



## Taquerias “al Norte”

- Taquerias are rich grazing grounds for food product developers.
- Tortillas now vie with leavened bread as North America’s cereal staple.
- Taquerias satisfy the desire for convenience, flavor, easy-to-eat, healthy food.
- Tortilla evolution—corn-flavored flour tortillas?

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The impact of Mexican cuisine on North American eating habits over the past 25 years has been nothing less than astounding. Tortillas now vie with leavened bread as North America’s leading cereal staple and salsa sales outpace ketchup. Now, as new regional Mexican fare finds its way into North American eating traditions, cereal foods developers would do well to look at North America’s proliferating taquerias for inspiration.

Every trend begins with a tradition. Taquerias were derived from years of feeding hungry people in the neighborhoods of Mexican cities, where the combinations of tortillas, sweet and savory breads, meat fillings, salsas, and beverages met the people’s appetites. Over time, taqueria cooks developed flavors unique to their particular regions of Mexico. The easiest, most flavorful, and great textured of these products have stayed as part of the diet you see today.

### Traditional Cooking and Ingredients

#### *Early Settlers to Today’s Cuisines*

The cuisine of Mexico was born at the point of a musket, blending the dishes of the native people with those of their Spanish conquerors; from this encounter

the fiery flavors linger like smoke. The ancient Aztec and Mayan civilizations cooked with basic foodstuffs such as corn, chilies, and tomatoes. Onto these, the Spanish grafted their love of sweets, marinades, and sauces.

Mexico is rich with produce and indulgent ingredients, the components of a flavorful cuisine. The Mexican kitchen is a hearty peasant kitchen that relies on this profusion of fresh vegetables and is dominated by the masa (corn) tortilla, a round pancake of unleavened corn flour that is as much a plate as a food. The flavors have a significant variety. There are some 50 species of beans and more than 140 different types of chili peppers, each with its own distinctive taste, purpose, and appearance. Quick and cost effective, taquerias are just one way in which these flavors reach the masses.

### What is a Taqueria?

A taqueria is the quintessential Mexican fast food place. Families and operators of taquerias have been serving customers the same type of menu for years, ripe with local flavors and combinations. A choice of corn or flour tortilla, available in a variety of sizes and served either crispy or soft and pliable, is filled with beef, chicken, or pork and offered with a multitude of sauces.

A combination of other fresh ingredients, such as tomatoes, tomatillos, spring onions, squash, and jalapeños, rounds out the imaginative possibilities. The flavors are fresh, colorful, and easily identifiable. The corn tortillas can be stuffed; rolled thin as a pancake; fried crispy, either whole

or as chips; formed into bite size bowls of masa mix, with a dipple in the center for fillings; or made into sweets and pastries.

### A Rise in the Market

The Mexican ethnic influence started when salsa became the preferred condiment in the United States during the late nineties. The concept of adjusting a food’s flavor with an ethnic condiment was the beginning of the taqueria movement. The spice and acidity of salsa are synergistic with a warm, flavorful carrier that acts as a “foil,” or less flavored substance. It is critical for the carrier to be balanced for flavor and texture and for it to be sturdy, too.

Why will we see a rise in these types of restaurants? Mexican cuisine is a perfect balance of health, flavor, and texture. Taquerias, in particular, satisfy the current desire for convenience, flavor, texture, easy-to-eat, neat, and healthy food—all available with a variety of carriers.

