



THE VIPER AND THE TORTOISE

IN MEMPHIS, A TASTE OF MEXICO CITY

by David Ramsey

JOSÉ “PEPE” MAGALLANES NEVER STOPS. ON A RECENT VISIT TO the restaurant he founded, Las Tortugas Deli Mexicana in the Memphis suburb of Germantown, the dapper seventy-one-year-old regaled me with tales of the restaurant’s beginnings, the unique joy and spirit of Mexican cuisine, the unlovely history of flour tortillas and Tex-Mex burritos, how he came to meet Walter Payton and Muhammad Ali, and his adventures racing motorcycles and skydiving. As the stories spun, he backslapped regulars, fetched me aguas frescas (“the way the lime cleanses your palate, it’s perfect, yes?”), gave me an iPad tour of restaurants in his native Mexico City, and explained his passion for the vibrant, colorful food he grew up with.

Photographs by Houston Coffield

Magallanes bears a passing (if clean-shaven) resemblance to the “Most Interesting Man in the World” of the ubiquitous television commercials. Part of the pleasure of visiting Las Tortugas is the chance to meet Pepe, a wind-up doll of *joie de vivre*, too-good-to-check stories, and folk wisdom. “Mexican food,” he says, “is part of the celebration of living. It’s not just going to eat so you don’t starve. Eating in Mexico is part of the party; it’s part of the fun.”

When I inquire about the huge serpentine ring Pepe wears, he smiles and says, “I’m glad you asked.” Pepe is an adrenaline junkie. He’s been riding and racing motorcycles since he was a teenager. Now he owns around twenty. The snake ring references his biggest and baddest motorcycle, which is built with a Dodge Viper engine. “So people started calling me Viper Man,” he says. “I decided to take up the alter ego of a kind of superhero.”

Viper Man flies, too. Pepe started skydiving at age nineteen, when the sport was just beginning in the early 1960s. “One of my friends joined this parachuting club,” Pepe says. “It was not skydiving as it is today—it was just jumping out of an airplane and hoping for the best. So I got very interested.” He’s done more than 6,000 skydives. Pictures of the airborne Pepe, falling thousands of feet with a rapturous, wind-blown smile on his face, hang on the restaurant’s walls.

Las Tortugas is tucked in a nondescript strip mall. Past a shoe store, a bank, Clips Hair and Nail Salon, and State Farm Insurance, there’s a simple sign on the corner: DELI MEXICANA. Consider it a surprise attack—some of the finest Mexican food in this country is hidden away in the kind of spot you might expect to house a Subway.

Pepe opened Las Tortugas in 2003 as a personal mission. The incredibly diverse food scene in Mexico City is marked by elegant simplicity, beautiful presentation, and fresh ingredients. By contrast, most Mexican restaurants stateside were serving up huge portions of cheap, processed food, with Americanized twists. “The reason I opened this place is that I wanted to show people the experience of quality that I grew up with in Mexico City,” Pepe explains.

He modeled Las Tortugas after the taquerías and tortariás that serve the “light, fresh food that people eat every day,” says his son Jonathan, forty-one, who runs the place nowadays. (Pepe still helps out and holds court.) “He was trying to be faithful to the places he loved in Mexico City. Places where the owner was the chef who went out to the market, brought in food, and made it in front of you. It’s an intimate thing—and the flavors and colors, it’s just a totally different experience.”

Before we get sidetracked with heady talk of cultural authenticity



or the values and pitfalls of culinary fusion, let me just get to the point: The food at Las Tortugas is astonishingly delicious. The core of the menu is tacos—served on corn tortillas, along with a creamy-spicy, avocado-based salsa verde and a snappy pico de gallo—and tortas, traditional Mexican sandwiches. Meat options range from the classic (the juicy marinated pork in the pastor tacos brought me back to my favorite hole-in-the-wall finds in Mexico) to the luxe (a five-ounce portion of filet mignon grilled to order).

The eponymous *tortuga* (Spanish for turtle) is the restaurant's take on the traditional torta, inspired by Pepe's favorite tortarías in Mexico City. As soon as loaves of bread come out of the oven, the middle is hollowed out—like the shell of a tortoise, thus the nickname—and the bread is grilled and then stuffed with goodies. In addition to generous portions of meat or seafood, the fillings

include perfectly ripe avocado, tomatoes, queso fresco, poblano peppers, and sliced sweet onion. Pepe jokes that if New Orleans is famous for po-boys, you might call these rich boys.

