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SUMMER RITUALS | TACOS AND HUARACHES

Stuffing Tortillas and Parkgoers, Dawn to Dusk

By [FERNANDA SANTOS](#)

On the concrete floor of a garage turned kitchen, behind a curtain stamped in lavender and green, was a freezer as tall as a man, as long as a car and as wide as a love seat. Inside was a pile of cardboard boxes stuffed with lettuce, tomatoes and cactus leaf nopales, a Mexican delicacy. The coolers on the opposite end were packed with raw meat: 40 pounds of chicken, 60 pounds of chorizo, 300 pounds of pork, 1,000 pounds of beef.

“I could feed an army,” Margarita Hernández said, playfully, her body stooped over a mound of Spanish onions, a sharp knife in hand.

Friday is preparation day for Ms. Hernández. From dawn until way past dusk, she and her companion, Ricardo Ramírez, toil in silence, slicing, dicing and seasoning the ingredients in the freezer in anticipation of a weekend at the Red Hook Recreation Area in Brooklyn.

Ms. Hernández is often the first of the 13 food vendors to arrive at the park on Saturdays and Sundays, and one of the last to leave. With the grace of a maestro and the patience of a middle school teacher, she will direct Mr. Ramírez and the four women she employs as they connect the arms of the tent that doubles as their restaurant; unfold and cover the tables in matching red plastic; and lay out chairs.

Last Sunday, the customers started to line up even before the grills were hot. A man in cleats asked Ms. Hernández in Spanish when people could eat. “Quince minutos,” she replied — 15 minutes.

She turned to her crew and whispered: “We have to work fast. The soccer players are coming.”

It was 7:45 a.m.

Ms. Hernández has performed this hot-weather tradition for 16 summers on the same spot on Bay Street, between the fruit salad and the Salvadoran food stands, along the northern edge of the soccer field.

Her tent is a front-row seat into a neighborhood fast in transition. If her customers were once almost exclusively Hispanic, now, about half of them are white, she said — men and women in wide sunglasses and fashionable haircuts who place orders in English, a language Ms. Hernández has had to learn for her new clientele.

“The first words I learned were numbers: five dollars, six dollars, two dollars,” she said as she flipped a tortilla on the grill.

Ms. Hernández, 43, is a cook by accident. In Mexico, she was a secretary at a branch of the federal mines and energy department in the mountainous state of Hidalgo, where she was born. She liked the job, she said, but it did not pay well. So, when her husband, Herminio Hernández, decided in 1986 to try his luck here, she followed.

They rented a home in Coney Island and had two children. In 2002, they moved to their own house, on a quiet street

in Woodhaven, Queens.

Ms. Hernández was introduced to the Red Hook fields by Mr. Hernández, who played soccer in one of the Hispanic leagues. One day, she decided to fire up a charcoal grill and make tacos for the team because there was no one else in the park who sold Mexican fare.

The experiment quickly turned a bustling business. The next summer, Ms. Hernández found herself in Chinatown, shopping for gas grills. Mr. Hernández eventually quit playing soccer and moved behind the counter to give her a hand. But on Dec. 31, 2003, Mr. Hernández, 56, was stabbed to death during a robbery outside a vacation home they owned near Mexico City.

“I couldn’t have made it without him, and then I couldn’t stop, even after he was gone,” Ms. Hernández said. “The park, my workers, the people who eat my food, they make me happy.”

Mr. Ramírez, 27, a weekend soccer player at the park who became friends with Ms. Hernández, is now her live-in companion — and her right-hand man at the food stand.

The line of customers ebbed and flowed last Sunday, but rarely disappeared. Peak hours were from 8 to 10 a.m., when the stand was overwhelmed by hungry soccer players with curvaceous women tattooed on their arms. At lunch, from noon till late afternoon, the crowd was a mix of Hispanics and whites.

“I can’t believe that I ate this whole thing,” Peter Arnold, an investment researcher who lives in Lower Manhattan, said as he swallowed the last bite of a beef huarache, a bean-stuffed tortilla shaped like the soles of Mexican sandals.

“Well, you didn’t, dear, but I’ll eat your scraps,” said his companion, Cora Cohen. And she did just that, picking up the pieces of lettuce on the plate.

To watch Ms. Hernández and her crew at work is akin to watching a cast of well-rehearsed actors performing a seemingly chaotic script. At one corner of the stand, Sofia Vasquez operates a contraption that looks much like a silk-screen machine, pulling a lever over and over to flatten balls of cornmeal dough and turn them into tortillas.

To her left, Mariana Hernández, no relation to Margarita, handles two tortilla grills. On the other side of the table of condiments — salsa macha, a spicy blend of green chili peppers; pico de gallo, a mix of tomatoes, onions and cilantro; and guacamole — Cinthia Eugenio and Yolanda Lima watched over the sizzling meat.

Mr. Ramírez does whatever is needed, which last Sunday included cooking, filling orders and collecting money. Margarita Hernández is the manager, making sure the food is prepared well and served fast. In addition to tacos (\$2) and huaraches (\$5; \$6, if served with cheese), she also sells quesadillas (\$5), Mexican soda and lemonade.

The orders come without interruption. Everyone is rushed, everyone smiles. The women wear matching denim aprons, “our uniform,” Ms. Hernández, the manager, said. Their forearms have burn scars.

The work area behind the grills is enveloped in a wall of greasy steam. Behind the wall, it feels like a breezeless summer day in the city, so hot that cheeks turn pink, so humid that skin shines as if it were polished with lemon oil.

At one point in the afternoon, when Ms. Eugenio left the grill and dipped her hands in the ice bucket to fetch a drink, her fingers twitched and she winced in pain.

“It’s exhausting, but we love our weekends at the park,” Ms. Eugenio said.

The first vendors set up shop at the Red Hook fields in 1973, when the soccer league, with mostly immigrant players, took shape. At the time, there were just a few vendors — Colombian, Puerto Rican and Dominican women. Ms. Hernández and other Mexican vendors arrived in the late 1980s and early '90s. Some Central American vendors had escaped a civil war that had torn their region apart.

Today, aside from Ms. Hernández, there are four other Mexican vendors, two each from El Salvador and Guatemala, and one apiece from Honduras, Ecuador, Colombia and Puerto Rico.

The vendors have had a series of temporary permits over the years, but the Department of Parks and Recreation now says they will need to bid for their space like vendors at other city parks if they want to be back next year. There is a general belief that the vendors will prevail, though the parks department's action has nonetheless created a tinge of worry.

For Ms. Hernández, who relies on the income from her food stand to pay her mortgage and other bills in the summer months, any change is daunting. In their off-season, both Ms. Hernández and Mr. Ramírez look for a variety of part-time jobs to make ends meet.

"After so much work," Ms. Hernández said of the summer food stand, "look how easy it would be for us to lose everything."

When night fell last Sunday, the crowds had dwindled to a trickle, so Ms. Hernández decided it was time to call it a day. "Focus in the present," she said. "The future is in God's hands."

Under the glare of a fluorescent light powered by a small generator, the crew undid what it had set up in the morning: dismantled the tent, folded the tables and chairs, and packed away the leftover meat, no more than 20 pounds.

On Monday, Ms. Hernández and Mr. Ramírez were back at work again, washing the containers, utensils and grills, as they do every week. On Tuesday, they would buy the vegetables; on Wednesday, the meat. On Thursday, a Mexican distributor would deliver soda to their home.

And on Friday, they would sit together in the makeshift kitchen, beside the giant freezer, slicing and dicing in preparation for another weekend at the soccer fields in Red Hook.

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