Furthermore, with an insurgence of Mexican and Latin American population, the need for authentic food is in demand. Italian and Chinese cuisines have become popular due to the large insurgence of immigrants since the mid-1800s from these respective countries. The number of Spanish speaking people coming to America is quite remarkable. This will have an effect on the cuisine and how it reaches our borders. The number of immigrants will drive up the distribution of authentic ingredients (supply vs. demand). First, the indigenous ingredients will show up in local ethnic markets and then enter into larger mainstream grocery

stores. Once the product is available to customers, the rest is history. You can currently find chipotle, cilantro, tortillas, masa mix, jalapenos, rice, and beans, which are the backbone of the Mexican cuisine. I think we will see more examples of convenient foods offered in the Mexican cuisine, such as traditional tamales in the corn husk frozen ready to heat and eat, empanadas in the true form, and picadillo—a traditional meat dish with pine nuts and raisins—in a ready to heat and eat format. As the consumers continue to want traditional Mexican fare, the manufacturers will have to keep up with demand and prepare foods for various segments: fast food, casual dining, frozen entrees, and shelf stable forms to fill the consumer need.

How far will we go to Americanize traditional tacos for the mainstream consumer? The traditional menu items from an authentic Mexican taqueria are already mainstream in their natural state. The level of heat in the sauce may need to be controlled to please the average consumer. An easy way to control heat is to offer a less spicy alternative and to allow the customer to customize their own taco. U.S. chefs also may add lettuce and diced tomatoes to their

tacos where those ingredients may not be used traditionally, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. We need our vegetables and fiber added to our diets.

### Traditional Cooking Techniques

The cooking techniques are simple. For example, steaming, grilling, griddling, barbecuing, braising, stewing, and poaching are all cooking techniques that are popular in Mexican cuisine.

### What's this Mean for the Cereal Foods Industry?

For those in the tortilla industry, creating carriers that have higher amounts of fiber is not a bad idea. What do you think about more absorbent carriers to hold the juice and make it easier to eat with less mess? Flavored or aromatic tortillas or other carriers will always be important as we focus on the authentic. The key is to keep it authentic and to mimic the true traditional flavors.

Will we see a conversion from traditional corn tortillas to flour tortillas? Flour tortillas have a smoother texture than corn tortillas. The corn tortilla is also not as pliable and is a bit grittier from the corn or masa. Flour tortillas are more abundant in the grocery stores where Mexicans are not the primary shopper. I think that Americans prefer the softer flour tortillas. In the future, we may see the evolution of a corn-flavored flour tortilla to please the market and stay authentic. Maybe we need to make a corn tortilla that has the same smooth texture as the flour tortillas to satisfy the consumer's taste and texture preference. The corn tortilla adds or complements the flavor of the filling. The flour tortilla plays the roll of a carrier that does not compete with the flavor of the filling.

What are the nutritional attributes of this concept? It is simple enough to eat a balanced diet with the choices from a taqueria. Tacos and the like are healthy alternatives for the on-the-move diet. The balance of protein, fat, and carbohydrates seem to be proportional. As long as we control the amount of calories we consume, we should be able to maintain a decent diet with these food products.

What is the average cost of a meal occasion? A taco served in a small four-inch corn tortilla can range from \$0.89 to \$1.49 each. Typically, an order of three

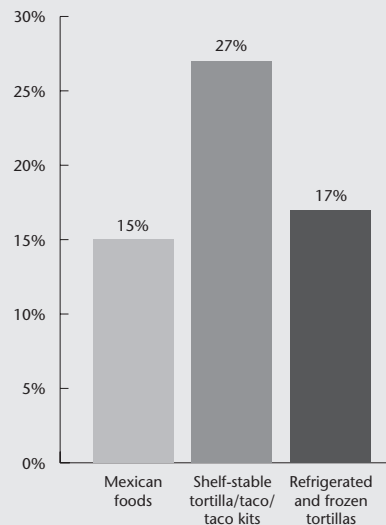
tacos with a side soda or water will fill the belly. For under \$3.00, a real meal deal can be consumed at a local taqueria.

