



NOT A DROP TO DRINK

THOUGHTS ON THE CALIFORNIA DROUGHT

by Gustavo Arellano



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EVERY TIME I DRIVE THROUGH THE SOUTH, behind the wheel of an obnoxiously large GMC Yukon, someone inevitably determines that I'm from California, and my home state becomes a point of discussion. A young man in Pall Mall, Tennessee, who proudly told my wife and me that he had never left the Tennessee foothills, wanted to know if we had ever visited Hollywood. A tour guide at Sun Studios in Memphis used to play in a rockabilly band in Fullerton, a city in my Orange County. A gas station clerk in Russellville, Arkansas, told me her plan was to move to San Francisco, where a cousin had married a tech millionaire, and find one for herself.

Back in 2008, a silver-haired and pasty-skinned Southern gentleman—responding to all my questions with a drawled “No, sir” and “Yes, sir”—drove me to Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport in South Carolina. When he discovered I was headed back home, he went on a homophobic rant because California had just declared gay marriage legal. All I could do as he growled that gays “knew their place” in his day was grit my teeth and grin, given it was 4:30 in the morning and he was driving me through some lonely-ass woods.

It's all good—California will always fascinate the rest of the country. But last year, a new topic was on the minds of Southerners: my state's epic drought. Friends jokingly asked if we were collecting bathwater (not yet at that point). A Mexican immigrant I interviewed for an SFA oral history project, who had moved to Louisville from Los Angeles, said he was glad his family didn't live there anymore. In Cave City, Kentucky, the clerk at a Comfort Inn asked whether our lack of rain was as apocalyptic as the media made it out to be. “Worse,” I admitted, before telling her I loved the Bluegrass State for its ever-verdant landscape.

“Well,” she responded, “we're in the fifth year of *our* drought.” Oh.

That was last year. In 2015, California's dry spell has become a near-daily topic in the national news. I write this piece from the

Ozarks, on the way to the 127 Yard Sale that serves as an annual vacation for my wife and me. We're carrying the drought with us. Already, we've told befuddled waiters that we'll share one glass of water. At every hotel stop, we turn off the shower while we lather and scrub—it's now a habit. I'm texting my brother daily, reminding him to water my garden not with the hose but with collected bathwater. (Yes, we're there.) Meteorologists say a phenomenon known as El Niño will deliver epic storms at the end of this year that will save us all. They said that last year, too, and our winter was about as desiccated as burnt carne asada.

It's scary times for us out west. And I blame you, Southerners, for taking us to the edge of ruin.

AFTER ALL, James G. Boswell II, a native of Greensboro, Georgia, essentially created modern-day California agribusiness in the 1950s. His family's cotton-empire clout dammed rivers, dried up lakes, and set us on the parched path we're on today. And the first person to commercially grow oranges and grapes in Southern California was a Kentuckian: the awesomely named William Wolfskill. Back in the 1830s, this green thumb convinced other Americans to transform what was then mostly cattle-grazing pastureland into tens of thousands of acres of thirsty citrus and avocado groves. Thanks for nothing, Wolfy!



FORGIVE ME FOR STEREOTYPING SOUTHERNERS, BUT ONE OF THE MAIN ATTRIBUTES I'D ARGUE DEFINES USTEDES IS A KNACK FOR PREPARING FOR HARD TIMES.

In reality, I blame all U.S. food consumers—which is to say, all of us. Our insatiable desire for California's luscious, delicious produce has tapped the state. Eighty percent of California's water used by humans goes to agriculture. That massive number won't change until the rest of the country decides to start weaning itself off our perfect climate, endless pool of cheap labor, and fields that can grow virtually anything. Too bad Vanderbilt will win an SEC football title before *that* happens.

California leads the nation in producing more than seventy crops. Many are the ones you'd expect: olives, raisins, bell peppers. And the state is virtually the sole domestic producer of figs, pistachios, walnuts, and almonds.

This is where the South comes back in: "Like the South, California typically exports about half its crop each year," reports the The United States Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service. Between the two of us, we serve as an international salad bowl and fruit basket. While farming brings billions of dollars to our respective regions, it's not a business model that's

sustainable. It's time we tell the rest of the country to feed itself, and save our precious water resources.

The demand for California produce has reached absurd proportions. A couple of years back, I noticed California peaches at a Nashville Kroger. Never mind that just days earlier, my wife and I had feasted on the fruit from a roadside farm in northern Alabama. When I asked the clerk why they sold peaches from the West Coast, she had a telling answer. "California fruit is just better," she said. "And cheaper, too."

We bought a half-dozen. Alabama's peaches were juicy, fragrant treasures. California's? Stale.

THE U.S. DROUGHT Monitor Map run by the National Drought Mitigation Center (NDMC) shows that, as of August 2015, abnormally dry conditions are afflicting almost all of South Carolina as well as swaths of North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida. The South can't yet claim the ominous crimson and red shades that color California on the NDMC map, but it's getting there.

In your coming troubles, I see

hope for the Golden State. Because Californians must all become Southerners now in order to save us from ourselves.

Forgive me for stereotyping Southerners, but one of the main attributes I'd argue defines *ustedes* is a knack for preparing for hard times. I'd say the same for Mexicans, which is why I think I have such an affinity for y'all. In Southern California, the land of eternal sunshine, we've been spoiled for more than 150 years on the idea that anything is not only possible, but attainable—damn the future. Build a megapolis in the desert? Sure: We stole water from the Colorado River and built a mighty aqueduct that sucked a lake dry hundreds of miles away. That assuredness is what left us so—pardon the pun—high and dry. And thirsty.

Though rivers crisscross the South and it rains abundantly, I

spot rain-collecting barrels on the sides of homes. In your region, canning culture is gospel. In California, backyard fruit rots on the ground, after we tire of eating and giving away the bumper crop. The South saves and preserves while California spends and throws away.

Will we follow your example? Possibly. California officials announced in August that the state had saved more water in July than what they had projected. Homeowners are ripping out their lawns in record numbers and planting drought-tolerant vegetation instead. Hopefully, next time I'm in the South, people will ask me about something other than our desertification. Like breakfast burritos, the next Mexican-food trend coming to conquer the South. Mark my words...or better yet, read my next column! ☘

Head to southernfoodways.org to explore Gustavo's first oral history project for the SFA: Kentucky's Mexican restaurants.

KENTUCKY'S MEXICAN RESTAURANTS
BLUEGRASS AND BURRITOS

In these oral histories, you'll meet chefs and restaurateurs such as Laura Patricia Ramírez of Taquería y Tortillería Ramírez in Lexington, pictured here. Ramírez's specialties include chicharrones (pork skins) and burritos.



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