

Where did “Tex-Mex” come from?

The divisive emergence of a social category*

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Chicago Magazine

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September, 2017

FORTHCOMING IN

RESEARCH IN ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

* We appreciate helpful comments on earlier drafts from Art Brief, John-Paul Ferguson, Marie Sarita Gaytan and Barry Staw. We also received useful feedback on developing the AOI survey from John-Paul Ferguson and Airin D. Martinez.

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ABSTRACT

Research on social categories has become one of the more active lines of research on organizations. Much of this research presumes the pre-existence of at least the “seed” of the category and then proceeds to study and explain how the category developed and became institutionalized. By contrast, this study joins several recent others in attempting to identify and explain why a previously non-existent social category emerged in the first place. Empirically, we examine the emergence of the Tex-Mex social category for food and cuisine. In studying Tex-Mex food, we present a brief analytical social history of the cuisine starting in Old Mexico and continuing up to contemporary times. We juxtapose the social facts that we report with prevailing theoretical ideas (social-activist theorization and similarity clustering) about category emergence drawn from organization theory. While insightful, we find current theoretical accounts to be incomplete in explaining why Tex-Mex emerged. By contrast, our analysis directs attention to the status dynamics of ethnic majority/minority populations, early inexpensive mass industrialization of the food and certain geographic factors. Casual comparisons to other ethnic food categories appear to support the speculative argument we advance.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the more vibrant strands of contemporary organizational research examines how social categories influence and shape organizational behavior and performance. Category research investigates the emergence of categories (Croidieu, Ruling & Boutinot, 2015), the constraints imposed by categories (Hsu 2006), and the social and economic sanctions associated with category association (Zuckerman 1999). Overall, this research has sensitized analysts to the many important ways that social categories affect organizations (for reviews see Negro, Koçak & Hsu 2010; Durand, Granqvist & Tyllström 2017).

The vast bulk of theory and research on categories presumes the existence of a category or a set of categories and proceeds from that vantage point (Jones, Maoret & Massa, 2012). For instance, category spanning of organizations across multiple categories is of major interest. Hsu (2006) lays the problem out nicely, which she describes as attempting to be a “jack of all trades and master of none.” She shows that category-spanning firms suffer a market penalty. Likewise, Negro, Hannan and Rao (2010) show that wines spanning broad institutionalized categories of “traditional” versus “modern” receive less critical acclaim than those clearly classified in either individual category. Paolletta and Sharkey (2017) find that category spanning affects the clarity of organizational identity. Kovács and Hannan (2010, 2015) bring category distance (or what they call “contrast”) into the picture.¹ More broadly, the ecology of categories concerns the development and positioning of categories relative to each other (Pontikes & Hannan 2014). In summarizing this line of research, Jones et al. (2012: 1523) say, “most category studies have focused on established categories with discrete boundaries.”

¹ Some of this work flows naturally from an earlier and continuing research tradition examining resource partitioning. See McKendrick and Hannan (2013).

A question central to this research program on social categories concerns how and when does a new category emerge initially and evolve over time? An earlier stream of organizational research posed a very similar parallel question with respect to an organizational form as the emergent entity (Ruef 2000). Analysts differ in the degree to which they consider the distinction between category and organizational form important and in the ways they distinguish between the two. For many analysts, category is the broader, more abstract concept and represents an institutionalized classification of a set of particular activities and actors, while organizational form is a more concrete set of features expected for an organization associated with a particular label. When considered together, an organizational form can be considered the commonly accepted organizational manifestation of a category; it is the socially accepted blueprint for organizations operating in a category using a particular label (Hannan, Polos and Carroll 2007). So, for instance, if a category for restaurants is “Italian cuisine,” then the organizational form is the set of taken-for-granted features that one expects to encounter upon examining an organization called an “Italian restaurant.” Fit to the expected blueprint need not be black or white--it can be a matter of degree and it can vary by audiences and it can vary over time.

Despite this conceptual distinction, extant research on category emergence often bases its explanations on phenomena and factors very similar to those deployed previously to explain organizational form emergence. Theories commonly used to explain category or form emergence typically identify as key variables structural aspects of the contextual organizational social structure such as density (Ruef 2000), crowding, straddling, contrast (Boegart, Boone & Carroll 2010) and differentiation (McKendrick, Jaffee, Carroll & Khessina 2014, Navis & Glynn 2010). Other theories look beyond the dynamics of producer organizations in the immediate domain and see external agents and organizations as key. Sometimes these agents are individuals or set of individuals behaving as activists leading a social movement of sorts (Rao et al. 2003). In other accounts, these agents include

collective groups and entities such as consumers (Rosa, Porac, Runsor-Spanjol & Saxon 1999; Sørensen & Feng 2017), industry associations (Wagespuck & Sorensen 2010), market intermediaries such as promoters (Khaire 2017), institutional logics (Jha and Beckman 2017) and agents of the state (Edman and Ahmadjian, 2017).

Analysts seem to agree that a fundamental part of the early category emergence process involves the articulation of, agreement about, and adoption of a label (or name) for the category. They also agree about the early-stage presence of a handful or more of highly engaged individuals, often referred to as activists, enthusiasts or vanguards. Beyond that, we see a major difference residing in the roles, activities and prominence that these early engaged individuals are theoretically depicted as playing. For conceptual convenience, we cast these depictions into two basic kinds of theoretical accounts, recognizing the possible loss of subtlety in doing so.

In the first kind of account, exemplified by Rao et al. (2003), the activists are portrayed as social movement entrepreneurs. These “entrepreneurs” are essentially advocates for the category. They are seen as being heavily involved in “theorization” of the nascent category and its rationale. They are also seen as undertaking and supporting organizational activities that communicate the category’s label and its “theory.” In addition, these social movement activists are viewed as attempting to persuade potential adherents to support and join in activities associated with the category. Rao et al. (2003) claim that the nouvelle cuisine category in France emerged this way.

In the second kind of account, developed most explicitly by Hannan et al. (2007), the enthusiasts play a prominent role in a process called “similarity clustering.” This process involves the cognitive grouping of entities perceived to be similar based on comparisons of their features with other available entities. In Hannan et al.’s (2007) depiction, the comparisons are systematic and bilateral, meaning that every entity is seen as being compared directly to every other entity in a one-to-one way. By this

process, the category's emergence accelerates fully only after early enthusiasts have come to some agreement about a similarity cluster and associated a label or name with it.

Notice that while the two accounts do not necessarily disagree with each other, they do emphasize very different roles and activities of activists. Most importantly, in the social-movement account, political and social interests seem to be driving the activists (although the advocacy arguments advanced often espouse a purely public interest). By contrast, in the similarity-clustering account, sense-making through cognition seems to be a strong driver. Here the enthusiasts mainly want to impose conceptual order on the world and interests do not seem to come into play, at least explicitly.

Common labeling of a set of entities encourages individuals to emphasize their underlying similarities, and facilitates communication about the set as a whole. Common labeling also guides the perception of others into thinking about the labeled set as a unified grouping. Such perception paves the way to schematization, automatic cognition and institutionalization as a default code embedded with expectations. Galperin and Sorenson (2014) show in an experiment that labels convey more salience to individuals than do descriptive attributes of category members and their common characteristics; they found consumers preferred products with the "organic" label more than those which listed the attributes required to be organic. In research on categories, labels figure heavily into analyses through processes involving the reinterpretation of categories such as modern and traditional styles of winemaking (Negro et al. 2011). Grodal and Kahl (2017) elaborate on how discourse further may affect category construction, especially audience discourse during the category's early phases of selection and collective definition. Likewise, Pontikes & Hannan (2014) argue that audience members and other agents assign labels to entities based on their perceived similarities to other category members.

Much empirical research on organizational form or category emergence presumes the existence of a label for the category and then traces the processes that catapult the nascent category into fully-

fledged institutionalized or legitimated status (Jones et al. 2012). For instance, in studying the health care sector, Ruef (2000) found that organizational forms are more likely to emerge in identity spaces neighboring other spaces already populated with organizations but not heavily crowded. Likewise, Boegart et al. (2010) showed that heterogeneity in identity and organizing principles slowed the emergence and acceptance of the broad “auditing” category as an eventual profession and form in the Netherlands; the contentious emergence of the form was associated with a density measure weighted by the various competing models. In Pontikes and Hannan (2014), labels provide a reference structure for assessing the typicality of producers and their distance from each other. While insightful and highly productive, it is important to recognize that such research does not usually attempt to account for the earliest stage of the process, the actual emergence of the label (Jones et al. 2012).

We study here the emergence of the food category labeled “Tex-Mex,” an historical case that we think gives some insight into the early label and category emergence process. Of course, the Tex-Mex food category is now fully established in the U.S. and elsewhere---search any restaurant review database. Tex-Mex is widely used as a cuisine category in contemporary discussions, both popular and academic (Pilcher 2011; Arrellano 2012). There is also considerable agreement about its meaning as a label (Walsh 2004). To wit, Tex-Mex typically implies concretely items such as chili con carne, nachos, fajitas and combination plates, among other food items; it usually also implies yellow cheese, cumin, corn chips, and chili powder among other ingredients. The establishment of such an institutionalized separate category for locally adapted immigrant food is somewhat unique---French, German, Italian, Chinese and Japanese cuisines never experienced such a widely agreed upon breakaway category distinction.

From historical publication records, we show below that the specific Tex-Mex label experienced a clearly demarcated emergence point---the late1960s/early 1970s in the U.S.---and then it experienced a

subsequent take-off period 20-25 years later. As we describe below, much of the food itself was widely available for decades prior, it was just not called Tex-Mex. We review and document the emergence of the Tex-Mex label as well as the circumstances surrounding it and the early development of the category. We then analyze this case with respect to theory on category emergence by asking the following research questions: (1) Under what social and economic conditions did the Tex-Mex label and category emerge? (2) How and why did it emerge? (3) How do the known facts of the case match up with current prevailing theories of category emergence? (4) What does the case imply for future theoretical development on label and category emergence? In attempting to answer these questions, we draw upon an original survey to evaluate how Americans perceive the authenticity of various Mexican and Tex-Mex dishes. We also make some comparisons to other imported cuisines and their category evolution. Finally, we consider why Tex-Mex was, until recently, often considered inauthentic and disparaged as a cuisine.

Our analysis suggests that common theories of label category emergence are partial or incomplete (at best) in accounting for the Tex-Mex category case. Specifically, we find a category that emerges in an intense, protracted and bitterly divisive process of ethnic status dynamics played out in geographically contiguous communities. These dynamics involved white Americans, vanguards and the masses, at key points, but also revolved heavily around Mexicans, Mexican elites, and Mexican-Americans. Physical geography likely came into play, as did perceptions of the authenticity of mass industrialized food, of which a variant of Tex-Mex food is an early instantiation.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we provide a brief overview to the theory and research on category emergence. We draw out further the distinction between two different types of explanations that have been offered, even though they remain under-articulated. We then offer a narrative of the history of Tex-Mex food, drawing from a wide variety of historical and other sources.

Following that descriptive exposition, we then attempt to reconcile the facts of the narrative with the prevailing theoretical accounts, an exercise that leads to us developing a more nuanced explanation for the emergence of Tex-Mex cuisine.

2. THEORY AND RESEARCH ON CATEGORY EMERGENCE

The last decade or so has witnessed an explosion of research on social categories, and the effects of their institutionalization. Although institutional theory has long recognized the pivotal role that normative conceptions of organizational forms play in explaining organizational action, the categories perspective pinpointed some key operative mechanisms with tighter precision and allowed identification of many of the pivotal agents. Institutional theory posited a specific but somewhat vague theoretical link between the normative order and organizational structure and action. Theory and research on categories filled in more of the picture of the normative environment by specifying an intermediating set of identifiable agents, rules and structures that enact the process.

The exact origins of the category research program could be debated but there is little doubt that the power of the approach readily caught scholars' attention with the seminal studies of Zuckerman (1999, 2000). He showed that organizational structures and stock market prices tend to align with the assigned portfolios of equity analysts. Firms whose degree and type of diversification activities lined up with the typical degree and type of diversification found in analysts' portfolios garnered stock premiums (or rather, in Zuckerman's terms, those who did not line up suffered a legitimacy penalty). So, it mattered not just how firms were doing in their various businesses but also how closely their businesses conformed to institutionalized combinations of businesses as defined by the implicit analyst-based categorization system. Zuckerman theorized that analysts had trouble evaluating activities that arose in unusual combinations and tended to devalue them as a result, either wittingly or not. Analysts also tended to encourage executives to drop businesses that did not conform to the institutionalized

combinations; many firms adjusted by doing so and thereby reaped benefits in the stock market. Most importantly, Zuckerman's studies identified the agents involved in enforcing the institutionalized normative order, pointed to the mechanisms operative in the process, and showed that structural variation in the agents' positions was crucial and could be readily measured. Recently, Zuckerman (2017) has described the categorization process as the "sorting and screening of exchange opportunities." He also notes that the process varies in strength across context and it varies in character by audience objective and by the audience's implicit theory of value. Rhee, Kennedy and Fiss (2017) propose some possible different conditions of emergence and speculate about their consequences.

Zuckerman's studies ignited research on categories with other professional market intermediaries such as film and film critics (Hsu 2006), wine and wine critics (Negro et al. 2010) and the like. Subsequent research has examined the roles categories play in cases of direct consumer feedback mechanisms, usually online. For instance, dining reviews show strong variations in mean value rating by category as well as by perceived authenticity of the producer (Kovács et al. 2014). Book reviews shift surprisingly downward when books are categorized as highly popular (Kovács & Sharkey 2014). Film reviews of category-spanning "hybrid" films show higher variance and occasionally result in exceptionally good performance (Hsu, Negro & Perritti 2012). Specific product reviews for beers vary depending on whether a brewer is categorized as a lager producer (Verhaal et al. 2015; Barlow et al. 2016; Frake 2016); and product reviews for digital cameras depend on the identity of the producer by its category (Sørensen & Feng 2017).

The first stage of category research focused on the effects of categories, and organizations' positions relative to their relevant categories. As mentioned above, perhaps the most common research problem studied is category straddling, or positioning of an organization to span more than one category (indeed, even Zuckerman's study can be seen as a study of category straddling). For the most

part, the research in this stage took as given an extant set of institutionalized categories and analyzed structure and behavior from that perspective, including the permeability or blurriness of category boundaries (Negro & Leung 2012).

A subsequent stage of research has started to address questions about category ecology, including the central issue of where do categories come from. That is, category emergence has become an interesting research problem in its own right, as did organizational form emergence in an earlier era. And, while there has been significant research ostensibly on category emergence, it almost always assumes the existence of a label or name for the category (and usually at least one instance of an entity in the named category, if not an exemplar). Research then proceeds by studying the category's development and institutionalization from this nascent state. From this research program, we know that the following conditions matter: consumer endorsement and acceptance of the category (Rosa et al. 1999), density of entities occupying neighboring categories (Ruef 2000), the degree of specialization or focus in the category (McKendrick & Carroll 2001; Boegart et al. 2010), articulation of a theory of the category (Rao et al. 2003), density of the category-labeled entities (Hannan et al. 2007), and endorsement by professional and industry associations (Wageuspeck & Soreneson 2011).

As Hannan et al. (2007: 47) note, when explicit labels or names get associated with a set of entities it “crystallize[s] the sense that [individuals] have identified a commonality.” The labeling or naming of a set of entities is commonly theorized to enhance establishment of a category because a common label: (1) emphasizes the underlying similarities of the set of entities with that label; (2) enables and assists communication about the set as a whole; and (3) facilitates transition of cognition about the set to automatic mode, and subsequent taken-for-granted status (Galperin & Sorenson 2014).

If labels provide the spark that ignites the category emergence process, then understanding when and where and how a label emerges and solidifies becomes key to tracing the origins of a category.