Will major U.S. foodservice chains pick up this authentic concept? Chipotle® quick service restaurant is a retro fit of a modern taqueria. There are several differences and likenesses. Here is how a Chipotle works. Customers enter and pick their style of carrier (burrito with large flour tortilla, bowl, soft flour taco, crispy taco, or salad), pick their filling of choice (chicken, steak, carnitas, barbacoa, vegetarian), and then pick their choice of salsa or topping (roasted chili-corn, tomatillo green chili, tomatillo red chili, fresh tomato, guacamole, sour cream). Now they are ready to pay up and chow down. The process is linear and quick. The food is prepared as fresh as possible and served in a sanitary environment. Overall, Chipotle is a good translation of a taqueria—without the corn tortillas. Consumer-based research must

### Sample taqueria menu

Menu item	Product description
<b>Types of carriers</b>	Corn tortillas, flour tortillas, bolillo rolls, tortilla chips fried, gorditas or stuffed masa, fried corn and flour tortillas, plantains, sweet breads, and cookies
<b>Tacos y tostadas</b>	Corn tortillas
Carne asada	Grilled steak
Pollo	Chicken
Barbacoa	Steamed beef
Lengua	Beef tongue
Lomo	Rib eye steak
Chili relleno	Stuffed poblano pepper
<b>Tortas</b>	Bolillo bread roll
Milanesa	Breaded steak
Pollo	Chicken
Lomo	Rib eye steak
Carne asada	Grilled steak
<b>Side dishes</b>	
Arroz	Rice
Frijoles	Beans
Arroz y frijoles	Rice and beans
Crema	Sour cream
Guacamole	
<b>Salsa</b>	
Salsa fresca	Fresh tomato sauce
Salsa verde	Tomatillo sauce
Salsa rojo	Pureed tomato and chili pepper

Increase of U.S. sales between 2000 and 2005



Since 2000, tortillas/taco/taco kits have experienced the greatest growth in the Mexican food market.

Courtesy of Mintel. Based on Information Resources Inc. InfoScan (Reviews Information/SPINS/Mintel).

have proven flour tortillas are preferred by Chipotle customers. Traditional taquerias would have a greater variety of ingredients than are common in any one location in Mexico.

Taco Bell® has taken Mexican food to an extremely innovative level, as they focus their product offerings on the texture, salty flavors, and diverse menu items their target market appreciates.

Rubio's® of San Diego, where traditional proteins, garnishes, and carriers are prepared, has promoted the Baja California-type fish taco for years now. Chains are all adapting their menus with something somewhat authentic in nature.

If the Americans realize the merit of an authentic Mexican taco, there will be a demand for such items. If the chains are successful at converting true Mexicans to eating Americanized foods, then we are in the middle ground that I refer to as the transition stage. I think true Mexican flavors could be acceptable to the American palate. The chains and independent operators popping up all across the country will serve either authentic or adapted flavors. The consumer will decide what is preferred and what will remain the

standard. I feel the authentic flavors will win out the preference test in the next 5 years as consumers are more educated on the possibilities.

As more Mexican culture and food travels across the border into America, you will see a lot more ingredients known to traditional Mexican cuisine. This movement will allow the cuisine into the culinary fabric of the United States and beyond. I suspect we will Americanize the traditional taquerias to focus on health and wellness by steaming the tortillas vs. frying or heating with oil, limiting the use

of lard, and focusing on all natural food for ingredients. This will be a tasty journey in time.

Local taquerias will continue to provide leading-edge insights into the flavors, aromas, and textures of Mexico and other Latin American cultures. Be it for food-service or food manufacturing, taquerias are rich grazing grounds for product developers in search for new ideas with which to captivate tomorrow's consumers, in "el Norte" America and elsewhere.

Support your local taqueria today, and remember, it really is all about flavor.



**Charlie Baggs**, president and founder of Charlie Baggs, Inc., has been part of the food industry for nearly 20 years. His passion for food, combined with his knowledge of food science, offers unique and sought after credentials. Chef Charlie has authored numerous culinary articles in various industry publications and is a sought-after speaker. He resides in a flavorful home in Chicago's Lincoln Park neighborhood with his wife and two young children. Baggs can be reached at [c.baggs@charliebaggsinc.com](mailto:c.baggs@charliebaggsinc.com).

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