

# TORTAS IN TUSCALOOSA

MEMORY AFTER A STORM

by Caleb Johnson



Taqueria Jaripeo, in 2010.

**C**HANGE COMES IN MANY forms. During the spring in Alabama it sometimes comes from the horizon, a funnel-shaped cloud descended from the gray-slabbed sky. So it happened on April 27, 2011, when an EF-4 tornado approached Tuscaloosa from the south and west.

You can lose yourself in the numbers from that day. The storm lasted more than seven hours, traveled almost 400 miles. The tornado, which killed 52 people in Tuscaloosa alone, grew to be a mile and half wide. Winds at 190 miles-per-hour destroyed 12

percent of the city, including much of the neighborhood where my favorite Mexican restaurant, Taqueria Jaripeo, used to be.

On a Saturday morning last November, while visiting from my new home in Philadelphia, my buddy Nate and I pulled over next to the vacant lot where Taqueria Jaripeo once stood. It was the first time I'd visited the spot since moving out of state the summer after the tornado hit. Nate and I ate warm, glazed Krispy Kreme doughnuts while arguing whether the taqueria had been on the left or right end

of the mini-mall. All that remained was a portion of the cinderblock wall, the foundation, and parking-lot scabs grown over with yellowed grass. In the wake of the tornado, much of Alberta City (a northeastern suburb of Tuscaloosa) looked this way—as if an enormous hand had slapped the earth.

While I may not remember the exact spot where the restaurant was located, I do, without a doubt, remember Taqueria Jaripeo's chorizo torta. The roll was crispy on the outside, soft on the inside. It could barely hold the avocado, onion, carrot, jalapeno, and sour cream. The chorizo inside was cooked until it resembled rust. Each time you took a bite, the innards dripped all over the plate, and if you weren't careful, onto your lap.

In my early twenties, when I first set foot in Taqueria Jaripeo, I'd never eaten a sandwich like that. Nor had I ever been to a Mexican restaurant in Alabama that didn't specialize in gluey white cheese dip, deep-fried chimichangas, and fajitas served on a sizzling cast iron plate. In addition to tortas, Taqueria Jaripeo offered an exhaustive selection of tacos. I tried lengua and al pastor for the first time there. They served tacos on corn tortillas and dressed them with fresh cilantro and chopped onion. At Taqueria Jaripeo you could wash down your meal with aguas frescas or a Mexican Coca-Cola in a glass bottle that a waitress brought

from a cooler in the corner of the rectangular dining room where pictures of Jesus, and other religious icons, hung on the wall. Taqueria Jaripeo was a family business. Two women—the mother and grandmother, I always guessed—worked the kitchen. The father, I figured this man to be, and two or three silent men, often sat eating a tomato-based beef soup at a table near two large windows. These windows faced north across University Boulevard toward Alberta Baptist Church, which had a giant blue and green fiberglass globe atop its sign. That globe is gone now too, though a renovated brick church remains.

For months after the tornado, folks gathered every night at their favorite bars. Mine was Egan's, a smoky little room where, after several drinks, you could acquire the ability to dance like James Brown. One night that summer, two friends introduced me to a young man who I'd never seen in the bar before. A band was playing, though I don't remember which one. All anybody talked about those days was the tornado. Everybody had a story to tell. Of seeing treetops punch holes through roofs, of picking their way down streets snaked with live wires. The young man began shouting his story to us over the music.

His family used to own a Mexican restaurant in town, he said. Now they sold lunches to the countless cleanup and

construction crews. My friends smiled while I pieced things together. Maybe it was the drinks, but meeting this young man felt like more than coincidence. In that moment, it seemed divined. By this time I was already set to move out of state. Everything seemed heightened, everything a potential last or never again. Here I'd been given a chance to tell this young man how much his family's food meant to me—something I'd failed to do any of the times I dined at Taqueria Jaripeo.

I'm sure my words fell short, but the young man appeared happy and proud to hear how his family's restaurant had changed the way I thought about Mexican food. My friends and I bought him whiskey shots and asked when the restaurant would reopen. A foolish question, I now realize. Change had come. Its fulfillment would be the development of high-rise condominiums, chain stores, and restaurants near the University of Alabama campus, not the return of small, family-owned businesses in a neglected, largely Latino neighborhood a couple miles away.

The young man left sometime before the band finished that night, and I never saw him again. It's possible that he, like many Latinos who lost their homes in the tornado, left the state altogether. I remember that night now, and many others from this period in

my life, like a burn. I wish I could remember the young man's name.

As Nate and I pulled away from the vacant lot last November, I was glad to have reconnected with my past. Since moving away from the state where I was born and raised, returning to my past has become something of a fetish, though returning usually leaves me feeling worse than the missing does. As Nate and I crossed some railroad tracks, I thought about the first time I went to Taqueria Jaripeo. It was summer and I brought a friend, which I tried to do every time after for the selfish reason that I wanted the restaurant to stay open so I could keep eating there. My friend and I were hungover from a night of drinking and dancing at Egan's. I don't remember what she ordered that day. What I do remember is holding my chorizo torta out for her to taste, how the sandwich spilled itself onto the table when she took a bite.

After lunch we bought canned beers at a gas station then went to swim in a pool at an apartment complex where neither of us lived. We were alone. We drank those beers while standing chest-deep in the piss-warm water. Later, the sky opened up and dumped rain on our heads. We didn't care or dare get out. This was not a storm, but a shower, and we were happily full on Mexican food and beer. 🍷

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## VIEW FROM THE TREEHOUSE

CHEF JASON ZYGMONT HAS A KICKASS RESUME AND A DISTINCTIVE CULINARY VOICE. BUT IS THAT ENOUGH FOR THE CRITICS?

by John Kessler

LET'S START WITH THE dish. This plate is slate gray and heavy, so concave it wants to become a bowl. If you eat out often in restaurants, you know it. Perhaps you remember your futile attempts to balance a knife on its curved rim. Maybe it once held an off-center swoosh of spice-dusted roasted carrots in yogurt, one of those plating designs that looks like yin without its yang. In a different restaurant, that dish might contain a mound of farmstead goodness: Carolina Gold rice grits, Cherokee Purple tomatoes, and heirloom okra topped with an enormously special chicken leg.

At the Treehouse in Nashville, that plate cradles a serving of pasta that looks like a Dale Chihuly glass sculpture and tastes like nothing you've ever eaten. Soft, fat agnolotti filled with puréed caramelized sunchoke wallow like baby hippos in a ruby red cranberry sauce. A scattering of Brussels sprouts' leaves, seared to emerald translucence, crest the top. Even the white shreds that dust the plate bring a surprise;

they look like Parmesan but deliver a sinus-clearing dose of horseradish. Everything about this combination of flavors wallops you with surprises. The pasta pillows squish sweetly; the sauce shrieks with fruit acid; the leaves steer the flavors toward bitterness and char. But does it all work?

It's hard to answer that question when the ingredients—the primary tastes themselves—create such a wall of flavor. Did Phil Spector's Wall of Sound strike virgin ears as a mile wide and an inch deep, lush but weirdly shallow, unfathomable because 'fathom' is the wrong word? Or maybe the better musical reference is Prince's "When Doves Cry." This dish is a song belted out with heart-gripping energy but no bass line, a trailblazer of the treble clef. I liked many dishes at the Treehouse better and a few not as well. But the sunchoke agnolotti was what you might call the most Zygmontian, and by the time the waiter cleared the plate, I still hadn't made up my mind about