That is, explaining category emergence from an early stage requires understanding what conditions or processes prompt individuals and groups to propose and agree upon a new label for a set of organizations or other entities. However, in practice it is very difficult to keep from conflating label emergence and category emergence and much extant research (at least implicitly) discusses the two processes interchangeably.

In current research, theories about these processes are often implicit in specific analyses of categories and leave lots of room for interpretation. Nonetheless, we think shades of two different theoretical postures can be discerned from current research and developed, perhaps in stylized fashion for clarity. Both theoretical postures depict important roles for early highly engaged individuals referred to as activists, enthusiasts or vanguards. In the first posture, the activists are articulating a vision for the category and building a social movement around it; in the second posture, the activists are making sense of what they see and stimulating a process that evolves their interpretation to a larger collective.

An example of the first theoretical posture would be Rao et al.'s (2003) analytical narrative about the emergence and institutionalization of nouvelle cuisine. In this narrative, activists are depicted as social movement-like entrepreneurs who articulate a "theory" of the nascent category; these entrepreneurs also organize activities that promote the category and attempt to persuade others. For example, Rao et al. (2003: 803, 805) say that:

"Nouvelle cuisine arose because an initiator movement exposed the mutability of logic of classical cuisine...Identity movements arise when activists construct institutional gaps by showing the existing logic cannot be an effective guide for action...and then offer a repertoire of practices that embody a different institutional logic...The [nouvelle] movement was shaped by activists such as Paul Bocuse, Michel Guerard, the Troisgros brothers and Alain Chapel"

Other examples that we would claim are generally consistent with this posture include the microbrewers of Carroll and Swaminathan (2000), the radio entrepreneurs of Greve, Posner and Rao (2006), the event promoters of Khaire (2017), the government agents of Edman and Ahmadjian (2017), and the cultural entrepreneurs of Johnson and Powell (2015).

The second theoretical posture is laid out in Hannan et al. (2007). Here the activists are trying to make sense of the unstructured world they encounter. Activists here are depicted as engaging in a process of clustering entities (often organizations) based on the relative similarity of their features. As they describe the process:

“The pre-category stage might exhibit little conceptual order. Enthusiasts have not yet settled on the features that will be used to specify a (not-yet-to-be-defined) category. How do they make sense of things? We conjecture that observers look at the producers/products in simple paired comparisons and focus on the features that they see as present, rather than on those they might consider missing. They might indeed see many more features for one object than for another, as when two producers differ in prominence. Similarity judgments will exhibit asymmetry in such cases” (Hannan et al. 2007: 40).

They go on to note that similarity clustering might occur around the features of products, or producers, or both. They describe this process as similarity-based classification. They suggest that similarity clustering is more likely when audience members experience the products/services themselves, without direct contact with their producers. Finally, they argue that individuals will not expend the effort to engage in similarity clustering unless the density or contrast of the cluster is high. Vergne and Swain (2017) describe the attempts to impose order and make sense of during Bitcoin’s appearance in the U.K. and the subsequent emergence of blockchain as a possible category.

Because the two theoretical positions are not yet fully fleshed out by analysts, making comparisons between them is a risk-fraught activity. It is also clear that various analysts within a position do not always see eye to eye. Still, it seems to us that some interesting suggestive observations about the two positions may be insightful. First, in both cases, generally unspecified larger exogenous shifts in the environment are often seen as triggering the processes depicted in the theory. For instance, Rao et al. (2003) refer to the countercultural political events of May 1968 as triggering the *nouvelle cuisine* movement. Hannan et al. (2007) list many macroscopic factors that might spark similarity clustering including resources, networks, technology and institutions. Second, in neither account are the motivations of the activists explicitly stated, but in the activist-theorization posture, the activists generally seem to us to have a stronger vested interest in the fate of the emergent category. Maybe this observation occurs to us because the activists in these accounts are often identified, while with similarity clustering they are typically described simply as individuals or agents. It is also easier to see, after the fact, who wins and loses as a result of a category's emergence and to trace these outcomes back to early involvement. Third, the skills and abilities of the activists to control category-related activities seems to be assumed to be greater in the activist-theorization position than with similarity clustering, where the activists' role seems very diminished after initial sense-making stage. In similarity-clustering accounts, the activists are typically anonymous and it is hard to know if they stay associated with the category; in the activist-theorization accounts, the named activists and their activities can be tracked as the category emerges and develops.

Although label emergence has been barely studied, notions about activist theorization and similarity clustering underpin most theory and research we have identified. For instance, Jones et al. (2014) use a decidedly institutional theoretical approach in attempting to explain the rise and institutionalization of the label "modern architecture" in the period 1870-1975. Their analysis delves

deeply into the agents and associations involved in the social construction of the category, which is highly contentious and multi-faceted. For much of their evidence, they relied on semantic analysis of the texts and buildings of 17 leading architects. To be more specific, Jones et al. (2012) identified competing groups of architects and the institutional logics they deployed in attempting to change architectural thought and practice. At the core of their argument, however, we find a fundamental argument about similarity clustering (but they do not refer to it by that name). To wit, they say:

“Categories are more easily constructed, recognized, and learned when artifacts’ features are distinct from those of other categories, and are also similar and visible within a category (Rosch & Mervis 1975). These categories are defined by artifact codes: the implicit rules about what is selected and combined to express a category (Ansell 1997, Atkinson 1985)” (Jones et al., 2012: 1524)

Likewise, in studying category ecology and movement in a domain, Pontikes and Hannan (2014 : 312) claim that, “feature-based similarities strongly influence label assignments even as actors change positions in both spaces.”

To sum up, although some studies claim to examine category emergence, these often entail study and research only after a label has emerged and an instantiation of it has been identified. Attempts to push back the causal process further would need to explain when a label emerges and why. The most highly developed theoretical account of this kind of label emergence depicts a process of making sense of an unordered set through a process of similarity clustering, where individuals delineate clusters based on the observed features of products and services, and sometime producers. We will return to this account of label emergence after next reviewing the social history of Tex-Mex food.

3. CAPSULE SOCIAL HISTORY OF TEX-MEX FOOD

Drawing from a wide variety of historical and other sources, we provide a brief narrative history of Tex-Mex food. Narrative has been defined as “the organization of material in a chronologically sequential order and the focusing of the content into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots” (Stone 1979: 84). While many have debated whether historical narrative “explains” events or not (see Davidson 1984; White 1984; Bruner 1986; Carr 2008), the question is peripheral to the way we use narrative here, which is to create a set of social facts that may or may not be consistent with relevant theories rather than to consider the narrative itself an analytical exercise. Our usage thus abides the conservative historians’ view that narrative is not strong analytically but is descriptively insightful (Stone 1979; Roberts 2006). A main attraction of narrative is that it is process-oriented and can potentially give “full weight to chance, contingency and unintended consequences” (Roberts 2006: 712).

Mexican food and the Tex-Mex label

The Tex-Mex label has been used for at least four decades to brand all Mexican-American food. But the term has also faced confusion and disagreement over how it should be applied. The core issue is “whether Tex-Mex means Americanized Mexican food in general or specifically the kind from Texas” (Walsh 2004: p. xvii). To those with very limited exposure to Mexican-related foods, the label Tex-Mex may still refer in their minds to any and all Mexican-American food. To most others, especially those with more experience and food knowledge, the meaning is closely connected to a specific set of food items using certain ingredients and prepared in particular ways (which we detail below). In fact, we believe that among Americans there is widespread knowledge and agreement that Mexican and Tex-Mex are separate and distinguishable social categories for food, even if not everyone can specify the

details and schemata underlying the distinction.² In other words, Tex-Mex is in our view (and most other analysts' views) an institutionalized label associated with the Tex-Mex social category, which specifies certain foods, ingredients and cooking styles as belonging to the category and others as not (itemized below). We use this meaning of Tex-Mex throughout the article.

Decades ago, the food cooked by Mexicans living in the United States was simply considered Mexican. Then from several directions arose cries of Mexican-American food as not only different, but also as inferior and simplistic compared to Mexican food south of the border (Santamaria 1959). Why did people begin considering Mexican-American food separate from “real” Mexican cuisine? And, why was Mexican-American cuisine denigrated as inauthentic? The Tex-Mex label was scorned; it not only came to imply inauthenticity compared to Mexican food south of the border, but to conjure up “culinary disgust” (Arellano 2012: 125).

The celebrated cookbook writer Diana Kennedy outspokenly vilified Mexican-American food in English first in her influential *The Cuisines of Mexico*, published in 1972, although so far as we can tell she did not use the term Tex-Mex. Since then, condemnations have come from other notable cultural figures. The Nobel Prize-winning Mexican poet Octavio Paz famously said “the melting pot is a social idea that, when applied to culinary art, produces abominations” (Paz 1987: 83). Accordingly, Paz praised the authenticity of Mexican regional cuisine while denouncing Tex-Mex food as a bastardization and criticizing Mexican Americans who blended the two cultures in their daily lives. Albert Adrià, the Spanish restaurateur and brother of famed modernist chef Ferran Adrià of the now closed El Bulli, described his reason for opening two Mexican restaurants in Barcelona: “The Mexican kitchen is brilliant in its regional diversity and the way it creates complex layers of taste and contrasting textures. So I wanted to rescue its reputation from the blight of the Tex-Mex cooking that’s better

² The same could be said for widely used categories of music. For instance, we venture that while most Americans know and use the categories jazz and bluegrass, only a subset can offer definitive descriptions of them.

known in Europe. . .” (quoted in Lobrano, 2015). And even the eminent British historian Eric Hobsbawm found occasion to brand Tex-Mex food “a barbaric mutation” of true Mexican cuisine (quoted in Freedland 2014: 22).

Dispute over the authenticity and worth of Tex-Mex food persists today. To understand why, we must look at the origins of Mexican food, and then at the origins and differing styles of food of the American Southwest, including the style and scope of what became known as Tex-Mex.

Food in Mexico before and after the Spanish Conquest

Mexico is complex, in geography, cultures, history, and the abundance of its unique native foods. Many different indigenous cultures with different languages and local cuisines arose in pre-Columbian Mexico. Separated by geographical divisions--mountain ranges, high plateaus, deserts, and tropical rainforests bordered by two oceans--local regions developed their own customs and identities. And, over the years, the difficulty of transport without pack animals, wheeled conveyance, or significant navigable rivers reinforced these distinctions.

Even the seeming constant staples of domesticated corn, beans, tomatoes, and chilies evolved into quite varied foods—different varieties were prepared differently throughout Mesoamerica, although the basic technology of processing corn into more nutritious masa was ubiquitous. Regional differences persisted even with the growth of larger societies as chiefdoms expanded over centuries and millennia into several highly developed ancient civilizations and empires. When the Spanish arrived, many regional cuisines existed in Mexico and their underlying distinctions endured despite the introduction of new European and global foods.

The story of post-Columbian Mexico involves mixture---the blending, incorporation, adoption, innovation, and fusion of peoples, cultures, and not least, of foods. Indeed, Mexico has a long tradition of defining itself as a *mestizaje* or mixing culture. Mann (2011) describes how Mexico in the 16th and

17th centuries became New Spain, a nexus of the worldwide Spanish colonial empire ranging from Africa to the Philippines and East Asia in a network of economic exchange via trade, conquest, and slavery. When Cortez conquered Tenochtitlan in 1521, the capital of the Aztecs was “bigger and richer than any city in Spain” (2011: 361). Renamed Mexico City, it became the capital of New Spain and the wealthiest city of Spain’s colonial empire by the 17th century.

Mercenaries, aristocrats, and clerics arrived from Spain and elsewhere in Europe and brought with them African slaves. The Spanish also brought many thousands of Filipino and Filipino-Fujianese Asians—sailors, servants, slaves, merchants, and migrants—who disembarked first in Acapulco via the galleon trade and then spread inland across New Spain to Mexico City.³ Mann argues that this mixture of foreign and indigenous peoples made Mexico City the “first global city” and a “showpiece for the human branch of the Columbian Exchange” (2011: 413-419). Coined by Crosby (2003[1973]), the Columbian Exchange refers to the period after 1492 when cultural and biological links between the Old and New Worlds became established by voyagers.

The Columbian Exchange explains the “reason there are tomatoes in Italy, oranges in the United States, chocolates in Switzerland, and chili peppers in Thailand” (Mann 2011: 7). As the Spanish dispersed many native Mexican foods (almost all plants) around the globe, they also introduced many new foods and cooking techniques to Mexico from Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. These included, most crucially, European domestic animals but also plant staples like wheat and rice.⁴

³ The influence of African slaves and Asian immigrants and their contribution to Mexico’s multiracial mixture was concentrated in coastal regions and urban areas; the mixing can easily be seen in cities like Veracruz and Acapulco, major ports for the Spanish galleon trade. An estimated 200,000 African slaves were brought to Mexico (Curtin 1969). Slack (2009) estimates that fifty to a hundred thousand Asians came to Mexico in the colonial period; 60 to 80 percent of the crew on the Spanish galleons and their accompanying vessels in the Pacific trade were Asian and many of them never returned to Manila.

⁴ “The culinary influence of Africans and Asians can be difficult to document directly because of the circulation of foodstuffs before 1492; for instance, it is impossible to say with certainty whether rice arrived in New Spain from Europe, Africa, Asia, or all three. Moreover, European migrants to the colony were not all of Iberian origin. Catholic priests, in particular, were often recruited from Italy and the Habsburg territories of Central Europe” (Pilcher 2012: 23).

Indigenous traditions included grinding corn and transforming it into masa with the technology of nixtamal (alkaline processing to free bound niacin and improve the grain's nutritional value). Other traditions involved making tortillas and tamales, and cooking beans, squashes, and a host of other native vegetables and fruits, seafood, and game, seasoning them with endless variations of salsas made with native chilies, tomatoes, avocados and chocolate. Introduced plants included onions, garlic, limes and many other fruits, sugar, rice, wheat for breads and pastries, spices such as cloves and nutmeg, and herbs such as cilantro and parsley. These were combined with native foods to season and prepare pork, chicken, beef, goat, lamb and dairy products, cheeses most importantly.⁵

This fusion of the traditions and techniques of pre-Colombian Mexico with non-indigenous ingredients and new cooking techniques in New Spain gave birth to an entirely new world cuisine. Renowned chef Rick Bayless calls it a “collision cuisine” (Vettel 2014).⁶ The birth was midwifed mostly through the labors and inventiveness of women—indigenous Indians, Spanish, African, Asian, Moorish, Creoles, French (during Emperor Maximilian's rule in the 1860s), and the mestizo blend of these peoples that came to characterize most Mexicans--first in convents and homes and later food stands and restaurants.⁷ It only slowly began to be recognized as Mexican cuisine after Mexico's independence in 1821.

⁵ The story is more complicated than outlined here because upper-class “Creoles” who derived status from their pure Spanish and European heritage long denied the value of indigenous culture, sought to emulate “pure” Spanish and French cuisines, both as nostalgic Creole and as the latest European fashion, and showed disdain for indigenous and mestizo foods. But later they embraced a partly mythical pre-Hispanic past, including its foods, as part of Mexican nationalist ideology (Pilcher 2012).

⁶ Bayless is a celebrated chef of Mexican cuisine, restaurateur, cookbook author, and television cooking series host. The television series *One Plate at a Time* is currently in its eleventh season on the PBS network. His most famous restaurants are Frontera Grill and Topolobampo in Chicago.

