

July 23, 2003

The True Flavors of Mexico, Hidden in New York

By ERIC ASIMOV

THE grocery Hidalgo Mexican Food Products looks as if it could as easily be in a courtyard in Cuernavaca as on a nondescript block in Astoria, Queens. The shelves are lined with avocado leaves and chilies. Small bags of dried herbs share the aisles with cans of beans, sacks of tortillas and racy comic books in Spanish. Bundles of fresh epazote leaves are stacked next to a cash register.

But sidestep a mop and bucket blocking one aisle and walk to the south end of the store, and a neat little counter with a handful of stools reveals itself. Behind the counter is a stove where a short woman in a tank top is tending a pot. She looks up with welcoming eyes. "Hola," she says as you take a seat and inhale the warm, homey aromas of steamed corn and sautéed pork.

The taqueria within Hidalgo is one of many hidden in the small groceries and shops that dot the city's scattered Mexican neighborhoods. Part lunch counter, part family dining room, these taquerias, serving mostly antojitos, or little street delicacies, have become an essential component of Mexican culture in New York City.

Not so long ago, any kind of taqueria was unheard of in New York. The city's Mexican population in 1980 was barely 24,000, according to the City Planning Department. But by 2000, that population had shot to about 187,000, primarily in the Queens neighborhoods of Elmhurst, Corona, Jackson Heights and Astoria; Sunset Park in Brooklyn; and East Harlem. It has spread farther since.

In the East Village, the Zaragoza Mexican Deli and Grocery, a cramped bodega with barely enough room to turn around between a cash register and a crate of fresh cactus paddles, offers a small selection of tamales and tacos each day, with a more elaborate selection on the weekends. A three-seat counter is squeezed in next to a jukebox, along with a pile of napkins on a paper plate, toothpicks and a bottle of salt.

At the Tehuitzingo Deli and Grocery in Clinton, the taqueria in the rear is far more spacious, complete with a blackboard menu, a small kitchen, a counter laminated with a sea creature design and enough fake flowers to hold a fake funeral. At Las Conchitas in Sunset Park, the taqueria is in the rear of a bakery, just a few simple tables and stools behind trays and trays of garish pastries in iridescent colors.

The quality of Mexican food in New York has improved markedly in the last few years, with restaurants as elaborate as Pampano, Rocking Horse and Salon Mexico showcasing the complexity and diversity of high-end Mexican cuisine. Yet the heart of immigrant Mexican culture beats within these rude and humble taquerias, where two soft corn tortillas, doubled and folded around carnitas or barbacoa — braised pork chunks or stewed goat — can for a moment soothe an ache for home.

These taquerias are decidedly modest. Paper plates are typical, and if you haven't mastered the important skill of grasping a taco and taking a bite without squeezing out the filling, the fork you receive will be plastic.

You have as much chance of seeing a margarita as a bottle of Château Pétrus. The drinks include beer or excellent Mexican sodas made by Jarritos, which uses cane sugar instead of the American corn syrup, giving the soda a clean, crisp taste in tangy flavors like grapefruit and tamarind. Occasionally you'll be offered a glass of house-made aguas frescas, lightly sweet water-based beverages in flavors like mango or strawberry. Hidalgo serves a wonderful agua fresca made with hibiscus, like the Jamaican sorrel drink, and called, fittingly enough, Jamaica (pronounced hah-MY-ka).

The flavors and aromas may evoke nostalgia, but oddly enough the institution of the grocery-taqueria is practically unknown in Mexico. "No, never," said Barbara Sibley, an owner of La Palapa, a Mexican restaurant in the East Village, who grew up in Mexico City. "Stores are stores. You'll more often see a person on the corner, selling their special gorditas, or a certain

kind of flauta or quesadilla."

Apparently the grocery-taqueria is a New York adaptation, perhaps inspired by the little groceries and delis in New York that double as sandwich shops. Or possibly it's a question of economy.

"Maybe it's because they have lots of labor — the whole family — but not much capital, so they want to get dual use of the stores they rent," said Paul Berman, an author and critic who has spent a lot of time in Mexico. "But mostly I guess it's because cuisine is a big aspect of Mexican culture, and to set up some kind of kitchen seems the logical thing to do for any Mexican."

