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The Roasty, Smoky, Spicy, Past, Present, and Future of Southwestern Cuisine

by Maggie Hennessy — JULY 17, 2022 11:34PM



Queso asado with chiles at Rancho Lewis GATELY WILLIAMS

he Thousand Steps Trail in the Franklin Mountains of westernmost Texas— which loom over El Paso and Ciudad Juárez, Mexico—is mostly an ordinary ramble through rocky Chihuahuan desert scape and spiny ocotillos. But from the highest point on a clear, calm day there's one sight that trains your gaze away from these neighboring cities: a rust-brown border fence cleaving the two and snaking southwest as far as the eye can see.



(https://mtgad.com/www/delivery/ck.php?oaparams=2_bannerid=4745_zoneid=6_source=sourcevar_cb=17eea7aebe_oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fplateonline.com%2Fadvertisement%2F31293%2F32483%3FHardLead%3DFalse%26CompanyId%3D3216%26url%3Dhttps%3A%2F%2Fplateonline.com%2Fbe-inspired-alaska-halibut-chef-george-mendes-veranda).

tribal form you want, but they are perfectly glad to share each other's food," says **Gregory McNamee**, Tucson-based journalist, editor, University of Arizona researcher, and author of *Tortillas, Tiswin & T-Bones: A Food History of the Southwest* (University of New Mexico Press, 2017). "You can't build a wall high enough to keep tacos out."

It lingers in your mind's eye as you **T**descend into sunny El Paso, where the cultural boundaries separating Texans and Mexicans blur much like the intermingling of Spanish and English you hear crossing the street or in line for conchas and red pork tamales at 49-year-old **Gussie's Tamales & Bakery**. You taste this mestizo heritage in the scratch-made blue corn tortillas that form the base of inventive borderlands tacos at Elemi, which begin with purple maíz imported from Jocotitlán and Tlaxcala, Mexico, to mimic the tortillas Chef/Co-Owner **Emiliano Marentes** ate as a kid with family in Juárez and his native El Paso. Equally, you taste it in the supple flour tortillas that encase chopped steak burritos at 95-year-old **L&J Cafe**, by the old Concordia cemetery.

"People may separate themselves culturally, linguistically, religiously, politically—whatever



Maria Mazon PHOTO: MEREDITH AMADEE PHOTOGRAPHY

The whole of the American Southwest traces a similarly complex history of intermingling foodways due to its proximity to Mexico, seasonal and forced migration, and trade dating back to Indigenous people who've mindfully coaxed ingredients from this arid landscape for centuries. For our purposes, "the Southwest" encompasses Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona—a definition that, for McNamee, hinges on language. "The first that would've been heard would have been Indigenous languages, overlain by Spanish and then English," he says.

For much of the country, Southwestern cuisine means fajitas, chimichangas, and other queso-smothered Tex-Mex. This owes partly to a certain Californian named Glen Bell who opened Taco Bell in San Bernardino in 1962, kicking off "the great expansion of Southwestern cuisine throughout the United States and abroad," McNamee says. It's also optics; many can't see bounty in this harsh landscape.

Flowers and plants

"It's because we're the desert," says **Maria Mazon**, chef/owner of Sonoran taqueria **Boca Tacos y Tequila** in Tucson. "Besides the beautiful sunsets, the coyotes, the moon, and the quiet, what is there to eat? Flowers and plants."

Tex-Mex and Southwestern food share core ingredients like beans, corn, and chiles. And you'll, indeed, find hulking cowboy steaks and carne-packed burritos beyond the Texas border. But the Southwest's culinary foundation is plants. Regionally grown whole chiles and a love of fresh

nixtamalized corn yield a sneakily nuanced, spicy cuisine whose finished dishes don't necessarily tell the story of what went into them. But they sure as hell fill you up.



Queso asado with chiles at Rancho Lewis PHOTO: GATELY WILLIAMS

“It’s like food that’s quick assembly, but all the prep that goes into setting up a kitchen for quick assembly—that’s days and days, preparing all these different sauces, not to mention the two days it takes just to make tortillas,” says Chef **John Lewis**. Lewis grew up in El Paso and southern New Mexico and recently opened **Rancho Lewis** in Charleston, S.C., to spread the gospel of what he calls “the OG Mexican-American cuisine.”

We often hear of the Three Sisters of corn, squash, and beans—so named and planted together for their compatibility—as symbolic anchors of many Native tribes who settled this area. Yet Indigenous folks from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean were once familiar with some 2,500 different types of food plants, McNamee writes in *Tortillas, Tiswin & T-Bones*—a testament to the erosion of biodiversity and systemic erasure of Indigenous foodways by Spanish and Anglo settlers.

Native beginnings

The Hopi people in northeastern Arizona were the first masters of dry farming; the southernmost Hohokam who migrated to Arizona from Mexico developed sophisticated irrigation systems to sustain corn. The 19 Pueblo tribes of northern New Mexico—whose homeland once stretched into Arizona and Colorado—cultivated native plants through flood irrigation and seed preservation, and techniques like learning to plant dandelions to keep certain pests away.

“One of the most humbling experiences is knowing that when you’re eating Native food, you’re eating food from the past,” says Monique Fragua, vice president of commercial operations for the nonprofit **Indian Pueblo Cultural Center (IPCC)** in Albuquerque and member of the Jemez tribe. “Our grandparents taught us how to farm in the desert Southwest, to preserve seed and not waste any part of the crop.”