⁷ “Perhaps it had seen its first independent life in the kitchens of the ubiquitous convents, where the Spanish nuns had to work hand-in-hand with Indian girls who knew the country's produce. Or it may have been the everyday cooks whose inventiveness led them to pepper their well-proved cooking with all things new. Whatever it was, the roots of today's Mexican food are buried deep in the first native tastes and traditional ways” (Bayless 1987: 19)

Regional variations in Mexican cuisine developed naturally based on local indigenous styles, climate and historical contingencies. These variations evolved further over generations after independence from Spain, sometimes though the influence of immigrants from elsewhere. For example, Mennonites moved from Canada to Chihuahua and founded a remote colony in the 1920s, where they began making a soft white cheese that became famous throughout Mexico (and later the U.S.) as *queso de chihuahua* (Pilcher 2012). In the 1950s and 1960s, second-generation Lebanese in Mexico City began cooking pork in the same way they had cooked lamb *shwarma* on vertical rotisseries in the Middle East.⁸ They put sliced meat into tortillas with a slice of pineapple; thus was born the *taco al pastor*, which spread all over Mexico and eventually to Mexican enclaves throughout the U.S., becoming one of the most widely savored tacos.

Myriad introductions, blendings, and innovations led to what is now recognized as one of the world's most complex cuisines. Indeed, an argument can be made that there was never a single Mexican cuisine and that today no such thing as a single authentic Mexican Cuisine exists. For good reason, Diana Kennedy titled her highly influential 1972 cookbook *The Cuisines of Mexico*, not *The Cuisine of Mexico*. She wrote (p. 3), "Indeed there are many cuisines that have grown up and flourished from pre-Columbian times to the present day. The regional dishes of Sonora, or Jalisco, have practically nothing in common with those of Yucatán and Campeche; neither have those of Nuevo Leon with those of Chiapas and Michoacán; in Oaxaca certain chiles are grown and used that are found nowhere else in Mexico."

Mexican America

⁸This more recent example of an Arabic influence in Mexican cooking recalls the Moorish influence that arrived with the conquistadors. The Spaniards introduced a distinct Arabic touch to the preparation of the ingredients they brought with them, many of which were traditionally used in Arabic cooking: almonds, sesame, sugar, olives, dried and candied fruits, pomegranate seeds, and many spices and herbs.

For over four centuries, Hispanics have lived within the present borders of the territory that now comprises the American Southwest, from Texas to California. Large parts of the Southwest were conquered and settled by the northern movement of Catholic Spanish colonial--and then Mexican--populations into Indian lands. This settlement occurred many generations before the southwestward expansion of people with Northern European ancestry into these territories. Through territorial incursions, wars, and treaties in the 19th century--justified by some American leaders as part of their "Manifest Destiny" (a term coined in the 1840s to justify war with Mexico and the annexation of its lands)--these powerful encroaching newcomers informally and then formally incorporated, in stages, these lands and their populations into the expanding sovereign entity of the U.S. The food of this border region reflects that history. Its originality and authenticity remains an object of dispute, both from the viewpoint of Mexican nationals and of Americans, including Mexican-Americans.

The huge immigration of Mexicans into the U.S. in the 20th century (and continuing somewhat to the present) brought many new and disparate influences. They arrived from different regions of Mexico and their settlements concentrated in different regions of the U.S. For example, Texas was most heavily influenced by Northern Mexico but California also had many settlers from Central Mexico. Besides cooking food at home, Mexican-Americans opened restaurants reflecting their different origins, catering variously to fellow Mexicans with the same regional roots, Mexican immigrants from elsewhere, adventurous non-Mexican residents, and tourists.

One distinguishing characteristic of Tex-Mex foods is the common use of cumin, as in chili con carne and most Tex-Mex chili powder recipes. With a few exceptions, cumin is not commonly used south of the border and appears to have been popularized, if not introduced, in San Antonio by Canary Island immigrants recruited by Spain to help colonize the struggling settlement (known then as Bexar) in 1731. They used the spice heavily in their native Berber cuisine, brought from Morocco. Likewise,

the common use of commercial ground beef instead of shredded or chopped beef and American yellow cheeses, such as Cheddar, American cheese, and Velveeta, also began to distinguish Tex-Mex food as they became readily available and inexpensive in the 20th century.

Besides dishes such as nachos and fajitas, which originated just south of the Mexican border but became iconic mainstays of Tex-Mex cuisine, several Americanized dishes using Mexican ingredients arose before the category emerged that would later characterize Tex-Mex. The quintessential Tex-Mex dish, for many Americans, is chili con carne (or simply chili, a bowl of chili, or a bowl of red, never spelled with the Spanish *chile* meaning the pepper). But just as aficionados endlessly debate the proper ingredients (beef, chiles, cumin, oregano--yes; tomatoes, onions, garlic, beans—arguable) and hold contests to judge the best, food historians endlessly debate chili's origins. Accounts—in newspapers, passed down memories and recipes, and Texas tall tales--agree only that the dish originated somewhere north of the Rio Grande, perhaps in frontier Mexican homes in *Tejas* before it became Texas, or perhaps it was invented by cowboy cooks on 19th century Texas cattle drives (Tolbert 1972).

It is generally agreed that chili first became widely popular in San Antonio, where legendary “chili queens” sold it at outdoor chili stands to locals and tourists arriving by railroad for decades before and after the turn of the 20th century. The invention of commercial chili powder around 1900 made the dish easy to prepare, and the companies who advertised and sold it and canned chili made the dish popular nationwide. These companies, notably among the first ones Gebhardt and Wolf Brand, advertised their products as “authentic Mexican” long before the label “Tex-Mex” was applied to Mexican-American food, or Americans even understood Mexican-American as distinct from Mexican.

Restaurants specifically aimed at non-Mexicans also paved the way for the later emergence of the Tex-Mex category. The “Original Mexican Restaurant” in San Antonio is purported to have introduced in 1900 the “Mexican plate,” still considered the signature dish of San Antonio. Opened by Otis M.

Farnsworth and lasting a half-century, the restaurant's mainstay was the "Regular Supper," which included tamales, frijoles, chili con carne, enchiladas, tortillas de mais, sopa de arroz (Spanish rice), and café, all for fifteen cents. According to Walsh (2004: 64-65), "Farnsworth's Original was the most profitable Mexican restaurant of its day. It was a bold new concept in marketing, a Mexican restaurant created by an Anglo for an audience of fellow Anglos [with Mexican cooks]. The Original Mexican Restaurant approached Texas biculturalism from the American side of the equation. It was a restaurant that made it easier for Anglos to feel like they were experiencing Mexican culture."

Americanized Mexican snack food that would later fall under the Tex-Mex label also played an important role in the rise of the category. First among them were corn chips, sold in packages as Tostada brand corn chips by the B. Martinez Sons Company in San Antonio and South Texas beginning around 1912 (and sold in bulk to Farnsworth's Original and other San Antonio restaurants). They were popularized as Fritos corn chips by an ice cream salesman named Elmer Doulin, who with a Georgia potato chip salesman named Herman W. Lay founded the Frito-Lay company beginning in 1938 (Walsh 2004: 194-198).

The second major snack food was jalapeño bean dip. Partners William Chambers and E. S. "Rocky" Rutherford invented bean dip in 1955 and sold it mostly in bars as Texas Tavern Jalapeño Bean Dip. In 1958 Frito-Lay bought fifty-one per cent of the Texas Tavern Company and placed bean dip on wire racks alongside Frito corn chips. Their national popularity has been traced to Johnny Carson's featuring them on his television show in the 1960s, humorously mispronouncing "jalapeño" to the annoyance of Mexican-Americans. According to Duane Rutherford [the son of Rocky], "Once you got an appetite for Fritos and bean dip, you were hooked on the Tex-Mex taste" (Walsh 2004: 198).

Regional variations in Mexican-American food

As a catch-all label misapplied broadly, Tex-Mex obscures the variety of Mexican-American food that developed across the Southwestern United States. When examined closely, the contrast between the Tex-Mex and what is sometimes called Cal-Mex⁹ cuisines is high. Pilcher says that a significant social difference between the formation of the Tex-Mex and Cal-Mex styles is that in California there was greater emphasis on literary texts such as cookbooks and a sense of authenticity based on family ties, whether real or a fantasy heritage, to the culture and cuisine of Old California. (Pilcher 2012: 146-150).

Throughout the 20th Century, differences developed in specific dishes and in restaurant cultures. California pioneered fast food crispy tacos and then burritos, the two foods that became the cornerstone of fast-food Mexican-American franchises, while in Texas, family restaurants served puffy tacos and combination plates of tamales, enchiladas heavy on the yellow cheese and smothered with “chili gravy,”¹⁰ served with beans and “Spanish rice,” later followed by nachos and fajitas, all better adapted to full-service operations.

According to Arellano’s concise list of contrasts (2014a), in Texas the iconic tacos are puffy; in California, they are crisp. In Texas, goat is roasted *cabrito*; in California, goat is stewed *birria*. Tex-Mex is breakfast tacos; Cal-Mex is breakfast burritos. Tex-Mex is the Taco Cabana chain; Cal-Mex is the El Torito chain. In addition, Cal-Mex offers more seafood dishes, including the Baja-influenced fish taco and Veracruz-style red snapper, made with green olives grown in California’s Mediterranean climate.

Although New Mexico and Arizona are less well known nationally for their Mexican-American food, New Mexico especially has a distinctive and well-developed cuisine that has not spread widely

⁹ We view Cal-Mex as a potential candidate for social category status, but which has yet to be widely recognized, schematized and institutionalized. While some food writers do regularly use the term, our impression is that their usage is not always consistent and has not yet caught on outside a circle of Mexican American food enthusiasts. As such, Cal-Mex may or may not become a social category.

¹⁰ “Chili gravy, the kitchen secret of casual-dining Mexican restaurants was simply basic Southern brown gravy with chili powder added. . . .” (Pilcher 2012: 148).

except as a part of “Southwestern cuisine,” a once trendy restaurant style that is past its heyday. New Mexican Hispanic roots are, in fact, the oldest of the Southwest regions.¹¹ Arellano says that “*New Mexican cuisine [is] a food developed in isolation over centuries and unlike any other Mexican food in the United States*” (2012: 109).

New Mexico is perhaps most celebrated for the excellent strain of long green chilies cultivated there,¹² especially the namesake chilies grown in the Hatch Valley. Green chile sauces are used in burritos (usually made with smaller flour tortillas than Cal-Mex burritos), stacked enchiladas (locally called Santa Fe enchiladas), tacos, and French fries. Other distinctive foods that might be called “New-Mex” include: *biscochitos* (star-shaped anise-flavored Christmas cookies), *carne adovado* (pork marinated in red chile sauce, grilled, cubed, and sauced again), *chimichangas* (more or less “thingamajig,” a small meat and bean fried burrito with green chile sauce, originally from Arizona),¹³ Navajo tacos (made with Native American flatbread), and *sopaipillas* (“little pillows,” a puffed fried bread filled with honey as a side dish or stuffed with meat, beans, cheese and chile sauce). New Mexico’s blue corn tortillas and chips, made from a strain of corn cultivated by the Hopi, became trendy Mexican-American (sometimes labeled Southwestern) foods around the country, and stacked Santa Fe green-chile, blue-corn enchiladas are perhaps the iconic New Mexico dish¹⁴ (Arrelano 2014b).

¹¹ Franciscan missionaries and Spanish settlers began moving into New Mexico territory in the early 17th Century in the wake of conquistador expansion and violence. Out of this long history grew a proud locally-rooted identity, held strongest by a substantial middle class who often evoked a Spanish rather than Mexican heritage, which has endured over generations (Fernández-Armesto 2014).

¹² A molecular biology study has recently found that “these chilies were closely related to different varieties grown in Mexican geographical regions running from Chihuahua to Morelos and Oaxaca—a north-south ‘axis of chile’ that likely followed seventeenth century Franciscan supply routes. These ancestral plants presumably converged through hybridization to create the renowned New Mexico chili. More research is needed to determine the precise origins of the local *chile verde*, but this study does support the picture of a regional cuisine developing in isolation during the colonial era” (Pilcher 2012: p.68).

¹³ Arizona’s Mexican food is much less developed, staying closer to the frontier food of Sonora south of the border.

¹⁴ First author Dennis Wheaton’s mother often made stacked enchiladas in their Texas Panhandle home when he was a child. He grew up loving them, but later wondered where she learned to make them, since he never saw stacked enchiladas elsewhere in Texas. Although they do exist around the isolated town of Marfa in far West Texas, he now suspects that she learned the technique during the years she lived in New Mexico in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Tex-Mex emerges as a social category

It is within this broad context that the label for the social category of cuisine known as “Tex-Mex” first emerged.¹⁵ The time and location of the label’s emergence in the U.S. is very clear—occasional and infrequent usage of the label in the late 1960s, and 1970s, followed by a noticeable upsurge in 1980 and continuing unabated through the next ten to twenty years, and then tapering off. The pattern can be seen through historical glimpses of word usage in leading newspapers. For example, Figure 1 shows word counts from stories in the Los Angeles Times up to 1991. Figure 2 shows the frequency of words about the phrases “Tex-Mex food” and “Tex-Mex cuisine” in the Google corpus of books up to 2000.

(Figures 1 and 2 about here)

Food historians and other sources also agree on this dating. The California food writer Gustavo Arellano says that “‘Tex-Mex’ as a term describing the cuisine is a relatively new concept; it only dates back to the 1960s, because before that there was no need to differentiate it from other types of Mexican food available in this country. Mexican is Mexican . . .” (2012: 126). The *Oxford English Dictionary* supplies the first-known uses in print of “Tex-Mex” in reference to food, from an August 11, 1963 article in the *New York Times Magazine* (“The star of the evening was her Texas or Tex-Mex chili.”) and an October 19, 1966 citation in the *Great Bend (Kansas) Tribune* (“It’s too bad that it has become known as ‘chili powder’ because some homemakers may associate it only with the preparation of ‘Tex-Mex’ dishes.”). And the *Oxford English Dictionary* also cites a 1973 article in an English-language newspaper *Mexico City News*: “It is a mistake to come to Mexico and not try the local cuisine. It is not the Tex-Mex cooking one is used to getting in the United States” (quoted in Walsh 2004: p xvi).¹⁶

¹⁵ We ignore its previous specific and very limited usages for a railroad and a style of music, which had very little or no apparent influence on food usage.

¹⁶ The specific linguistic term “Tex-Mex” was initially used more generally, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which cites the first use in print in *Time* magazine, 1941, referring to Tex-Mex Spanish (Walsh 2004: xvi).

The Texas food writer Walsh calls 1973 “the year the paradigm shifted” because in that year, Diana Kennedy’s *The Cuisines of Mexico* (1972) became “a national sensation” and in it she denounced Mexican-American food and argued that it is distinct from “real Mexican food.” Also in 1973, he points out, Ninfa Lorenzo introduced fajitas to her Ninfa’s restaurant in Houston, the beginning of the fajita craze that swept the United States (Walsh 2004: 208). The historian Pilcher agrees that Ninfa’s, in bringing the border specialty of fajitas to mainstream audiences in 1973, helped “popularize a self-consciously Tex-Mex cooking style” (Walsh 2012: 148), however, the true origins of the fajitas dish are somewhat disputed.¹⁷

Since then the Tex-Mex category quickly become widespread and institutionalized. The growth and expansion of Tex-Mex restaurants such as the Dallas-based El Chico chain, established by the Cuellar family, were an important vehicle for this development. By the 1990s, there were more than one hundred El Chico restaurants, often located in suburban shopping centers but stretching to Dubai, where Texas oilmen could enjoy a taste of home. Such entrepreneurs “helped transform Tex-Mex food into the most popular and widespread form of Mexican American cuisine. Hundreds of Tex-Mex-style restaurants opened across the United States, competing with other regional variations such as Cal-Mex, Sonoran Mex, and New Mex–Mex. Tex-Mex imitators thrived in small restaurants and fast-food chain outlets such as [the visible and almost ubiquitous] Taco Bell. Central American restaurants also added familiar Tex-Mex dishes and drinks to their menus” (Smithsonian 2016, words in brackets added).

