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# MEAT, MEAL, AND THE HISTORY OF THE HOT TAMALE

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## IT WAS 2009 WHEN I ATE MY FIRST MEXICAN HOT TAMALE.

I was sitting on a patio bench at a bar in the Mission District of San Francisco when a friend of mine spotted the famed Tamale Lady. She entered the patio from the street entrance, carting two ice chests filled with what were said to be the best tamales in the entire city. We flagged her over and ordered a pork tamale each. While I enjoyed it enough to happily consume the whole thing—without sharing—I couldn't help but wonder: What is this thick dough casing all about? Where is all the sauce? And can someone please find me a bottle of Tabasco?

I was utterly confused. It was nothing like the hot tamales my stepfather would regularly bring home for us as an after-school snack when I was growing up in New Orleans. Among other things, the hot tamales I was accustomed to were smaller, spicier, and left bright orange stains on your fingertips from the hot oil that coated them. I had literally never met a true Mexican tamale until that day. The hot tamale was all I knew.

Yet, when most people hear the term “Southern food,” it doesn't conjure up images of tamales or other Latin-inspired dishes. No, we tend to cast our eyes toward countries on the African coast to explain the presence of okra in gumbo. We credit Native Americans for the Southern love affair with smoked meats and barbecues.<sup>1</sup> We look to Europeans as the stewards of bright red tomatoes and the “holy trinity” of onions, bell peppers, and celery found in classic Creole cooking. While these places and people have surely left their

mark on the fabric of Southern cuisine, the lesser-known hot tamale, consumed throughout Mississippi and Louisiana, offers a unique window into Southern history. It is one that includes the oft-forgotten social interactions between African Americans and Mexicans.

Unlike a traditional Mexican tamale, hot tamales are small in size. Their spiced inner meat tubes, which many tamale makers refer to as “the chili,” are rolled in a thin layer of dry, spiced yellow cornmeal, as opposed to the thick *masa harina* dough that's characteristic of the Mexican tamale. Additionally, while traditional Mexican tamales are wrapped in two cornhusks and eaten from the middle, hot tamales are wrapped in either a single cornhusk or, sometimes, a special type of textured parchment paper that is unique to the hot tamale. They're then placed standing upright in a vat of simmering spicy oil, which allows the tamale to soak up fat and spice. After a long, slow oil bath, the hot tamales are served “wet,” smothered in spicy simmering juices with a side of Saltine crackers, which act as tiny pale vessels for scooping the tamales from plate to mouth—no forks necessary. In fact, no forks are allowed.

So, just how did tamales come to be arguably one of the most, if not *the* most important foodway in the Mississippi Delta, a place that's about as Southern as Southern gets? The answer to that question is as hotly debated as the hot tamale is seasoned. One theory asserts that the hot tamale has been a Southern food staple for centuries, the modern version of an African food called *cusb*, a type of seasoned corn meal.<sup>2</sup> Another theory claims that American soldiers returning

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home after fighting in the Mexican-American War brought a taste for tamales with them, which would later be adapted to accommodate southern flavor preferences with added spice and sauce.<sup>3</sup> Professor Roberto Avant-Mier, a Communications professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, is currently working on a research paper that proposes a third theory. He relies on data from the lyrics of old folk songs as the basis of his research.

Avant-Mier told me, “My research is mostly about music. I have found songs about hot tamales going back into the late 1800’s... and the roving tamale vendors in places like San Antonio and Dallas.” He says these songs allude to the idea that these roving vendors “were known to be both Mexicans and Blacks,” which he says is evidence that African American tamale vendors existed in Texas as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. This makes it unlikely that hot tamales could have made their first appearance in the US any later than that.

The dominant theory, however, is one that Avant-Mier’s perspective contradicts. It asserts that in the wake of the Great Migration, which brought many African Americans north in search of better economic opportunity and social treatment, a labor gap was left in the Mississippi Delta. This stretch of land extends 250 miles from northern Mississippi down the western portion of the state, along the muddy waters of the Mississippi River. Mexican migrant workers, so the story goes, moved to Mississippi to fill the demand for low-wage laborers on the dozens of cotton fields that dotted the Mississippi Delta.<sup>4</sup> Many argue that it was in these fields, where Mexican and African American workers are said to have labored alongside one another in the early 1900s, that the hot tamale was likely born.

Amy Evans, an oral historian at the Southern Foodways Alliance, argues that the overwhelming number of African American tamale makers in the Delta lends support to such a theory. According to Evans, “Today, African Americans in the Delta are the primary keepers of the tamale-making tradition. It makes sense, then, that the interaction of African Americans with Mexican migrant laborers explains part of this culinary confluence.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, corn and pork have complimented one another in food cultures around the world for centuries. So, is it possible that tamales have always been in the Delta, as the first theory argues? Evans says that, though African Americans in the South relied on the two complementary ingredients in their cooking long before their interaction with Mexican migrant workers, putting them together in the form of a hot tamale was almost certainly the result of interaction between cultures. She states, “It is possible that the recognizable ingredients of meat and meal, which were familiar to African American slaves and sharecroppers throughout the South, were elevated to the more complicated tamale,”<sup>6</sup> one with the basic structure and components of the Mexican tamale, but with the heat of traditional Southern fare. This was the comingling of two unique cultures, the joining of two distinct tastes and food rituals.

