

# Orale! Food and Identity Amongst Latinos

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The topic of food and how it pertains to a person's identity is a target of scholarly research. But why is food important to study? Professor Susan D. Blum, Chair of The Department of Anthropology at The University of Notre Dame, answers both of these questions in an effective manner. She states that food is important to study because "[a]ll humans eat, many times a day. Food is involved in our most animal-like, biological needs but also in our most symbolic, personal, psychological, and social (and human) activities. Food can be explained in terms of power, social relations, identity, aesthetics, religion, geography, gender, economics, and more" (Blum). Food is essential to all humans, without it, we cannot survive. However, food means much more than man's survival. Food can be explained in many different ways; in order to understand ourselves, we must understand something about the food we consume. It is only natural that this leads to understanding how food allows us to establish our identity, or how our identity comes alive through the food that we consume.

Professor Blum also answers how food gives us knowledge about an individual/society's identity. She states, "[w]e eat the foods we choose for a variety of reasons, including the accident of where we are born and how foods come to have the social meanings they do within the specific culture we inhabit. Often our identities through food remain after migration, for two or sometimes three generations, and often we our identities as constructed through food are in opposition to other groups' foodways. Always, these choices are meaningful, and they are never obvious or sole set of choices that can be made" (Blum). Professor Blum touches on the idea that food brings about our identity because of how it allows a person to connect with their culture or how their native culture brings about

their food choice. Even the choice of food allows one to reject the dominant culture, such as the choice of a Mexican-American to eat enchiladas over hot dogs.

Within the context of Mexican culture, however, food and how it identifies a person comes alive. Mexican culture in the United States has gone through recent struggles, such as the issue of undocumented immigration or the racialization of Mexican-Americans as immigrants. There is a feel that while not all Mexican-Americans feel this hostility, it is an undeniable reality of the

Mexican experience here in the U.S. As much as recent discourse attempts to suppress this culture in favor of becoming more like an "American," one aspect of Mexican culture that identifies and resists this sentiment is food.

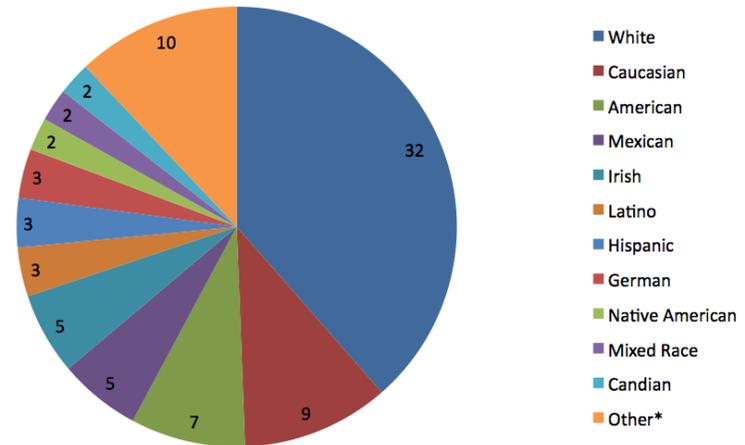
## *Food can be explained in terms of identity*

Food plays an important part in Identity, this is true, but it helps to understand how people label themselves, and see their own identities as being. If the phrase "You are what you eat" is correct, then might not the opposite, "You eat what you are" be true? With a particular focus on Mexican food, we conducted a survey on several topics, trying to discern what exactly it meant to be Mexican from different people, not just Mexicans, and how they viewed food when it came to both Mexican, and their own identity.

## Group Identity

For our survey, we put out an open survey on Facebook, collecting results and essentially snowball-sampling. Anyone could answer, and barring all erroneous and unsigned surveys, all answers were considered. A total of 79 surveys were recorded, and after eliminating those we couldn't use, 72 sets of answers were taken into the study. In the group, there were 53 males, age ranged from 18 to 50, with a mean of 26 years old, and 19 females, age ranged from 19 to 41, with a mean of 23.8 years. We asked each individual to identify both what they claim to be (ethnic identification) and the ethnicities of their parents, to decipher whether they identified as a mixed race individual. The following is a chart describing the breakdown of ethnicities, and whether they identified as mixed due to the origins of their parents (in order from most popular answer to least popular).