Any immigrant culture, of course, tries to reproduce aspects of its homeland, and while grocery-taquerias may not show up on the corners of Cuernavaca, they are organized in New York along typically Mexican lines. Almost always they are family enterprises, with the men generally in charge of the grocery, and the women handling the cooking. It's not surprising. While a legion of Mexican men cook in restaurant kitchens throughout New York, the kitchens of Mexican homes are ruled by women.

"In Mexico, women are the owners of the kitchen," said Carmen Boullosa, a Mexican poet and novelist who lives in Brooklyn. "You really have to be a revolutionary soul in Mexico to cook if you are a man."

When you enter one of these taquerias you are in a way joining an extended family that seems to embrace each customer. Often the television is on, showing soccer games or soap operas, soundlessly so as not to compete with the blare of the jukebox. A child might be playing on the floor as mother and grandmother work the counter. People come in and out, issuing friendly greetings. Everybody seems welcome and accepted.

The food is family style as well. Though the menu changes little from taqueria to taqueria, the details vary. Each place has its own recipe for tacos and tamales, folk dishes with the proverbial secret ingredient. At Hidalgo, Carmen Fuentes, who owns the taqueria with her husband, Carlos Sanchez, serves tacos spread with salty, intensely flavorful guacamole. Her carnitas are chunky, with an almost crisp exterior, while the stewed goat, served on weekends, is wonderfully mellow. At Tehuitzingo, the carnitas are soft with a nutty flavor, the taco neat and compact, sprinkled with queso fresco and a salsa verde tangy with the taste of tomatillos. The tacos al pastor, made with chunks of roasted pork, are superb, and Tehuitzingo often serves chicharron tacos, made with almost jellylike pork skin that is far less chewy and more flavorful than you might expect.

"People are serving stuff that they serve at home," Ms. Sibley said. "Sometimes it's really good, sometimes not."

At Zaragoza, the tacos are filled to overflowing with tender lengua or cecina — tongue or salted beef — along with onions, cilantro, lettuce and red or green salsa. The delicious tamales are removed from their cornhusks and served drizzled with grated cheese, crema and lettuce. At La Vega in Corona, Queens, a deli with a small room that holds a half-dozen tables, the tacos are small and delicate, subtly flavored, accompanied by a thick, spicy salsa verde. At Las Conchitas, the bakery in Sunset Park, the tacos are also petite — you can easily eat three for lunch — and the salsa verde is thinner and milder.

Homesickness is evident in the names of the groceries that are in front of the taquerias — Zaragoza and Tehuitzingo are the hometowns of the owners. Modesty, too. No matter how proud a cook might be if you enjoy her tacos or tamales, she most likely would insist on directing you across the street to a restaurant for even better ones.

"Most of the Mexicans in New York are working class," Ms. Boullosa said. "They are running away from poverty, but they are not running away from their country." She said many send much of their earnings to their families back in Mexico, and fantasize about returning to live there one day.

As is typical in households of such recent immigrants, the children must do much of the English speaking for their parents. Why did Miguel Fuentes (no relation to Carmen) and Matilde Lopez start offering food at Tehuitzingo Deli? Simple enough, answered their son, Abraham Fuentes. "Customers came and they wanted to eat here," he said.

Few of the grocery taquerias are as elaborate or have as advanced a business plan as Hidalgo in Queens, which has been in business 10 years. It has always sold sandwiches and tacos, Carmen Fuentes said, but the counter was added four months ago with an eye to a steady stream of customers from the school down the block that is under construction and due to open in September.

Ms. Fuentes is from Costa Rica, but her husband is Mexican and she learned to cook for him. Now she oversees a small crew of women who prepare her recipes. Almost every day she has tacos with several fillings and tamales, wrapped either in cornhusks or banana leaves (the difference is subtle). She serves fabulous roasted chicken, tangy and moist as if lacquered in citrus. But many of the specialties are available only on weekends, like carnitas and barbacoa, pozole soup and tripe.

There is no menu, so you either have to know what is available, or just luck out. Sitting at the counter one afternoon, I noticed a woman making gorditas. She picked up a handful of masa, or corn dough, and shaped it into a pocket around a dollop of braised pork and closed the edges. She put it in a pan to fry, and as it sizzled enticingly, I gestured toward it. She gestured back, and we had closed the deal.

When it was done frying, she scooped it up, cut open an end, stuffed it with crumbled cheese and cream and handed it to me on a square paper plate. It was delicious, like a sandwich on a dense corn muffin. From a corner of the counter, Ms. Fuentes beamed. Her extended family was growing bigger.