

EL SUR

MEXICO & THE SOUTH: BROTHERS FROM ANOTHER MADRE

HOT SAUCE IS JUST THE BEGINNING
OF OUR KINSHIP

by Gustavo Arellano



FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS, my wife and I have spent the first weekend of August on the 127 Yard Sale, the epic annual flea market running from Gadsden, Alabama, all the way up to Michigan. She loves to shop for Victorian-era gumball machines, cast-iron bells and garden décor, and more bourbon decanters than Jim Beam and Ezra Brooks ever imagined. I go because I've always loved the South, specifically Kentucky. I feel an almost ancestral tug for the place because it reminds me of my roots in the central Mexican state of Zacatecas. The rolling hills, the crafting of liquors—mezcal and bourbon—the affinity for horses and ballads, and the love of the land mirror each other sentiment for sentiment. Zacatecas has sent hundreds of thousands of its natives to the United States over the past century (but not many to the South...yet).

My parents came from the mountains. They were ridiculed as *chúntaros*—the Mexican term for our hillbillies—by the rest of the country for their funny Spanish and their backwards ways. Kentuckians and Zacatecas are brothers from another *madre*, a connection I discovered in high school after hearing a Bill Monroe album and discovering he was essentially a Mexican in whiteface.

But I don't romanticize. I know the hard truth. The South has absorbed the largest increase of Latinos over the past twenty years of any region in the country, and this demographic eruption has thrown a chicharrón in the pork-rind bag of the South's traditional black-white divide that neither side has figured out yet. Back in Southern California, the only time we ever hear about Mexicans in the South on the news is when a city council member or a state politician proposes draconian legislation against undocumented folks. When that happens, my Chicano friends inevitably slur the South as a bunch of *gabachos* trying to revive Juan Crow.

But I know you, South. I remember the kind reception I received in 2008 at the University of South Carolina Upstate: 300 people gathered in Greensboro to hear how Mexicans were going to change the South. (On the ride to the airport, my driver was more upset about gay marriage than Latino anything—ah, progress...) I hear you when I talk on Charlotte radio shows, fielding questions in a call-in format of *¡Ask a Mexican!*, where the callers are rarely rude and almost always honestly earnest. I taste it every year during the 127 Yard Sale, when my wife and I finally get homesick and eat at Mexican restaurants in Danville, Kentucky, and Crossville, Tennessee, and notice that everyone in those restaurants are

white folks. And I feel your acceptance of my kind on the 127, when people are more impressed by the fact that I'm from California than that my wife and I are Mexicans.

Every year I return for the 127, I see the South becoming more and more Mexican—not just the shoppers, but also the businesses. Albany, Kentucky, boasts a Latino district. Just outside Mentone, Alabama, I passed a Latino evangelical church and saw Mexican dads haggling with good ol' boys, not about politics, but tool prices. This summer, outside the Eagle Lake Convention Center in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky, a taquero sold tacos, burritos, and tortas, offering detailed descriptions of each dish in English.

In Danville, we stop at Guadalajara's, a restaurant that has become so popular that the owners opened a second location just down the street. The first year we went, the only hot sauce on the menu was Tabasco (I had to ask the restaurant owner for the picante stuff; he joyously whipped up a fresh batch of salsa just for me). Two years later, Tapatio was on the tables. Last year, there was El Yucateco, a hot sauce derived from habaneros that even Mexican restaurants in Southern California usually don't stock. Guadalajara's wasn't upping their game in a claim for authenticity: The owner told us he started stocking those salsas because his clientele was asking for it.

I'm not predicting a smooth road for Latinos in the South. There will be battles fought, innocents demonized. But as a cultural historian and longtime reporter on demographics, I also know that the first indication that a dominant group is willing to accept a new ethnic group is by eating their food. First we win over your stomachs, then your hearts, then your minds. Love us, South, just as Mexicans are starting to love you. And together, a *Nuevo Sur* will rise. 🍷

Gustavo Arellano is the editor of OC Weekly, author of the syndicated column ¡Ask a Mexican!, and of Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America. He spoke at the 2012 Southern Foodways Symposium.

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