From Latino ORLANDO *to International* MEMPHIS

Foodways, dissent, and the politics of place

by SIMONE DELERME

Photos by HOUSTON COFIELD *and* ROBERTO GONZALEZ

For over a decade,

I've been documenting the cultural, political, and economic transformations that Latino migrants have brought to Southern communities. I'm particularly interested in changes to landscapes and soundscapes. In places where I've conducted fieldwork—Florida, Tennessee, and Mississippi—the number of Latino-owned businesses has increased over the last thirty years. These businesses tend to be concentrated in commercial spaces where Spanish-language advertising and storefront signs create a distinctive cultural landscape, and the Spanish language can be heard as frequently as, if not more frequently than, English.

Buenaventura Lakes (commonly shortened to BVL), a suburb in Osceola County, Florida; and Summer Avenue, a six-mile-long commercial district in urban Memphis, Tennessee, experienced an influx of migrants in recent decades. In both cases, newcomers introduced new restaurants, markets, and food stands. And in Florida in particular, existing businesses pivoted to serve changing tastes. The evolving culinary landscape held different meanings for incoming and receiving residents. Some residents saw these businesses as evidence of the migrant population's successful incorporation into the community, as a means for maintaining Latin American and Caribbean foodways in the US South, and as an opportunity for community revitalization. For others, the changing foodways served as an unwelcome reminder that the population was now majority Latino.

When I moved to BVL in 2010, the process of Latinization was already well underway. Puerto Ricans and other Latinos migrated to central Florida in large numbers several decades before my arrival. As a result, the landscape and soundscape already reflected the Latino presence. In Osceola County, one of four counties in Greater Orlando, the proportion of Latino residents increased from 2.2 percent in 1980 to 45.5 percent in 2010. By 2020, Latinos were over 50 percent of the county's total population and numbered approximately 211,089. The growth of both small and large Latino-owned establishments, where business was conducted primarily in Spanish, made it evident that the Puerto Rican diaspora had already reached a critical mass.

In his book, *Divided Border: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity,* Juan Flores described the similarities

RIGHT: An assortment of baked goods at La Espiga Panadería on Summer Avenue in Memphis, TN

