Taco bell provides a striking vision of the future transformation of ethnic and national cuisines into corporate fast food. This process, dubbed “McDonaldization” by sociologist George Ritzer, entails technological rationalization to standardize food and make it more efficient. Or as company founder Glen Bell explained, “If you wanted a dozen [tacos]…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.” That something was the creation of the “taco shell,” a pre-fried tortilla that could be quickly stuffed with fillings and served to waiting customers. Yet there are problems with this interpretation of Yankee ingenuity transforming a Mexican peasant tradition. As connoisseurs of global street cuisine can readily attest, North American fast food is by no means fast. Street vendors in the least developed of countries can prepare elaborate dumplings, noodles, sandwiches, or tacos as quickly as any US chain restaurant can serve a non-descript 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 that the taco has existed unchanged since time immemorial—a dubious historical claim. In contemporary Mexico, the soft taco is simply a fresh maize tortilla wrapped around morsels of meat or beans. The tortilla has surely been used in this fashion since it was invented thousands of years ago. By contrast, the hard taco, a soft taco fried in pork fat, must be a comparatively recent invention, because Spanish conquistadors brought the pigs. Yet the puzzle remains of why an everyday food with deep pre-Hispanic roots is called by a Spanish name, in contrast to other Mexican dishes clearly derived from indigenous words. An examination of dictionaries, cookbooks, archives, and literary sources reveals that the word “taco” has a surprisingly recent provenance, entering regular usage only at the end of the nineteenth century in Mexico City. As cultural historians have shown, words literally shape social reality, and this new phenomenon that the taco signified was not the practice of wrapping a tortilla around morsels of food but rather the informal restaurants, called taquerías, where they were consumed.

In another essay I have described how the proletarian taco shop emerged as a gathering place for migrant workers from throughout Mexico, who shared their diverse regional specialties, conveniently wrapped up in tortillas, and thereby helped to form a national cuisine. Here I wish to follow the taco’s travels to the United States, where Mexican migrants had already begun to create a distinctive ethnic snack long before Taco Bell entered the scene. I begin by briefly summarizing the history of this food in Mexico to emphasize that the taco was itself a product of modernity rather than some folkloric dish transformed by corporate formulators. After describing the reinvention of the taco by migrants in early-twentieth-century Los Angeles, I examine how tacos gained a following among mainstream audiences, with particular attention to the geographical distribution of restaurants. From this evidence I conclude that the first taco franchises succeeded not by selling fast food per se but rather by marketing a form of exoticism that allowed nonethnics to sample Mexican cuisine without crossing lines of segregation in 1950s southern California.

Proto-Tacos

Before examining the taco’s migration northward, we must first locate its origins in Mexico, which is no easy task. Linguistic evidence of the edible taco is most notable for its absence. The Spanish word “taco,” like the English “tack,” is common to most Romantic and Germanic languages, although its origins remain unclear. The first known reference, from 1607, appeared in French and signified a plug.
used to hold the ball of an arquebus in place. 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 snack of food, and the specific Mexican version was not acknowledged until well into the twentieth century. Of course, European definitions must be used with caution in referring to a Mexican reality. Nevertheless, taco did not appear in early Mexican dictionaries either, most notably Melchor Ocampo’s vernacular volume, published in 1844 under the wry title “Idiotismos Hispano-Mexicanos.”

Nineteenth-century cookbooks provide no more help than dictionaries, which may come as no surprise given the elite preference for Spanish and French cuisine over indigenous dishes. The first and most influential cookbook published in the nineteenth century, El cocinero mexicano (The Mexican Chef, 1831), provided a long list of popular dishes including quesadillas, chalupas, enchiladas, chilaquiles, and envueltos. The envuelto (Spanish for “wrap,” appropriately) comes closest to what would now be called a taco, although it was something of a cross between a taco and an enchilada, with chile sauce poured over the fried tortilla. Most elaborate were the envueltos de Nana Rosa (Granny Rosa’s wraps), stuffed with picadillo (chopped meat) and garnished with “onion rings, little chiles, olives, almonds, raisins, pine nuts, and bits of candied fruit.”

