



A rally in New York City on August 9, 2015, the one-year anniversary of the death of Michael Brown

These separate, but overlapping justice-centered efforts are not in vain. When people put their bodies on the front line, risking their freedom in pursuit of a fairer world, they highlight the complex ways in which inequalities shape neighborhoods, wages, job security, and food access. On the ground, protestors show us how to pay attention to multiple issues at once. They demand it of us researchers, advocates, and activists. To create a world in which everyone has equal access to fresh, affordable, healthy food, we have to grapple with the roots of racism that

produce the fruit of inequality. It is not enough to know where grocery stores are located or how people acquire the food they choose. Food access does not begin and end with the supermarket—it reflects societal ills that manifest in several ways. Recognizing this issue as part of racial and economic justice brings us in conversation with researchers, advocates, and activists who challenge our beliefs. If we are intentional, perhaps we will be one step closer to eradicating the roots from which inequalities in the United States grow. 🐦

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Cem Ozdel/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

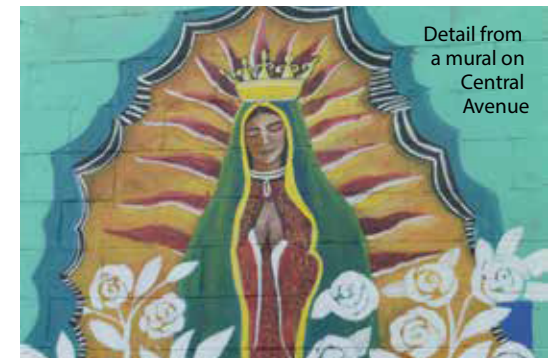
CHARLOTTE IN FIVE TAMALES

UNWRAPPING CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

by Tom Hanchett and Eric Hoenes del Pinal

WHICH US METRO area has the fastest-growing Latino population? According to a recent Nielsen study, Charlotte, North Carolina, ranks first, followed by Raleigh and Atlanta. This is the newest New South. A region that has reinvented itself again and again since the Civil War is now in the midst of a newcomer revolution, as people of every background move here from across the United States and around the globe.

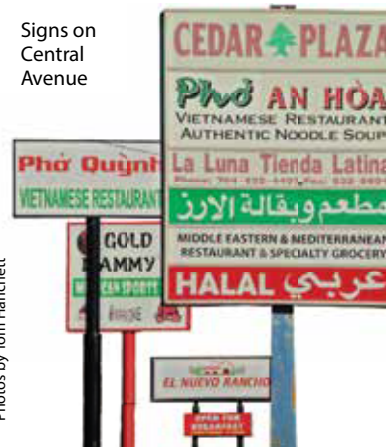
Charlotte is one of the fastest-growing cities in America. In 1990, Mecklenburg County, of which Charlotte is the county seat, was home to a half-million residents. In 2013, the county's



population topped one million. Approximately 15 percent of new arrivals come from outside the US. That's a surprise to many of the folks who grew up in this part of the South, which historically attracted few immigrants. Today, business signs in Spanish, Vietnamese, and Arabic dot older suburban corridors such as Central Avenue and South Boulevard, signaling a profound change in the region's demographics.

About half of the Charlotte area's immigrants hail from Latin America. Of those, half are from Mexico, while the rest represent virtually every country in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Those numbers imply a rich array of Latino cultures. Charlotte's food scene offers Mexican tacos and tortas, as well as Venezuelan arepas, Colombian empanadas, Salvadoran pupusas, and Cuban pressed sandwiches.

One item in particular, the tamale, offers insight into the diverse cuisines of Charlotte's Latino population. Many US diners are familiar with tamales, but they might not know that this



Photos by Tom Hanchett



TAMALES AND BISCUITS, SIDE BY SIDE

ACROSS THE CAROLINAS, convenience stores attached to rural gas stations serve breakfast biscuits with a slice of country ham, a hunk of sausage, or a spread of livermush. At the Poplar Tent Marathon station off Interstate 85, at the edge of the Charlotte metro, hot tamales share space with biscuits under heat lamps by the front counter.

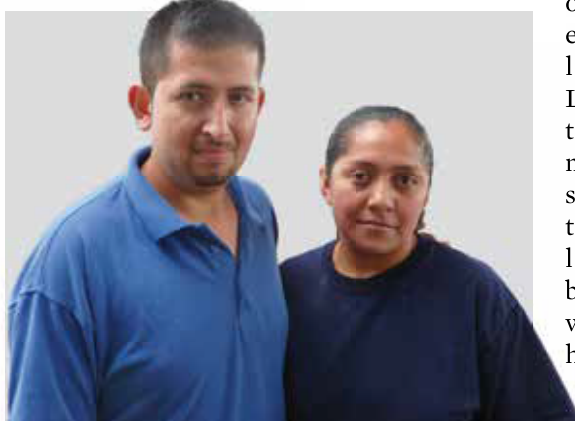
The cashier, Anselmo “Chemo” Bustos, tells a story of blue-collar migration and adaptation. In 1999, Bustos, who comes from the tiny village of Tamácuaro, Guerrero, Mexico, followed his brother to look for work in the Carolina tobacco fields. He eventually took a job as a kitchen helper at this gas station and worked his way up to cashier and then manager.