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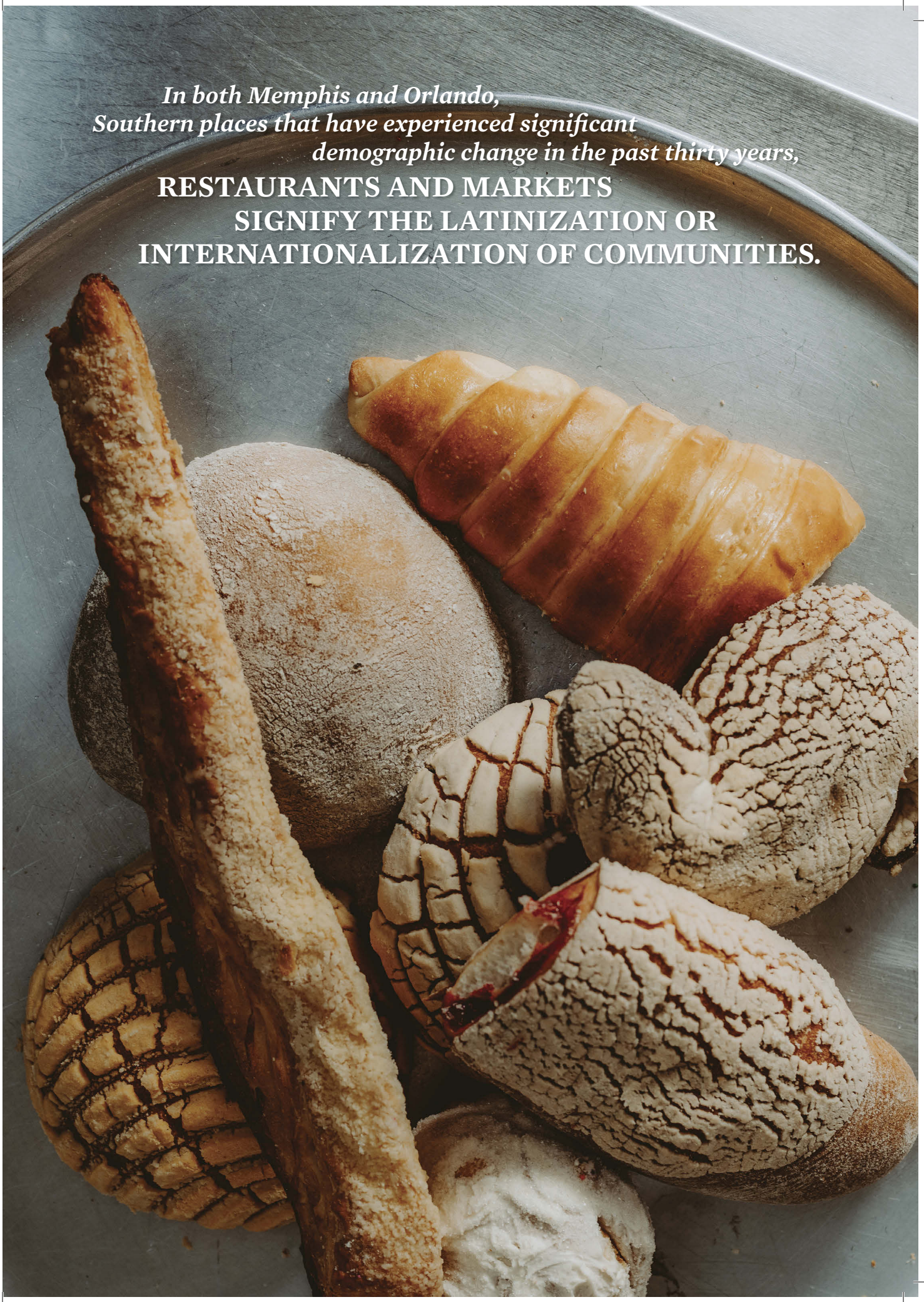


In both Memphis and Orlando,
Southern places that have experienced significant
demographic change in the past thirty years,

RESTAURANTS AND MARKETS SIGNIFY THE LATINIZATION OR INTERNATIONALIZATION OF COMMUNITIES.

A bus stop in BVL displays a campaign ad for Viviana Janer, a Puerto Rican running for re-election to the Osceola County Commission, February 2022.

Roberto Gonzalez

between Los Angeles and New York's huge Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. In these two urban spaces, he wrote, "all of your senses inform you that you are in Latin America, or that some section of Latin America has been transplanted to the urban United States where it maintains itself energetically." In the suburbs of Greater Orlando, I found that the Puerto Rican diaspora was already influencing political, economic, and cultural life.

Puerto Ricans are the largest group of Latinos in Greater Orlando, and the wave of migration in the 1990s through the early 2010s included both professionals and low-paid service sector workers. Multiple push-pull factors fueled and sustained the migration, including real estate marketing and opportunities for homeownership; labor recruitment; powerful social networks (a phenomenon known as "chain migration"); and the perception that Florida offered a better quality of life. For upwardly mobile Puerto Ricans, central Florida offered greater economic promise in a similarly attractive climate. Push factors from the island included the social consequences of Puerto Rico's economic instability, such as rising crime rates and the fear of violence. Additionally, deindustrialization in the United States during the 1970s led to layoffs of Puerto Rican workers living in Northern cities and contributed to outmigration to other parts of the country, including Florida. Since Puerto Ricans are United States citizens, they are able to avoid some of the social and political barriers faced by foreign-born immigrants. By 2010, the population's growing political power and cultural influence was evident.