The growth of widely sold packaged-food brands in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s popularizing Tex-Mex foods contributed to the widespread recognition of the Tex-Mex category. Among the first was Old El Paso, a brand dating from 1938 but now marketed internationally by General Mills. Then came products such as the salsa Pace, founded in 1947 in Paris, Texas and now owned by the Campbell Soup

¹⁷ Kennedy in a *Texas Monthly* interview in 1985 called Ninfa’s a “disgrace” (quoted in Arellano 2012: 100).

Company, and Frito-Lay's tortilla chip brands Doritos, the first tortilla chip brand to be released nationally in 1966, and Tostitos, which went into national distribution in 1980. Tortilla chips and salsa, sometimes with yellow melted cheese and jalapeños in nachos, have of course now become ubiquitous snacks for Americans watching televised sports events.

In print media, Amazon today lists more than 25 Tex-Mex cookbooks currently for sale. In late 2013 the website *The Daily Meal* listed the best 15 Tex-Mex chains in America from a list of 50 it had assembled and asked its followers to vote on their favorites. The website announcement said that Tex-Mex “didn’t gain momentum until the 1970s when it was deemed trendy. . . [and today] Tex-Mex is available all around the world” (www.thedailymeal.com, Dec 10, 2013; accessed Aug 21, 2015).

Tex-Mex experienced a surge in trendiness in New York City in 2015, even though the quality of the food remained suspect. The *Wall Street Journal* said in April 2015 that "The debate over whether Tex-Mex tacos--a subset currently spreading like Texas kudzu across New York's restaurant scene--qualify as legitimate Mexican food is thorny enough to warrant a story of its own" (Dunn 2015: D1). The restaurant critic of *New York* magazine also said in the spring of 2015 that “lately we seem to be in the grip of a mini Tex-Mex craze.” Despite the upswing in popularity, the two most notable new Tex-Mex restaurants in Manhattan, Javelina and El Original, received negative and sometimes mockingly dismissive reviews from *New York* magazine and the *New York Times*, casting doubt on the worth and legitimacy of Tex-Mex food (Wells 2015: D6; Platt 2015: 84).¹⁸ Despite these negative reviews, the Texas ex-pat owners of these restaurants assert that they are serving authentic Tex-Mex cuisine. Javelina bills itself as “New York’s first authentic Tex-Mex restaurant” (Wells, 2015). El Original is

¹⁸ Interestingly, all three of these writers commenting on the new Tex-Mex food appearing in New York made it clear that the craze was for authentic dishes from Texas, not Mexican-American food generally. For example, Wells in his review of Javelina for the *New York Times* said wryly: “What if something I didn’t like turned out to be the very thing that Texans most love about authentic Tex-Mex? It may get in the way of my earnest desire for my next trip to Texas to be a safe and peaceful one” (Wells, 2015).

named for San Antonio's famous Original Mexican Restaurant, opened in 1900 along the San Antonio River, with Mexican cooks but aimed at an Anglo clientele.

4. DISPARAGEMENT OF TEX-MEX FOOD

Tex-Mex cuisine is often criticized---implicitly and explicitly---as somehow being inauthentic. In this usage, authentic usually refers to being faithful to the original, the food commonly prepared in Mexico prior to its importation by immigrants to the U.S. Because much of what was once northern Mexico is now within the borders of the U.S., this question of authenticity can be a tricky subject that arouses passions. The hue of inauthenticity gives the Tex-Mex social category a negative valence to many. We suggest that at least three commonly made attributions lie behind this negative characterization of the category: (1) Tex-Mex is a blended, Americanized cuisine; (2) Tex-Mex is a rustic, simplified frontier cuisine that originated north of the Mexican border in the United States and therefore, especially from the Mexican viewpoint, is not a Mexican cuisine by definition; and (3) Tex-Mex is cheap mass-industrialized fast food largely aimed at non-Mexicans. What to make of these claims?

Tex-Mex is a blended, Americanized cuisine

The claim that Tex-Mex food has incorporated inevitable North American influences carries with it the strong implication that in doing so, the food has become diluted or impure. Octavio Paz's criticism of Tex-Mex food echoes this concern. But, as discussed earlier, Mexican cuisine was born as a blend of cultures and global influences in itself, and this mixing should not make Tex-Mex food any less authentic than Veracruzano or Yucatecan cuisines with their African and Caribbean influences. Pilcher (2012) says that, "'Tex-Mex,' which has been used to denote any form of inauthentic Mexican food, more properly describes a regional variant of Mexican culture from Texas, with Anglo Saxon and Central European influences, just as Veracruz is a melting pot of Afro-Mexican culture and Sonorans

have a taste for Chinese. Such a consciousness allows for the recognition of endless varieties of Mexican food” (Pilcher 2012: 16).¹⁹ Arellano agrees, saying that we “must consider the infinite varieties of Mexican food in the United States as part of the Mexican family—not a fraud, not a lesser sibling, but an equal” (2012: 9). In this sense, Mexican-American cuisine in its Tex-Mex and other variants are simply continuations of Mexico’s long tradition of *mestizaje*, mixing cultures. The pronounced use of cumin in Tex-Mex recipes influenced by Canary Island immigrants to San Antonio in the 18th century is a further instance of this historical mixing of cultures. We also think it is important to note that many (most?) foods various immigrant groups brought to America evolved steadily as they were influenced by local ingredients, cooking techniques and tastes. Yet for the most part (there are some exceptions) these adapted immigrant foods did not get widely and publicly spurned as inferior and inauthentic, as did Tex-Mex. So blending alone does not seem able to account for Tex-Mex’s status.

Tex-Mex is a rustic and simplified style that originated north of the Mexican border

Mexican-American food is in large part based on the rustic cuisines of the northern frontier of Mexico before much of the territory was incorporated into Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, and other parts of the United States. This geographic fact alone makes the distinction between whether the style originated north of the present border or not meaningless in many instances. For instance, the Tex-Mex staple fajitas, with origins traced to borderland *barbacoas* around Laredo, appeared in Texas in the late 1960s, became popular when introduced at Ninfa’s restaurant in Houston in 1973. Nachos, another Tex-Mex mainstay, were created in the 1940s in the Mexican border town of Piedras Negras,

¹⁹ Czech and German settlers in Texas did much to invent Texas barbecue, along with Mexicans and African-Americans. Arellano notes that before Roy Choi and his Korean taco truck became the hot trend in Los Angeles, there were Tex-Mex bratwurst and kielbasa tacos (Arellano 2014a). An estimated 13,000 Chinese immigrated to Sonora and other northern Mexican states in the late 19th century, encouraged by the government of Porfirio Díaz, although many were expelled in the early 20th century (Hu-DeHart 1980).

across the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass, by chef Ignacio (nickname Nacho) Ayala. He made them for Texas military wives who named them “Nacho’s Special.”²⁰

Does a frontier or border cuisine born in harsh geography and arid climate, and as a result less richly diverse than the foods “from the heart of Mexico,” make it any less authentic? No authority on Mexican cuisine claims that the northern border food of Chihuahua or Sonora is as complex as that of Michoacán or Oaxaca or Mexico City.²¹ Mexican-American food, originally such a frontier cuisine, can be simpler and more humble than the cuisine of cultural centers and still be authentic. In other contexts, food critics lavishly praise the authenticity and worth of such rural cuisine, and the term “rustic” typically applies to it—rustic Italian, rustic Nepalese, rustic Dongbei—as one of approval not disparagement.

Developments on the Mexican side of the border may well have played a role in the denigration Mexican-American food with the label Tex-Mex. An increasingly affluent Mexico sought to enhance its international prestige and economic power through claims of world-class status for its cuisine. Mexico’s government, cultural authorities, and tourist industry asserted the authenticity of Mexico’s regional cuisines in promoting nationalism and tourism. As part of that effort, Mexican officials and opinion leaders stressed the purity of their cuisine in contrast to the inauthenticity and inferiority of the simpler and often blended Mexican-American food north of the border, both in its traditional and industrialized forms. And in this context, the fact that an early printed use of the term “Tex-Mex” applied to food appeared in a Mexico City newspaper is revealing, as is the definition of chili con carne

²⁰ First author Dennis Wheaton recalls eating nachos for the first time not in his native Texas but in the late 1960s in a restaurant in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez, in the company of his brother-in-law, a Chihuahuan rancher who also happened to be nicknamed Nacho. His memory is that the nachos were made with melted *queso de chihuahua*.

²¹ Bayless says that “smoky hot embers” is the common thread of Northern Mexico’s cuisine: “Northern flavors are forthright, frontier flavors—just the kind to wrap in warm flour tortillas” (1987: 23).

in the *Diccionario de Mejicanismos*, published in Mexico City, which translates to “a detestable food falsely labeled Mexican” (Santamaria 1959).

Tex-Mex is cheap mass-industrialized food aimed largely aimed at non-Mexicans

Controversy over the authenticity of Mexican-American cuisine also arose because it became one of the first and most prominent examples of mass industrial food production with the rise of Taco Bell and its kin. The original global spread of Mexican food emanated from the mass-marketed forms created by American entrepreneurs and enterprises. That this food was much lower in quality than the original Mexican and Mexican-American dishes it derived from further hurt its reputation in the eyes of many who were familiar with regional styles such as Oaxacan but not non-industrial Mexican-American styles.

The Americanized food in chain restaurants such as Chi Chi’s and fast-food franchises such as Taco Bell, along with much of the supermarket food labeled Mexican, deviated from the Mexican-American food eaten for generations in the Southwest in homes, family restaurants, and at food stands. This difference fueled claims that Mexican-American food was inauthentic, especially as an increasingly sophisticated American public grew aware of the rich array of regional Mexican cuisines and wary of industrialized food. The success of fast-food restaurants based on foods like the crisp taco and the Mission-style burrito,²² and the mass-market popularity of tortilla chips and salsas added reasons for disparaging Mexican-American food (and lumping it under the derogatory label Tex-Mex). The industrialization of Mexican-American food has transformed the way it is thought about, consumed, and its very nature.

²² Despite recent food safety problems, Chipotle Mexican Grill, in copying the California Mission burrito formula and sourcing naturally raised ingredients, somewhat avoided the erosion of flavor quality—and authenticity—inherent in much fast food, from tacos to hamburgers.

As a case in point, consider Bayless's (1987) first cookbook. In it, he argues that the image of Mexican-American food suffered from takeoffs served in chains like Chi Chi's and El Torito's. The food, he claimed, had "become a near-laughable caricature created by groups of financially savvy businessmen-cum-restaurateurs who saw the profit in beans and rice and margaritas." Bayless says now that he thought this image was unwarranted and wanted to include his favorite Tex-Mex recipes in this cookbook (he grew up eating it in Oklahoma), but his editors at William Morrow and Company insisted on excluding Mexican-American dishes and focusing exclusively on the food from south of the border.²³

In our view, three types of mass industrialized Mexican-American food loom large in many American perceptions and thoughts about Mexican food: (1) fast food chains such as Taco Bell and (recently) Chipotle, (2) tortilla chips such as Doritos and Tostitos, and (3) salsas such as Pace and Chi-Chi's. The cheap and processed nature of these foods (Chipotle less so), combining methods of modern marketing with operational management, made them readily accessible but also limited in their variation and quality. As Pilcher (2012: 5) says: "For Mexicans, the fast-food taco must seem like a funhouse mirror, distorting their cuisine beyond all recognition."

No one can deny that much poor quality Mexican-American food exists,²⁴ whether in full service and fast food chains, commercially marketed convenience food in grocery stores, or in countless homes where cooks follow simplified and Americanized recipes. Much of the Mexican-American food that is familiar to non-Mexican Americans, including that labeled Tex-Mex, was designed for them, not

²³ Bayless's personal communication (Pilcher, 2012: 232; Walsh 2004: xvii). But in his next book, *Rick Bayless's Mexican Kitchen*, under the heading "Simple Ideas from My American Home," he did slip in a recipe for "Cheesy 'Tex-Mex' Enchiladas" (1996: 58).

²⁴ Of course, this is also true in Mexico, where there has been ample opportunity for generations to eat poorly made and inauthentic Mexican fare, especially in locations catering to foreign tourists.

Mexicans.²⁵ The tacos at Taco Bell are industrially processed, simplified versions—poor imitations--of what any typical *taqueria* in a Mexican-American barrio serves freshly made. Routine combination plates were created early last century in Tex-Mex restaurants to satisfy Anglo patrons because they could order unfamiliar food in a familiar fashion in a familiar, if appealingly exotic, café setting by combo number or other label, unlike the Mexican custom of eating dishes at food stands or separately at home. Many Mexicans eat *frijoles*, for example, after the main course of a meal. It was a version of this Tex-Mex combination plate, designed for non-Mexicans, that so incensed Diana Kennedy.

Authenticity of Tex-Mex food

The difficulty of defining “authentic Mexican cuisine”—and its boundaries—is part of the contentiousness over whether Tex-Mex or Mexican-American food is an authentic variation of Mexican cuisine, an authentic regional ethnic American cuisine, or a lamentable bastardization. For a variety of reasons, the term authenticity is fraught with pitfalls when considering any aspect of Mexican cuisine. These have to do with its highly hybridized creation and the existence of many regional variations of Mexican cuisine. Claims for the authenticity of regional forms of Mexican cuisine, for instance, leave their proponents vulnerable to counterclaims about the authenticity of Mexican-American as merely another variation of regional Mexican cuisines, indeed, one that encompasses its own regional forms, such as Tex-Mex and Cal-Mex and New Mexico Mexican.

5. THEORETICAL RECONCILIATION

²⁵ Mass-market packaged Mexican and Tex-Mex foods can be of high quality, of course. Most notably, in 1996 Rick Bayless joined with Manuel Valdes, formerly a marketing manager at Kraft Foods and consultant with Arthur Andersen & Co. to establish Frontera Foods, Inc. The company sells in supermarkets nationwide an extensive line of salsas and seasoning sauces for easily making good Mexican food. They are advertised as all natural and made in small batches with fresh ingredients like fire-roasted chilies. Along with Oaxacan red mole for chicken and barbacoa sauce for braised beef, the many regional styles include New Mexico taco sauce for chicken, Texas taco sauce for ground beef, and fajita sauce for skirt steak, treating New Mexico-Mex and Tex-Mex as equal to other Mexican regions. They appear to be aimed at a non-Mexican audience familiar with authentic Mexican flavors (fronterafiesta.com). In 2016, Bayless sold Frontera Foods to ConAgra for over \$100 million.

We now attempt to reconcile the facts of the Tex-Mex case with theoretical claims about category emergence. Our efforts involve comparing basic empirical expectations of theories about label and category emergence with known and likely facts and other information. We start by considering the ideas of activist theorization and similarity clustering in light of known facts because, as we reviewed above, they provide the foundation of much theoretical reasoning about label and category emergence. We then consider the possible effects of the mass industrialization of Mexican food. Finally, we examine the possible role that geography and ethnic dynamics played in the establishment of the Tex-Mex label and category. We make occasional comparisons to the evolution of other ethnic food categories in the U.S.

Activist theorization

As reviewed above, the activist-as-theorist conceptual scenarios envision agents as describing, explaining and advocating on behalf of the nascent category. The articulation usually involves extensive usage of the label, and attempts to implant a coherent (and usually favorable) story about the category in the minds of the audience and wider publics. The effort may be regarded as an effort of persuasive sense-making where the agents are making the case for establishment and acceptance of the category, that is, to bring conceptual order to something unknown. Because of the relatively unstructured nature of the activities and because the activists may be pushing up against entrenched interests, the scenario has been compared to a social movement and many of the concepts in social movement theory seem relevant here too. It is not uncommon, for instance, for activists to depict the category as in opposition to established categories and related producers in the domain.