To help Chemo combat homesickness, family members would occasionally send videotapes of important fiestas in Tamácuaro. In one of these videos, the image of a young woman caught his eye. Calls were made, and he learned that her name was Lurdes, that she came from a town called La Palma, about 250 miles from Tamacuaro, and that she was single. They were soon talking on the phone, and their long-distance relationship bloomed. Two months later they were married, and Lurdes joined him in North Carolina.

Lurdes makes tamales each day,

dish comes in national and regional varieties. Move southward and the wrappers change from corn husks to plantain leaves. Masa becomes moister, and fillings vary—mole sauce in southern Mexico, whole chicken legs in Guatemala. In short, tamales have cultural geography. Their flavors and compositions reveal the ways in which this dish spread from ancient Mesoamerica through the rest of the continent. Charlotte’s tamales demonstrate how Latin American cultures and foodways are changing—and being changed by—the South.

Chemo and Lurdes Bustos



Laura Gonzalez Perez of Tamería Laurita

urban area in her home country, followed by immigration to the United States. Born in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, Perez learned her way around a commercial kitchen after migrating north to the city of Monterrey, fewer than 150 miles from the Texas border.

Those skills have served her well in the ten years she’s been in Charlotte. She began by running a lonchera, or food truck, to serve the construction workers who built up this growing city. It wasn’t long before she was able to add a second truck. In 2015, Perez leased a commercial kitchen in a mostly vacant shopping center located behind a former McDonald’s restaurant. She hired several cooks to help,

just as she did in back in Mexico. She prepares the masa, stuffs it with slow-cooked chicken or pork, spreads it with a lightly spiced salsa, and then wraps it in a corn husk to make a neat, hand-sized bundle, which she then steams for three hours.

Lurdes has also adopted the traditions of her new home. While the tamales steam, she bakes the biscuits and fills them with sausage, egg, or country ham. The Bustos’ journey from rural village to big city parallels that of earlier Southerners who left Appalachian mountain hollows to seek their fortune in urban centers such as Charlotte. The old textile mills have long since closed, but fresh economic opportunities are creating a nuevo New South.

MASTER OF MOLE

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL spirit that drew the Bustos to Charlotte also drives Tamería Laurita’s owner and namesake. Laura Gonzalez Perez’s story, like that of many Latino immigrants, involves a two-step migration: first a move from a rural to an



and almost as an afterthought, installed a to-go counter and a half-dozen tables.

Tamería Laurita serves Mexican staples from several regions, including tacos al pastor and pozole. She offers six kinds of tamales, including spicy chicken



in the northern Mexican style, pork tamales wrapped in corn husks, and two sweet dessert tamales—one dyed a deep, sugary red, the other made with young, sweet corn.

The mole tamales are her real specialty, and a direct connection to her home state of Chiapas. From the Yucatán Peninsula southward, in areas where Maya rather than Aztec culture dominated, tamales tend to be moister and are wrapped in green banana leaves rather than dried corn husks. Perez prepares her mole tamales this way, filling them with chicken slow-cooked in a sauce made from ancho, guajillo, and pasilla peppers, plus chocolate, peanuts, garlic, onion, tomato, and black pepper. They are savory and piquant with a hint of cinnamon sweetness.

In Charlotte, traditions from separate parts of Mexico come together. Though half a dozen employees now work in her kitchen, “I have to make the mole tamales myself,” she says in Spanish. “No one else gets the seasoning just

right.” As Perez expands her business and makes money to support her family, she also honors the *comida casera* (home cooking) that she grew up eating.

GUATEMALA THE BEAUTIFUL

WHILE MEXICANS ACCOUNT for more than half of Charlotte’s Latin American population, a growing array of Central and South American food cultures thrive here, too. Charlotte now boasts at least two eateries catering to the Guatemalan population.

Panadería El Quetzal occupies a slot in a small shopping plaza built in the 1960s. Most drivers might not give it a second look. But Guatemalans readily recognize the quetzal—a bird with flamboyant green and red plumage—as the symbol of their nation. Inside, they know they’ll find a taste of home.

A long glass counter at El Quetzal displays dozens of traditional baked goods, from mini-loaves of sweet, moist *pan de elote* (cornbread) to crispy sugar cookies called *champurradas* that Guatemalans nibble with afternoon coffee. Bulbous loaves of *pan francés* (French bread) pair beautifully with refried black beans and the hard cheese called *queso seco*. A crew of six bakers rolls out dough to keep up with the demand. Many of El Quetzal’s customers buy bread daily.

The bakery also sells tamales.

As in southern Mexico, Guatemalan tamales are sheathed in banana leaves. Inside is an entire chicken leg cooked in red achiote gravy and topped with strips of *pimiento* and a single green olive. The masa is wetter than most Mexican tamales, and El Quetzal serves its tamales with tortillas or a hunk of bread on the side to help sop up the masa and gravy.

