# A GLOBAL HISTORY OF MEXICAN FOOD

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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



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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]