How does the Tex-Mex social history of category emergence stack up against the activist theorization accounts? Not very well, in fact, not at all in our view. While we imagine that the early street food vendors and restaurateurs took pride in their food and encouraged people to try it, so far as

we can tell, no one promoted a collective awareness campaign or led an advocacy effort promoting the new food as something new or different with a new label. (To be more precise, we find no historical evidence of such a person or group undertaking these activities or loudly expressing these sentiments in the early period.) Indeed, it seems likely that what is now called Tex-Mex food developed in the first half of the 20th century and persisted—even thrived---as a popular food known and referred to simply as Mexican food. Indeed, the initial “Tex-Mex” food items appeared in the late 19th century and proliferated widely, while other “Tex-Mex” items emerged and spread for at least 50-60 years until people started calling it Tex-Mex.²⁶

The label began to catch on, in large part, because “activists” like Diane Kennedy gained visibility and entered into public discourse. But, as we have seen above, Kennedy and her ilk were hardly there to explain and promote the category. Rather, they intended to protect the purity of the Mexican category and used the Tex-Mex label in derogatory and denigrating ways to do so. This group of activists and others bear little resemblance to the *nouvelle cuisine* advocates, or the microbrewery entrepreneurs, who individually and collectively explained, promoted and defended the categories associated with themselves, during a period of time that roughly coincided with the first usage of the label and the new products and producers driving the category.

This is not to say that the emergence of the Tex-Mex category had nothing to do with Kennedy and similar disrespecting observers. Kennedy and her followers were attempting to promote and legitimize Mexican cuisine as a social category and in this respect their behavior does jibe with activists theorization accounts: they were elucidating and advocating on behalf of Mexican food from the

²⁶ To cite a few of the better known examples of Tex-Mex, chili con carne is widely believed to have emerged in the late 19th century in San Antonio, the combination plate arose in the early 1900s in San Antonio at the fabled Original Mexican Restaurant operated by Otis Farnsworth. Chimichangas (less Tex-Mex but Mexican-American for sure) were developed in Tucson in 1922 at El Charro. Nachos came from Ignacio Anaya in Eagle Pass, Texas in 1943. Steak fajitas’ exact restaurant place origin is somewhat disputed but its dating is not: 1968 or 1969 in Pharr in the Rio Grande Valley. The puffy taco came in the 1970s in San Antonio.

country Mexico. It just seems like they had a problem in that many people thought Mexican food was something other than what they did, so their challenge was to define and draw a boundary around that which they wanted to promote. Nothing unusual here—early microbrewers did the same thing when comparing their beers to those of the mass producers. What seems different here is that what came to be defined as Tex Mex did not at the time of initial boundary exclusion already have a separate label and collective identity, as did American light lager beer producers. So, the category Tex-Mex arose as a kind of artifactual by-product of the very emergence of regional Mexican food as a great world cuisine(s) as elucidated by Diana Kennedy and other Mexican food experts and promoted by influential Mexican nationals for reasons of national identity, cultural pride, and culinary tourism. That is, the Tex Mex label and category emerged in part as collateral damage of the high profile celebrity-driven attempt to exclude Mexican-American food from the newly emerging tony category of “Mexican.” Initially, the label was as a catch-all artifact used by attaching to it all the negative connotations in the way “Mexican food” was perceived as a result of inaccurate, distorted, and misguided knowledge and especially its widespread industrialized forms that originated in the U.S.

Recent years are dramatically different. An increasingly vocal group of activists are embracing and even promoting Tex-Mex cuisine. Among many defenders who grew up eating Mexican-American food, several prominent chefs and food writers advocated a rethinking of the negative Tex-Mex evaluation. Bayless began his first cookbook, *Authentic Mexican* (1987:14), by recalling his youthful memories of the “authentic, assertive, almost wickedly good Mexican fare” he grew up on in Oklahoma City: “My taste buds were trained on Mexican food. And it was real Mexican food to our family: hot tamales and tacos wedged in between a greasy auto-repair yard and a hubcap seller, and El Charrito down on Paseo with its oozy cheese-and-onion enchiladas smothered with that delicious chile gravy.” (Note that his phrasing “real Mexican food to our family” is a caveat on his enthusiastic “authentic”

initial praise.) Given this and other praises for Mexican-American food by Bayless, one of the ironies of this controversy is that those who assert the purity and worthiness of “authentic” regional Mexican food over the purported inauthenticity and inferiority of Tex-Mex or Mexican-American food have been labeled “Baylessistas” by some of its most vocal defenders.

The most influential proponent of Tex-Mex cuisine is the Texas food writer Rob Walsh, former restaurant critic of the *Houston Press*, partner in a Houston restaurant, El Real Tex-Mex, and the author of *The Tex-Mex Cookbook* (2004) and other Texas-themed cookbooks. Walsh, Bayless, and academic writers such as Jeffrey Pilcher, author of *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food* (2012) have done much to erase the negative connotations of Tex-Mex food.

A more aggressive ethnic-tinged activist-like voice has come from the LA-based Mexican-American food journalist Gustavo Arellano, author of *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America* (2012), who has been openly critical of Bayless and others for appropriating Mexican cuisine. He and others in the Latino community have found Tex-Mex cuisine to be a salient focal point for ethnic identity and solidarity.

These and other observers agree that Tex-Mex should be considered a unique regional cuisine (or in the case of Mexican-American, *cuisines*) distinct from Mexican food south of the border, whether thought of as “native foreign food, contradictory though that term may seem” (Root and de Rochement 1976: 281) or as “America’s oldest regional cuisine,” as Walsh argues (2004: xix).²⁷ After several years researching Mexican food on both sides of the border, Bayless, a chef who looks at Mexican culture

²⁷ If we assume it or they *are* distinct, we still have to note that the cuisines blend along the borderlands, just as people who live along the border legally move back and forth in their economic, family, and entertainment activities. That and similar harsh desert and semi-desert climate in large part explain why northern Mexican food is generally more like the Mexican-American food in southern areas of American border states, with a greater use of beef and flour tortillas, for example, and less complexity than Mexican food in lush climates. In many ways, for example, the Mexican food of Arizona and neighboring Sonora south of the border are indistinguishable.

and cuisines with the eye of an anthropologist,²⁸ concluded that “two independent systems of Mexican cooking...[have developed]. The first is from Mexico, and . . . it is the substantial, wide-ranging cuisine that should be allowed its unadulterated, honest name: Mexican. The second system is the Mexican-American one, and, in its many regional varieties, can be just as delicious. But its range is limited, and to my mind it forms part of the broader system of North American (or at least Southwest North American) cookery” (1987: 14).

Within 15 years, the tide had turned among restaurant patrons and food writers. Many of them were not only seeking out and popularizing restaurants in the United States serving authentic regional Mexican dishes, they were becoming aware that Mexican-American food, including especially Tex-Mex, had its own charms and claims to authenticity. Bayless wrote in a blurb for Walsh’s 2004 book: “*The Tex-Mex Cookbook* celebrates a dynamic regional cuisine that has long been pushed to the sidelines. . . Kudos to Robb Walsh for busting through the ‘myths’ of authenticity.”²⁹

Tex-Mex now boasts many fans across the United States, and they have taken up this pejorative proudly in proclaiming its worthiness and authenticity, in the same manner other denigrated social groups in America have transformed old slurs into proud new badges, what linguists call reclaimed epithets.³⁰ In the past decade, the term has broadly shifted from one of disparagement to one of approval and acceptance, and the earlier disparaging claims of Kennedy and others are often pointed to

²⁸ Bayless studied for a doctorate in anthropological linguists at the University of Michigan, later quipping that *Authentic Mexican* was his “dissertation on Mexican food.” He (and his wife) spent parts of several years living and researching in Mexico while working other parts as a consultant for the Los Angeles-based restaurant chain, El Paso Cantina (Brownson, 1987).

²⁹ For many years the owners of restaurants that served real Tex-Mex food would not use the label. As Walsh (2004: xvii-xviii) explains, “Tex-Mex was a slur. It was a euphemism for bastardized, and it was an insult that cost Mexican-Texan families who had been in the restaurant business for generations a lot of business.” But as Tex-Mex started to lose its negative aura and became popular, even trendy, label usage shifted. As Walsh (2004: xvii-xviii.) explains, “some of the same Texas-Mexican restaurants that once shunned the term have begun to claim that they invented Tex-Mex!”

³⁰ Walsh has purportedly said, “Why do we call it Tex-Mex? So we won’t piss off purists by claiming it’s Mexican” (quoted in Arellano 2012: 135).

as openly discriminatory in the solidarity rallying calls of activists. These and related activities may rightfully be scored as explicit activist theorization of the category in the same vein as nouvelle cuisine or modern architecture. Coming at least a century after the introduction of some of the iconic foods of the Tex-Mex category, and a half century after initial wide usage of the label, these activists and their proclamations can hardly be seen as accounting for emergence, however righteous they may be.

The broader category “Mexican-American food” has likewise achieved a cachet of approval as describing a form of authentic American regional cuisine, although not so much as a form of authentic Mexican regional cuisine. There is also a growing awareness and acceptance that several sub-categories of Mexican-American cuisine exist, only one of which should be properly called Tex-Mex; these other categories are however far from institutionalized to the degree of Tex-Mex.

Similarity clustering

The similarity clustering idea holds that labels or names play a central role in how individuals make sense of entities encountered in a domain (Hannan et al., 2007). By this account, individuals mentally group clusters of relatively similar entities together and attach labels or names to them in order to facilitate cognition and communication. The field of observation (populated with entities) for an individual may be structured or ordered in some way by institutional and other forces, but the individual is not necessarily aware of this structuring and does not necessarily take it into account. He or she is depicted as filtering through the entities, scrutinizing their characteristics and features, while comparing each to other previously scrutinized entities. As the process unfolds, the individual forms groupings based on those entities regarded as most similar to each other. A distinct group is then assigned a label or name so that it can be referred to as a collective whole. The exact timing of the label’s emergence relative to the clustering process is a bit fuzzy but Hannan et al. (2007: 74) do make clear it occurs early in the process (see Figure 3.1 in Hannan et al. 2007). What is most important in this process is that the

individual deals with real and concrete entities, not abstractions or imaginary entities, and he or she is fairly systematic in his or her assessments. Individuals undertaking this process are actively interested in the label's usage and are seen as enthusiasts. It matters not that similarity assessments pass any objective criterion---the process is entirely a social construction.

How might we assess whether similarity clustering drove the establishment of the Tex-Mex label? Obviously, we cannot go back and observe what food enthusiasts at the time of the label's emergence were doing. We can, however, look at the historical written record and see what various critics and other enthusiasts said about the food at the time. Such analysis should likely begin with Diana Kennedy, who wrote in her groundbreaking 1972 book, *The Cuisines of Mexico*, Kennedy:

Yet today in the United States, a country that shares a 2,000-mile border with Mexico, and where there is a yearly exchange of tourists from both sides that runs into the millions, far too many people know Mexican food as a "mixed plate": a crisp taco filled with ground meat heavily flavored with an all-purpose chili powder; a soggy tamal covered with a sauce that turns up on everything---too sweet and too overpoweringly onioned---a few fried beans and something else that looks and tastes like all the rest. (1972:4).

In her second major cookbook in 1989, Kennedy again lamented the "platter of mixed messes" of Mexican-American food.

While these claims seem to involve some degree of similarity clustering, they are fairly simplistic in characterizing all Mexican-American foods with a broad brush. There does not seem to be the intense (pairwise or other) scrutiny of individual food items, food purveyors or restaurants of the kind expected by theory. Moreover, Kennedy's complaints seem to be anchored more in concerns about low quality more rather than ingredients, compositions or techniques, criteria she used skillfully in drawing

distinctions among various Mexican regional cuisines. Similar quality concerns about Mexican-American food can be found in the Tex-Mex cookbook of Butel (1980: 13): “[B]ecause of bulk preparation, shortcuts, the lack of fresh pure seasonings and the deletion of the traditional techniques for combining ingredients, the true flavors are lost.” Here, as with all the historical texts we have discovered, we find no text suggesting similarity clustering of food items or producers other than that of quality.

In order to explore questions of possible similarity clustering further, we conjectured that traces of the differences in Mexican and Tex-Mex would likely persist today, and be identifiable (a least roughly) in individuals’ personal assessments of food items. That is, we set out to ascertain whether individuals today tend to cluster clearly identifiable Tex-Mex foods as distinct from other food items, especially traditional Mexican food items and more common American fare.³¹ The similarity clustering theoretical ideas would lead us to believe that we should see some rough grouping of these items compared to others, and there is likely some discontinuity between assessments of Tex-Mex food and Mexican food, on the one hand, and American food on the other. It is from such a distinct grouping of food items that similarity clustering theories would lead us to expect that a label would first emerge, and then a subsequent category with schema and the like associated with it.

³¹ Of course, the validity of this assessment depends on a certain degree of consistency or stability in the way that the food items are grouped today and how they were grouped in the 1960s when the label initially emerged. There are many possible reasons to expect that either the items or the groupings may have evolved over time, and so this is a rough and imperfect method. However, if similarity clustering theory is applicable here, then in most scenarios we would expect the grouping to become more distinct, exaggerated and severe over time. Once a label emerges and becomes known, then we would expect that individuals would use it and its underlying schema to guide or influence their classification of items. Likewise, we might expect that food items which initially appear to be misclassified based on similarity assessments evolve over time in the way they are conceived and constructed and actually become more like the others in their classification group (ingredients and recipes may change accordingly). In these scenarios, it would seem that any evolution likely to occur would tend to produce more distinct clustering today than might have existed at the time of label emergence. In other words, the assessment method likely tilts the evidence it produces in favor of the hypothesis of similarity clustering.

We first envisioned what the food landscape likely looked like before the Tex-Mex label emerged. We conceptualized the landscape in terms of individual food items, with names, labels and recipes and ingredients attached. That is, we imagined how the basic environment of food items appeared to individuals and enthusiasts before the Tex-Mex label.

Our reading of the history suggests that there was a strong sense of some food items being Mexican in nature, and these were differentiated from other food items, especially American food. So, it is easy to envision a continuum that has clearly Mexican food on the one end, and clearly American food on the other end. On the Mexican end, we would think that an item like Chile Rellenos would be found, and on the American end, we would see an item like a Cheeseburger or Clam Chowder.

We suspect that the ways food items were distributed along this space could be characterized by a U-shape, with greater numbers of items found at or near each pole. The region in the middle would be sparse. The distribution reflects groupings around the two poles and far fewer items spanning the poles equidistantly. Figure 3 depicts the distribution we have in mind, although our analysis below does not rely heavily on it.

(Figure 3 about here)

What would constitute evidence consistent with similarity clustering underlying the emergence of Tex-Mex? In our view, traces of similarity clustering would likely manifest themselves in the rough grouping of food items considered to be Tex-Mex somewhere on the continuum emanating from the Mexican pole. The way we envision it, in similarity clustering, individuals would scrutinize Tex-Mex food items by comparing them to authentically Mexican items and finding them different, seeing this group of items as more similar to each other than to the authentic Mexican items. That is, we would expect a clustering of Tex-Mex items somewhere on the left side of the U-shaped pattern shown in Figure 3. More interestingly, Figure 4 shows a more exaggerated version of the pattern where not just

the items cluster, but also their prevalence increases. Either pattern would be consistent with similarity clustering.

(Figure 4 about here)

How might we discern such a pattern? Fully recognizing the limitations of our approach for inferring a pattern from the past, we conducted an online query-driven survey to see how individuals classify various food items along a continuum emanating from an authentic Mexican anchor point. Specifically, we presented individuals with a wide range of food items, including many items considered to be Mexican, many consider to be American and other, and of course, a set considered to be Tex-Mex (we identified and used 144 food items). We then asked the survey participants to assess how “authentically Mexican” each food item was. Appreciating the cognitive burden this question imposes in the abstract, we used a more concrete method---the external “All Our Ideas” survey platform (www.allourideas.org) of Salganik and Levy (2012).

