JULIO DREAMS OF TORTILLAS

I'm convinced that Maíz de la Vida makes the best tortilla I've never tasted.

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

IT WAS MARCH 2020, JUST AS THE REALITIES of the COVID-19 pandemic began to set in, and Julio Hernandez was fretting about the future. The Bronx native moved to Nashville in 2011 to live near a brother who was stationed at Fort Campbell in Kentucky and to "run away from all the nighttime craziness" that came with working at restaurants in Manhattan.

He spent most of the 2010s working his way through Nashville's kitchens—at country clubs and at Mexican restaurants, where fellow cooks advised him to use sour cream instead of chile peppers because white people supposedly didn't like the latter and would prefer the former.

Like so many restaurant workers whose careers were interrupted by the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hernandez felt a mixture of frustration, excitement, and fear about what to do next. Then one day, lying in his bed, his mind turned to comfort. He thought of tortillas.

Specifically, he went back to the thick, fresh tortillas of Tlaxcala, the Mexican state where his father was born and where Julio lived from his infancy until he moved back to the Bronx as a teen.

"Why am I overdressing tacos," Hernandez thought, "when all I have to do is use a good corn tortilla?"

The question might sound rhetorical to most eaters. Isn't a corn tortilla a corn tortilla—just a flattened disc made of water, mashed-up corn made into masa, and maybe salt? Technically yes, but what matters more than anything is the corn that becomes the masa. Just as there are heirloom varieties of beans and tomatoes, the same exists for corn—especially in Mexico, the birthplace of the crop. But for decades, tortilla makers eschewed such types in favor of Maseca, a dehydrated corn masa. It has little flavor but makes tortilla production far easier.

Hernandez quit his job at a Tex-Mex restaurant soon after his Proustian moment. He used his life savings to buy a ton—literally, 2,000 pounds—of heirloom Oaxacan corn and a *molino*, a corn grinder. His wife "lost her mind," he now jokes, but they, along with Julio's mother, got to work.

He ordered his corn through Masienda, a Los Angeles–based company that works with organic farmers in Mexico. A delivery driver dropped off

Photos by Danielle Atkins

A quesadilla, churros, and tacos from Maíz de la Vida

LEFT: Julio Hernandez at work; RIGHT: A molino stone caked with freshly ground nixtamalized corn

the corn and the 600-pound *molino* in his front yard. Hernandez stored the corn in his daughters' bedroom because it had an air conditioner. Neighbors helped him lug the *molino* to his garage.

There, Hernandez first soaked the corn in slaked lime. This a process, called nixtmalization, softens the kernels and releases niacin, an essential nutrient. He then ground the softened corn into masa, which he used to hand-press eighty dozen tortillas, and put them, uncooked, in plastic bags.

The following day, Hernandez set up a table and tent at the East Nashville Farmer's Market.

"If we failed," said the self-deprecating Hernandez, "well, at least we'd have a lot of tortillas and a lot of leftover masa to make tamales."

