





# The Art of Texas Mexican Cooking

The point of  
culinary art  
is not that  
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but *how*  
we survive.

*by*

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# THE ART OF COOKING

has the ability to transcend our everyday limits and lift our horizons beyond just feeding. In my own Indigenous Texas Mexican American community, it has sustained us through suffering.

Our Texas Mexican culinary art is born of want and dispossession. Colonization killed 90 percent of our Indigenous ancestors—a horrible truth, and yet today we are still cooking. How has the art of cooking worked to sustain our memory, fashion identity, and strengthen community?

I define the art of cooking as the act of preparing food in a technically proficient, tantalizing way, so that it has significant impact on individuals and relationships within a community. As it functions, it evokes memory, forms identity, and impacts community. Anthropologist Alfred Gell described art in terms of its power to advance social relations. Artistic activity is a type of agency that “is collective, ancestral, and essentially political in tone,” Gell wrote. That type of powerful agency is at work every day in our restaurant and home kitchens.

In my kitchen in Houston, Texas, my cooking is shaped by a continually growing awareness of my Indigenous roots, coupled with an awareness that I’m cooking in my ancestral lands. My ancestors were the first people to step on Texas soil over 15,000 years ago, and they cooked with fire. When I boil water for a stew, I feel, I know: That technique of boiling has produced delicious family meals in Texas for over 750 generations. When, on my grill, the mesquite smoke wafts over Texas Gulf shrimp on a Sunday evening under the big Texas sky, I think of how my Native American

ancestors enjoyed the same aroma and employed the same technique.

There’s a saying that I learned from my mom that I keep as a guiding compass in my cooking: “Las tortillas no se cuentan.” It translates to English as “Don’t count the tortillas.” I used it as the title of my second book.

In the book, I tell a childhood story. Six years old, I was crouched at the table, watching my mom make tortillas by hand, enjoying the aroma and rhythm of it all. As the pile grew taller, I wondered how many she’d made. I reached over and—practicing the arithmetic I was learning at school—began adding them up. She stopped me. “Las tortillas no se cuentan.” *Don’t count the tortillas.*

Over the years, I’ve remembered her voice, her inflection, that stack of corn tortillas, and I’ve learned the many meanings of that *dicho*. Was she telling me that food is not a commodity? That food is sacred? That I should not be cavalier when approaching food, because it is a vehicle for human interactions? Yes: all of these meanings, and more.

Her words have guided me toward the understanding that cooking is more than mere mechanics and feeding. Cooking is about elemental connectedness and generosity. It is technical and creative, with the power to captivate. It is art.

Cooking is memory. It's a way that we remember our family and community traditions. How our ancestors cooked shows how they dealt with their environment, how they cared for their sources of food. This implies a value system for making choices.

Cooking is also about identity. When we cook, we narrate who we are. Styles of cooking have origins in places and moments that we've lived. Over time, they shape who we are.

Finally, cooking is about community. It brings people together. Seen in its cultural context not just of survival but of hospitality, cooking nourishes community and can define its boundaries.



## FOOD AS MEMORY

One of my earliest memories is about landscape and an avocado taco.

I now live in Houston, Texas, but I was born in

San Antonio. In addition to our home in San Antonio, my family owned land in a town named Nava, in the Mexican state of Coahuila, just twenty-five miles south of the Rio Grande. I remember riding in the back of a pickup truck for the three-hour ride between my two hometowns, a journey that took me from one country to another but held me in a single landscape.

One breezy evening in Nava, we were relaxing outdoors, and my uncle served us freshly made heirloom-corn tortillas. The tortillas were hot off the griddle, and inside each one he had tucked a slice of avocado that he had just picked from the tree that shaded us, topping it with just a tiny sprinkle of salt. Taking a bite, I was walloped by the exquisite flavor. To this day, that iconic Mexican flavor combination is a poignant memory of embodied pleasure.

Weeks after we drove back to San Antonio, my mom made a fresh corn tortilla and, while it was still steaming, laid upon it two thin slices of avocado sprinkled with a little salt. I started eating it, and it was pure memory. My palate, my body, had the realization that it was the same



taco I ate under the avocado tree in Nava. I felt at home, with an identity that easily connected to my extended family in Texas, USA, and also in Coahuila, Mexico. Food fosters human interactions and creates memories and connections that can endure a lifetime. The avocado taco, to this day, holds those memories.

