture and Sonorans have a taste for Chinese.[29] Such a consciousness allows for the recognition of endless varieties of Mexican food. Norteño cooks often make soft tacos with tortillas of wheat flour instead of corn because of regional patterns of agriculture. Ground beef, iceberg lettuce, and cheddar cheese were the most readily available ingredients from the U.S. food-processing industry. Contrary to corporate myth, Mexican Americans even invented the taco shell, back when Glen Bell was still boiling weenies. Instead of the fast-food taco, it should be called the Mexican American taco, as a tribute to the creativity of hardworking ethnic cooks.

Planet Taco shows how images of authenticity have been invented to promote culinary tourism and nationalist ideology. People use food to think about others, and popular views of the taco as cheap, hot, and potentially dangerous

have reinforced racist images of Mexico as a land of tequila, migrants, and tourists' diarrhea. Moreover, colonial stereotypes about Mexicans and their food, which took shape in the southwestern United States, have been transmitted around the world. But it makes no sense to exchange the Anglo mythology of chili queens and the Taco Bell dog for a Manichean nationalist ideology prescribing romanticized peasant food as an antidote to McDonaldization. Either conclusion would be far too neat. The history of tacos, like eating tacos, is a messy business.