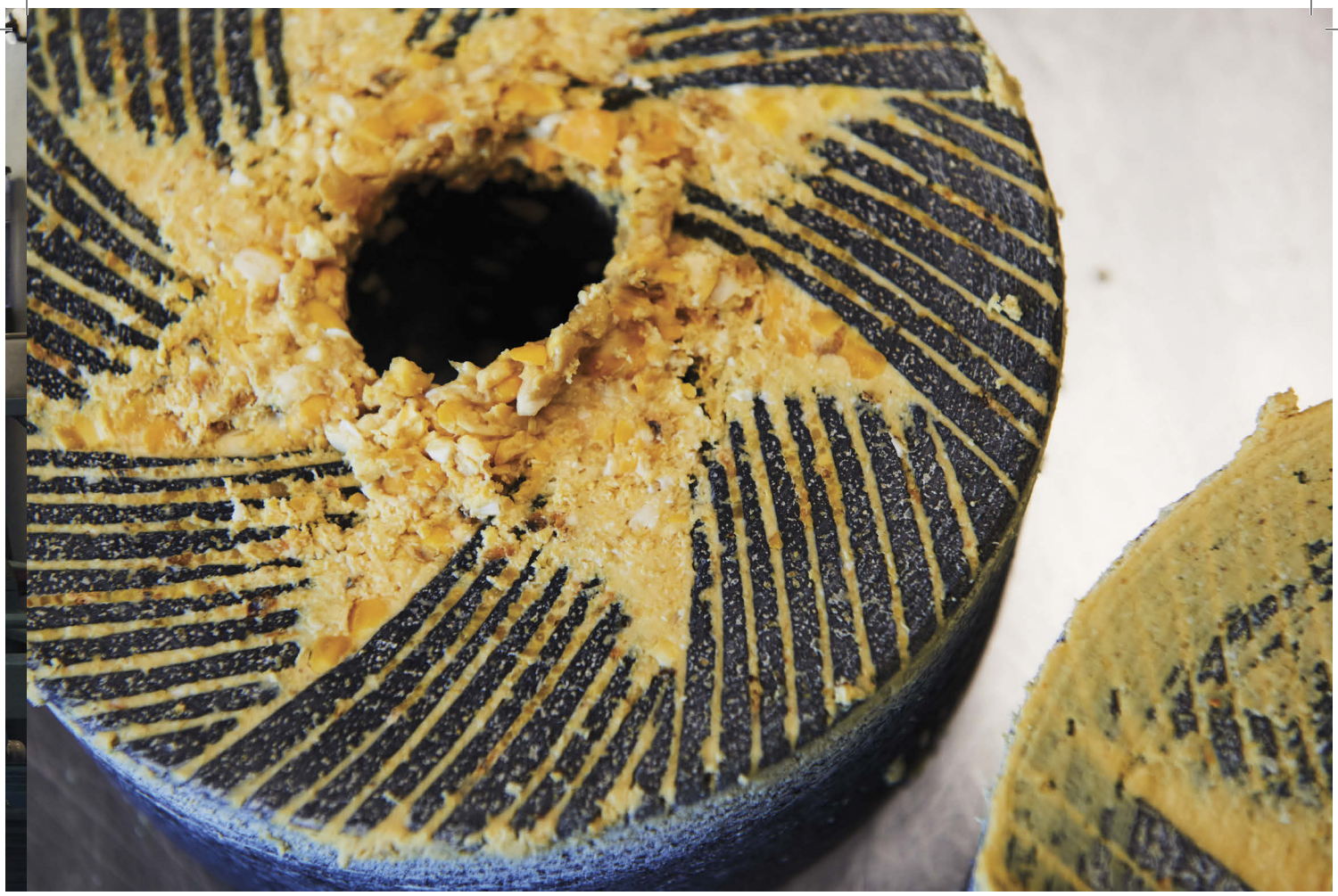
They sold out within an hour.

Hernandez had already begun to make tacos and quesadillas with his tortillas under the name Maíz de la Vida—Corn of Life. (He held his first pop-up a few weeks before that farmer's market sell-out.) Its quick success allowed him to buy a short bus, which he transformed into a mobile kitchen. He'd set up at night outside Chopper, an East Nashville tiki bar. Maíz de la Vida earned laudatory reviews from the local press and a following from Mexican and non-Mexican eaters alike. Besides tacos, Hernandez's menu includes tamales; thin, foot-long quesadillas nicknamed machetes; and tetelas, a triangle-shaped burrito of sorts from the state of Oaxaca.

Hernandez is preparing to open a brick-and-mortar version of Maíz de La Vida this April, nearly two years after his masa odyssey began. It will stand just across the way from Arnold's Country Kitchen, the beloved meat-and-three stalwart.

"It's unreal, man," the thirty-one-year-old Hernandez told me over the phone. "When you think of tacos, you never thought of Nashville. Never. Never. Now, tacos are becoming barbecue here. It's moving in our direction."

MEXICAN RESTAURANTS ACROSS the South have made fresh corn tortillas for decades now, and industrial tortillerias—tortilla factories—dot the region. The largest is probably La Banderita Tortillas, a division of Norcross, Georgia–based Olé Foods. You may have seen them at Walmart or Kroger. They're even on the shelves of my local Whole Foods here in Southern California.



But many corn tortillas on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, whether handmade or from a machine, contain a secret: They're cut with Maseca because it lengthens the life of tortillas (fresh masa has a short shelf life) even as it imparts a sour flavor. The product is so ubiquitous in kitchens on both sides of the border that sour and relatively tasteless is now the default flavor for mass-produced corn tortillas.

As Hernandez sees it, that's a shame for a foodstuff that Mexicans have eaten for millennia. Ask older Mexicans like my dad, and they'll plainly tell you that tortillas don't taste like tortillas anymore—and Maseca is to blame.