Nineteenth-century costumbres (local color) literature provides further detail about Mexico’s rich tradition of street foods. The first national novel, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi’s El periquillo sarniento (The Mangy Parrot, 1816), mentioned a lunch cooked by Nana Rosa “consisting of envueltos, chicken stew, adobo (marinated meat), and pulque (fermented agave sap) flavored with prickly pears and pineapple.” In a footnote to the 1842 edition, the editor lovingly evoked the scene. “On the banks of the irrigation canal on the Paseo de la Viga, there was a little garden park where Nana Rosa, who lived to be nearly a hundred, attracted the people of Mexico…charging them stiffly for the good luncheon spreads she prepared; and even today, the envueltos de Nana Rosa still figure in the cookbooks.” Another formidable gourmet and man of letters, Guillermo Prieto, recalled plebeian restaurants at mid-century serving enchiladas, gorditas, and frijoles refritos, while the renowned geographer Antonio García Cubas compiled an exhaustive zoology of ambulant vendors. Yet none of these acute observers of Mexican popular culture recorded a gastronomical usage of taco.

Perhaps the first unequivocal reference to the Mexican taco appears in Manuel Payno’s 1891 novel, Los banditos de Río Frio (The Bandits of Rio Frio). During the festival of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the indigenous classes 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.” Although this culinary meaning of taco had no doubt been in common usage by the popular classes for some time, with Payno’s benediction, it quickly received official recognition in Feliz Ramos I. Duarte’s 1895 Diccionario de mejicanismos, which also attributed the geographical origin of the term to Mexico City.

Unfortunately, these literary sources do not indicate how this Spanish word, newly used for a generic snack, became associated in Mexico City with a particular form of rolled tortilla. Peasant women have long used such tortillas as a convenient package to send food to male relatives working in the field or elsewhere, even if they called it something other than a taco. Some speculation is necessary to make the precise connection, but one possibility lies in a peculiar eighteenth-century usage among the silver miners of Real del Monte, near Pachuca, Hidalgo, to refer to explosive charges of gunpowder wrapped in paper. While this particular variant does not seem to have been recorded in any dictionary, it derives from both the specific usage of a powder charge for a firearm and from the more general meaning of plug, since the silver miners prepared the blast by carving a hole in the rock before inserting the explosive “taco.” And with a good hot sauce, it is easy to see the similarity between a chicken taquito and a stick of dynamite.

We cannot know exactly when the miners might have brought their tacos to Mexico City, but nineteenth-century civil wars and economic turmoil struck the silver districts particularly hard, forcing many to migrate in search of work. 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 (see photograph on p. 27). These treats were made by frying tortillas briefly, stuffing them with a simple mixture, often just potatoes and salsa, and wrapping them in a basket to stay warm, hence an alternative name, tacos de canasta (“tacos from a basket”). Both chronicler Jesús Flores y Escalante and early archival sources confirm this connection with miners by pointing out that tacos sudados originally carried the sobriquet tacos de minero.

However appealing this lineage may be, it is by no means exclusive. The Mexican practice of wrapping bits of food in tortillas is far too common, and the word “taco” has far
too many meanings in Spanish, and perhaps indigenous languages as well, to allow for any definitive etymological origin. Heaven knows there are already enough culinary “just so” stories without adding another. At least this derivation avoids the usual fallacy of attributing a popular-sector food to an elite, male personage such as the Earl of Sandwich.

**National Tacos**

A brief survey of the emergence of the taco in Mexico shows the contingent nature and constant innovation that characterized this food. Informal taco shops offered a new social space for the lower classes at the end of the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship (1876–1911) and during the subsequent Revolution of 1910. Although street foods have long been popular in Mexico City, they acquired particular importance around the turn of the twentieth century with the arrival of large numbers of labor migrants attracted by incipient industrialization. The advent of revolutionary fighting, in turn, brought soldiers, soldaderas (camp followers), and refugees to the capital. As the colonial city grew into a modern metropolis, overcrowded tenements with inadequate kitchen facilities became a fact of life for the masses, who numbered nearly half a million by 1910. Taquerías, whether an actual restaurant with kitchen and tables or a poor woman standing on a street corner with a basket of tacos, offered a space for newcomers to assuage their nostalgia for the particular foods of their home towns. A critical mass of these shops, serving up countless distinct regional specialties in convenient and inexpensive mouthfuls, allowed the Mexican working classes to experience directly an incipient national cuisine without the intervention of elite cookbook authors. Culinary intellectuals quickly discovered this trend and sought to appropriate it for themselves, sanitizing the taco of its plebeian roots. Through the clash of these rival cooking traditions, the taco gradually acquired its modern forms—hard and soft, elite and popular—even as it spread throughout the country and became a truly national icon.