**Breakdown of Respondent's Ethnicities**



\*Other Includes Chicano, Portuguese, Lebanese, Visayan, Asian, Basque, Czech, Black, Slovak, and Turkish (note: some respondents put more than one ethnicity)  
 Identified their parents as different Ethnicities: Yes: 23, No: 49

Clearly, our survey is dominated by White/Caucasian males, but this did offer a unique perspective into their views on Mexican foods.

### Latino/Hispanic, What's the Difference?

If one were to look up the definitions of Hispanic and Latino online, one would get the following definitions, courtesy of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary:

**Latino:**

**(noun)** A Latin American inhabitant of the United States.

**Hispanic:**

**(noun)** A Spanish Speaking person living in the US, especially one of Latin American descent.

**(adjective)** Of or relating to Spain or to Spanish-speaking countries, esp. those of Latin America.

Just reading those two definitions, it seems like the only real difference between the two would be Spain, the original colonizer. There have been many discussions about what both terms mean, as some people prefer to be called one or the other, while many throw around either term, never really noting that there is at least one distinct difference. In our survey, 3 people identified as Latino, while 3 identified as Hispanic. When asked what it means to be Latino, we received a variety of answers.

- "To be of [L]atin American heritage" (Caucasian)
- "Describing someone in the US with heritage from a "Latin" country, de-emphasizing the role of [S]pain" (Chicana)
- "This is your ethnicity" (Irish)
- "only people from Puerto Rico" (German)
- "to be from [L]atin America/[M]exico (Visayan)
- "being [L]atino is a sense of community and family" (Basque)
- "a word tied to describe any particular non-Nubian or Asian person of color who speaks a Latin-influenced language" (Black)

## Latino/Hispanic, What's the Difference? (cont.)

While many responses were near the definition, it is interesting to note that there were several answers that were completely off, assuming particular nations were solely involved, while others went deeper than the overall general meaning.

We posed the same question, but asking about Hispanic.

- "Spanish speaking cultural descent" (Caucasian)
- "descended from a [L]atin country" (white)
- "people with Spanish speaking roots raised in the US" (Mexican)

Many of the answers were far less clear, and many also seemed to believe that Hispanic referred solely to Mexicans, which, by the definition, it does not.

When asked if there was a difference between the two terms, the lines were split:

Yes: 43, No: 16, Not Sure: 13

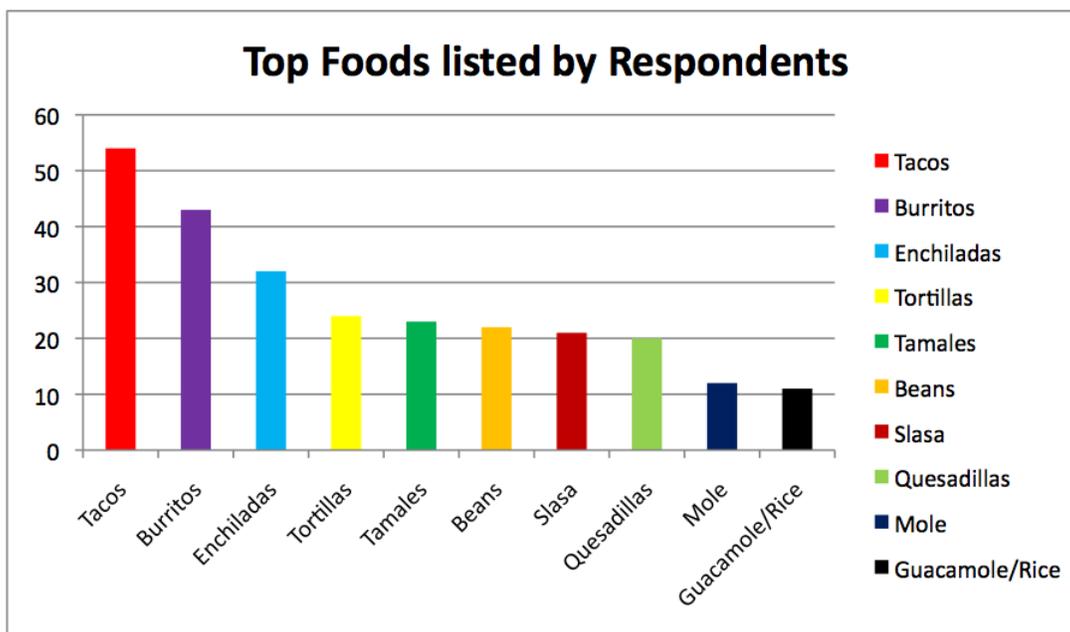
Many noted that the difference was minimal, and looking at how the lines are defined, it's true.

