
COWBOYS - VAQUEROS

Origins Of The First American Cowboys

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Chapter 9 Vaquero Cuisine

It is an interesting irony of New Mexico culture that modern day icons such as Indian jewelry and Mexican food have exchanged their prefixes. That is to say, that historically, Mexican food originated from Native American Indian food, and Indian jewelry originated from Spanish and Mexican silver smithing technology brought from Europe.

The Hispanic people took local semiprecious stones such as turquoise and taught silversmith jewelry skills to New Mexican Indians. Over the passed four hundred years, different tribes have developed their own styles of Indian jewelry. Similarly, the Indians introduced the Spanish to native foods such as chile, corn (maize), beans, squash, melons, potatoes, tomatoes, tobacco, chocolate, peanuts, vanilla, avocados, coconuts, and pumpkins, as well as the many recipes we are familiar with, like tortillas, tacos (flautas), enchiladas, and tamales, to name a few. To these foods, the Spanish added oats, wheat, yeast, garlic, fruit trees, vinegar, wine, cheese, and milk. Spanish livestock provided horses for managing ranches along with other livestock, which produced pork, lamb, beef, and eggs. According to Rodero, "generally, the boats coming from Andalusia were supplied on Tenerife or La Gomera, taking as point of departure the Antilles on the Island of Hierro. According to Morales Padrón (1974) from the Canary Islands, they shipped sugar cane, pigs and bananas, legumes, vegetables, oranges, melons, saffron, figs, apricots, olives, horses, goats, dogs and sheep. All were shipped in the stowage of the ships to take root on the other Atlantic coast."

The blending of the two cultures and cuisines all began in 1519 in the shadow of snowcapped stratovolcano, Popocatepetl in the town of Cholula, when Hernando Cortez arrived with an army of Tlaxcalans to recruit more soldiers. The Cholulans, rivals of the Tlaxcalans, secretly conspired with Montezuma of the Aztecs to kill the Spaniards and Tlaxcalans. Cortez' girlfriend, Malintzin learned of the planned ambush and informed Cortez. Cortez and the Tlaxcalans responded with a preemptive attack. After many bloody battles the 1521 conquest over the Cholulans and Aztecs resulting in the replacement of most of the temples with Catholic churches, and an infusion of ranching technology, language, religion, and of course the food stuffs of the Spanish conquerors. Almost eight decades later, in April of 1598 this blend of cultures was brought to the cradle of the American West into the kingdom of New Mexico by Don Juan de Onate, over five hundred colonists, and seven thousand head of European livestock, see America's First Cowboy chapter II above. Aside from the arrival of Cortez in Mexico, this is the most significant historical event resulting in the beginning of what we have come to know as American "Mexican" food. What has evolved, as Mexican cuisine in the USA is very different from what has evolved as Mexican food in Mexico. Recently, Mexican National companies have begun to get into the "Mexican Food" restaurant business in the USA. They are creating confusion by claiming to serve "Mexican" food. It should be noted that the Kingdom of New Mexico established in 1598, from which our current state of New Mexico is one in the same, (albeit substantially whittled down by the US Congress) has first claim to the traditional meaning and label of "Mexican" food because New Mexico is much older than Old Mexico and the food to which we refer was developed here in New Mexico. New Mexico so christened under the government of New Spain preceded the country of Mexico, which did not begin as a sovereign and independent entity until September 16, 1810, a difference of 212 years. One way to distinguish the two different cuisines would be to refer to the food from Mexico as "Mexico Food," and our traditional New Mexican food as "Mexican Food."

Accordingly, unless otherwise noted, hereinafter references to Mexican dishes will mean those, which evolved on what was to become modern day New Mexico, USA from the 1598 Onate colony. Early seventeenth century Mexican food, the food of the early vaqueros began as much less embellished and basic versions of the recipes we are familiar with now. For example, vaqueros did not have modern methods of food preservation available. Consequently, when he was out on the range herding sheep or cattle, the food he could take with him was severely limited to the most practical forms, which his saddlebags could accommodate. Even saddlebags took some time to evolve on the primitive saddle of the seventeenth century. Almost certainly the most common

menu of the vaquero included his canteen, red chile, dried tortillas, and charqui, which was eventually corrupted into today's word jerky. With those ingredients, the vaquero making camp would be able to make primitive enchiladas or tacos. Enchilada means simply "enchilied" or in chile. If he were traveling with a carreta or families with wagons, he would have beans and corn available to add to his Posole, enchiladas or tacos. One of those earliest portable and practical foods brought from Europe, which most likely eventually dropped off the vaquero menu, were cakes made of oats or other European grains in favor of other tastier local choices. Because it was practical and nutritious these grain cakes in pre-Columbian Europe were common especially for the vaquero traveling light, in the absence of bulky cookware, fire, and water necessary for making fresh porridge. The cakes were made by cooking the grain then allowing hardening into a portable desiccated form for later consumption. If these grain cakes tasted anything like modern day rice cakes, I can understand why they were replaced with the newfound ingredients for Mexican food.

Vaqueros did not always just take alternating bites of his desiccated jerky, tortilla, and chile pods and wash it down with his canteen. Given a cook pot, he could have made a stew with the chile and jerky and dipped the tortilla, much as we now do with chips and dip. The tortilla and jerky would now be "in chile," and technically an enchilada a long journey from today's moist chicken or beef stuffed tortillas smothered in red or green chile sauce and melted cheese, topped with a fried egg, and accompanied with sopapillas; a New Mexican invention (tortilla shaped bread fried and leavened in lard).

Tacos originated with native Indian tribes as a yellow corn tortilla. With the arrival of the Spanish who brought wheat, tortillas were made of wheat flour as well, thus producing a brown to white color depending on how thoroughly processed the flour. Once you add an ingredient to the tortilla, it becomes a taco. Flautas, named after their "flute-like" shape were popular prior to the 1970's are now making a come back in some Mexican restaurants. Flautas consisted of fried corn tortillas filled with chicken, mutton, beef, beans, cheese, or potatoes, served with lettuce, cream and salsa. Since the Spanish were good at keeping journals the first documented consumption of tacos was in Mexico when Hernan Cortez organized a banquet for his Captains in Coyoacan. Bernal Diaz del Castillo documented the taco banquet using imported Spanish pork. As with all other Mexican dishes, the contents of the taco ranging from fish to insects depends on the geographic location. Wrap the ingredients in a wheat tortilla; add cheese and sour cream and you now have a burrito. The Vaquero for practical purposes would have used his taco to wrap whatever wild game kill of the day, be it rabbit or venison. If he were traveling with carretas or wagons, he would have the added luxury of adding beans and chile to his taco and washing it down with blue corn Atole or a cup of coffee
