



## ABOUT GRAVY

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# The Cooks Who GIGGLE

by Bill Smith

I HAVE A MERRY KITCHEN. I realize that this may seem unusual. We have all seen or at least heard about professional kitchens that are decidedly unmerry. But I have had the good fortune to have hired people who giggle. Mostly they've come from Mexico.

We're a Southern restaurant by definition, so as a rule I don't put Mexican items on the menu, but Latino cooking has begun to insinuate itself all over North Carolina. No one escapes completely. For instance, almost nobody says that the collards are too spicy anymore. That was a common complaint when I came to work here in the early nineties. So what else is new on the menu?

Well, there are now lots of good Mexican restaurants, run by Mexicans here. These restaurants are full of gavachos—that means Americanos. The word gringo has gone out of fashion. (Black and white folks are usually there in equal numbers, so a general term is needed.)

In the last year we have seen an absolute swarm of taco trucks in neighboring Carrboro, where zoning is less difficult than here in Chapel Hill. Everyone likes tamales. (In fact, one of the cooking classes that I teach most often includes those big banana leaf wrapped



tamales from Oaxaca.) Everyone knows what jicama is and there are always several choices of fresh chiles at the grocery store. Pozole is liable to be the soupe du jour at the local brew pub. My mother sends me out for tres leches cake when I'm home because there is a pastilleria within walking distance of her house. The effects are both obvious and subtle.

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Twenty years ago I don't think I even knew anyone from Mexico. Now half of my best friends are from there.



Back when I began working at Crook's Corner, there were only a few Mexican dishwashers on the staff. They were pleasant men who kept to themselves mostly and who giggled a lot among themselves. Interaction with the Anglo members of the staff was minimal simply because of language. Sometimes they would come to parties. Sometimes they would bring food to work and let the rest of us try it. And of course we all immediately learned each other's dirty words, but mostly we parted ways after work.

Now their community is well established here. Many of them have worked their way up through the ranks in my kitchen. We switch languages there without giving it much thought. Twenty years ago I don't think I even knew anyone from Mexico. Now half of my best friends are from there.

This isn't my first encounter with an immigrant work force. In the seventies, we received a large number of Vietnamese people here, who were being helped to resettle by the churches. I was in a different restaurant then, but the delightful friendships were very much the same. The new foods, equally eye opening. I have always seen this as an opportunity. I like to say that you can wash dishes in any language, but you can do lots of other things too. Learn lessons, for instance.

I have learned more about what is important and what isn't from these guys than from any group of people I can name. They work hard and if they can find time, they play hard. When they work hard it is often at menial jobs, but a menial job at ten dollars an hour can mean unprecedented advancement to someone used to making ten dollars a week. Some people, especially in this economy, see a threat. This is a change, certainly, but I see it as a good one. Things never go back to the way they were. I'm looking forward to more good food and good music with good friends. I will perhaps learn to play a little harder as well.

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Bill Smith's merry kitchen is located at Crook's Corner in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. He is the author of *Seasoned in the South: Recipes from Crook's Corner and from Home*.