## Mexican Foods:

What classifies a food as Mexican, and what does not? The majority of the people stated that to be Mexican food was simply to be a food item common in Mexican cuisine, or native to the country. One of the main points that were noted was the idea of "Americanized" Mexican food, particularly Tex-Mex cooking and places like Taco Bell. Foods like Chimichangas and Nachos with Queso were listed on both sides of the categories, because these items are not typically native to Mexico, and are often sold in venues like Taco Bell, whose Mexican food authenticity can really be questioned. Here's a list of the top foods.



Photo by April J. Gazmen/Flickr (Creative Comment)



Often, foods that were listed as NOT Mexican came from other regions...Japanese or Korean food, American food, etc...but occasionally we would also get foods that some might consider Mexican, but were not native to Mexico or eaten by many Mexicans (such as chimichangas). However, when asked if eating the above foods MADE someone Mexican, the overwhelming majority (71:1) said No, and the exact same numbers were reproduced when we asked if NOT eating these foods makes you NOT Mexican. Clearly then, the two phrases aren't entirely true.

# Staples of Mexican Food

## Guacamole



Image from: [http://simplyrecipes.com/recipes/perfect\\_guacamole/](http://simplyrecipes.com/recipes/perfect_guacamole/)

Guacamole comes from the Nahuatl word meaning avocado sauce. Guacamole perfectly highlights what Mexican food is and what Mexican culture is all about. Its ingredients, avocado, tomato, and chile are Mexico's gifts to the world. These same ingredients are used heavily with many Mexican dishes, such as beef a la Mexicana. Beef a la Mexicana uses roasted tomatoes and green chiles with beef in order to create not only a dish that tastes of Mexican culture through the usage of Mexico's gifts, but also essentially recreates the Mexican flag within the dish. This is because with the green chiles and red tomatoes, white onions are also commonly used, which helps to create not only the taste of Mexico, but even helps to visualize Mexico through the usage of foods with the colors of the national flag. However, in guacamole, all three of these gifts come together to make "the butter of the poor" (Bayless 2). Guacamole is used on a variety of dishes such as on tacos. However, the usage of guacamole in the Mexican setting helps to identify the Mexican culture. Guacamole's presence can be described as versatile, which allows it to be used as a casual party food. This helps to create the perfect "sauce" for an outing between a Mexican family and its extended family members. The image of guacamole as a casual environment helps bring alive the Mexican cultural value of family, which is essential to identifying the Mexican culture.

## Maize



Image from: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Koeh-283.jpg>

Few Mexican dishes can be identified as authentic without the presence of tortillas; it is the staple grain of maize that makes this possible. Staple Mexican dishes such as tortillas and tamales are impossible without this staple grain. It is known that "maize is the staple that gives Latino cuisine a cohesive identity" because of how it is used to bring all the ingredients together to make a Mexican dish possible, such as putting all the meat into a tamale (Janer 25). Nixtamalized masa is what is used to create the common tortilla that makes up the Mexican dish. The use of maize comes alive in identifying Mexican culture not because of what it is used to make, but because of how often Mexican dishes use something that has been made of maize. Most Mexican dishes, such as tacos, pozole, and enchiladas, are created either with the product of maize being used to bring it all together or having the product of maize used with the meal, such as tortillas on the side when eating pozole. The use of maize and its products within Mexican dishes cannot be overemphasized, as many Mexicans and Mexican Americans will tell you that a meal is not ready to be eaten until tortillas are on the table.

## Chiles



Image from: <http://mexicofoodandmore.com/salsas/mexican-chiles-from-mild-to-fiery.html>

If there is one thing that consistently describes Mexican food, it is spicy. Aside from the “spiciness” seen throughout Mexican culture, such as the “reporters” seen on some Mexican news telecasts, Mexican food can be described as hot, or spicy, and chiles are a big reason for this. While chiles are indigenous to the Americas, nowhere else is its use more sophisticated than in Mexico. Most places use chiles simply for the heat factor it provides, but chiles in Mexican food is used also for the flavor and texture. This is why there are various types of chiles used for different dishes, with each of the different type of chile serving a different culinary purpose. There are different flavors of chile, which ranges from the sweetness provided by bell peppers to ensure a chile taste without the heat to the habanero chile, which all but guarantees that the consumer will be in for a rude awakening if they are not prepared for it. Of course, chiles are essential to create another staple of Mexican food: salsas. Many Mexican dishes call for salsa, if not for heat, then to add flavor.