In keeping with this perspective, it’s likely that the hot tamale also served a practical purpose to the African American and Mexican migrant workers that are said to have been a key part of its birth. In other words, it wasn’t just that the food was enjoyed by the laborers and thus a culinary tradition began. The hot tamale’s portability was pivotal, given the labor role occupied by many African Americans and Mexicans at the time, who were working long days in the cotton fields. Its small size allowed the food to be easily transported into the fields while the hot simmering liquid kept the tamales warm throughout the day.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, the tamale is so much more than stewed meat and meal to the people who eat, live, and breathe it throughout the Mississippi Delta. On a recent trip to Vicksburg, Mississippi, at the southernmost tip of the Delta, I got to experience firsthand all that this historically significant food has to offer to the people behind the pushcarts and restaurants that sell them. What I found was a food that served as a means of survival to some, and offered unparalleled opportunity to others.

My first stop was The Tamale Place. I pulled into the wide parking lot and was surprised to see cars scattered all around it haphazardly, parked in no particular order or according to any easily discernable method. I watched people come and



PHOTO: BROOKE CONROY BASS, PH.D.

go through the tinted swinging glass door, carrying their styrofoam containers filled with the orange and tan hot tamales. It seemed that The Tamale Place was *the* place to be for lunch on a Tuesday. Since there is no sitting area in the takeout-only restaurant, no one stayed long. Instead, most ate their tamales while seated on the trunks of their cars in the chaotic parking lot, under the bright, blistering sun.

Later, I spoke to owner Alan Brown. He told me that one reason tamales are so popular in Vicksburg, where thirty-five percent of the city's residents live below the poverty line (compared to fifteen percent nationwide),<sup>8</sup> is because the dish makes a little go a long way. In other words, it has been a necessary survival tool for many economically disadvantaged families in the South, both in the past and the present day. As Brown put it, "With hot tamales you can take a pound of meat and make it feed twenty people, 'cause cornmeal is cheap!"

The next stop on my list was Solly's Hot Tamales. When I first walked into the inconspicuous restaurant that afternoon, I was one of only two patrons. The other sat perched at his table, an unlit cigarette hanging from his mouth as he waited for his order to arrive. In the corner, a tiny black Sony radio played scratchy country tunes while its face

blinked "12:00" in unreliable red lights.

What I learned from Solly's, aside from the fact that their seasoned tamale chili was some of the best I'd ever had (probably due to the rendered kidney fat it's simmered in), was that families in the Delta don't just rely on hot tamales to eat or even to feed their families. For those who make the hot tamales, in a region where economic opportunity is scant but where the appetite for spiced and cornmeal-crusting tubes of meat is abundant, the tradition comes with unique opportunities for success.

Jewel McCain, who inherited Solly's Hot Tamales from a family friend she called "Papa," is living proof of this. At the time when Papa offered her the business, McCain was making ends meet by working at a bank. She said she "was thinking about better things for my children," which prompted her to accept Papa's offer to take over the business.<sup>9</sup> Since then she has maintained the restaurant, which supports her family and has provided her with multiple opportunities to travel both within and beyond the state of Mississippi, opportunities that likely wouldn't have existed without her hot tamale business.

When I spoke to McCain that afternoon, she shared her



PHOTO: BROOKE CONROY BASS, PH.D.

stories of where her tamale business has taken her. One trip brought her to Greenville, Mississippi, the hot tamale capital and the location of the annual Hot Tamale Festival. McCain's tamales won "Best Meat" in her first year as a competitor. Another trip brought her to Washington, DC, where she was invited to demonstrate how to hand roll hot tamales in a week-long exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum, an offer she initially assumed was a practical joke. She reminisced about her first conversation with the coordinator: "Okay, this is a joke," I said. "Someone's playin' a joke on me." So I got their phone number and told them I was busy... and then I called them back later and I said, "Is this a joke? Is this really real? I mean, do you *really* mean this?"

McCain beamed with pride as she recalled the experience, showing me the newspaper clipping that showcased her contribution to the Smithsonian event and the gold medal she'd won at her first Hot Tamale Festival. She pulled out an old guestbook filled with the names of visitors to the restaurant from as far as Japan and Australia, and regaled me with stories of her far-flung patrons. Afterwards, she walked me over the pushpin-covered map that showcased

visitors' hometowns, hanging limply on the wood-paneled wall. From Portland to Pittsburgh, Anchorage to Albany, and everywhere in between, the multicolored dots cluttered the twelve-square-foot map. It told a story about the renowned hot tamale joint, and a story about McCain herself. The business had given her an opportunity for self-sufficiency, for travel, and for self-pride.

Hot tamales carry a storied past, one that is as illustrious as the cotton-clad region where they were born. Beyond that, they tell a story about a place. This is a place with disadvantage woven into the fabric of its existence, a place with a history of comers and goers, and a place where cultural lines blend and people come together over food— all wrapped up in a corn husk wrapper and served wet (with a side of Saltine crackers.)

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**\*SEE PAGE 30 FOR ENDNOTES**