

What People Don't Taco-Bout

Sierra Vela

<<Sound of sizzling from taco meat fades in>>

[Sierra Vela]: Do you hear that? The sizzling of perfectly seasoned taco meat cooking. The chopping of tomatoes and lettuce being cut into small bits for easier addition to your plate.

<<Chopping sounds adds on top of the sizzling sound>>

[Vela]: You can almost taste how the end result will be, can't you? You have that flavor of the perfect taco stuck on your tongue, whether it's made from your favorite restaurant, your best friend, or even your own grandparents.

<<Sound of eating adds on top of previous ambiance>>

[Vela]: The endless popularity of this Mexican delicacy, whether they're street tacos or crunchy, is never-ending, but it didn't always use to be this way. Some people used to think that tacos were too cheap and uncivilized to be eaten. They were looked down upon especially in schools and in the workplace, but why? There's only one clear reason that I'm sure you're already thinking of, yet we consistently try to avoid it as a subject itself. Hi, my name is Sierra Vela, and together with my own grandparents, David Cuevas, a man whose nickname used to be Mr. Brain, and Ofelia Cuevas, a woman who's not afraid to speak her mind in front of anybody, we'll be telling you about what people don't taco-bout.

<<Sound of cooking fades out>>

[Vela]: First, we have to explain the setting: Corpus Christi, Texas, a beautiful city that sits on the Gulf of Mexico and is well known for fishing, beaches, and their annual Día de los Muertos Festival. With its own military base and with the history of Selena written all over the city, there's always something for everyone. Corpus is full of Mexican American culture, both from locals and from its rich history, the city is best explained with the statement, "Corpus is a big city with a small-town mentality." Locals have a tight network, and everyone knows everyone through a friend, of a friend, of a friend, meaning gossip gets around quick. Downtown Corpus Christi is a lively place where most *pulgas*, festivals, and local fairs happen. While there is a diverse population of roughly over 326,000 people in this city, a majority are Hispanic. As diverse and creative as it is though, it wasn't always like this. Let's go back to Corpus Christi in the 1960s. While there was still a large population of Hispanics, this was still a time when racism was more blatant in society today. Mexican Americans specifically found it very difficult, as their fight was more subtle on paper. Mexican Americans are, by law, deemed as White, so when trying to fight against segregation laws, there was no "law" that was holding them back. In the public's eyes, Mexican Americans weren't white, but on paper they were, so there was this disconnect between both sides, which caused tensions to be high at times.

[O. Cuevas]: You know, they were not allowed to speak Spanish. I had an incident one time, it was just a bunch of girls from work, we went to a restaurant and we were speaking Spanish, and there was a bunch of older ladies, white ladies, and uh we were all laughing and you know having a good conversation, but it was all in Spanish, and it didn't happen to me it happened to one of my coworkers. One of the ladies asked her if they could be kind enough to speak in English because they couldn't understand. And so the girl turned around and told me, and I said, why? She said because she thinks we might be talking about them because we're having too much fun. And I said, well which one was it? So I- I tapped the lady on the shoulder and I said, Ma'am, this is our culture, you're speaking English and that's fine, you don't know how to speak Spanish. But let me tell you one time, you wouldn't have to- don't have to worry about us talking about you, we don't even know you so we have nothing to say. But let me tell you, if I knew you, I would talk in English to let you know what I'm talking about, and I would make it in English to let you know what I'm talking about. And I would make it in English where you could understand, and she got offended, and "Huh!" (laughs)

[Vela]: With no actual laws to help with segregation, instances like this would continue to happen for a while, and even today you still have some instances like this one. But it wouldn't only happen in businesses and restaurants, you would also see it frequently in schools.

[O. Cuevas]: -my oldest brother, Johnny, and he's in his 80's now, they would take tacos to school, and um, the White folk would make fun of them, and lunchtime, they would go hide and eat their tacos because the White folk would make fun of them.

[Vela]: Tacos themselves, are very quick and easy. When I say they were seen as cheap food it's because they were and still are today. Back then, if you weren't Hispanic, then you wouldn't really eat them, but for those low on money, it was a smart option that could last a long time when needed, and you could make different kinds depending on what you could find.

[O. Cuevas]: There's a lot of different tacos as long as you have tortillas, either flour or corn. There's a taco anytime a taco with, whether you have a flour or a corn tortilla. You can make your own specialty. It doesn't have to be a restaurant, you can make a home taco out of your own ingredients. Pom! You got a taco. You know, anything that you put in between a tortilla and fold it in half, that- that's considered a taco. We can make a taco just about with anything. It's not the original, it's stuff that being, I wouldn't say poor, I would say being average, we would just make anything that we're not gonna starve our kids. We're gonna feed them one way or the other.

[Vela]: And that was always the goal at the end of the day. To make ends meet, and make sure that your kids got fed. It didn't necessarily matter in the details, as long as your family had their needs covered, which often meant that kids would go to school with the same thing for lunch every day, as many kids also couldn't afford school lunches at the time. Anytime you could get something other than your average tacos or go out to eat, it was a treat.