Sandra Lopez (an alias), a schoolteacher from New York City who had relocated to BVL, recalled driving into Orlando to find Latin American and Caribbean products in the late 1980s. "It took between forty-five minutes to an hour to get plátanos [plantains] or pernil [roast pork]. As time progressed, the food changed." Food, she explained, was a measure of the demographic transformations. "Eventually the supermarket created an international food aisle and you knew that was your section." Over time, entire supermarkets replaced the single international food aisle. Some of these restaurants and markets took

Buenaventura Lakes (BVL) in Osceola County, FL, identifies as 76 percent Latino.

Roberto Gonzalez

the place of existing establishments that once catered to non-Latino white residents.

In 2005, the Publix supermarket chain opened a standalone market called Publix Sabor in Osceola County's Kissimmee. All product information and signs were bilingual, and the store offered a wide variety of Latin American and Caribbean products. Plátanos maduros (sweet plantains), empanada dough, and a selection of frozen Goya dinners—arroz con pollo (rice with chicken), ropa vieja con arroz (rice with shredded beef), and arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas)—were just a few of the products that lined the freezer shelves.

For some residents, the availability of familiar Latin American and Caribbean foods was central to their sense of being at home in a new place. For others, the Latinization of grocery shelves was a daily reminder that BVL was changing and non-Latino white residents were becoming a demographic minority for the first time.

On a hot summer day in July 2010, I stood outside of the Robert Guevara Community Center in BVL, named after the first Puerto Rican elected to the Osceola County Commission, and listened as a small group of non-Latino residents discussed their frustration with the local supermarkets and businesses that they saw as "catering" to Latino consumers. One mentioned his experience in a local supermarket where several store associates had to look around to find an English-speaking worker to assist him, while he waited patiently in disbelief. Another resident chimed in and mentioned another supermarket, Sedano's, which had opened earlier that year in the same space as her former grocery store.

Founded in 1962, Sedano's initially catered to a Cuban American clientele. It grew to a chain of about thirty-five Florida markets. Salsa music played, pastelitos (a pastry baked or fried with sweet or savory fillings) were available in a café, and clerks greeted customers in Spanish, although signs were in English. In 2009, Sedano's purchased three Albertsons markets in Central Florida with plans to serve the growing Puerto Rican customer base. The new Orlando-area Sedano's stocked brands like Iberia, Conchita, and El Norteño. Augusto Sanabria, president and

chief executive officer of Prospera (formerly the Hispanic Business Initiative Fund), told a journalist at the time, "Anytime that a big Hispanic company comes into town, it just re-emphasizes the power of the Hispanic community here in Central Florida.... It's music to my ears."

Yet not everyone celebrated the arrival of Sedano's. On January 8, 2010, an Internet user who went by the name of tim (sic) commented on an *Orlando Sentinel* article about the new chain. "Hispanics need their own supermarkets...wow!...the regular supermarkets are not good enough for them??"

Supermarkets and formal businesses weren't the only signs of Greater Orlando's changing culinary landscape. When I drove around BVL on weekends, I encountered garage sales, yard sales, and poster boards advertising the sale of alcapurrias (a fritter made from plantains and stuffed with meat), empanadas, or pinchos (meat kabobs). These types of "plate sales" are common in other parts of the South. My neighbor consistently set up his grill on the front lawn, arranged folding chairs, and prepared pinchos to sell when cars pulled over and neighbors congregated.

Life had clearly changed since the 1980s, when Sandra Lopez had to travel forty miles for familiar Puerto Rican foods. In BVL, the concession stand at the Archie Gordon Memorial Park sold empanadas and pernil sandwiches while the cashier behind the counter blasted salsa music on a radio. I was even able to purchase pasteles during the holiday season from a vendor in the local Walmart parking lot. (Pasteles are a traditional Puerto Rican dish. Labor-intensive to prepare and usually associated with the Christmas season, they are made of a root-vegetable masa stuffed with meat and boiled in a plantain leaf.)