An archival sample of early taco shops, drawn from citations issued by municipal inspectors from 1918 to 1920, indicates the diversity of foods available in proletarian neighborhoods of Mexico City. Unfortunately, most were written up as anonymous taco and torta (sandwich) stands, but a few notations hint at the variety of regional dishes. For example, at least two shops specialized in pozole, a hominy stew typical of Guadalajara, Jalisco, and another restaurant called “La Jalisciense” also presumably offered dishes from this state, whether pozole, birria (goat stew), or something else. Plentiful seafood was likewise available to the working classes thanks to improved railroad links with the coast. Thus, diners had their choice of several oyster shops, two fried fish stands (one inexplicably called “El Torito,” the little bull), a place called “Pescadería Veracruz” (Veracruz Fish Restaurant) and another “Pesca de Alvarado” after the Veracruz port town famed for its fresh seafood and sharptalking women. We can only wonder what other culinary delights might have been recorded if the municipal government had employed ethnographers instead of tax collectors.

Elite culinary intellectuals quickly imitated this popular innovation, but the upscale tacos they produced were carefully distinguished from the foods of the street. Newspapers, with their daily deadlines and competitive demand for novelty, may have been the first to print recipes for tacos. Filomeno Mata, editor of the *El Diario del Hogar* (*The Daily of the Home*) and pioneer of the women’s section in Mexico, published a version of *tacos de crema* (cream tacos) on June 2, 1908. This recipe began with directions for making French-style crêpes, perhaps the first use of a now-common tactic for gentrifying plebeian foods, for example, *crepas de cuitlacoche* (crêpes with corn smut doused in béchamel sauce). The author continued: “stuff them with pastry cream or some dry conserves and roll like a taco. In the same fashion make all of the tacos that you like; arrange on a platter in the form of a pyramid, cover with meringue and adorn with strawberries, orange blossoms, and violets.” Such an elaborate concoction clearly invoked the latest street foods, but transformed them into socially acceptable dishes through the use of European ingredients and cooking techniques as well as perishable and expensive fruits and edible flowers. More recognizable versions of tacos followed in succeeding decades, but the quality of ingredients helped to maintain social distinctions. By the 1960s, restaurants in affluent neighborhoods served *tacos al carbon* (grilled tacos) using expensive cuts of meat such as *bifstek* (beefsteak) and *chuletas* (pork chops).

The tacos of the working classes likewise continued to evolve, using whatever castoff bits of meat that cooks could afford. Cookbook author Josefina Velázquez de León traveled throughout Mexico at mid-century collecting such humble dishes as San Luis Potosí tacos made with pork trotters and potato, while also helping to diffuse such Mexico City classics as *taquitos de crema*, tortillas rolled around strips of green chile, deep fried, and topped with a spoonful of thick cream and crumbled fresh cheese. Meanwhile, Ana María Hernández’s pioneering home economics manual included recipes for *barbacoa* and *carnitas* (barbecued haunches and random chopped meat, both from an unspecified animal),
brains (preferably sheep), and maguey worms (now an expensive delicacy, but considered beyond the pale in the 1930s). Hernández also explained that tacos should be fried a deep golden color or left very smooth, depending on whether they were hard or soft; both were served with a lettuce salad and salsa.21 Shredded lettuce eventually became the usual accompaniment of tacos dorados (“golden” fried), while soft tacos in contemporary Mexico are generally garnished with chopped onions and cilantro.

Although cookbooks serve as important historical records, the spread of proletarian taco culture took place quite independently of these texts as workers traversed the country, adopting recipes from their new neighbors. Moreover, these migrants included many foreigners such as the Lebanese who settled in Puebla in the 1920s. Their gyros, cooked on a rotating vertical spit and served with pita bread or its local counterpart, a wheat tortilla, came to be known as tacos árabes. Mexicans borrowed the technique, using the more abundant pork, flavored with a slice of pineapple, and eaten with corn tortillas. This new innovation, called tacos al pastor (shepherd’s tacos), quickly spread throughout the country and beyond.22 The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed not only widespread internal movement, but also the beginnings of large-scale Mexican migration to the United States, and these travelers carried their new taste for tacos across the border.

Migrant Tacos

Foods provide an important example of “ethnic and racial borderlands,” as historian Albert Camarillo has characterized the points of contact in pluralistic societies.23 They police the boundaries between groups through dietary laws and stereotypes and simultaneously offer an inviting port of entry for those who wish to taste the unfamiliar. These culinary borderlands become fertile sites of innovation, as cooks borrow recipes and ingredients from their neighbors, transforming them to produce a constant stream of “fusion” cuisine.24 Yet they also express ethnic and racial conflicts in a visceral fashion, when the vague threat of an outsider suddenly assumes the physical force of food poisoning. These ambivalent culinary encounters have been played out repeatedly in California as alternating waves of migrants came west from the United States and north from Mexico.

