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### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/61h9z1wr>

### **Journal**

Voices, 1(1)

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### **Publication Date**

2013

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# Yo quiero Taco Bell: How Hispanic Culture Affects American Taste Buds

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## ABSTRACT

*At 12.5% of the population, Hispanics are the largest minority group in the U.S. This article takes into account various food-related studies to show the importance of Hispanic culture in the U.S. food industry. Topics include the increase of Hispanic products, the appearance of 'authentic' and Mexican concept restaurants, and the rising number of advertising campaigns directed at Hispanics. The data shows the strength of Hispanic influence and explains why the Spanish language will have increased importance as Hispanic culture becomes a larger player in the U.S.*

**KEY WORDS:** *Hispanic, culture, food*

1. **INTRODUCTION.** The United States of America (U.S.) is a melting pot of people, cultures, and especially cuisines. As others have mentioned in this volume, Hispanics<sup>1</sup> make up 12.5% of the population, forming the largest minority group in the U.S. It is predicted that this number will increase 5.3% by 2020, with the Hispanic population rising to 17.8% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Cuisine rests at the heart of culture and often serves as a gateway for others to delve into another way of life. Consumption of Hispanic food has consistently played a more significant role in what is known as American cuisine and consequently American culture. In this preliminary article, various food- and restaurant-related studies will be taken into account to show the influence and importance of Hispanic culture in the United States, especially at the dining table. Throughout the years the consumption of certain products and the prevalence of advertising campaigns in Spanish have increased. Additionally 'authentic' and concept Mexican restaurants have increased in number, showing the growing impact of Hispanic culture.

2. **INCREASE IN THE CONSUMPTION OF CERTAIN PRODUCTS.** One of the most obvious effects of Hispanic culture's influence on U.S. culinary preferences is the growing amount of various Hispanic products in the food industry. For example, the word *burrito* appeared for the first time ever on an American menu in the 1930s at a café in Los Angeles called El Cholo (Smith 2004). Burritos were first mentioned in the U.S. media in 1934 (Smith 1999) when a collection of regional recipes was published under the title *The Mexican Cookbook* (Smith 2007). Today, burritos are one of the most commonly consumed forms of Mexican food. However, these were not the first times Hispanic cuisine had been consumed in the U.S.

The first tequila producer, José Cuervo, according to the company's website, was founded in 1795. The first documented importation of tequila into the U.S. occurred in 1873, when three bottles of tequila were sent north 'on the back of a donkey' (James 2001; José Cuervo: La Rojena). It is estimated that 80% of all tequila produced for export goes solely to the U.S. (Fernández 2000; José Cuervo: La Rojena). In fact, tequila consumption in the United States has increased by an astounding 900% since 1986, making it the 'fastest growing spirit in America' (James 2001). The popularization of the beverage has led to increased exposure to at least a piece of Mexican culture.

One particularly popular 'Mexican' product, although created in Maywood, California, is *Tapatío* hot sauce. Commonly found at the end of any given restaurant dining table, it was first offered in five ounce bottles in 1971. Due to heavy demand in the United States, the company created larger and larger bottles and today we have the gallon bottle. Interestingly enough, fast food restaurants and military personnel requested a smaller version of the hot sauce, individual-sized servings, which were created in packets just like ketchup (Tapatío Hot Sauce Website). This convenient size aided in the diffusion of *Tapatío* throughout the fast food industry and its popularity has only escalated. In fact, salsa production overtook ketchup production in the U.S. in 1991 (Chipotle Mexican Grill Website). The increase of Hispanic-influenced products is, of course, not limited to Mexican cuisine. In Los Angeles, for example, Salvadoran food, like *pupusas*, is becoming more prevalent, as are other Hispanic cuisines.

3. **INCREASE OF ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS IN SPANISH.** The increase of advertising campaigns in Spanish proves to be more evidence in the way American culture is impacted by Hispanic culture. The California Milk

Processor Board, known as the CMPB, was created in 1993 in order to counteract the declining milk sales. These were mostly due to increased consumption of other drinks such as soda. In fact, milk consumption had been progressively declining since the 1970s as Hispanic immigration to the U.S. had been consistently rising (U.S. Census Bureau 2008).<sup>2</sup> While the average Californian drank twenty-nine gallons of milk per year in 1980, this amount decreased to twenty-three gallons per year in 1993. The CMPB realized the essential role that the Hispanic community, at over a quarter of the population, played in California's milk consumption and economy. They quickly created a campaign geared towards Latinos one year later. It was called the 'Familia, Amor, y Leche' campaign. In 2001, the first ever Spanish language spot was broadcasted on American television in a *Got Milk?* ad featuring the infamous, at least in Hispanic culture, *La Llorona*. It received much media coverage (Holt 2002). For some Americans, this was their initial contact with the Spanish language.<sup>3</sup> In 2006, the 'Toma Leche' campaign replaced the 'Familia, Amor, y Leche' campaign (Toma Leche Website 2010) and just this past year, in 2010, the 'Mucho Más Que Leche' campaign was instated (PG Store brands Website 2010). In a parallel business endeavor, the CMPB invested \$1.5 million in an additional campaign to popularize the Hispanic drink, *licuados*. The majority of this money went towards ads that contained a blender filled with fruit, without any milk. The blender's buttons read 'Got Milk?' (Cearley 2003). Manning, executive director of the CMPB, believed that the Hispanic drink had enough potential and cultural relevance that it could easily become extremely popular all over California for Latinos and Anglos alike. Not only did these campaigns affect all of California's milk consumption, but they also showed California how Hispanic culture was an evolving force economically and socially, and therefore as an essential component of American culture.