I quickly learned that while some of my interviewees appreciated the availability of familiar Caribbean foods in residential spaces and commercial parking lots, other residents interpreted this practice as a health-code violation and as evidence of unwelcome cultural changes. The suburb they had called home for decades now felt foreign. When I began my research in Florida, my focus was not on foodways. Yet restaurants and markets emerged as important sites of contestation, and I continued to pay attention to them.

Houston Cofield

Andrew Gattas owns Knowledge Tree, a school-supply store on Summer Avenue in Memphis. He is the second generation in his family to own a business on Summer Avenue.

Summer Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee, is another Southern landscape that has changed dramatically over the years. The avenue was the location of the first Holiday Inn in the United States as well as the first McDonald's in Memphis. In the mid-twentieth century, Summer was lined with restaurants and motor courts, and there was a thriving business district. In recent decades, the area became home to a sizable immigrant population. Latinos made up a large portion of this growth. New immigrants to the Summer Avenue corridor opened businesses of all kinds, but especially restaurants and grocery stores.

Caiman Authentic Venezuelan Cuisine and Bakery, which I visited several times in the summer of 2017, was an important social space for Venezuelan Memphians to gather, converse about Venezuelan politics, and enjoy cuisine that reminded them of home. Caiman owner Allen Ampueda left Venezuela in 2004 and arrived in Arkansas, where his sister was living. He found work remodeling houses and repairing semi-trucks until his sister put the idea of a restaurant in his head. Eventually, he moved to Memphis and opened Caiman. (The restaurant has since closed.)

During one visit, a customer named Maria told me that she came to Caiman when she was having a difficult day. She took out her cell phone to show me a photo of a bullet-riddled house that belonged to someone she knew back in Venezuela. Maria left the country because she feared for her life. "It's a dictatorship—they want the oil. Venezuela is a rich country. They imprison anyone who opposes," she said. Her family is now scattered around North America and Europe. Maria only needed to complete a few more credits to earn her master's degree, but she couldn't feed her children on her teacher's salary. She described herself as an activist and wanted me to understand that the people in Venezuela were suffering. She continued her activism as best she could from her new home in Memphis.

In 2018, the Summer Avenue Merchant Association initiated an effort to brand the avenue as Memphis' official "International District," naming a roughly three-mile section of Summer between Highland Street and White Station Road "Nations Highway." Restaurants and markets in particular

Roberto Gonzalez

A house in Buenaventura Lakes (BVL) displays a flag for a free Cuba. While Puerto Ricans make up a large percentage of BVL's population, the area is also home to other Latino communities, including Cuban Americans.

An employee behind the bar at Mi Tierra on Summer Avenue in Memphis, September 2021.