"The torta is really a staple of Mexican cooking and cuisine, as popular as hamburgers in the United States," Jonathan says. "Great meat or seafood, vegetables, salsa—the same things you see in a taco, it's just as easy to put them in a torta."

The daily specials depend on what's available and in season. The showstopper, if it's available: a torta stuffed with bright red Gulf shrimp. Gulf shrimp at a Mexican restaurant in landlocked Tennessee? Turns out they've partnered with a shrimper on the Gulf Coast of Mississippi who drives up with his fresh catch on ice, packed in coolers in the back of his pickup truck.

Pepe calls the style at Las Tortugas "the most upscale presentation of Mexican traditional

light eating," adding, "this is not a food truck, okay?" While the restaurant often puts a high-end spin on street fare, the atmosphere remains casual. The dining area is small, simple, and festive. The walls are filled with laminated signs offering up rants and aphorisms from Viper Man. One sign lists the top ten questions customers ask at Las Tortugas (Number 1: "Is Jonathan married?"); another floats the idea of Pepe for President.

The key to ordering is the initial chat at the register with Pepe or Jonathan, in which you get tips on what's fresh today and hear the specials, like smoky brisket from nearby Claybrook Farms. Jonathan welcomes returning customers by name; Pepe estimates that his son has 3,000 names memorized. New customers get the lowdown on the menu and the core values that inspired Pepe to open Las Tortugas, a tradition that Jonathan is proud to carry on. Their homage to authentic Mexican cuisine isn't just about the style of cooking, Jonathan explains to first timers. Just as Pepe used to do, Jonathan starts each morning with several hours of shopping, selecting every item that the restaurant will serve. "This is what Mexican food is famous for," Jonathan says. "When you go to Mexico and the food is good, this is why. Because they just bought it fresh. The evidence of this is in the food: You are going to taste it."

Tapping in to a network of local

farmers and scouring more than half a dozen markets, Jonathan does as much local sourcing as he can. "It's constantly evolving, someone new entering the fold, someone leaving," he says. "It's up to us to always be on the hunt and find new opportunities—eggs from this farm, pork from that farm." Two years ago, Las Tortugas started ordering whole Berkshire hogs from Newman Farms in Myrtle, Missouri, to butcher in-house. Customers have come to learn that the menu will always be in flux depending on what Jonathan can find. "We have to protect their expectations about the food," he says. "If we can't find what we're looking for, we're not going to serve something inferior."

During the summer, Jonathan can nab beautiful corn, watermelon, tomatoes, and cantaloupes

"THE SAME THINGS YOU SEE IN A TACO, IT'S JUST AS EASY TO PUT THEM IN A TORTA."

grown in Tennessee and Mississippi. For spices and chocolates not available locally, he works with a Memphis-based importer—bringing in fresh tamarind from Mexico, for example, which the cooks shell and seed by hand for a bright, punchy agua fresca. Meanwhile, he partners with

produce managers at several supermarkets and gets first pick from what comes in on the trucks in the morning.

Jonathan has developed techniques to maximize quality for produce that doesn't grow in the mid-South, like mangoes and avocados. When I mentioned that

**NO CHEESE DIP,
NO DOLLOPS OF
SOUR CREAM,
NO BURRITOS,
NO FAJITAS.**

I was surprised at the consistent perfection of the avocado garnishes, he explained his method: "I only buy avocados that are green and hard as a rock, the most unripe I can find—because I want to control the environment that the avocado ripens in. A ripe avocado in the store is almost always bad because it's moved between warm and cool climates. If it matures in a constant temperature, it's going to mature wonderfully, but the only way to ensure that is if you get them green and do it yourself." He stores hundreds of avocados at the restaurant, allowing him to pick the best ones at just the right moment of maturity.