Newcomers of the nineteenth century were primarily Anglos, drawn by the gold rush and the prospect of easy land. Negative stereotypes predominated in the first decades after the US invasion of 1846, as Mexican residents, called Californios, were seen as lazy, dirty, and devious,
unfit for the land that they possessed and that Anglos coveted. Tamales provided an obvious culinary metaphor, both potentially unsanitary and dangerously hot to the taste of New England merchants and settlers. Yet palates adjusted to chile peppers, and the growing predominance of Anglos in California helped fears of Mexicans to recede. Sensationalist charges of food poisoning remained a staple of mass-market newspapers, but that did not stop all sectors of society from buying tamales from street vendors. These pushcarts were ethnic borderlands in more ways than one, as Anglos, African Americans, and even Japanese began selling tamales alongside Mexicans. The pre-Hispanic pastry eventually blended into the “fantasy heritage” of pastoral life in the Southwest, which as Carey McWilliams pointed out, provided a way of incorporating Spanish colonialism into the national history while subordinating the Mexican population. Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1884 novel, Ramona, popularized this romantic vision of Old California, which Anglos duly reenacted in tamalada picnics and luncheons.

In the early twentieth century, when the old Californios had been reduced to an insignificant underclass, a new influx of Mexicans began to arrive in response to industrialization and revolution. These migrants included a few wealthy Porfrian exiles, but most were ordinary folk in search of jobs in agriculture, industry, and railroads, which Los Angeles provided in abundance. Equally important, the city’s Mexican population of perhaps 100,000 by 1930 offered the social comforts of an established ethnic community, including familiar foods. In migrating across the border, tacos seem to have lost some of their lower-class stigma. At El Veracruzano, a restaurant owned by the Merino brothers, an order of meat, chicken, or brain tacos cost fifty cents, which was more expensive than a plate of chicken with mole or pipián (chile or pumpkin seed sauces), a rib steak, or a shrimp salad. Early descriptions from English-language cookbooks basically resembled Mexico City tacos. In 1914, Bertha Haffner-Ginger, a domestic columnist for the Los Angeles Times, included a recipe for tacos dorados as an afterthought to some rather impractical instructions for making tortillas at home. In 1929, Ramona’s Spanish-Mexican Cookery, by home economist Pauline Wiley Kleeman, juxtaposed plebeian tacos of pork snout, ears, and jowls with more upscale cream cheese tacos.

These resemblances notwithstanding, tacos were already evolving in a distinctive fashion north of the border. Vicki Ruiz and other historians have uncovered the innovative strategies that Mexican American women used to mediate the ethnic borderlands between Mexican family traditions and US citizenship and consumer culture. The tacos these women produced were soon as distinctive as their identity. Although it is difficult to generalize about such a diverse population, an ethnographic study directed in the mid-1920s by anthropologist Manuel Gamio has left a wealth of information about the life of migrants. In particular, most informants felt that they could reproduce a Mexican diet with foods available in the Southwest. Hasia Diner’s study of European migrants around the turn of the century suggests that newcomers ate far more abundantly in the United States than they could in the homeland. Large numbers of Mexicans would doubtless have agreed, especially those who fled the ravages of revolutionary fighting. Moreover, many adapted a North American diet or sampled different ethnic foods—Italian, Chinese, Mexican, or Anglo—as the mood took them. One assimilated youth, Carlos B. Aguilar, complained that he got sick whenever he visited his parents and they cooked Mexican. Yet most seem to have retained their basic dietary preferences, and many cited the high cost of living in the United States compared with Mexico.

Important dietary changes resulted from the late-nineteenth-century industrial revolution in food, but cultural preferences mediated reactions to mass-produced foods. We might suppose that abundant meat made possible by industrial slaughter and refrigerated transport constituted a significant benefit of migration. In fact, Mexicans often complained about the poor quality of meat in the United States and were nostalgic for the taste of freshly slaughtered meat from a local abattoir. By contrast, many migrants added eggs and dairy products to their diet, including fresh milk and local cheddar cheese. Another surprise for newcomers from central Mexico was the prevalence of wheat flour tortillas, a regional variant common only in the north. Industrial flour production in the United States, combined with a scarcity of corn mills, made flour tortillas cheaper than corn, a reversal of prices in Mexico. One other notable change resulting from industrialization was the increased availability of produce, whether fresh iceberg lettuce or canned green chiles. Ramón Fernández explained that local food “has no taste; the only thing I like of the Americans are the salads, those they know how to prepare well.” José Rocha acquired the nickname “panza verde” (green belly) because he ate so many vegetables. Thus, many of the distinctive elements of the Mexican American taco, including cheddar cheese, shredded lettuce, flour tortillas, and anonymous ground beef rather than distinctive pork products, were adaptations to foods available in the United States.

