

Green Chile and Flour Tortillas: The Making of a Standard New Mexican Cuisine.

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Stephanie M. Sánchez

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Abstract

Regional and ethnic cuisines result from generations of cultural mixing and adaptation. In the case of regional New Mexican cuisine, a food culture distinct from other southwestern diets, emerged since the colonial era, based on the central role of *chile* peppers, both green and red varieties. The *mestizaje* in preparations of such as flour *tortillas*, *sopaipillas*, and blue corn further defines New Mexican culinary traditions. The unique ingredients and cooking practices of New Mexico cuisine are assessed in this article as essential expressions of cultural identity and regional tourism, and are increasingly important to marketing and the agricultural industry.

Green Chile and Flour Tortillas: The Making of a Standard New Mexican Cuisine

STEPHANIE M. SÁNCHEZ
UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO

Abstract: Regional and ethnic cuisines result from generations of cultural mixing and adaptation. In the case of regional New Mexican cuisine, a food culture distinct from other southwestern diets, emerged since the colonial era, based on the central role of *chile* peppers, both green and red varieties. The *mestizaje* in preparations of such as flour tortillas, *sopaipillas*, and blue corn further defines New Mexican culinary traditions. The unique ingredients and cooking practices of New Mexican cuisine are assessed in this article as essential expressions of cultural identity and regional tourism, and are increasingly important to marketing and the agricultural industry.

Key Terms: Green chile; New Mexican foodways and cuisine; New Mexican identity

What is the "standard" New Mexican cuisine? Is it even possible to say a standard exists? These are important questions because regional and national cuisines express and highlight particular cultural influences, intersections of class, gender, and economics, and even historical struggles. A result of colonization includes the very existence of a unique and hybrid New Mexican cultural identity. This *mestizaje* was borne of indigenous and European blood, and yet it's quite different from other Spanish-speaking cultures of the southwestern United States.

"New Mexican" or *nuevomexicano* is itself a cultural and regional identity that transcends nationalistic identity and other ethnic or racial categories, such as "Hispanic," "Latino," or "Mexican American." It is place-based identity rooted in particular experiences and expressed through traditional practices and beliefs. These include fiestas in honor of patron saints; *matachines* dances in small towns along the Rio Grande; blessing of the water rituals along acequias; *remedios* for healing; and of course, foods. It is cliché to say, "you are what you eat," but a closer look at essential New Mexican foods reveals the aptness of such a maxim. Jeffrey M. Pilcher, in his book *Que vivan los tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican Identity*, examines how cuisine, and the significance of women's roles within foodways, influenced Mexican national identity and nationalist ideology (1998). Using a similar framework, one can determine how Old World and New World foods and food practices collided and

came to be distinctly New Mexican, and how such an identity has expanded beyond the family home and kitchen to influence tourism and the business of food production.

To provide background, my scholarly and personal interests in food developed over the course of my dissertation fieldwork in ethnography, which took place in San Rafael, a small New Mexican village located in the west-central part of the state, where there are other small Hispanic, and alternately, Native American, communities. The women who participated in my research demonstrated culinary talents and performative skill, especially when it came to traditional New Mexican foods and food events. I could not accurately describe their strategies for community and cultural preservation without including and privileging the role of foodways and their associated gustatory narratives. On a personal level, the bright red *chile con carne*, the piquant smells of different salsas, and rare treats of *pastelitos* (fruit-filled, thin pie cut into small squares), *panochas* (sprouted wheat pudding), and *natillas* (a soft custard), aroused my senses and became tangible links to a particular people and my own New Mexican identity. Food, for me, became a powerful means of expression and understanding.

NEW MEXICAN IDENTITY AND COOKERY

I identify as a native New Mexican,¹ which generally refers to those who have, in many cases, generations of one's family living and dying in New Mexico. Many



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
muse@press.jhu.edu



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