### Mexican Dish and its Ingredients

#### Mole Rojo Clásico de Guajolote

5 ounces (3 medium) tomatillos, husked and rinsed  
½ cup (about 2 ½ ounces) sesame seeds  
½ cup rich-tasting pork lard or vegetable oil, plus a little more if necessary  
6 medium (about 3 ounces total) dried mulato chiles, stemmed and seeded  
3 medium (about 1 ½ ounces total) dried ancho chiles, stemmed and seeded  
5 medium (about 1 ½ ounces total) dried pasilla chiles, stemmed and seeded  
4 garlic cloves, peeled  
A scant ½ cup (about 2 ounces) unskinned almonds  
½ cup (about 2 ounces) raisins  
1 whole (about 4 pounds) boneless turkey breast with skin on, the two halves cut apart, and any netting removed (some brands sell individual turkey breasts as 2-pound roasts—you’ll need two of them)  
Salt  
½ teaspoon cinnamon, preferably freshly ground Mexican canela  
¼ teaspoon black pepper, preferably freshly ground  
¼ teaspoon anise, preferably freshly ground (optional)  
A scant 1/8 teaspoon cloves, preferably freshly ground  
1 slice firm white bread, darkly toasted and broken into several pieces  
1 ounce (about one-third of a 3.3-ounce tablet) Mexican chocolate, roughly chopped  
4 to 5 teaspoons sugar  
Sprigs of watercress or fresh flat-leaf parsley for garnish

Recipe taken from Rick Bayless’  
*Mexico One Dish at a Time*

### Importance of Red Mole

Mole “is a celebration. This dish—the pride of all Mexico—holds the same place as our Thanksgiving turkey, though it’s certainly made more often. It truly might be more important, since in most homes mole is the culinary offering made to ancestors (and to the living) during the Days of the Dead in November” (Bayless 204). This statement may surprise those whose primary knowledge about Mexican food is tacos and burritos. Mole is Mexico’s national dish. It is served at important celebrations like weddings and baptisms. Red mole has more significance than a national dish; however. Even the very Nahuatl word “mole,” which means sauce, shows a connection to Mexicans roots from the past, dating back to the Aztecs. This dish is the perfect example of how food identifies Mexican culture, as it not only uses many ingredients that is Mexican, but its inclusion and significance in a significant Mexican ritual shows how even though red mole is simply a food to some, to Mexicans, red mole stands for what it means to be Mexican.

The complex mixture of ingredients in mole allows one to experience taste with all their taste buds simultaneously. Eating good mole is a very satisfying experience. As shown in the recipe on the right, many different sorts of ingredients go into the thick, paste-like mole sauce. Among these key ingredients are a variety of chiles of different shapes, colors and sizes. Chiles are, as we saw above, the quintessential ingredient in Mexican cuisine. It makes sense that chiles of different types would be essential to mole.

## Mexican Dinners

It's also essential to gather an idea of how people believe a Mexican dinner comes to pass. What is your ideal vision of a Mexican family eating dinner? With this question, a good majority agreed on similar visions, where the whole family eats together, and it's typically the nuclear family: father, mother, kids, and maybe grandparents. Quite a few said that the women in the family would prepare the meal, from fashioning tortillas to cooking the traditional, if not stereotypical, rice and beans.

## Gender?

Following the last question, it was asked whether cooking was a gendered task, as many above stated that women tended to be the ones doing the cooking. The general consensus was that women still do a lot of cooking, especially in the household, and for many women, this is a task they realize comes with the job of being a wife. The idea of male "machismo" would often keep a man out of the kitchen. But men are starting to play bigger parts in making meals, especially when it comes to outdoor cooking. Many respondents felt that it was a man's duty to grill meats outdoors, and that it's becoming much more acceptable for a man to be a good cook. In fact, many great chefs and professional cooks are men, so to the question of gender in cooking, while there are divisions, they are clearly starting to disappear.

## Feelings Associated with food

We asked our respondents to list what emotions they tend to classify with food. The overwhelming answers were Joy, Happiness, and Pleasure. Food is seen as something a family shares, and unless you are driven to eating for depression or anger, food can often build a sense of togetherness and nostalgia and contentment otherwise lacking in some instances.

# PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

## George (How We Eat)

There is also the way Mexican families enjoy their meals when compared to their American counterparts that food help to identify Mexican culture. For my dad, eating with the family after work was one of the most important part of the day for him because it not only allowed him to see us and talk with us, but it always brought the family together once during the day. The importance of this is highlighted by the fact that he turned down a higher paying, but more hours, job so that he could keep his presence within the family consistent. For the family, eating was always done together, never separate, as the meals were always something that brought us together. This establishes that to Mexicans, food helps identify the importance of family and togetherness. However, outside of my family, I had little idea how my friends ate with theirs; I always assumed it was the same as mine. When I once asked my best friend at the time when will he be eating with his family, his answer that he was going to eat by himself shocked me greatly. To me, eating by yourself and without your family seemed unthinkable. While this has not been as big a deal to me as it was then, I can still remember clearly my confusion that it was possible for children to eat by themselves without the family coming together to enjoy the meal. Eating separately is more of an American invention or concept, which explains why, as I have become more American, I have began to see eating on my own as less of a big deal. However, eating together rather than adapting the American style of eating shows how food, or in this case, how families eat food, can identify Mexican cultural values. It also symbolizes a type of rejection of the dominant culture by holding onto the Mexican cultural values of coming together as a family and enjoying the food as a family.

## Ruben (Thanksgiving)

Being of mixed descent (Puerto Rican and Mexican) and born/raised in America, Thanksgiving is an important time of year for my family. Everyone gathers, and my grandmother would be the one doing most of the cooking. Traditional American thanksgiving meals call for Turkey, Green Bean Casserole, Stuffing, Cranberry Sauce, Mashed Potatoes, and maybe some other dishes, so it was always interesting to me to watch the Puerto Rican food mix in with everything else. Yes, we'd have a turkey and mashed potatoes and stuffing. But we'd also have Arroz con Gandules (rice with pigeon peas) which is a classic Puerto Rican dish. If I went to visit my Mexican side of the family, I'd find dishes like Chicken Mole, and lots of tortillas served alongside the regular fixings. The integration of Puerto Rican and Mexican foods is just another example of how food can identify us. I remember being invited to my roommate's home for thanksgiving, and I offered to prepare something. So I went to the store and bought several unripe plantains for tostones. Being the only non-white individual at the dinner table, it was interesting to watch each person taste the tostones and react to a dish that is nowhere near traditional American thanksgiving fare. Yet, they loved it. Those tostones were my identifier on that table, and it's safe to say that with those, I made a good impression on people I had never met before. Food is expression and identity, and says more about a person than you can truly imagine.

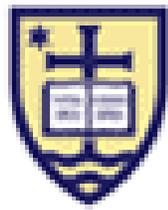
## Conclusion

The phrase “You are what you eat” is controversial. Many would deny that the adage applies to them. Yet in our survey, a good number of respondents agreed with the notion that food is an expression of the self. Food is a reflection on a person’s upbringing in the cultural melting pot of America, and stands as a good way of bringing people together over a table, whatever the location or occasion may be. The fact of the matter is, food is universal, everybody eats, and what type of food you are most likely to eat can really identify where you come from, and let others know who you are. Would you think better of someone eating simple nachos with cheese as opposed to another person dining on foie gras? And what ethnicities would you classify those two as? Food is an important factor in identity, and it says a lot more about you than you might think. “You are what you eat” is true, but it’s also probably true that the thing you eat most is what you are.

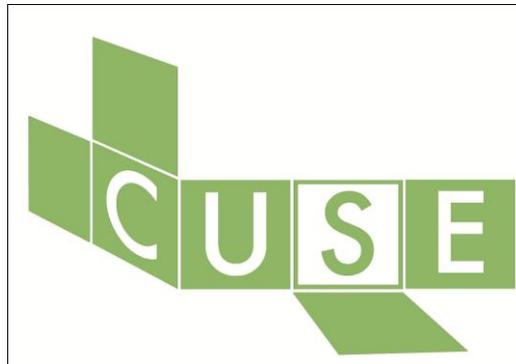
Mexican culture comes alive through food, such as a meal not being complete unless tortillas are on the table or the use of moles or salsas made with indigenous ingredients like chile peppers, tomatoes, onion, garlic and avocado. Food expresses Mexican culture and perpetuates Mexican cultural identity here in South Bend and wherever Mexicans settle in the United States.

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