Other changes may have resulted from the interactions of regional Mexican cuisines; indeed, the ethnic borderlands
extended to new migrants from the central part of the country who came in contact with Mexican American traditions of _norteño_ (northern) origin. Little evidence remains of such culinary exchange in Los Angeles, but New Mexico provides a revealing point of comparison. The Spanish first settled Santa Fe in 1598, and with fewer Anglo interlopers, the local elite were better able to maintain their wealth and culture. Hispanic doyenne and home economist Fabiola Cabeza de Vaca Gilbert published a cookbook in 1949 revealing both the influx of new migrants and the process of culinary innovation. “Tacos are definitely a Mexican importation,” she observed, “but the recipe given below is a New Mexico adaptation.” Her basic formula of meat and potatoes had been published a decade earlier in Albuquerque by Margarita C. de Vaca, but the New Mexico College of Agriculture graduate suggested a novel twist, which became almost universal north of the border, pre-frying the tortillas into the characteristic “U” shape of a taco shell before adding the filling.35

Mexican American inventors likewise began to experiment with industrializing their own foods. In 1949, Joseph Pompa of Glendale, Arizona, filed an application with the United States Patent Office explaining that “heretofore tortillas were fried by hand in deep fat and held in position by hand as they hardened and turned crisp until they assumed the folded position desired.” Pompa planned to increase the efficiency of taco production by creating a deep fry basket with horizontal rows of tortilla holders and a parallel frame that could be folded down to hold them in place under the oil. However, two years earlier New York restaurateur Juvecnio Maldonado had proposed a similar “form for frying tortillas to make fried tacos.” The invention consisted of vertically stacked tortilla holders in a metal frame that could be immersed in oil then unfolded to release the fried tortillas (see illustration on p. 33). References cited in the applications indicate that both drew inspiration from other ethnic food technology including donut fryers and sausage makers. Maldonado, who received his patent in 1950, proudly explained that his invention restored “peace after open mutiny among his own cooks, who dreaded handling the fried taco orders.”36

As the example of Maldonado’s New York restaurant indicates, tacos soon gained a following beyond the ethnic community. This snack food presented mid-century diners a new and seemingly more authentic version of Mexican food, replacing chili con carne and tamales, whose novelty and appeal had been eroded by fifty years of canned merchandise. Moreover, the fried taco shell offered newcomers a relatively easy introduction to that peculiarly Mexican performance of eating with a tortilla. One guidebook explained: “The Mexican’s dexterity with the tortilla is as amusing to watch as the Italian’s business-like disposal of spaghetti and the chop sticks of the Oriental.”37 Nevertheless, ethnic restaurateurs seeking to build a mainstream clientele in the postwar era found themselves on the wrong side of sharpening lines of segregation.

**Segregated Tacos**

Dramatic new migrations reconfigured the ethnic and racial borderlands in mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles. Midwesterners came in great numbers, attracted by a combination of industrial jobs, favorable climate, and the enduring romance of the Spanish fantasy heritage. Southerners likewise contributed to the city’s massive growth, whether they were African Americans fleeing Jim Crow discrimination or “Okies” and “Arkies” thrown off the land by the Great Depression. Mexican numbers declined briefly in the 1930s, when officials expelled unwanted workers, including many who held US citizenship, but greater numbers returned to find jobs in the wartime economy, either informally or through the “bracero” guest-worker program, founded in 1942. Los Angeles acquired its sprawling suburban geography and combative racial politics in the postwar era, as whites, blacks, and Mexicans interacted within these social spaces. Although largely unknown to migrants from the east, tacos quickly caught on across the social spectrum. Taquerías might well have become an open borderland, that is, a space that encouraged cross-ethnic proletarian alliances, as they had in Mexico City. Instead, competition between Mexican American and nonethnic restaurateurs to market the taco closed off such opportunities and reinforced emerging patterns of segregation.