That's why I'm excited by what Hernandez is doing. Out here in Southern California, we've seen a tortilla renaissance for almost a decade, driven by Mexican and Mexican-American chefs who see using heirloom corns as a form of cultural resistance to the Maseca-fication of tortillas and returning to roots. I run a tortilla tournament for a Southern California NPR station, so I'm privy to the best of the best out here: Taco Maria's emerald-blue tortillas, Kernel of Truth's pink ones, or the pinky-thick marvels of Miramar Tortilleria in Boyle Heights. The end result is always revelatory—softer, chewier, earthier. Like tortillas once tasted, and should always taste.

This masa movement is spreading across the United States—restaurants boast of freshly nixtamalized tortillas in New York, in Houston, even in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area. The trend gave Hernandez the confidence to pour his life savings into Maíz de la Vida. He now makes 250 pounds of masa a week, which he presses into tortillas for his own operation and for other restaurants. While I've yet to taste them, I've admired his trajectory from afar and ogled the vibrant hues of the heirloom corn tortillas he makes—pink, red, blue, dark yellow—on Instagram. He transforms a cranberry-hued maiz rojo from Oaxaca into a tortilla the color of raspberry sherbet, which he then fills with carne asada.

Hernandez says he's open to sourcing corn from the South, and he knows he could get much cheaper corn closer to home. But his focus is on the quality and flavor of heirloom varietals. "I'm not trying to feed cattle, *güey*.[1] I'm trying to feed people."

1 Literally, "ox"; figuratively, "dummy." A slight profanity in Mexican Spanish as a synonym for "dude."

Hernandez with a batch of freshly made masa ready to be pressed it into tortillas

He quickly adapted to life in the South but wondered why more Mexicans weren't prominent in Nashville's food scene. "Every restaurant has *mexicanos*, so why *chingado*[2] are we not showcased more?"

It's true. Mexican American chefs are slowly gaining name recognition across the South—I'm thinking of Oscar Diaz of The Cortez in Raleigh and Paco Garcia of FOKO in Louisville, among others. But too many Mexicans remain the back-of-house workers, quietly cooking most of the food we eat across the country. It reminds me of what Anthony Bourdain once said about this dichotomy: "As any chef will tell you, our entire service economy—the restaurant business as we know it—in most American cities, would collapse overnight without Mexican workers."

And Hernandez remembered being bothered by Mexican and white colleagues who told him to dial back the spice. "Everyone talks about Nashville hot chicken, so how can the tacos *not* be spicy?" That's why he trusted that Nashvillians of all backgrounds would embrace his tortillas.

"People get shocked at first—they're just not used to such a strong corn flavor!" Hernandez said with a laugh. I know what he means: A tortilla made from heirloom corn has a funky, earthy flavor that almost reminds me of mushrooms. "But we're talking about food that Southerners are familiar with, just like Mexicans. After another bite, it's like the ancients are talking to them and saying, *We got you, just keep chewing!*"

Hernandez is no purist, though. "I'm trying to find a balance; trying to make everyone happy. I want to make *los compas mexicanos*[3] happy but also explain to the *gúeros*[4] how good this shit is." He has no qualms about selling Tex-Mex classics like cheeseburger tacos or fried tacos, entrées nowadays frowned upon by Mexican-American food critics as too whitewashed. The point for him is the tortilla.

"I can't expect Southerners to understand [the flavors of] Oaxaca or Tlaxcala right off the bat," he said. "I need to sell a taco to Joe down the street, to Alan." But they'll understand a good tortilla.

At the same time, he needs to ensure that Maíz de la Vida's Mexican customers are satisfied. He remembers one Mexican woman who ordered a quesadilla and cracked that Hernandez was *medio blanquito*.[5]

Hernandez remembered, "She took a bite and said, '*No mames!*[6] I forgot what this tasted like. I've been here for twenty-two years, and I keep thinking about what tortillas tasted like, and now that I'm tasting it again, I can't describe how I feel.'"

She's now a regular.

He expects more chefs around the South to adopt small-batch tortillas and is already seeing it happen in Nashville. Sean Brock is a customer, for instance.

"Ten years ago when I moved here, it was about pecan-crusted pork loin," he said. "We wouldn't have had a chance. Now, it's going in our direction. And that's just *chido*."

He's right. That's just great.

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2 Why the f@#$?
3 The good ol' Mexican boys. (*Compas* is short for compadres.)
4 White people
5 Literally "half white," but here meaning "kind of a white boy."
6 A vulgar way of saying "You're kidding me."