In early 2016, El Quetzal’s owners opened *Guate-Linda*—“Guatemala the Beautiful”—in another shopping plaza about two miles away. Co-owner and chef Nora Guerra serves an extensive menu of Guatemalan dishes. Alongside tamales, the choices range from snack-sized fried tostadas called *garnachas*, to big bowls of *pepián*, a hearty pre-Columbian dish of poultry stewed in a sauce of tomato, tomatillo, pumpkin seeds, and chiles. The success of El Quetzal and *Guate-Linda* underscores the pluralism now found in Charlotte’s Latino population.

SUPERMARKET TAMALES

COMPARE FOODS IS A CHAIN of nearly fifty full-service supermarkets that stretches across central North and South Carolina, and as far away as New England. Dominican immigrant Eligio Peña started it in New Jersey, then moved to North Carolina to serve the state’s growing Latino market. Compare carries an extensive



selection of Latino items, as well as Asian, African, and US staples—from kimchi to fufu to Kraft Mac & Cheese. You can also buy everything you need for tamales there: masa, corn husks, banana leaves, spice packets for making gravy, and even the big pots needed to steam them.

Many of the Compare locations also feature prepared food counters or restaurants that operate semi-independently within the store. At the Compare on Arrowood Drive in south Charlotte, Dominican-born Pedro Mena runs *Bahía de Gracia*, which sells *mangú* (mashed green plantains), *chicharrón* (meaty fried pork cracklins), and *sancocho* (beef stew), as well as a Caribbean version of tamales, known as *pasteles en hoja*—“cakes in leaves.”

For this Caribbean take on tamales, a mix of plantain and yucca forms the masa. Plantain leaves serve as the wrapper. The filling of the *pasteles* is made from seasoned ground beef along with green olives, onions, and red bell peppers; or shredded chicken flavored with





L-R: Ofelia de Guerra, her daughter Arlette Guerra de Hurtado, and Elizabeth Castillo with an hallaca they made



tamales, too, including Mexican and Salvadoran varieties. At Compare, Charlotteans from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere shop and eat side by side.

HALLACAS FOR CHRISTMAS

CHARLOTTE'S ANNUAL Parranda Navideña, a Christmas celebration held each December since 2014, showcases the vitality of the city's Venezuelan community. It also suggests how elements of Latino culture cross over into the wider life of the city. Tamales play a starring role.

As a youngster in Venezuela, Tony Arreaza fell in love with American funk guitar. When he immigrated to Charlotte as a teenager, a six-string and a wah-wah pedal became his calling. He spoke little English, but hanging out at the local community college with his guitar in hand, he struck up lasting musical friendships. Today, he plans festivals for the city's Latin American Coalition and on weekends plays rock en español and vintage Latin pop with his band, UltimaNota.

When Arreaza thought about organizing a traditional Venezuelan Christmas party, he wanted it to be a bridge-builder. So he booked the Neighborhood Theatre, an old movie theater turned alt-rock concert venue in the NoDa neighborhood. And he spread the word throughout local Latino circles and in the mainstream music press.

green olives, green peppers, raisins, cilantro, and carrots. The taste and consistency evoke the Creole culture of the Caribbean, where African influences are more pronounced alongside Native American and European ones. In fact, the plantain traveled to Latin America with enslaved Africans.

Mena's deli counter offers other

That first year, hundreds of people of all backgrounds showed up to dance to live music and sample holiday foods, including the Christmas tamales called hallacas. The Venezuelan hallaca requires hours of chopping and simmering to create a rich filling of beef, chicken, and pork, plus raisins, olives, and bits of bell pepper.

"For me, an hallaca is much more than just a dish," Arreaza says. "Every December, my entire family gathered to make them assembly-line style. My mom made the filling, my brother the dough, my dad cleaned the plantain leaves that you wrap them in, my sister tied the knot, and I was in charge of putting special marks on the ones that were spicy."

That old family custom is becoming a Charlotte tradition. For Latinos from other countries, the Venezuelan tamales are at once comforting and new—making and eating tamales is part of the Christmas season in many Latin American countries. For non-Latinos, an hallaca offers a new experience. For all, it's a warm part of a welcoming celebration that draws people of every background together year after year.

(RE)MAKING CULTURE

MORE THAN HALF OF LATINO residents in the South are US citizens. Many are young people, born here during the past twenty-five years. Nearly a quarter of

pupils in Charlotte-Mecklenburg public schools are Latino. In Charlotte and most other urban areas in the South, there is no single Latin American neighborhood. Instead, Latinos live and work across many parts of the city and alongside people from every corner of the world.

There's a sense of fluidity, of possibility, of unexpected encounters. As Charlotte emerges as a global city, Latinos will continue to reshape the South, and the South will reshape what it means to be Latino. 🍷

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Eric Hoenes del Pinal, born in Guatemala, is an anthropologist and assistant professor of religious studies at UNC-Charlotte. He's been eating tamales ever since he can remember.

A mural by Rosalia Torres-Weiner on Central Avenue