The modern taco took shape at precisely the moment when San Bernardino, California, restaurateurs Richard and Maurice McDonald were transforming their carhop from a teenage hangout into the prototype of the fast-food industry. The origin of the McDonald’s system for selling standardized, low-cost food in large quantities is a well-known story. They started with the menu, eliminating all but a handful of items, hamburgers, fries, and shakes, which could be eaten without utensils. Next, they redesigned the kitchen to produce these items efficiently and installed heat...
FORM FOR FRYING TORTILLAS TO MAKE FRIED TACOS

Filed July 21, 1947
lamps to keep the burgers warm so they could be made ahead of time. A standardized garnish of catsup, onions, and two slices of pickle eliminated the inconvenience of special orders, while the use of disposable paper bags, wrappings, and cups allowed further economies. Lines formed out the door when the McDonald brothers reopened the restaurant in 1948, selling hamburgers for just fifteen cents, or half their former price. Ray Kroc purchased the franchise rights in 1954, and the fast food empire was born.38

Glen Bell, in asserting his claim as the inventor of the fast food taco, drew explicit connections with this modern-day creation myth. In 1948, he opened a hamburger and hotdog stand in a Mexican neighborhood of San Bernardino, across the tracks from McDonald’s original restaurant. Rather than compete directly, he sought to apply their industrial techniques to a new market niche, the taco stand. Bell devised a taco fryer in 1951—unaware that Maldonado had beaten him to the patent office—and modified his chili-dog sauce to use as salsa. He then began selling tacos and orders of refried beans for nineteen cents each. Following a divorce, he opened two new restaurants, called Taco Tia, in the western suburbs of Barstow and Redlands. He sold those stores to a partner in 1957 and
went into business with Los Angeles Rams football players Charley Toogood and Harland Svare, who had sampled Bell’s tacos near their Redlands training camp. From 1957 to 1961, they opened El Taco restaurants in downtown Los Angeles and Hollywood, northeast in Pasadena and Monrovia, and on the bay in San Pedro, Long Beach, and Wilmington. Finally, with the 1962 opening of the first Taco Bell in Downey, he established the chain that came to dominate the Mexican fast food market.79

Although Bell trumpeted his technological innovations, geographers have recently emphasized the importance of spatial analysis in examining the development of fast food.80 To follow the spread of taco restaurants through Los Angeles County from the 1940s to the 1960s, it may be helpful to begin with a map of Mexican-owned restaurants (see illustration on p. 34). The dots represent establishments under Spanish surnames in the 1941 city directory and correspond to patterns of Mexican residence at this time. Large numbers of Mexicans lived in the downtown area, including Sonoratown, as Anglos dubbed the site of the original founding of Los Angeles in 1781. This district had been restored about 1930 as the tourist center Olvera Street and had no fewer than ten Mexican restaurants, including the city’s most famous, La Golondrina (swallow). Others were located across the river in Boyle Heights, and a string of eateries ran down Brooklyn Avenue (now East César E. Chávez Avenue) in Belvedere. Yet there were surprisingly few such places given East Los Angeles’s future as the center of the second largest Mexican community in the world. George Sánchez has noted that Mexicans lived in almost all parts of the city on the eve of the Second World War, and their restaurants were scattered from West Hollywood to the largely Jewish West Side and African American neighborhoods of Southeast Los Angeles.81

Wartime racial tensions such as the Zoot Suit Riots, in which servicemen clashed with Mexican youth, accelerated a process of resegregation in Los Angeles.82 Taking advantage of the housing boom of the 1950s, Anglos abandoned the integrated neighborhoods of downtown and East Los Angeles for distant suburbs around the periphery of the city, ranging from the San Fernando Valley and Whittier in the north to Lakewood and Orange County to the south. The city’s minority populations grew even more rapidly during this period, and African American and Mexican enclaves likewise appeared in suburbs from Pasadena to Long Beach. Yet despite a 1948 Supreme Court ruling against restrictive covenants, zoning laws and homeowners’ associations helped ensure that these neighborhoods remained separate, creating a pattern that historian Philip Ethington has described as “segregated diversity,” and which persists in present-day gated communities.83

The concept of segregated diversity can be useful for analyzing not just housing but other forms of social interaction such as dining. The rise of the taco shop in 1950s Los Angeles exemplified this process, as nonethnics were able to satisfy their tastes for Mexican cuisine or sample these dishes for the first time without venturing into segregated ethnic communities. A map of restaurants listed in the Los Angeles Yellow Pages with the word “taco” in their names shows a very different spatial distribution (indicated by triangles in the illustration on p. 34) from 1940. The striking absence of such shops in East Los Angeles—just two out of fifty establishments—during this later period suggests that Mexican restaurateurs avoided the word “taco” when seeking to attract customers within the ethnic community. While some small restaurants may not appear for lack of telephone service, only a few from the sample such as Tacos de Oro (golden tacos) made proper use of the Spanish language. El Taquitos, although grammatically questionable, clearly appealed to Mexican migrants with a specialty of “tortas estilo la Capital” (Mexico City-style tortas) and may also have had considerable crossover business from students at the neighboring campus of the University of Southern California.