John Lewis PHOTO: GATELY WILLIAMS

The IPCC opened the **Indian Pueblo Kitchen** in the 1970s, a time of sweeping Native pridemovements in the United States. The IPK offers the sustenance that’s fed tight-knit Pueblo communities for generations with hospitality akin to traditional Feast Days, when tribes open their homes to feed neighbors, friends, and family. Fragua describes dishes that connect the pueblos—like sturdy green chile stew, red chile bone posole, and Pueblo oven bread, an enriched loaf with a crusty exterior and tender crumb that’s traditionally baked in outdoor ovens.

The menu also honors regional nuances, like Chef **Josh Aragon’s** northern heritage, via thick, ground elk chili with beans and the Navajo taco (which the Taos Pueblo might call a Tiwa taco), a comforting assemblage of Churro lamb, Pueblo beans, cheese, and red or green chile on frybread. Fragua acknowledges the controversy of the latter, for its colonial origins and health implications. Frybread—a flatbread fried in shortening or lard—originated among the Navajo (Diné) tribe as survival food when the U.S. government forcibly removed Indigenous people from their ancestral lands to remote reserves and rationed out processed foods and dry goods. In the generations since, it’s become a comforting symbol of togetherness for Indigenous communities.

“While we know stories of why it was created, how it was consumed, and how these rations or commodities were put onto pueblos, it’s hard to say something is bad when we eat it in our pueblos and continue to own it for our culture,” Fragua says. “And there’s a new wave of Native cooks and chefs trying to rewrite that history. For example, is there a way to cook it with wheat rather than unbleached white flour? Or maybe not cooked in lard, but olive oil. I don’t know that at IPK we address the controversy necessarily; we try to use it as an educational experience. Maybe we can’t solve it, but let’s start the dialogue.”



Steak fajitas at Rancho Lewis PHOTO: GATELY WILLIAMS

Mexican diaspora

Meanwhile, in Tucson, Mazon has work to do on the dialogue surrounding real Sonoran cuisine, the diaspora food of a Mexican population who migrated almost exclusively to Arizona. Sonorense cooking to Mazon—who spent her childhood in Sonora—means mesquite-grilled Sonoran beef (“better than Kobe!” she cries) piled into fresh corn tortillas, or caldo de queso sprinkled with dried chiltepin (what she calls the wild mother of all chiles). For many, it’s still the chimichanga, aka deep-fried burrito, which Tucson chain Charro’s (falsely, per McNamee) claims to have invented in the ‘20s. Or perhaps the Sonoran hot dog, wrapped in bacon, topped with pinto beans and onions, squiggled with Mexican crema, and nestled in a bolillo roll. Of course, that’s part of Mazon’s Tucson, too.

“It’s childhood; it’s memory,” she says. “It’s late-night eating after the bars, when you don’t care that you get stinky from the onions.”

At her bustling storefront, Mazon feels immense pressure to not just represent Sonorense cuisine, but to push it forward. She MacGyvers sauces like curry cilantro and orange oil, and even Thin Mint mole with actual Girl Scout cookies, ancho chile, epazote, and Mexican chocolate. She pairs classic chorizo and potato with cucumbers and a Thai-inspired sauce on a crispy tostada ([recipe](https://plateonline.com/recipes/asian-tostadas) (<https://plateonline.com/recipes/asian-tostadas>)). She rubs octopus tentacles in ancho and guajillo chile powders, cinnamon, butter, and lime, then grills and serves them with charred green onions, aïoli, and fresh tortillas.

The future of Southwestern cuisine

In that sense, the future of Southwestern cuisine is already here. It's in the pato al pastor at Elemi, where Marentes marinates duck in citrus and herbs for 24 hours, cooks it sous vide, then mesquite-grills it before nestling it into those sturdy yet supple blue corn tortillas. It's at **Ursula** in Brooklyn, where Albuquerque-born chef **Eric See** rewrites the myth of the “only for dessert” sopaipilla by filling these fried pastries with pinto beans, New Mexican chiles, and carne adovada before smothering them in more chile.



Red chile beef bone posole at Indian Pueblo Kitchen PHOTO: INDIAN PUEBLO CULTURAL CENTER

The future is the past, too—honoring the integrity of ingredients and those who long ago figured out how to cultivate and prepare them right. As Lewis traversed the borderlands a dozen-odd times with his chef de cuisine trying to determine what the cuisine really is, “we deduced that it’s not particularly fancy,” Lewis says. “There’s this homestyle, grandma-made essence to it that makes the best places the best.”

Aside from mastering large-scale prep and holding techniques that Lewis refuses to divulge, maintaining this homespun essence comes down to ingredients. That's why he hauls mesquite wood by the ton from El Paso to Charleston and routinely treks back to Hatch, N.M., not 40 miles from my home in Las Cruces, to source dried pinto beans and those inimitable, long green and red New Mexican chiles. For Lewis, there's nowhere to hide when he menus something like (real) chile con queso ([recipe \(https://plateonline.com/recipes/chile-con-queso\)](https://plateonline.com/recipes/chile-con-queso)) or smothered chiles rellenos— two dishes that forever imprinted on him as a kid on the border.

The peppers' tang and grassy heat sing as I pinch bites of soupy, savory chile con queso with flour tortillas at roadside biker bar **Chope's** in La Mesa, N.M., the inspiration for Rancho Lewis' own version. I revel in the chile's roasty savoriness, attacking a plate of rellenos at Lewis' beloved **Nellie's Cafe** in Las Cruces, where the sweet, roasted Big Jim chile variety are stuffed with asadero cheese, dredged in fluffy egg batter, and shallow-fried daily by 89-year-old **Nellie Hernandez** herself. As the sign on Nellie's dining room wall says, "A day without chile is a day without sunshine."

And what would this desert Southwest be without either?

Maggie Hennessy is a New Mexico-based freelance food writer.

COMMENTS

Share your thoughts,**Susie D**

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