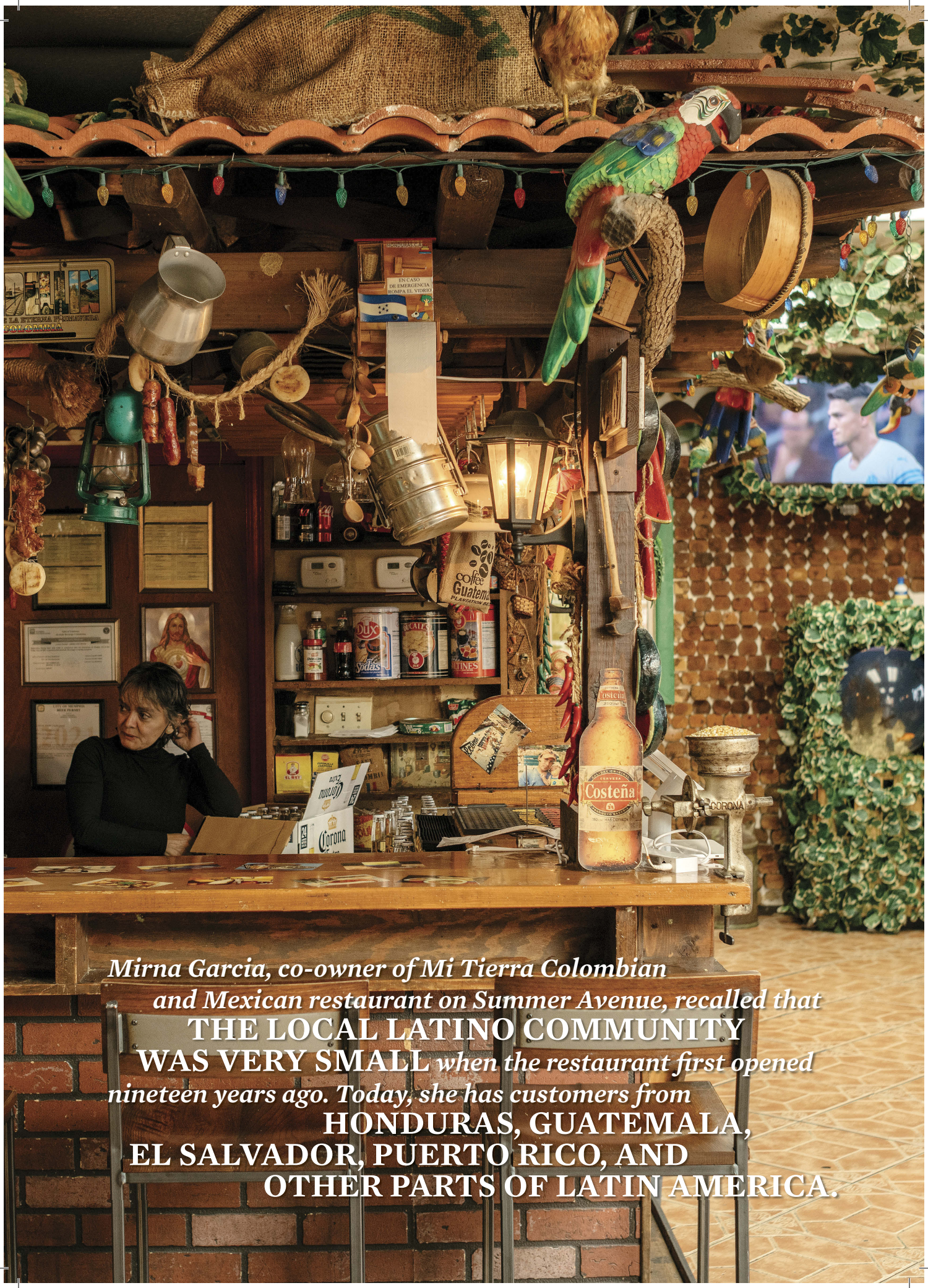
became key to that international place-identity. In a 2018 article from *High Ground News*, Meghan Medford, the association president, explained that "Summer Avenue used to be the place where everyone wanted to go to, where everyone hung out.... We're trying to bring that energy back to Summer." She later told me, "There's just so many different nationalities and countries represented here, and you can get any kind of food from anywhere. And so we were thinking, what is this area and what does it mean to people?"

White flight to the suburbs following the desegregation of Memphis public schools may have paved the way for new immigrant populations to transform Summer Avenue, Meghan said. "A lot of the immigrants moved into those houses that are in the area, and they rented them. And it's an area that welcomes everyone and they felt comfortable," she said.

Andrew Gattas, owner of the school-supply company Knowledge Tree, spent much of his childhood and adolescence working for the department store his father opened on Summer Avenue in 1970. He reflected on the transformations he witnessed over the years. "I didn't really fully understand the impact until probably five or six years ago, when you drive down and you genuinely see every type of ethnic restaurant you could imagine..." he said, clarifying, "I think it had happened long before that, long before I noticed."