The most significant geographic shift in the two decades around mid-century came from the expansion of taco shops north into the white suburbs of Glendale, Pasadena, and the San Fernando Valley, and south into the African American community of Watts. Care must be taken in interpreting this map without exaggerating the degree of racial separation in Los Angeles during the 1950s. Watts, in particular, had a substantial minority of Mexicans living among African Americans. Nevertheless, using nhgis technology to correlate these taco shops with tract-level racial profiles from the 1960 census reveals a striking degree of segregation. Of the fifty restaurants, twenty-seven were in majority white neighborhoods, twelve in majority black neighborhoods, and eight in majority Mexican neighborhoods. Only a third of the restaurants operated in even the broadest definition of a “racial borderland,” a neighborhood in which two or more groups each constituted a minimum of 20 percent of the population. These tended to be in the near north or south, areas such as Lincoln Heights or Watts, or in the business district downtown, where new taco shops opened alongside or in place of existing Mexican restaurants, which had a long tradition of serving a mixed-ethnic clientele.84

Moreover, the process of assimilating tacos should not be oversimplified to the industrial logic of McDonaldization.
Many taco shops doubtless had Mexicans in the kitchen preparing the same foods they served at home. Bill’s Taco House employed African-American hostesses Ann Hilliard, Ozella Millner, and Willie Mae Stinson to greet their Watts clientele, even though Hank Silva may have overseen the kitchen.45 Other culinary border crossings may have resulted from the local particularities of markets and marriages. Lalo’s Tacos of El Sereno, for example, specialized in pastrami tacos and burritos, a kosher alternative to the usual pork carnitas and chorizo. Lalo’s personal story—whether a Jewish-Mexican mixed marriage or a restaurateur seeking to expand his clientele in this multiethnic neighborhood—may be lost to history. Nevertheless, an offbeat Los Angeles institution called the Kosher Burrito, founded in 1946 by a Jewish man who married a Sonoran woman, still exists on the corner of First and Main, although under new management.46

These caveats notwithstanding, the taco clearly demonstrates a culinary example of segregated diversity. Anglicized names, appealing to customers who could not speak Spanish, provide one indication of the taco’s growing distance from its ethnic origins. Perhaps the first such restaurant, called simply the Taco House, had opened already in 1946 on Broadway downtown. This restaurant inspired a variety of imitators, including Ernie’s Taco House, “specializing in Mexican food orders to go,” which had branch outlets in North Hollywood, Glendale, and on Broadway north of downtown by 1953. Minor variations on the Taco House theme included Alice’s Taco Terrace, Bert’s Taco Junction, and Frank’s Taco Inn. More creative names, Taco Kid and Taco Th’ Town, arose from the African American neighborhood of Watts.47

The most detailed account of this process of assimilation can be found in Glen Bell’s authorized biography, Taco Titan. Having grown up in a family devoted to Ramona, Bell marketed his restaurants on the fantasy heritage, carefully sanitized for Anglo sensibilities. When a consultant suggested the name, “La Tapatia,” he changed it to a nonsensical Spanish phrase “Taco Tia” (Snack Aunt) in deference to English-speaking customers. Each new restaurant celebrated its grand opening with an ethnic amalgam of Mexican mariachi bands and straw sombreros juxtaposed against dancing women wearing Spanish castanets. With the founding of Taco Bell, he elaborated this Mexican theme park image using faux adobe walls, a mission-style bell tower, and an elaborate courtyard fountain, later discarded. This strategy worked well for Anglo customers in Southern California, but when the company expanded into more established Mexican markets such as El Paso, Texas, the modified chili-dog sauce had few takers. To satisfy more knowledgeable customers, the franchisees began shopping across the border in Ciudad Juárez. Yet such authenticity has been the exception for the chain, and not until 1997 did executives begin a major marketing campaign directed at Hispanic consumers. More often, the company has alienated the ethnic community with advertisements such as the talking Chihuahua.48

The mass marketing of packaged Mexican foods in grocery stores followed a similar pattern of nonethnic corporations dominating the industry. Although Juvencio Maldonado did a good business selling take-out taco shells from his restaurant near Times Square in New York, Anglo firms such as Patio Foods and Old El Paso brought the taco shell to a national market in the 1960s. Historian Donna Gabaccia has attributed the predominance of outsiders in marketing ethnic foods to the longstanding hostility toward ethnics of US corporations and to their skill at adapting foods to mainstream tastes.49 Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the importance of segregation, not only in determining the success or failure of individual restaurants, but also in shaping the social hierarchies that place continental cuisine above Mexican taco shops or Chinese take-out.