In this survey, participants were presented with a series of two food item pairs and asked a simple question “Which food item do you consider more authentically Mexican?” That is, for each pair of food items, the participant was asked to choose which of the two items was more authentically Mexican. Participants could also choose an “I can’t decide” option, in which case they could answer: “because both are good answers” or “neither are good answers.” The pairs of food items were randomly selected from the list of 144 items described above and shown in Table 1. We used this setup because it allows for simple and direct comparisons between two items. The series of two-way comparisons has been shown to place a much lighter cognitive burden on participants than alternative structures such as rank-ordering a long list of items in decreasing order of relevance (Thurstone 1927; Salganik & Levy 2012). It is also a direct representation of the two-way similarity clustering process described in Hannan et al. (2007).

Two hundred survey participants were recruited from the online pool of Amazon's mechanical turk portal. Participants were asked to complete at least 50 of the food item comparisons. They were told it would be appreciated if they completed more than 50. However, they were informed they would be paid \$1.50 in a gift card for completing 50 or more comparisons. The 200 participants cast a total of 10,547 votes on two-way comparisons of the 144 food items.

An important feature of the "All Our Ideas" platform is that it can be used to estimate "public opinion" from the set of pairwise votes. Using a Bayesian algorithm (described in Salganik & Levy 2012), the platform assigns a number between 0 and 100 to each food item. This number comes from the aggregation of the individual votes and reflects the probability that the keyword will be chosen as a "winner" when presented as an answer. An attractive feature of this scoring system is that it may be interpreted as capturing the subjective nature of interpretations of "authentically Mexican"; words with lower scores reflect claims about which there is less agreement about its interpretation and perhaps less confidence in the underlying judgment. So, if similarity clustering is present, we would expect that those food items known as Tex-Mex should appear within a narrow or restricted range, indicating their perceived similarity. Conversely, if we find Tex-Mex items widely, and almost randomly, distributed then it would not appear that they are regarded similarly with respect to Mexican food, and so would not suggest similarity clustering.

Table 1 shows the scores assigned to the specific food items based on the survey results. As might be expected, the food items receiving the highest scores for being authentically Mexican were readily identifiable traditional dishes such as "chile rellenos con queso" with 84 points, and "carne con chile verde" with 82 points, and "chile rellenos" with 81 points. Other items that scored high on authentic Mexican-ess include "chimichanga," "chili colorado con puerco," "chili rellenos filled with pork picadillo," and "beef enchiladas." Conversely, the lower the score (i.e., closer to 0), the less the food

item is associated with authentic Mexican fare. The low scoring items include: “welsh rarebit,” “pecan pie,” “hot dog,” “maple syrup,” “macaroni and cheese” and “patty melt.”

(Table 1 about here)

Table 1 also identifies those food items typically considered to be Tex-Mex items. Based on expert assessments, we marked with bold red type those items unequivocally considered Tex-Mex. Perusing the ordering of items in the table, what is striking to us is the lack of any strong grouping among the Tex-Mex items, (we reach the same conclusion with a graded assessment of the Tex-Mex items). From this survey, it would appear to us that above a score of 20, the Tex-Mex food items are widely and almost randomly distributed along the Mexican-other food continuum. The lack of any semblance of grouping around the Tex-Mex items means that there is no, or at best very little, evidence of similarity clustering remaining in institutionalized conceptions of Tex-Mex food among Americans. For example, we see no evidence that Americans distinguish Tex-Mex food by the inclusion of generous amounts of cumin in certain dishes such as chili con carne and most chili powder recipes, which is not characteristic of most Mexican dishes south of the border. If accurate, then it would seem that similarity clustering of food items is not a very plausible explanation for the emergence of the Tex-Mex label and category.

What then might account for the establishment of a separate Tex-Mex food label? Like prior theorists, our speculative answer has to do with both activist articulation and dense clusters of similar activity, but the ways we see these things operating here bears little resemblance to received accounts.

Racism, cultural prejudice, and the dynamics of ethnicity and status

Social boundaries, including borders, are often used by groups to exclude cultural contaminations and preserve purity. Historically, this was a strong social dynamic on both sides of the Mexican-American border, where mestizo Mexicans striving to assert the purity of their culture, including

cuisine, encountered Americans with a heritage of U.S. imperialism and discrimination against Indians and “half-breed” Mexicans. The desire to distance one’s group from others carried over to American attitudes about Mexican and Mexican-American food. “People use food to think about others, and popular views of the taco as cheap, hot, and potentially dangerous have reinforced racist images of Mexico as a land of tequila, migrants, and tourists’ diarrhea” (Pilcher 2012: 16-17). The U.S. Border Patrol and its mission to stop “illegals” from Mexico, as well as anti-Mexican immigrant political allegations, currently evoke potent images on both sides and on several levels.

The complex and conflicted history connecting Mexico and the United States intensifies the problem of assessing the authenticity of Mexican-American cuisine. Mexican cuisine was not just brought to the U.S. by millions of Mexican immigrants and farm workers from areas as diverse as Oaxaca and San Luis Potosí, as for example, Italian immigrants brought Italian cuisine from Sicily and Rome. The very borders of the United States were moved south and west, usually by force, to encompass millions of Mexicans who had lived in the territory for centuries and had their own long-established food traditions. With this two-layered history of Mexican-American food came conflicts of resentment, economic (and some would argue cultural) exploitation, discrimination, and racism bearing on disputed claims of authenticity.

Pervasive racism cannot be ignored. “In the eyes of Anglo critics, Mexicans suffered from the notion that they were typical human hybrids—half-breeds in whom whatever virtues might have existed residually in Spanish blood were tainted or extinguished by breeding with Indians” (Fernández-Armesto 2014: 147). This racism long endured, warping the attitudes of otherwise admirable people. Walter Prescott Webb, the pioneering 20th century historian of Texas and the American West (and an early ecologist and environmentalist), said that Mexican-American blood was “ditch water”. There are

many accounts of pre-civil rights era storefront signs in the American Southwest reading “no dogs or Mexicans allowed.”

Defenders of Mexican-American food have spoken bitterly about the class and racial prejudice underlying its dismissal, prejudice coming from both sides of the border. Walsh, for example, has said: “Intellectual Mexicans look down on Tex-Mex because it is a peasant food . . . Intellectuals up here look down on Tex-Mex because it is a peasant food. Until 1972, it was just Mexican food. And it was Mexicans cooking it. It’s *pinche indio* [worthless Indian] food. The people who are opposed to Tex-Mex now are opposed to it for some reason of purity. It’s mongrelized, it’s bastardized, right?” (quoted in Arellano 2012:134).

The dispute over whether Mexican-American food is authentically Mexican involves the larger use of food by cultures and nations as symbolic boundary markers. For example, burritos were first seen as a food of *braceros* and became in the eyes of Americans and Mexican-Americans markers of lower class status before they gained popular favor.³² Racism and discrimination against Mexicans by Anglos within these borders lend the dispute a moral dimension on both sides. The concept of purity carries a strong weight in this long cultural conflict, with accusations of its violation on both sides and sensitivity to charges of impurity.

How to think about Mexican-American food, labeled Tex-Mex or not, is a continuing debate. Is it, for example, a regional Mexican cuisine or a regional ethnic American cuisine? This and other aspects of how to think about this food, its social and cultural meaning, and the people who lay claim to it are at times deeply contentious. Issues of national and ethnic identity, class, racism, industrial farming, mass production and authenticity come into play surrounding claims of its distinctiveness.

³² Arellano (2012: 144) argues that because of their association with these poor temporary migrant workers, burritos were early on considered a shameful food by many Mexicans in the United States; Chicano literature of the 1950s and 1960s is filled with stories of Mexican students in that period “suffering burrito humiliation.”

English-speaking food writers, critics, chefs, and other culinary opinion-makers enter into this dispute. Some proclaim the inauthenticity and inferiority of Mexican-American food by using the Tex-Mex label in a disparaging way. Others encourage North Americans to look beyond Tex-Mex and to discover authentic regional Mexican cuisine. Still others defend Tex-Mex and Mexican-American food in general as either an authentic form of northern or frontier regional Mexican cuisine or an authentic regional ethnic American cuisine. This dispute over authenticity and worthiness becomes rancorous at times, while others try to demonstrate why a disagreement over authenticity is pointless and misses the true pleasures of Tex-Mex in its traditional forms and in its newer expressions.

Based on its history, Mexican-American food has three plausible claims for authenticity. The first is that it is part of the authentic frontier cuisine of Mexico. The second is that as a pluralistic cuisine with many distinctive variations and foreign influences, Mexican food has room for a variation with North American influences. If the first two are dismissed, Mexican-American food can still be considered an authentic regional American ethnic cuisine.

Walsh favors the third claim for Tex-Mex food, saying, “Today, most people agree that Tex-Mex isn’t really Mexican food.” But then he turns Kennedy’s crucial dismissal of Mexican-American food into something completely different than what she intended: “We can all thank Diana Kennedy for inadvertently granting Tex-Mex its rightful place in food history. By convincing us that Tex-Mex wasn’t really Mexican food, she forced us to realize that it was something far more interesting: America’s oldest regional cuisine” (Walsh 2004: xviii-xix).

But the claim that Tex-Mex and its north-of-the-border ilk are inauthentic just because they are blends—bastardized—makes no sense in the context of a broad cuisine built on blending. The claim that Tex-Mex or Mexican-American foods are inauthentic because they have been created by fast-food

industrialization and are made of ingredients produced by industrial farming³³ holds only if ball park nachos, Taco Bell, Fritos Bean Dip and other industrialized forms are taken as representative of Mexican-American food--the sum and substance of Tex-Mex. And certain authentic Mexican-American foods, such as the Cal-Mex Mission-style burrito, are quite adaptable to fast-food industrial production using non-industrially farmed ingredients without losing their basic authenticity or much inherit quality—witness the success of Chipotle.

The controversy is inescapably grounded in the complex history of Mexico and its food. Efforts to codify and promote “authentic” Mexican cuisine as a major world cuisine and make it an integral part of Mexican national and cultural identity spilled over the border into the debate over the authenticity of Mexican-American (especially what became Tex-Mex) cuisine. Defining boundaries, both geographical and structural, for a national cuisine proved problematic because of the complex and contentious historical relations between Mexico and an often dominating United States, during which millions of Mexicans and huge expanses of formerly Mexican territory came to be included within the US. Inside the U.S. itself, negative attitudes about Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, whether longstanding American citizens or migrant workers, foisted dismissive and often ignorant and prejudicial opinions of Mexican-American food (Fernández-Armesto 2014).

As Mexican-American food in general became damned with the label Tex-Mex in the early 1970s, Mexican-Americans who ran the family restaurants serving this food shunned the label for good business reasons at first. The Tex-Mex label thus became strongly valenced in a negative way (Lizardo & Pirkey 2014) and its fate became tied to discussions about its authenticity, especially as compared to the regional Mexican cuisines.

³³ Industrial farming is also increasingly affecting the cuisine of modern Mexico, which also happens to be the source of much American produce year-around. In both countries, Mexican laborers are major harvesters of industrially farmed produce and processors of industrially farmed animals.

Summing up

After this investigation, it strikes us that the establishment of the Tex-Mex food label, so tied to the debate over its becoming recognized as an authentic cuisine (or at least not being an inauthentic one), resulted from a complex and protracted struggle among Anglo-Americans, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, led by visible and vocal activists on all fronts. Anglos and Mexicans alike distanced themselves from the lower class and marginal Mexican-Americans. The unique food items that developed and flourished among Mexican-Americans were not obviously distinguishable from Mexican foods based on inspection of their ingredients or methods. Rather these foods were regarded as impure and low quality, as were the style and places in which they were served.

Articulation of these differences came initially not by activists advocating on their behalf but by those bemoaning their low quality. The differences likely were salient because of geographic factors---the early physical contiguity of the Mexican immigrant groups in barrios in Texas and the Southwest, and the early physical adjacency of the immigrant groups to the remaining indigenous population in Mexico, compared to the rest of America. The Tex-Mex label associated with these foods became tainted in a general way, and it was not until decades later that activists, enthusiasts and others managed to get the category reexamined and reevaluated in a more positive light. It did not help matters that the cheap mass industrialized versions of Mexican food--castigated by Mexicans as an American debasement--were also often lumped together in the public's mind. All in all, we see the attempt to distance Mexican-American people and their food as central to the establishment of the Tex-Mex label and category. It is these dynamics of ethnicity and class, along with industrial and geographic factors, that we conjecture account for the establishment of the food category we know as Tex-Mex.

6. DISCUSSION

The label and social category of Tex-Mex arose almost simultaneously with the recognition of regional Mexican food as a major world cuisine(s) as elucidated by Diana Kennedy and other Mexican-food experts and as subsequently promoted by Mexico. Emerging in the 1970s, the Tex-Mex “project” can be seen, at least in part, as a by-product of extensive and sustained efforts on both sides of the border to exclude from the category “Mexican” all Mexican-American food. The exclusion included even those dishes strongly rooted in the authentic frontier cuisines of northern Mexican territories before they were incorporated within the borders of an expanding United States. Influential Mexican nationals preferred and increasingly used the Mexican label out of cultural pride, resentment of American hegemony and prejudice, and to promote tourism. Perhaps ironically, the very notion of authenticity in Mexican cuisine was invented in recent historical times to promote the food, and by extension, tourism, of Mexico proper. Distinguishing it from Mexican-American food was a key part of that process. As a result, American food authorities started using the label Tex-Mex as a kind of exclusionary catch-all, an artifactual by-product, as they too hailed the new recognition of a pure and authentic Mexican regional cuisine distinct from the Mexican-American food found north of the border. Tex-Mex emerged as an exclusionary means of labeling all Mexican-American food as inauthentic while simultaneously strengthening claims for the authenticity and purity of Mexican cuisine.

Viewed from the vantage of organizational theory, the process of Tex-Mex’s emergence does not follow closely expectations from the prevailing accounts for category emergence. These typically involve either of two general processes. The first is pro-active, positive theorization followed by promotion and advocacy by activists in a gathering collective effort that has the look and feel of a social movement. Indeed, the process has been explicitly likened to social movements by relevant theorists. The second process is similarity clustering. In this process, activists try to make sense of an unstructured world that they encounter filled with various entities including products, services and

organizations. In doing so, individuals delineate clusters of entities based on the observed features of products and services, and sometime producers. They then give labels to the clusters of similar entities; subsequently, they develop and test more general schema that can be used to define and predict whether an entity would likely be included in a given cluster and associated with the label. The label eventually carries with it expectations regarding all the entities to which it is assigned, at which point a socially agreed upon category has emerged.

Tex-Mex's emergence as a label and category are inconsistent with these theoretical accounts in at least three glaring ways. First, the historical timing of the label's emergence is way off from expectations. Both theories assume or explicitly state that the label emerges early in the process, if not at its initiation. With Tex-Mex, the label came literally decades after the food and associated establishments had been in place in the U.S. and had become familiar and highly successful in their markets. Second, the category Tex-Mex emerged without advocates or activists proclaiming its unique virtues and positive appeal, as again both theories hold at least implicitly. Indeed, during the emergence period, the focus was not on Tex-Mex per se so much but instead on the category from which it was being excluded, Mexican food. Tex-Mex was the label for the artifact-based category given to those entities that did not pass the Mexican category's emergent classification test. Third, and relatedly, the Tex-Mex category emerged with strong negative rather than positive connotations. This fact does not so much contradict the theories as it is unexpected by them. Looking back, we can see that this negative valancing arose partly as a result of inaccurate, distorted, and misguided knowledge of Mexican and good Mexican-American food. It also included a lack of basic understanding that almost all Mexican cuisine is historically and fundamentally a complexly blended cuisine based on indigenous roots but with strong global influences. Additionally, the fact that Mexican-American food became

strongly associated with widespread industrialized forms originating in the United States surely made the category Tex-Mex easier to condemn as inauthentic and inferior in quality.