4. INCREASE IN 'AUTHENTIC' MEXICAN RESTAURANTS. According to Ferrero in her article entitled "*Comida Sin Par*. Consumption of Mexican Food in Los Angeles," Mexican food leads a 'dual life': one for Mexican diners and one for non-Mexican diners. She argues that culinary practices are adjusted in order to accommodate for the latter and that Mexican culture is 'on display' in the sense that items like *sombreros*, Mexican flags and pictures of traditional *señoritas* are common in restaurants serving food for non-Mexican diners. Food becomes somewhat standardized and we see a repetition of entrees like *enchiladas*, *quesadillas*, and *nachos* (Ferrero 2002).

On the contrary, 'authentic' Mexican food restaurants tend to contain a wide variety of entrees and typically have specialties that vary each day. They are less likely to be homogenized and food isn't necessarily mass-produced, hence the absence of large restaurant chains. Ferrero quotes an informant as saying that in order to produce real Mexican food 'one must buy Mexican ingredients, pans, and crockery at Mexican markets' (Ferrero 2002). A personal definition of an 'authentic' Mexican restaurant is one that serves 'authentic' Mexican food, cooked with the same ingredients and prepared in the same manner as the corresponding dishes in Mexico—the décor, crockery, and consumer's ethnicity being irrelevant. After all, non-Mexican diners do eat at 'authentic' Mexican restaurants and Mexican diners do eat at 'non-authentic' Mexican restaurants.

Whatever your definition of 'authentic' Mexican restaurants may be, it is quite evident that their appearance is increasing, especially in larger cities, but it is unfortunately difficult to track their growth in a precise manner due to their sporadic nature. Fast food chains, however, are easily accounted for.

5. INCREASE IN MEXICAN CONCEPT FAST FOOD CHAINS. Due to Hispanic gastronomical influence, Mexican concept fast food chains have emerged. These restaurants do not technically serve 'authentic' Mexican food, but rather Mexican-influenced dishes and their variations. With over 6,000 restaurants, Taco Bell is the most popular Mexican concept fast food chain in the world. It opened in 1962, jumping to one hundred restaurants five years later and is now international (Taco Bell Website 2011), with restaurants in twenty different countries (Taco Bell Answers 2011). Taco Bell has attempted to enter the Mexican market twice, once in Mexico City and once in Monterrey, without success (Cerdeña 2010). The lack of authenticity of Mexican food obviously fails to faze Americans as Taco Bell and its popularity only continue to grow.

Del Taco, Taco Bell's competitor, actually opened their first restaurant one year before Taco Bell, in 1961 (Del Taco Website 2011). They now have over five hundred restaurants throughout the United States and have not attempted to enter the market in Mexico (Del Taco, Inc.).

A newer Mexican concept fast food chain that focuses on burritos rather than tacos is Chipotle. The first Chipotle restaurant opened in 1993, and there are currently over nine hundred restaurants in the U.S., Canada, and England. Although there are no locations in Mexico, Chipotle has a website in Spanish that is accessible from their homepage

showing the company's value of Hispanic consumers (Chipotle Mexican Grill Website). Neither Taco Bell nor Del Taco has a link on the homepage to their entire website in Spanish.<sup>4</sup>

Different approaches to marketing to consumers in Mexico exist among the various fast-food chains. Taco Bell, for example, rather than trying to assimilate to Mexican culture, differentiated themselves by marketing as a restaurant that sold American food, going as far as to add french fries to the menu. Taco Bell even modified the names of their items in an attempt to acknowledge their differences from real Mexican food. Tacos in the Mexican locations were called *tacostadas* and the English word *spicy* was used to describe food instead of *picante*. This venture differs from that of McDonald's who made an effort to assimilate to Mexican culture, adding new menu items such as the 'McBurrito a la Mexicana' and creating individual-sized packets of jalapeño toppings (World News Australia 2007).

It is also interesting to note that while some words for different foods are welcomed into the English language and accompanying dictionaries, others aren't entirely. *Burritos* are not referred to as 'burrito sandwiches,' yet salsa is occasionally referred to as 'salsa sauce.' Even the word *salsa* has deviated from its original Spanish meaning, any type of sauce, to mean a spicy tomato-based sauce usually with onions and hot peppers.

6. CONCLUSION. As shown through the increase of the consumption of products like tequila and Tapatío in the U.S., various advertising campaigns specifically geared towards Hispanics, and the popularity of Mexican food and restaurants, it is evident that Hispanic culture plays a considerable role in American taste preferences. Hispanic culture is becoming more and more prominent in our society not only due to the sheer number of speakers, but also because of its influence on American culture, and especially on the food industry.

## NOTES

1. The terms 'Hispanic,' 'Latino,' and 'Hispanic American' are used interchangeably in this article.

2. It is unclear as to whether there is a direct correlation between the decline in milk consumption and the incline in Hispanic immigration to the U.S.

3. Although it is probable that this was not the first encounter with Spanish for most.

4. As of the date this article was written.

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