I realize now that to understand what anthropologists call commensality, the act of human beings eating together, it is necessary to take off my nationalistic eyeglasses. When I do so, and look at the border, the Rio Grande, the country to the north, and the country to the south, they become landscape. I can appreciate the weather, the rivers, the soil, and the earth formations. Bodies of water weave forcefully or meander through the terrain. Birds fly back and forth based on where the berries are and where the weather calls them, and they never stop at any immigration checkpoint.

For over 15,000 years, my ancestors communicated and traveled from places in what is now south Texas to places in what is now northeastern Mexico, exchanging cooking techniques, ingredients,

stories, and recipes. My family's food, cooked in San Antonio, Houston, and other Texas cities, did not come from across the border. It is rooted in the landscape, with a history that dates back to the Texas First Peoples: the Karankawa, the Tonkawa, and hundreds of others, including my ancestors, the Coahuiltecos.

Then I pick up my eyeglasses of nationalism and put them back on. Geopolitical borders are important, to be respected. But now I've added landscape and movement to my understanding of place, food, and people.

As humans travel the globe, food also travels. Its flavor changes, and so does its meaning. Today every cuisine is, in some way, cosmopolitan. Goats, which were first domesticated in what is now Iran, are raised and served in Monterey, Mexico, and claimed as their own. The hot chile peppers of Indian and Thai cuisines arrived as war loot from the conquest of Mexico. African watermelon is now an iconic ingredient of Texas Mexican cuisine.

Chefs everywhere, when faced with new ingredients, relish the opportunity to play and to



discover new flavor possibilities. They sometimes copy and often share techniques. When chefs pursue their artistic vocations in this way, using new ingredients, the dishes—and the future—become more beautiful.

But sharing and adaptation can also cause real harm, so chefs need discernment. Native Texas Mexican cuisine is the *comida casera*, the home-style cooking of Texas Mexican American families, with iconic dishes like cactus salads, mesquite-flour breads, and pan-roasted, oil-free pinto beans. In some instances, it has been appropriated by commercial cultural poachers who in the process hurt both the cuisine and the community that created it.

I use the term “cultural poachers” to describe people who pretend to represent the best of a cuisine but cannot ever do so because their actions divorce the cuisine from its culture. Culinary cultural appropriation can escalate from harmful to sinister when it hides behind the pretense of culinary auteurism, the same word that film directors use for their role as authors (auteurs) in creating films.

What I mean by auteurism is the cook’s rightful artistic exploration and expression. It should be championed. But that is far different from poaching. How to tell the difference? I try to discern voice, agency, and money.

Does the entry into another culture’s cuisine diminish or silence the voice of the original creators of that tradition? One example is how we understand and use chile peppers in cooking. Poachers of Mexican cuisine have defined chiles according to the amount of capsaicin in the seeds and membranes. The Scoville scale assigns a number to each type of chile, based on heat, so one can select properly the type of chile needed for a recipe. But that ignores the real way that chiles work in the cuisine.

The original voices of Mexican cooking will explain that chiles are used for taste, color, aroma, and texture. One example is the Texas Mexican enchilada, where we cut open the chiles to remove all the seeds and membranes, which is where the mouth-burning capsaicin resides. Heat is the lesser flavor concern. So, when poachers promote heat as the authentic character of Mexican food and erase the flavor qualities of chiles, not only the original voices but the cuisine itself is diminished.

I also look at agency. As opposed to collaboration, poaching into another’s cuisine minimizes,

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even erases, agency, which is the artistic ability to create flavors and dishes. Indigenous Texas Mexican women are the agents who created the stew we now call “chili.” But the credit is most often given to Texas cowboys, with stories and legends that aggrandize them—erasing the agency of Indigenous women.

And finally, I follow the money. Beginning with the arrival of Spaniards in 1528, native peoples were violently dispossessed of our Texas lands, and our markets of trade and travel were decimated. The economies of Indigenous Mexican American communities were destroyed, deprived of capital—and it is working capital that underpins the restaurant industry.