The Las Tortugas tradition also means, as Jonathan puts it, "staying true to the identity of authentic Mexican food." That's part of his spiel to new customers: No hard-shell tacos or flour tortillas, no cheese dip, no dollops of sour

cream, no burritos, no fajitas. Some of those laminated signs echo the point. My favorites were a couple that took the form of Pepe-penned letters to Californians and other border-state residents. "To Californians with an attitude implying that Memphians are ignorant about Mexican cuisine," begins one, "we've got news for you.... We are from Mexico City." Another manifesto establishes the Las Tortugas mission: "setting the record straight about what is truly fresh classic Mexican cuisine with absolutely no influence of the American way of cooking."

If you want cheese on top of your tacos, Jonathan and company will politely decline. "My father has a passion for preserving the integrity of the dish," Jonathan explains.

PEPE'S FAMILY owned a strip-mining company back in Mexico City. His father instilled a work ethic in him from a young age; before he could drive a truck or a bulldozer, he worked as a peon. "I worked in that place since I was nine years old," Pepe remembers. "Taking rocks from here to there, that kind of deal."

He used to sneak into the kitchen as a boy to spy on the family cooks, and slowly taught himself their tricks—he once ate all thirteen eggs the cooks had prepared for the family just so he could watch them make another dish. "I remember the cooks used to complain—I would go over there



and elbow them out,” he says.

As a college student in Monterey, Pepe met Nancy Martin, an American student from Memphis doing post-graduate work in Spanish. He fell in love, and they kept up a long-distance courtship when she returned home. Four years later they married, and Nancy joined Pepe in Mexico City, where Pepe ran the mining business.

In 1980, Pepe and Nancy, now with two sons in tow, moved to Tennessee. Nancy worked as a Spanish professor at the University of Memphis (“she speaks Spanish better than I do, grammatically speaking,” Pepe says), while he continued to run the mining operation back home. “When it came time for us to move, I thought it was going to be a good adventure—but my business was still in Mexico,” he says. For the next twenty years, he commuted back and forth between Memphis and Mexico City.

By 2000, he had earned enough money to retire, and sold his part of the business. He and Nancy moved to Naples, Florida, to relax. (Pepe’s version of relaxing included skydiving and racing motorcycles at speeds of almost 200 miles per hour in Daytona.) The life of the retiree, however, was not for Pepe. “When you have too much fun, you lose the flavor,” he says. “I retired, and it was boring. Work

is how I enjoy life—not fishing.”

Less than three years later, they returned to Memphis to open a restaurant. He had no history in the food business. Pepe says that his naiveté turned out to be the secret to his success.

“I thought when you opened a restaurant, you went out and bought food, bring it back, cook it, and do the dishes,” he says. “I didn’t know anything about food service companies. I went out and picked up the best of everything. So that was the reason for the success.”

Jonathan, who had been working in sales in Florida, came back to Memphis to help his father with the restaurant two years after it opened. In 2010, Pepe passed the torch to his son.

The first time Jonathan put up his own dish on the special board, a pumpkin-seed green mole, customers loved it. “It was the first time that people ever paid money for something that I had made,” he remembers. “To have someone come up and tell you that’s the best mole they’ve ever had—I’ve never experienced anything else like that. To have the creative liberty to choose what you want to make and have the confidence that people are going to like it—that’s it, I was done, I could not imagine a more satisfying career, period.”

Like Viper Man, like son. 🐍

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SOUTHERN, REBORN

MY BOILING SPRINGS BECAME A WELLSPRING

by Monique Truong

I WAS BORN IN SAIGON, South Vietnam, in 1968.

I was reborn in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, in 1975.

Not a “rebirth” in the religious sense of the word but in the shape-shifting transformation that refugees and immigrants undergo upon our arrival here in the U.S. With a new language, often a new name, and always a new daily bread, we necessarily become someone new. For a child, this metamorphosis is even more acute and thorough.

I was seven when my family came to Boiling Springs as refugees from the Vietnam War. I didn’t add the English language to my Vietnamese. I traded it wholesale. Now when I try to speak my first language, I’m told that my accent is *cứng*, which in this context means the opposite of supple. In my new home, the given name that I answered to during my young life became, literally, a dirty word. I went from Dung—the “D” is pronounced like a “Y”—to Monique, a name on my Catholic

The author marches in the 1977 Shelby Christmas Parade.



Courtesy Monique Truong