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## TEX-MEX VS. MEX-MEX: QUE EN LOS DIABLOS ES UN TACO CONCHA?

The extent to which we in the West stereotype "other" cultures is obvious from our advertising, television and cinema, let alone our supermarkets, but whereas the information and entertainment industries use cultural stereotypes as code for the undesirable "foreignness" of other cultures, the food industry works the other way, seeking to transform unfamiliar, "difficult" dishes into easily recognisable domestic staples. In the cinema we are encouraged to associate Asians with inscrutability, Italians with organised crime and Mexicans with laziness, but in supermarkets, spring rolls, lasagne and burritos become desirable consumer items. Comprehensively repackaged, they offer "elsewhere" in unthreatening form.

A cursory examination of Australian supermarket shelves would suggest that the Australian diet has kept pace with the country's multi-culturalisation. But pre-packaged food companies are as adept as Grundy screenwriters at reducing complex cultures to metonyms. In the hands of domestic food conglomerates, China's complex civilisation becomes frozen sweet and sour, India's canned lamb korma and Thailand is represented by microwavable satay chicken—and amidst this fearful concentration of geography, culture and monosodium glutamate, Mexican food appears to have done rather well. At least two companies have devoted themselves to presenting a wide variety of Mexican-style foods, and the range has grown so big and so popular that any self-respecting supermarket must be prepared to give over a good couple of cubic metres to these Latin favourites.

I myself have not been immune to the lure of Mexican food kits and pre-mixed, measured accessories in brightly coloured boxes. The most successful pre-prepared food company—let's call it Elderly Dos Passos—makes the consumer feel that eating Mexican food need be no more difficult than mastering the "lick, sip, suck" technique used to sell tequila in Australian bars. Elderly Dos Passos have mastered Mexico's complicated traditional recipes and reduced them to three-step, three-packet miracles which can be put together in the time it takes to win an electric bed on "Wheel of Fortune." I was particularly partial to their taco kits, to which I would add beans instead of the usual mince, and my own home-made salsa, in order to maintain some "cultural authenticity." The recipe never failed to impress my lefty friends, on three counts: firstly, it had cultural cred; secondly, since everyone knows that authentic "third world"

food is much healthier than western food, the beans were health on health; and finally, by substituting beans and my own salsa for the Dos Passos stuff, I was subverting a commercially generated culinary stereotype and demonstrating my solidarity with the Mexican poor.

In February this year I left North Queensland to live in Mexico City. And it was here, in a suburban Mexican supermarket, that I discovered the truth about my gesture to the tables of Mexico's poor. Looking forward to impressing the check-out operator with more than just the customary "Buenos Dias," I paced the aisles for taco shells and little packets of beans. The beans I could find—in fact, the beans occupy an entire aisle. Mexicans can choose from fifteen different varieties of bean in four different packaging styles and eight different sizes. That's 480 different bean possibilities for the Mexican shopper. In Australia, I'd go to the health foods section at Woolworths and weigh up the relative merits of borlottis and pintos. In Mexico they ask "what kind of borlottis?" The taco shells were more difficult to locate. Mexicans do not eat them.

Mexican food in Australia is a simulacrum, an imitation of an American imitation. Mexicans would not recognise what we know as Mexican food. I was not expecting supermarkets here to carry pre-packaged burritos with a choice of mild, medium or hot salsas, but the products I discovered in the Mexican supermarket made Elderly Dos Passos look like in-flight food. Perhaps this does not come as much of a surprise. The Westernisation of Mexican food could be justified as culinary "hybridisation." However, when the West sets out to hybridise *itself*, the result is usually the de-culturalisation of everything else. It is one thing to embrace a range of cuisines that are not your own in the name of globalisation, but it is quite another to transform those dishes into a close replication of something tamely familiar in order to "maximise market potential." In this particular form of cultural colonisation, the West is its own victim. We are selling the lie to ourselves. With their concentration on convenience foods designed to reduce space, refrigeration and storage-time, Western supermarkets have already been instrumental in changing our eating habits, so it stands to reason that they will redesign oddly-shaped and tasting foreign foods to fit their standardised shelves and the standardised Western palates they cater for. "Mexican" food may have helped to broaden the Australian culinary lexicon, but now, ironically, it has become a convenience food which evokes Texas more strongly than Tamaulipas.

However, the difference between my pre-packaged taco dinners in Australia and my half-kilo of fresh beef mixote in Mexico represents more than just a fault-line in culinary customs. Where the availability of instant "Mexican" food in Western supermarkets indicates how vulnerable Western consumers are to the colonising strategies of international corporatism, the commitment

which Mexicans have to the protection of their culinary identity is demonstrated daily in THEIR supermarket delicatessens, despite the pressure in most other aspects of their lives to capitulate to the demands of multi-national corporations. Unlike ours, Mexican supermarkets have managed to resist international corporate intervention and to remain signs of cultural independence. By assuming the role of the traditional Mexican kitchen at a time when social and economic demands have transformed the lives of Mexican women, they have helped to protect traditional Mexican eating habits. Today, Mexican women no longer devote the better part of their time to grinding corn into tortilla flour or slapping dough against heated rocks, so the tortilla bakery at the supermarket takes on the job, producing an apparently endless stream of fresh tortillas. In addition, the delicatessen offers huge tubs of traditional hot fish, beef, chicken, bean and vegetable stews, fresh quesadillas, tamales and several varieties of salsa, all cooked on site. The Mexican shopper need only steam some rice for the evening meal to be complete.

Open-air markets are central to Mexico's retail traditions, and they continue to play a major role in daily life. The covered supermarket, however, with its car parks, muzak and rotating beacons, is a twentieth-century invention, and an American invention at that. The three major supermarket chains in Mexico—Gigante, Suparama and Aurrera—are U.S. owned, and, as Mexico is one of the U.S.'s major trading partners, some osmosis is bound to occur. However, Mexicans have refused to let the corporations determine what they eat. The supermarkets are thus forced to duplicate most of the goods on offer at the traditional markets and/or providing the traditional dishes which would otherwise be prepared in home kitchens.

Thus, Mexicans have adopted a "within and against" approach to colonial corporate incursions in their space. The multinational household-goods giants may have been able to convince the people that they cannot live without Drano or fifteen varieties of air-freshener, but Mexicans have refused the corporations access to their kitchens. They have bought the *concept* of the supermarket, but *they* determine what is sold within its walls. Moreover, in demanding that their food be freshly prepared, the customers ensure that the supermarkets buy only local, Mexican-grown ingredients. So, not only have Mexicans managed thus far to avoid pre-packaged corporate appropriation of their diets, they have reserved their local market for domestic produce, and this despite the immense pressure of NAFTA (the North Atlantic Free Trade Association, as cynical a manifestation of "globalisation" as there ever was) to become the 51st state. How many Western countries can claim as much?

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