Cultural poachers who do have access to capital grab the best of Texas Mexican dishes and turn them into businesses that quickly overtake the traditional, small, family-owned Mexican restaurants, who suffer the vestiges of historical capital deprivation. When taking another culture’s recipes and overtaking their market, food poachers cause economic harm. In this way, competitive market advantage replaces native dishes with high-salt, high-fat, and high-sugar imitations and thus destroys a community’s culinary art.

Cultural poachers need to get beyond their “auteur” argument that chefs have the right to artistic freedom and therefore can act without constraint, any way they wish. That, alone, is not

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an artistic vision. There is another, overriding value and vision that all artists must face: Can you have beauty without justice?

Every dish has a past. When we cook, we reach into history to find meaning. Nutrition is only one dimension. The guiding principle of artful cooking is to create joyfully and skillfully a meal that advances and strengthens human relations.

With each meal, the good cook narrates to us who we are, individually and as a community, and, with enchanting food, conjures up togetherness. It's through the pleasure of eating that a cook's artistry enmeshes diners in a world of what holds us together. This is why cooking is an important artistic act: It shifts the focus away from purely feeding and infuses material culture with meaning.

We are human beings, capable of love. We are not about the survival of the fittest. Sure, we have to eat to survive, but the whole point of culinary art is not *that* we survive, but *how* we survive. We survive with beauty and by affirming who we are as human beings and who we want to be as a community.



## **COOKING AND IDENTITY**

Cooking makes me remember that I have Indigenous roots here on this land. It speaks to my identity as Native American. I regularly cook with cactus, which has grown in our state for

over 9,000 years. I also cook venison, crab, catfish, duck, snails, and so many other food sources that formed the diet of the first peoples of Texas.

In addition to Indigenous roots, there is a second aspect of identity: What does it mean to be a colonial immigrant on this land? I respond to the colonial immigrant question as I do with the Indigenous one: by doing. I cook and I garden in ways that celebrate my European immigrant identity. For example, I enjoy watching “mi Yorkshire puddings” rise in the oven, using a recipe a chef shared with me when I visited northern England.

Although my surname, Medrano, originates in Spain, I don't often identify with the culture and traditions of the Spanish conquerors who began to arrive in Texas in 1528. It's mainly the painful effects of conquest that touch me: discrimination and dispossession.

The question of immigrant colonial identity asks us to identify and unveil the sense of entitlement that some European immigrants have. Unfortunately, many of my non-Indigenous chef friends lack awareness of themselves as immigrants on this land. Nor do they consider the damaging effects that colonization has had on Indigenous communities as regards to land distribution, destruction of traditional food sources, and exclusion from the dominant social and political spheres. More reflection in this regard, I believe, would benefit all of us in the Southern United States and would promote a sense of honest, meaningful encounter. Anyone can accept this realization of having newly arrived by undertaking practical, personal actions.

How to do this is exemplified by Suzanne Bellamy, an artist from New South Wales, Australia, who worked with earth sculptures and agriculture. I chose an Australian cook and artist as an example to show that we are not isolated in our pursuits. Our Texas and Southern food questions are shared by other communities around the world.

Bellamy, who died in 2022, was not Aboriginal, but said she felt an absolute dedication and connection to Australia, her real and only home. Acknowledging the displacement and devastation that colonization wreaked upon the Australian Aborigines, and aware that she was a colonial immigrant, she lived in a community of solar-powered dwellings. Her garden art works explore how humans can connect with and respect the land.



Yet in her writing she described her awareness that her actions were of someone who is newly arrived: “In an ancient, dry continent like Australia, we are beginners, always needing to confront deep alienation and ignorance from the forces of the land as European colonials and immigrants.”



## FOOD AND COMMUNITY

Foodways of all peoples, when they are preserved and celebrated, cannot help but make us whole. Delicious food begs to be shared. It helps connect us to each other and to the planet. Sharing a meal

is about hospitality, an atmosphere of generosity, of openness—to others, and also to change. A good meal invites us to soften our boundaries and rigidity toward the other. That is the basis of community.

We can build community as good stewards of our traditions, keeping our culinary heritage alive and accessible, and taking it to a place that is vivifying.

We do not eat just to survive. The art of cooking invokes memory, impacts identity, and strengthens community. How our ancestors cooked generations ago in the place where we stand now, in its social and cultural context, can encourage us to look more deeply into who we want to be as a society. The art of cooking is not about the survival of the fittest. It’s about the survival of the finest. 🍷

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