We recognize, of course, that a full and convincing positive theoretical account of the Tex-Mex category's emergence remains elusive. We have suggested, in a speculative vein more than anything, that the historical ethnic dynamics of class and status—between Mexicans and poor Mexican-American immigrants, as well as between white Americans and Mexican-Americans---likely played a major role. We also intimated the role of early mass industrialization of the food.

But neither of these explanations, ethnic dynamics or mass industrialization, is fully convincing either. Consider other immigrant groups to the U.S. and the evolution of their cuisines, such as Chinese, Italians, Japanese, Germans and French. In every case, the circumstances of their new national home and its markets brought on a distinct foodway and local cuisine, one that involved many departures from the purity of their original cuisine, often involving a degradation of quality. Many of these groups also confronted widespread and systematic social exclusion, disparagement and racism---perhaps all on the list above did except the French. There were also plenty of cheap mass industrialized versions of Chinese and Italian food, if not the others. Yet these experiences did not really result in a distinctive and widely institutionalized labels and categories such as Tex-Mex. People do not typically (albeit occasionally) talk of Chinese-American food, or Italian-American food, or Japanese-American food, but rather of Chinese food, Italian food and Japanese food. This lack of unique labeling comes despite widespread recognition (both in the U.S. and the home countries) of the at-times major differences in the original and the Americanized versions of the food, its ingredients, its preparation and the context of its service. Only French food, with its evolution into Creole and Cajun cuisine labels and categories in Louisiana, comes close to resembling the evolution of Mexican cuisine and Tex-Mex.

What, then, besides ethnic class dynamics and mass industrialization, might account for the emergence of the distinctive label and category of Tex-Mex? Again, we can only speculate. By comparing to the other immigrant groups' cuisine noted above, we do not think it has to do with degree of local adaptation or the extent to which local ingredients must be used as substitutes for unavailable or prohibitively expensive ones, as similarity clustering might suggest. In considering other factors, two related geographic aspects of Mexican immigrant patterns seem relatively unique and intriguing in terms of their possible impact. The first is that early Mexican immigrants to the U.S. resided primarily in a geographically contiguous space in America, albeit a very large space in Texas and the Southwest. The second is the immediate geographic adjacency of that space to the home country of Mexico, compared to the rest of the U.S. Both factors likely heightened awareness by other social and ethnic groups of Mexican-Americans and their living and eating patterns, the first to long-resident (mainly European origin) Americans, the second to Mexicans. This heightened awareness would likely have increased the salience of other differences between the groups and Mexican-Americans on many dimensions such as income, wealth and education, but also food and eating patterns. The corresponding social and cultural context, with such a salient and exaggerated sense of difference, would likely have been readily receptive to claims about lower quality and the lack of purity in Mexican-American food, thereby engendering receptiveness to labeling and categorizing it separately.

In recent decades, of course, perception of the Tex-Mex category has changed dramatically. It has come to refer in a much more positive way to a kind of Mexican-based food north of the border, focused on Texas and made and enjoyed by whites as much as by people of Mexican ancestry. Initial resistance to the label over decades turned to re-appropriation and proud embracement.³⁴ In the process, the category Tex-Mex has developed into a popular and admired style (whether as a regional American

³⁴ There is also more recognition that other parts of the Southwest such as New Mexico and California have their own distinct and indigenous forms of authentic Mexican-American food. See the Appendix for details.

cuisine or a blended Mexican style) as Americans of all sorts—and Texans especially—came to love this category of Mexican-American food, especially in its rooted, non-industrial form. In Texas itself, openly loving Tex-Mex food became almost “patriotic” in the same way Texans are famously loyal to their state. In the process, the category Tex-Mex acquired its own kind of authenticity, which even New York restaurant critics acknowledge.

Reinterpretation of a social category has been seen before by organizational theorists. Negro et al.’s (2011) investigation of traditional and modern Barolo winemakers in Italy examines exactly this problem. But the dynamics of the process they discover in their context seem dramatically different than what we observe for Tex-Mex, although both involve highly vocal and expressive activists. Moreover, we suggest that the category reinterpretation process of Tex-Mex resembles more closely those that occur with increasing frequency in modern social life, where previously disenfranchised and disparaged groups assert their rights, propose new labels to define themselves -- only to subsequently re-appropriate the derogatory labels foisted upon them, and reinterpret the associated category with a positive valence. Interestingly, this process of re-appropriation and redefinition would appear often to come after the original offensive word has been replaced in common parlance by a new, more appropriate and socially acceptable label. In any event, it seems to us that category reinterpretation is not a rare phenomenon. Yet, it hardly gets the theoretical or empirical attention it deserves relative to its occurrence and social importance, especially in comparison to how much attention other topics about categories (e.g., category spanning or straddling) seem to get, perhaps because they are so much easier to study.

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Table 1. Scores of Authentic “Mexican-ess” of Food Items from All Our Ideas Survey

(items shown in **bold** are clearly Tex-Mex items)

Chile Rellenos con Queso	84	Sopapilla	70	Corn Bread with Jalapenos and Cheddar Cheese	52	Chili Mac	27
Carne con Chili Verde	82	Navajo Taco	70	Smoked Chili Aoli	52	Burgoo	26
Chile Rellenos	81	Arroz Rojo	70	Venison Tamales with Cranberries and Pecan	51	Fried Chicken	26
Chimichanga	79	Mole Poblano	69	Jicama Salad with Watercress & Romaine	51	Fried Catfish with Hush Puppies	25
Chili Colorado con Puerco	78	Chalupas	69	Barbecue Shrimp Taco with Mango Red Onion Salad	50	Goulash	24
Chile Rellenos filled with Pork Picadillo	78	Pollo a al Uva	68	Ground Beef Hard Taco	49	Sweet Potato Pie	23
Beef Enchiladas	78	Cheese Enchiladas	68	Bean Dip With Fritos	49	Fried Clams	23
Tamales	77	Pork Adobada	67	Biscochitos	49	Clear Chicken Broth	23
Chicken Fajitas	77	Cheesy Chimichanga with Sour Cream & Red Sauce	67	Mexican Cole Slaw	49	Creamy Grits	23
Chiles en Nogada	76	Chicken Mole	66	Frozen Margarita	48	Dr. Pepper Taco Soup	23
Huachinango a al Veracruzano	76	Chile Macho	66	Chuy's Green Chile Stew	48	Caesar Salad	21
Carne en Salsa De Chile Colorado	76	Tortas	66	Tex-Mex Mole	48	Crab Cakes	21
Frijoles	75	Burritos	66	Chicken Fajita Pizza	48	Venison Stew	20
Guacamole	75	Carnitas Wraps	64	Puffy Taco	47	Hand Red-eye Gravy	20
Quesadillas	75	Blue Corn Tortillas	64	Taco Salad	47	Slow Roasted Prime Rib	19
Cheese Enchiladas	75	Tamale Pie	64	Chocolate Diablo with Cherimoya Custard Sauce	46	Waldorf Salad	19
Chile Rellenos filled with Cheese	75	Cabrito	63	Taco Casserole	46	Waldorf Salad	19
Cornmeal Tamales	75	Higaditos	62	Jalapeno Cheese Grits	44	Collard Greens	19
Arroz Verde	74	Portabella Relleno	61	Cream Tacos	44	Crayfish Bisque	19
Tostadas	74	El Fenix Guacomole Soup	61	Braised Rabbit with Wild Boar Tamale Tarts	42	Hush Puppies	17
Fajitas	74	Sangria	61	Taco Burger	39	Cheeseburger	17
Chili con Carne	73	Nachos	61	Swiss Chard Tacos	39	Lobster Roll	17
Chile con Queso	73	Margaritas	60	Avocado Sandwich on Whole Wheat Bread	39	Tuna Melt	16
Sopa de Arroz	73	Cochinita Pibil	60	Elvis Green Chile-Fried Chicken	36	Roast Turkey	16
Refried Beans	72	Bunuelos	59	Black-eyed Peas	35	Smoked Salmon	15
Quesadilla with Flour Tortilla	72	Grilled Chiptole Lime Chicken Breasts	59	Chili Gravy	34	Clam Chowder	15
Green Chile Chicken Enchiladas	71	Cajeta Flan with Cinnamon Cactus Cookies	59	Frito Pie	34	Doughnuts	14
Tacos al Pastor	71	Crispy Tacos	59	Blue Crab Salsa	33	Chop Suey	14
El Chico's Salsa Fria	71	Goat Cheese Blue Corn Quesadillas	59	Fried Oyster Nachos	33	French Fries	13
Pollo Pulquero	71	Fritoque	58	Grilled Trout Alamdine	31	Corn Dog	13
Salsa	71	Puchero	57	Jambalaya	31	Patty Melt	13
Grilled Chicken Fajita Taco	70	Corn Chips with Salsa	55	Artichoke Bread	29	Macaroni & Cheese	12
Caldo de Mariscos	70	Fish Tacos	55	Lemon Rice Pudding	28	Maple Syrup	11
Steak Fajitas	70	Flan Cake	55	Chicken-Fried Steak	28	Hot Dog	11
Carne Deshebrada	70	Paella	55	Texas Caviar	28	Pecan Pie	9
Chorizo	70	Panocha	53	Beignets	28	Welsh Rarebit	9

