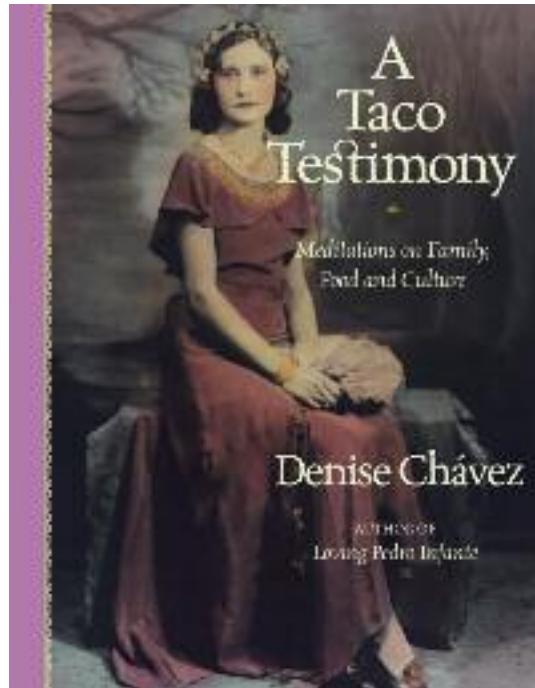


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# A TACO TESTIMONY\*

BY DENISE CHAVEZ



I am no stranger to tacos. If I had to make a list of things I am familiar with, tacos would be high on the list, and for many reasons.

My mother, Delfina Rede Faver Chávez, made sure that all the little kids, male and female, who passed through her house held a tiny rolling pin in their even tinier hands and made tortillas. I like the memory of my now oh-so-macho nephew at my mother's table mastering the art.

As children, we were allowed to play on the kitchen floor with bandejas/pans of all shapes and sizes and with an odd assortment of lids Mother has accrued over the years. Very few lids ever had a matching pan, but somehow she partnered up the mismatched pieces and made a whole. Her old faithful frying pan, her beloved sartén, had a lid that fit perfectly, whether rice was simmering in there or a tasty pot roast.

Mother's foolproof theory was that young children should be kept low and occupied. And if they played on the kitchen floor it was good. No muss, no fuss.

Banging away, a one-person band on blue linoleum, or attempting to roll out a perfect round globe of misbehaving dough that insisted on becoming the island of Cuba, we were taught to be attentive to tortillas.

The mastery of making tortillas led, most naturally, to the mastery of taco production.

As a teenager, I'd sit at the dappled 1950s red-and-white metal table rolling up taco after taco, overseen by Mother, who—vigilant as ever—made sure I didn't have the wrong side of the corn tortilla facing out.

For those who don't know: There is a front and backside of a tortilla. The front side, *la cara* (the face), is the side that hits the hot sartén first, toasting to a lovely tan. This side has more of a "burn factor" than the other side. The backside is less dark and is the side that should face out to greet the hungry world. Invariably, I had the wrong side facing out, much to my mother's chagrin.

Mother often insisted that I reroll. I would do so, with exasperation, eating taco meat from the bowl. Gingerly, or as best as I could, I redid the tacos, removing the taco meat that now lay smack dab in the middle of the cooling corn tortilla.

When we made tacos there were always two or three people rolling at a time. It might be that your fellow taco roller would squeeze the meat into a little cylindrical shape, ready to be inserted like a pre-fabricated mold.

You had to move fast with hot tortillas and blistering taco meat. Most likely you kept a pan of cold water nearby to dip your fingers into when the heat got to be too much. There was an unspoken rule that you had to work fast—the imminent danger of badly burning your fingers on either the taco meat or hot tortillas always lurked. Have you ever had taco meat burn? It can really hurt. So many Mexican food injuries go unreported.

With tacos, as in life, there are unspoken rules:

Consejo #1: Remember that the more burnt side of the tortilla goes "in."

Consejo #2: Never have a dry meat base. Have you noticed that most tacos fall apart when you pick them up? This has to do with the lack of "binding." Mother taught us the art of moist tacos, adding in potatoes or some other kind of vegetable that "holds" the meat together. The binding agent adds a moistness that is very desirable. Nothing is worse than either dry, flyaway meat or greasy beadlets that leave a film on your palate.

Consejo #3: Don't forget to add onion. Garlic, as well, if you choose. And by all means, don't forget to include the comino/cumin seasoning. I can tell if a taco is superior from three feet away by the glorious aroma of comino that wafts in my direction.

Observation #1: The folded taco had to have been invented in California, even though some say it comes from the Mexican state of Sonora or from Arizona. Who knows where all Mexican food mutations have come into being? No doubt the chimichanga was born there in a place with a strange name. The crisp half-shell tacos have become a favorite with Johnny Cook 'em Quicks. They probably have this type of taco at Mad Mex, a well-known Mexican restaurant in Pittsburgh I recently discovered. I worry about restaurants with names like that and especially in places like Pittsburgh.

The rolled taco reached its pinnacle of greatness in my Mother's kitchen. Her neatly laid out tacos lay golden brown in an old familiar cookie sheet, a sheet that was never used for cookies other than biscochos, our beloved Christmas sugar cookies. My Mother's tacos had a life and dignity of their own. Perfectly symmetrical, resting contentedly with no loose meat hanging out to dry to a hard crisp, with two types of cheese sprinkled on top. But first, the tacos went into a 350-degree oven to brown.

Consejo #4: Never put on the cheese too early.

Consejo #5: Watch what cheese you use. What happened to *cheese* cheese? Nowadays it's hard to find a decent cheese that melts the way it should. A combination of Longhorn and Monterey Jack works nicely.

Consejo #6: There's no getting away from frying the tortillas in oil. Sorry. It just won't taste the same. You can use low-fat oil. Canola oil works well. You can pat the tortilla dry and this will help, but you can't take the grease away from the taco.

Observation #2: Many a taco or enchilada has been ruined by hypersensitivity to grease. You need a little grease to get the tortillas soft and pliable. Steaming them won't do. I nearly lost a friendship over a plate of steamed enchiladas once. So watch out!

There are so many things I love about New Mexico, where I live. One of them is those cultural givens that we take for granted, like Morrell lard. Las Cruces is one of the few places that I've lived that has a run on Morrell lard each Christmas and various times throughout the year. I have driven across town—and back again, in desperation, all hours of the day and night—searching for lard. Many of you have probably suffered the same fate. Lard is as necessary to us as air. There is no way you can make the perfect biscocho—and I've tried—without lard.

I'll drive far for a taco. And as my husband says philosophically, "It's better to have tacos in times of no money than to have money and no tacos."

Tacos recall to me the special times: a house full of company of all ages, some little kid in the kitchen with a unisex apron around his neck like a giant bib, rolling out tortillas with a little rolling pin; another kid banging two mismatched lids together, pans strewn all over the floor;

someone rolling tacos with an ouch! ouch! as they dip tender fingers into cold water. Someone nearby is checking the taco meat to see if it has enough salt and someone else is frying up the tortillas while your cousin on your father's side grates cheese. In the background, someone yells, "Más tacos! More tacos!" as the kid with the lids—a future Ph. D.—begins a deafening drum roll on a metal pan. Nearby your nephew molds a fresh new world from what seems to be an inert and inanimate clump of dough.

Tacos. I know tacos. They are familiar. And not so ordinary.

P.S. I feel I have to put a disclaimer here. If you want to steam your tortillas, go ahead. Just see what you get.

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