Abdullah Mohammed, a merchant from Taiz, Yemen, who opened the Stone House Market in 2016, described the changes he witnessed along Summer Avenue. He decided to open his business because he saw Latinos, Yemenis, Iraqis, and Palestinians in the area. It looked like it was going to be an international street, he explained. He went on to name a Turkish grill, a Japanese restaurant, an Iraqi investor, a Jordanian laundromat owner, a Mexican immigration attorney, and a furniture salesman from Jerusalem. "Now the street is just an international place," he said.

Mirna Garcia, co-owner of Mi Tierra Colombian and Mexican restaurant, recalled that in 1995 the Latino community was very small. When her restaurant first opened nineteen years ago, it only sold Colombian food, but "customers would look in and they'd look and they loved the place, but



Mirna Garcia, co-owner of Mi Tierra Colombian and Mexican restaurant on Summer Avenue, recalled that **THE LOCAL LATINO COMMUNITY WAS VERY SMALL** *when the restaurant first opened nineteen years ago. Today, she has customers from* **HONDURAS, GUATEMALA, EL SALVADOR, PUERTO RICO, AND OTHER PARTS OF LATIN AMERICA.**

THIS PAGE: Tom Tongumpun owns The Cottage, a Thai restaurant on Summer Avenue in Memphis. OPPOSITE: The Sheba Special Galabah at Queen of Sheba restaurant on Summer Avenue in Memphis

they were not adventurous enough to try the food, so they would leave.... So we added Mexican food to the menu, and that started letting customers stay trying the Mexican food and also try the Colombian. Now they come back and just order the Colombian." Garcia has customers from Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, and other parts of Latin America.

The Summer Avenue Merchant's Association embraced and promoted the different ethnic groups that contributed to the revitalization of the area. In 2018, local newspapers mentioned a $50,000 Community Enhancement Grant the association received from the county. Heidi Shafer, a former Shelby County commissioner, told the press that "we've really been trying to bring Summer up for about a decade now.... One of the things I thought would be helpful is if we could start to give Summer a sense of place." The first phase of the project was the installation of banners that said "Nations Highway" and displayed flags from different parts of the world to demarcate the space. The second phase would focus on landscape design and other beautification efforts.

What happened next surprised me. Controversy over the branding effort emerged from within the international community and quickly became a topic of debate on social media and in the local press. Residents questioned whether there was an equal investment in the surrounding community. At least one person expressed fear that the increased attention would make Summer Avenue businesses the targets of raids by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Another criticized the effort as a project of "neoliberal multiculturalism," arguing that the international identities of the business owners and the diversity they brought to the commercial strip was being exploited for marketing purposes and profits. Some saw the project as catering to tourists rather than neighbors.

The branding initiative received additional criticism from both native Memphians and members of the international community who objected to the banners that were placed on poles along the avenue. Each pole featured a flag from a different country. According to some reports, the local Vietnamese population wanted the yellow flag that represented South Vietnam on display instead

of the red flag that represented North Vietnam before being adopted as the countries unifying flag. I later learned that the banner with the Vietnamese flag was torn down. The Chinese flag was also challenged for having communist symbolism, while the Israeli flag was criticized because the Jerusalem Market was owned by Palestinians. All of the flags were eventually removed.

In 2021, the Tennessee Department of Transportation awarded an urban transportation grant to the City of Memphis' Division of Planning and Development to create a Complete Streets Plan, which would guide Summer Avenue's future development. The design renderings stood in stark contrast to the modest strip malls that currently line the avenue. Those improvements would certainly improve the aesthetic, and perhaps they will transform Summer Avenue into the destination space that many business owners hoped for. However, I couldn't help but think of the opposition to the infrastructural changes and the emphasis on gentrification. There was fear that rents would increase, potentially pushing some businesses to close.

In Memphis, Tennessee, and Orlando, Florida—Southern places that experienced significant demographic changes in the past thirty years—restaurants and markets signal the Latinization or internationalization of communities. Migration, food, and the identity of place are deeply bound together. And this phenomenon is occurring, or has already occurred, in so many places across the South. Perhaps even in your own backyard.

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