Figure 1. Annual Frequency of Mentions of “Tex Mex” in *Los Angeles Times*

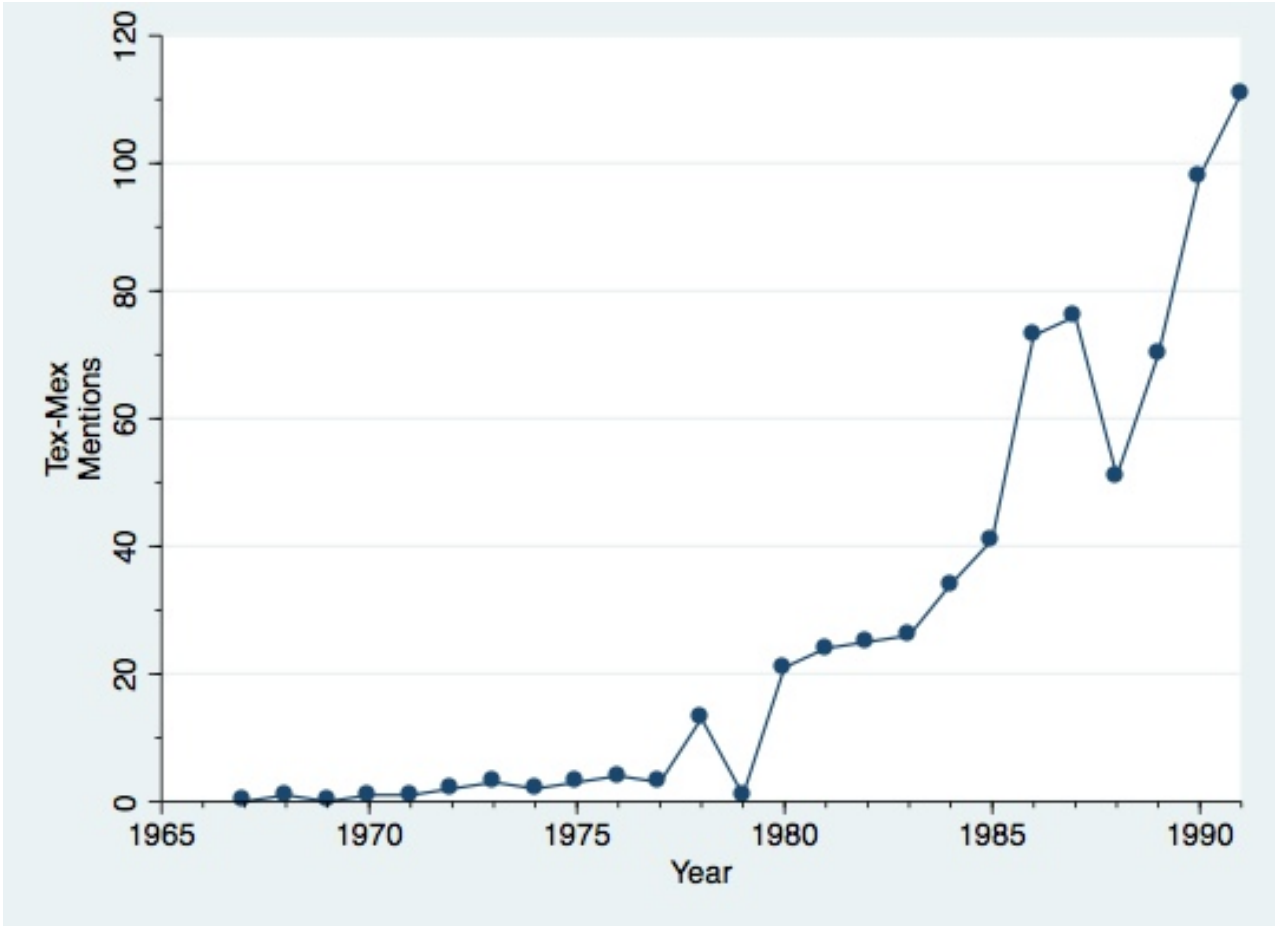


Figure 2. Annual Google n-grams for Tex-Mex Phrases

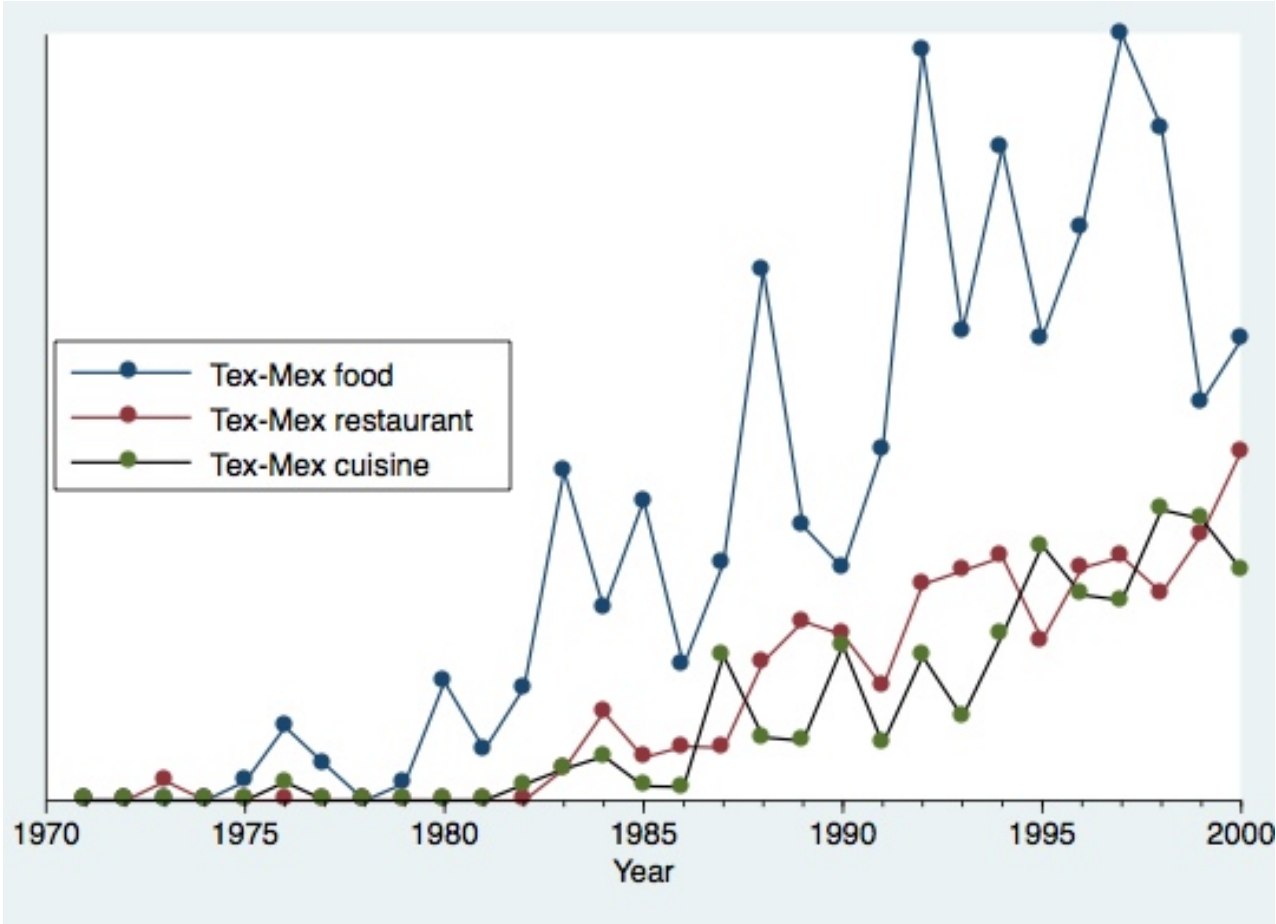


Figure 3. Conjectured Distribution of American Food Items on Mexican-ess Scale

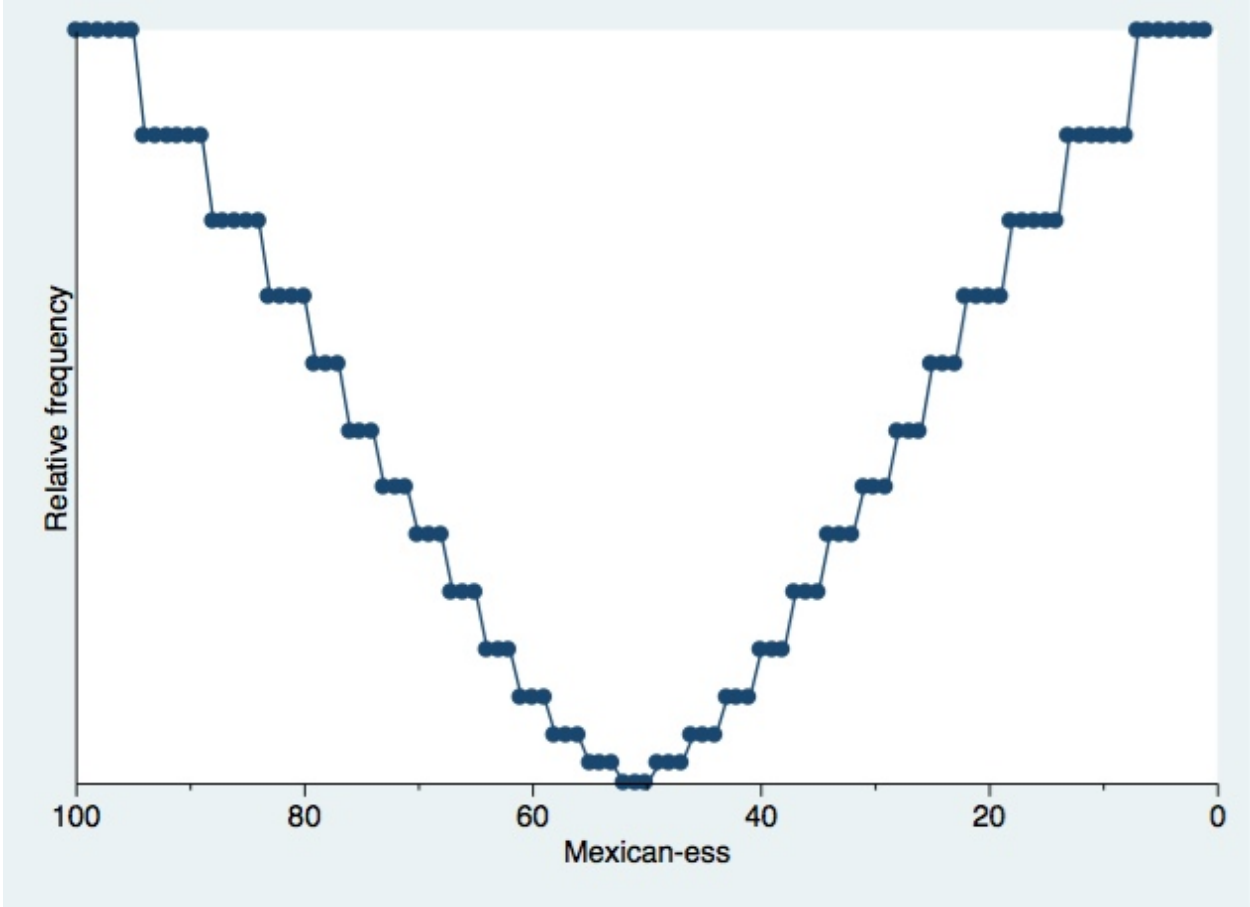
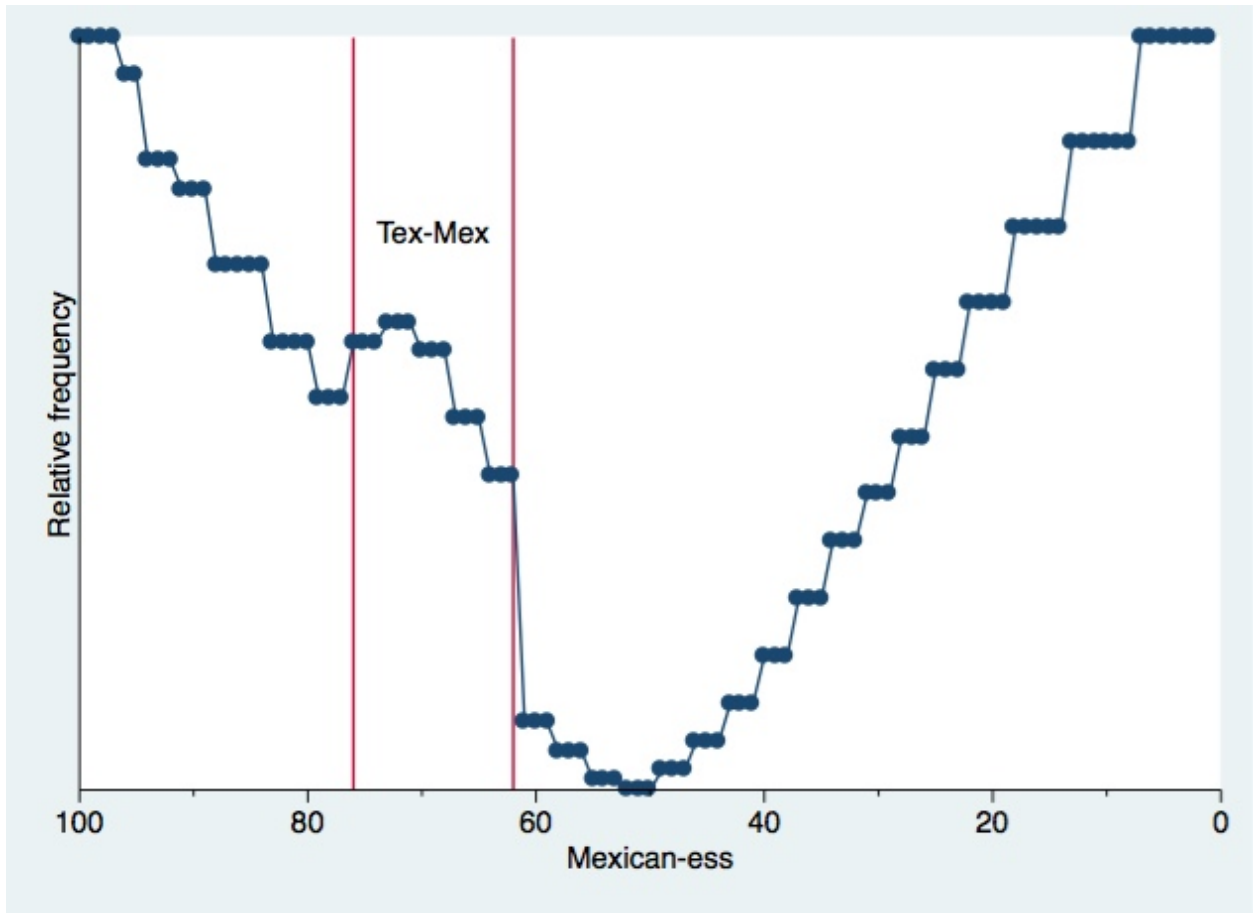


Figure 4. Conjectured Location of Tex-Mex Items on Distribution of American Food Items on Mexican-ess Scale with Strong Similarity Clustering



APPENDIX: Varieties of Mexican-American Regional Cuisines

TEX-MEX

Roots

Northern Mexico, Mexican frontier and ranching region (closely linked to cowboy culture of Texas and other parts of the Southwest)

Cooking style hybridized largely in family restaurants, many owned by Anglos with Mexican cooks, catering to Anglos

Chili Queens of San Antonio (1870's until perhaps early 1930's, Mexican women opened stands in the market in evenings selling chili from big cazuelas as well as frijoles and tamales to locals and railway tourists; colorful, sometimes racy, legends from local press and writers like O Henry)

Characteristic Foods

Chile con carne (murky origins, possibly San Antonio in mid-19th century)

Frito Pie (supposedly invented by Frito founder Doolin's mother: open small individual bag of Fritos, pour in ½ cup chili con carne, shredded cheddar, chopped onion, and jalapeno slices—eat out of the bag) (From Walsh, p 204; also see New Mexican below)

Tex-Mex cheese enchiladas (American or Velveeta cheese, onions, chili gravy)

Chili gravy (cross between Anglo brown gravy and Mexican chile sauce)

Puffy taco (appeared in San Antonio in the 1970s)

Combination plate (invented at Otis Farnsworth's Original Mexican Restaurant in San Antonio in 1900)

Chile con queso

Nachos (created in the 1940s in the Mexican border town of Piedras Negras)

Fajitas (disputed, but popularized at Ninfa's restaurant in Houston in 1973)

Chili powder—mix of powdered ancho chilies, cumin, oregano, and black pepper that standardized much Tex-Mex food (invented in 1890s by William Gebhardt, a German immigrant to Texas)

Industrialized Foods and Chain Restaurants

Fritos, Doritos, Tostitos (Fritos invented in 1930s by Elmer Doolin in San Antonio, produced since 1959 by Frito-Lay)

Fritos Bean Dip

Gebhardt's Mexican Foods--Gebhardt's Eagle Brand Chili Powder Co. (patented in 1899), Gebhardt's Tamales With Chili Gravy, Gebhardt's Chili Con Carne, and other products (bought by Beatrice, and what's left of the product—unclear--now owned by ConAgra)

Pace Picante Sauce (founded 1947 by David Pace, located in Paris, Texas, now owned by Campbell's Soup Co.; largest user of jalapeños in U.S., 25 million lbs. per year)

Taco Cabana (fast-casual chain out of San Antonio, founded by Felix Stehling in 1978; most of the 165 locations in Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico have drive-through, many are 24-hr operations)

El Chico (Dallas-based Tex-Mex chain, started 1940 by Cuellar family, Mexican immigrants with matriarch Adelaida Cuellar selling tamales at a Texas county fair in 1928, now with 78 locations in South and Southwest)

NEW-MEXICO-MEX (or New Mexican, includes Arizona)

Roots

Semi-mythical connections to Spanish Colonial era

Earliest Spanish settlements in Southwest U.S.—4 centuries ago

Blue corn maize from Hopi

Isolated from major Americanization until 20th century

Characteristic Foods

Hatch green chilies

Blue corn tortillas, chips, and other blue corn products

Green chile sauces in burritos, tacos, French fries, hamburgers

Stacked Santa Fe green-chili blue corn enchilada

Carne con chile verde—green chile stew

Carne adovada—red chile pork stew

Biscochitos—star-shaped anise-flavored Christmas cookie

Chimichanga—fried flour tortilla burrito (originally Arizona)

Navajo tacos—made from fried Navajo flatbread

Panocha—brown sugar pudding

Sopaipilla—puffed fried bread filled with honey or stuffed with meat, beans, cheese and chile sauce

Industrialized Foods and Chain Restaurants

Frito-Lay Tostitos Simply Blue Corn Tortilla Chips

Garden of Eatin' Organic Blue Corn Tortilla Chips

Arrowhead Mills (Hereford, Texas) Blue Corn Pancake Mix

CAL-MEX

Roots

Late-18th century Franciscan missionaries and troops from Sonora laid much of the Spanish groundwork, introducing crops, livestock, and making of olive oil, cheese, and wine, along with tortillas and tamales to region lacking large organized tribes or agriculture

Semi-mythical connections to Old California

Cookbooks and other written culinary texts

Pushcart tamale vendors (late-19th century Los Angeles, spread out to San Francisco and across U.S. until 1940s; “Mexicans, African-Americans, and European immigrants dominated the trade” [Arellano, p. 39])

Characteristic Foods

Crisp taco

Mission burrito

Breakfast burrito

Baja fish taco

Industrialized Foods and Chain Restaurants

Fast-food ground beef crisp taco

Mission burrito

Breakfast burritos

Taco Bell

Chipotle Mexican Grill

El Torito (founded by Larry Cano in 1954 in refurbished Tiki restaurant in Encino, past its heyday, now with 69 locations primarily in California and in 2011 in Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings, but popularized sit-down Mexican restaurants outside Southwest along with margaritas)

Baja Fresh (founded 1990 by Jim and Linda Magglos in Newbury Park, CA, emphasizes fresh food, 256 restaurants in 29 states plus Dubai locations)

Rubio's Fresh Mexican Grill (now just Rubio's, popularized fish tacos; founded in San Diego in 1983 by Ralph Rubio, in 2007 there were 190 restaurants in 5 Western States)

SOUTHWESTERN

Roots

General term for a new cuisine style with a Mexican-Old West flavor—especially Texan and New Mexican—with Southern, Cajun, and Creole influences often made by celebrity chefs with classical and nouveau French training that became trendy in 1980s. Leading “Modern Southwestern Cuisine” chefs out of the West Coast were Santa Fe-born John Sedlar (Bikini and Abiqui in Santa Monica) and Mark Miller (Fourth Street Grill in Berkeley, Coyote Café in Santa Fe). In Texas an important group of similarly trained chefs, notably Dean Fearing, “The Father of Southwest Cuisine” (Mansion on Turtle Creek in Dallas), and Stephan Pyles (Routh Street Café, Star Canyon, and over a dozen others, centered in Dallas-Ft. Worth area) worked to make modernist cuisine from Tex-Mex, calling it New Texas Cuisine. Similarly, Tim Love fashioned what he called “Urban Western Cuisine” at his Lonesome Dove Western Bistro in the Historic Stockyards of Fort. Worth—he brings in American Indians and Australian Outback touches with coffee-rubbed kangaroo with cilantro-lime mashed potatoes. Texas forms of Southwestern restaurants seem to be enduring longer than the California Southwest style.

Characteristic Foods

Goat cheese blue corn quesadillas

Smoked rabbit-black bean tostadas with goat cheese-roast garlic cream

Barbecue shrimp taco with mango-pickled red onion salad

Smoked chicken nachos

Braised rabbit and wild boar tamale tarts

Smoked chile aioli

Mixed seafood grill with golden tomato salsa and jicama-melon relish

Roast turkey stuffed with fresh corn tamales

Grilled rattlesnake cakes with guajillo aioli and fried spinach

Venison tamales with cranberries and pecans

Cajeta flan with cinnamon cactus cookies

Cranberry pudding tamales with tequila-orange curd

Chocolate diablo with cherimoya custard sauce

Industrialized Foods and Chain Restaurants

Blue corn tortilla chips

Santa Fe or Southwestern chicken salad in many franchises and chains such as Applebee's and McDonald's