**Malinche’s Tacos**

Taco Bell has evolved so far from the contemporary Mexican taco that it seems hard to believe that the two share such a recent common ancestor, but in fact they developed through a form of parallel evolution, being invented and reinvented almost simultaneously in Mexico City and Southern California. The story of the modernization of Mexican food is as much about the movement of people as about technological change. This is not to deny the importance of McDonaldization, the logic of industrial efficiency, in shaping the corporate taco. An anonymous employee recently explained: “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.”50 Nevertheless, as this essay has shown, ethnic cooks created virtually all aspects of the Mexican American taco except the central commissary. Corporate hagiography notwithstanding, Glen Bell did not make a better or faster taco; he just packaged it for a non-ethnic clientele.

The history of the Mexican American taco also helps to explain the seemingly paradoxical reception of Taco Bell within the ethnic community. Although the corporation has largely ignored, if not outright offended Mexicans,
there are nevertheless Taco Bells operating profitably on Whittier Boulevard in the heart of East L.A. This does not mean condemning the Chicanas who eat there as traitorous Malinches, after the indigenous woman who facilitated the Spanish conquest and became Cortés’s mistress. Instead, we should recognize—and seek to transform—the structures of modern life that make fast food appealing to harried working families.

This reality prompts a final conclusion about the need to place food history within a broad social context. Too often culinary historians become so infatuated with elite texts that we lose sight of the labor performed by anonymous cooks—slave women, Mexican migrants, or just overworked housewives—who provide the meals that bind families and societies together. Food history offers a tremendous opportunity for uniting the academy and the educated public, but this entails a responsibility to write meaningful and democratic narratives that foreground the centrality of kitchen labor in producing gastronomic delights, including even the humble Mexican American taco.

NOTES


3. Compare tamales, from the Nahua tamaalli, pozole (hominy stew) from pozolli, or mole sauce, from molfi.


9. El Cocinero Mexicano o colección de los mejores recetas para guiar al estilo americano y de las más selectas según el método de las cocineras Españolas, Italianas Francesa e Inglesa, 5 vols. (Mexico City: Imprenta de Galvan a cargo de Mariano Arevalo, 1821), 13:78–88, quote 85. Tacos were likewise absent from late-nineteenth-century volumes, even *La cocina poblana y el libro de las familias*, 2 vols. (Puebla: N. Bassols, 1881), assembled by the intrepid Catalan gourment, Narciso Bassols, who was no stranger to street-corner kitchens.


16. For example, Hector Manuel Romero has suggested a Nahuatl derivation from the word itacate—sort of a doggie bag. See his *Vocabulario gastronómico mexicano* (Mexico City: Coordinación General de Abasto y Distribución del Distrito Federal, 1991), 58.


26. See *Los Angeles Times*, 1 December 1899, 4 November 1904, 26 February 1907, 7 April 1907.


30. Her familiarity with these different traditions may owe as much to two decades editing a women’s column in the Mexico City daily, *El Universal*, as to the foods served in Los Angeles. See Pauline Wiley-Kleeeman, *Ramona’s Spanish-Mexican
40. Daniel D. Arreola, Tejano South Texas: A Mexican American Cultural Province (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); David Bell, Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat (New York: Routledge, 1997).
42. These riots have been interpreted as an attempt by Mexican youth to defend their community against incursions by white servicemen. See Eduardo Obregón Paíin, Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
44. I am deeply grateful to David Van Riper of the Minnesota Population Center for compiling this data from xinhis files of the 1960 census. Spanish surnames were used as a proxy for Mexican population, and Anglo population was calculated by subtracting Spanish surnames from total white population. As a result, the predominance of taco shops in white neighborhoods may be even greater, but on the other hand, segregation may be somewhat overstated by using 1960 data. Unfortunately, tract-level Hispanic population is not available for Los Angeles in 1950.
45. The hostesses featured prominently in advertisements in the African-American newspaper, the Los Angeles Sentinel, July 7, 14, August 4, 18, 1960.
46. Interview with the manager of Kosher Burrito, Los Angeles, January 31, 2001.
49. Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 149–174.