

EL SUR

LA FONDA

COMIDA AUTÉNTICA IN
FORT PAYNE, ALABAMA

by Abigail Greenbaum



IN MEXICO CITY, where Esteban Rojo spent the early part of his life, “la fonda” is the term for a certain kind of restaurant. A small place, he explains, pausing to consider how to translate *comida auténtica* into English: “home food.”

A meal at Rojo’s La Fonda in Fort Payne, Alabama, begins, as *comida auténtica* often does, with fried tortilla chips, still hot and gleaming with oil, and a small bowl of house-made roasted jalapeño salsa. La Fonda’s building, a brightly colored and whimsical A-frame, preserves the architectural legacy of the classic American drive-in restaurant. It is an unexpected pairing. But the styles blend well—a vibrant serape hanging from the wall complements the colorful chairs from the original restaurant.

La Fonda occupies the building that Jack Locklear opened in 1963 as Jack’s Hamburgers, a drive-in and dine-in restaurant so popular that Locklear often needed a cop to help him manage the traffic. A Fort Payne native, Locklear played center and linebacker for Auburn and was drafted by the Cleveland Browns. Instead of joining the pros, he returned home to open a restaurant. “He was always a cook,” says his daughter Lynn Locklear Brewer. “We were always grilling out.”



Rojo rents the building from the Locklear family, who kept the property after Jack Locklear passed away in 2012. While some interior touches are clearly Rojo's—sombros, the *santo*-style Jesus statue, the horchata machine—the painted trim, curbs, and siding recall the original burger joint. When he had to replace the terra cotta roof, Jack Locklear made sure that the metal, still in use today, mimicked the crimson of the tile. The Locklears have rebuilt the restaurant at least twice—once after a grease fire sent the grill area up in flames, and another time in the 1970s when a tornado touched down in Fort Payne. (The staff took shelter in the walk-in cooler.)

When Rojo leased the restaurant in 2005, he was more excited about the building's downtown location than the architecture. La Fonda is within walking distance from several of Fort Payne's sock mills, the town's primary employers. At first, the majority of his clients were immigrants from Mexico and Central America who worked in the hosiery industry. Several mills closed in the economic downturn, but business did not slow at La Fonda. By then, it had grown popular with a diverse clientele. On special occasions like Mother's Day and birthdays, Rojo often bakes Jack Locklear's widow a tres leches cake.

In 2010, more than one-fifth of Fort Payne residents identified as Hispanic or Latino, making Fort Payne's community five times larger than the statewide percentage. A stack of copies of *LATINO Alabama*, a Spanish newspaper, sits by an aloe plant in the dining room. In 2011, the state enacted HB 56, the toughest immigration law in the country. Some of its strictest provisions, such as the criminalization of giving a ride to an undocumented immigrant, have been gutted by a federal court. Rojo says that he's never had anti-immigrant problems at La Fonda, and that Fort Payne, perhaps due to its larger Latino population, is a tolerant place. There's a poster for a Tea Party rally up in the window. Though Rojo has no interest in the rally or the Tea Party, he leaves the poster hanging. "Some customer put that up," he shrugs and smiles.

Rojo's devotion to customer satisfaction explains why he never used the drive-in speakers that were once set up in the parking lot. "More personal than Sonic's," he says. "If someone isn't happy with the food, I want to see it." Rojo has changed some menu items, in name anyway, to adapt to the local environment. His flautas translate, on the menu, as "fried tacos." Explaining this choice, Rojo switches into

English. "This is the South," he says. "Always fried." Rojo also serves hamburgers, a nod to Jack's.

Rojo's own favorite is the torta chilanga, a sandwich he learned to prepare in Mexico City. He bakes the oversized telera bread daily. The texture is light enough to soak up the guajillo pepper-infused grease and solid enough to hold in the pastor pork, grilled pineapple, grilled ham, avocado, queso fresco, yellow cheese, and mozzarella.

Leaving La Fonda, I wonder how to reconcile *comida auténtica*: the breads and salsas of Rojo's Mexico City, the tastes and structures of the Locklears' American main street. Historic preservation can sometimes be an ugly business, a coded way of fighting demographic change. Some things need tearing down, like the WHITES ONLY sign that hung, Lynn Locklear Brewer reminds me, on the original door of Jack's. But at La Fonda, the effort to preserve an American burger joint is a more complicated, cooperative, and carefully seasoned enterprise. 🍷

Abigail Greenbaum's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in Ecotone, Free State Review, and Creative Loafing Atlanta. Alyssa Bishop and Raven Wilson assisted the author with interpretation and translation for this piece.

PHOTOS by Raven Wilson.