[D. Cuevas]: I remember the story in 8th grade at Cunningham, was I was eating my tacos, and Mr. Garcia who was my math teacher came over to me one time and he had a tray of food that he got from the cafeteria, and he said, like, "David, I haven't eaten tacos in several weeks, would you like to trade your tacos for my tray of food?" And I said sure! And we traded, and the other students kept looking at me saying, "How did you get a tray of food and we have to eat our tacos?" So he went over and ate the tacos, and he would do this on occasion, like maybe in that one school year at eighth grade, he must have done it probably six times. And I, I felt good about that. What I didn't know, is that he felt sorry for us, for me. He knew how dedicated my dad was. In making money. And he- and he, I'm sure he knew that the other fathers of the kids were in the same predicament, but he didn't know the other fathers of the kids. He knew my dad. But that's the one story I remember about Tacos.

[O. Cuevas]: We weren't brought up with like- not that we never had it, but we weren't brought up with a lot of um- how would I describe- American food. To me, American food is like fried chicken, hamburger, you know um- out to eat type of thing. We were lucky that- we were very lucky when I was growing up, that we would go out once a week, and most of the time that was on Fridays when my parents got paid. We would go out to eat. The rest of the week, it was homemade, everything, breakfast lunch, and dinner, the reason we would go out to eat on Friday, it was payday. We didn't even have a car, but we were lucky to have- like a little hamburger stand close by the house and we would walk. And I remember many a time, that my mom- my dad would give my mom his paycheck and she would start separating her money, payment here, payment there, groceries here, and he would say, "no no no no. Take them out to eat first, and whatever's left over, then we can pay. And if we don't get to pay the, this week, we'll pay the next week."

[Vela]: Meals meant everything, and they still do in Hispanic Culture. I know even for myself, meal times are when everyone gets together to spend time and enjoy our food as a family, no matter how busy we are with outside life. So what changed in between then and now? Why are tacos now so suddenly popular?

[O. Cuevas]: Things have changed quite a bit. The world has changed.

[Vela]: With the constantly evolving world we live in today, nothing is ever permanent. We've come so far even in terms of only the last 30 years, so to put it frankly, as people's minds have started opening up, so did their taste buds.

[D. Cuevas]: I do find that, here in San Antonio, there's always been a battle I think, um, between cities of who makes the best tacos. And there's always a battle between the city of Austin and the city of San Antonio as far as getting the best tacos. And they do have an annual competition which brings, thousands of people from both cities to come to the contest to see who has the best tacos. And you find these food trucks at this one particular big park or whatever it is and you get to- to get to venture out and test- taste different types of tacos. And they're virtually the same, some might have more cilantro, some may have more spices, some will have all this concoction of- of sauces.

[O. Cuevas]: My favorite is beans, but then, let me tell you again, it has to be with a certain tortilla, when I have beans and chorizo, I would prefer corn tortilla. If it's a carne guisada taco I would have a flour tortilla. It makes a lot of difference on whatever you're gonna put in the- in the tortilla. Period. The- the tortilla itself gives the taco even a better flavor with the size, with the type of tortilla you want. At least to me anyway, and we're all different. And like I said, all our tacos are different. We make, several tacos, several different ways. A taco back then was a tortilla shell, folded in half, hamburger meat, lettuce tomatoes, and cheese, that's the original taco, to me. Because that's the way we were brought up, but now we make potato and egg taco, beans and cheese taco, chorizo and beans, and that- now we call that a taco.

[D. Cuevas]: And, the Hispanic culture is so vast, that if you were to go to Cuba, they will have a- a taco that may not be called a taco, because they also use tortillas, they use corn tortillas because the natives in Cuba just like the natives in Mexico only had corn before the White people came over on those ship from Europe, they brought over the wheat, they brought over the flour. So, the original natives never knew what a flour tortilla was in Mexico, South America, or in Cuba or in the Caribbeans, and that's when they started making these different types of meals, with folding a tortilla whether it's corn or flour. But, all the ingredients are different in every country, so the taco has grown, and I don't- again I don't know where the taco originated, but it has grown to all these other countries in South America, the Caribbeans, and in Mexico, that it's flowing all over the world. And that, I think that does make me feel good, that at least that small portion of a meal that originated in my mind, in my culture, has grown worldwide. So I'm happy to- I'm happy to see that.

Bibliography

- Alan Lessoff. *Where Texas Meets the Sea: Corpus Christi and Its History*. Vol. First edition. Clifton and Shirley Caldwell Texas Heritage Series. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. <https://search-ebcsohost-com.manowar.tamucc.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=937483&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.
- Arellano, Gustavo. *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America*. 1st Scribner hardcover ed. New York: Scribner, 2012.
- Lemon, Robert. *The Taco Truck: How Mexican Street Food Is Transforming the American City*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020.
- Rayo, Mando, and Jarod Neece. *The Tacos of Texas*. First edition. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016.
- White, Brittany R. "Jose Cisneros v. Corpus Christi Independent School District: Mexican Americans, African Americans, and the Failed Promise of the Desegregation of Schools." Order No. 10276539, Texas Christian University, 2017, <https://manowar.tamucc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/i-jose-cisneros-v-corpus-christi-independent/docview/1910128743/se-2> (accessed September 9, 2022).