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## The Budding Aromas from Taco Trucks: Taste and Space in Austin, Texas

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### Abstract

*This paper evaluates how taste preferences produce space in Austin, Texas. Austin is a booming city. Indeed, it has been the fastest growing metro area in the United States for the past 20 years. It is also renowned for its evolving and enthralling food truck scene. Food trucks of all sorts spring up throughout the city. Some of the more innovative foods stem from gourmet trucks. And these trucks often become symbolic capital that spur gentrification. Other trucks, such as the traditional taco truck, are ensconced in marginalized neighborhoods. They feed the working masses of Mexicans who flock to Austin to find work. Certainly, the gourmet truck vendors experiment with food flavors; however, taco truck entrepreneurs are innovative as well. The taco truck cooks modify their menus to accommodate Austin's shifting demographics. To this end, I argue Austin's landscape transformation can be examined through cooking practices. This paper takes a close look at how immigrant cooks negotiate social spaces through the foods they make. In so doing, I interviewed two traditional taco truck owners about how they decide what to cook based on the social spaces in which they park their trucks. Surprisingly, their subtle choices reflect the changing culture and budding taste preferences of the city's residents.*

**Keywords:** *Tacos; Mexican cuisines; food studies; urban studies; food geography; urban transformations.*

### Introduction

Austin, Texas, is a swiftly changing city. Since the 1980s its population has flourished from 250,000 to over a million people (US Census 2015). Actually, Austin has been the fastest-growing urban region in the United States for the past several years. And with its exponential growth comes a boom in symbolic capital, such as opulent restaurants, swanky shopping strips, luxury lofts, and funky food trucks. Zukin (1993) contends that such markers of urbanity stimulate the economy aesthetically. Noticeably, since 2009, boutique food trucks and trailers have contributed expressively to Austin's eccentric and eclectic landscape image and cultural economy.

The gourmet or boutique food trucks and trailers are renowned for offering artisanal cuisine to the Anglo middle class. Conversely, ten years prior to popular food trucks swamping the city, there was the traditional taco truck.

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Taco trucks mostly locate east of Interstate 35 and south of Oltorf Street. Long-term Latino residents as well as Mexican immigrants reside in these areas. The traditional taco trucks feed mainly Mexican day laborers flocking to the city to do construction or work in the service industry. In other words, the manifestation of taco trucks fulfills a cultural and economic niche of an estranged immigrant Mexican population who seek affordable and familiar flavors from home. In this respect, taste is key to understanding the formation and function of divergent food trucks' social spaces. According to Bourdieu (1986), "taste" is an adopted behavior absorbed through cultural codes, which can also act as a sign of social distinction. Significantly, a spatial inquiry to the formation of taste then should address how food preferences adapt as social urban spaces shift.

In this paper, I evaluate Austin's landscape change through the food practices at taco trucks. I investigate how *taqueros* (the people who cook tacos), navigate Austin's landscape through cooking. I use Oltorf Street and Interstate 35 as benchmark boundaries to illustrate the socio-spatial interactions around taco trucks in the city. I employ boundaries to evaluate taste and space. I do not use boundaries, as many food geographers traditionally have, to define place (Areola, 2002; Bell and Valentine, 1997; Shortridge and Shortridge, 1983, 1998). Pertinently, I emphasize cultural topographies over social topological approaches, such as Actor-Network Theory (Flannery and Mincyte, 2010; Wilk, 2010) and semiotics (Kalcik, 1984; Williams-Forson, 2006.) Certainly, geographers and anthropologists have examined the ways in which social spaces around ethnic foods mix (Brown and Mussell, 1984; Cook, 2008; Duruz, 2004, 2005; Kalcik, 1984). Oddly, few studies have interviewed ethnic immigrant entrepreneurs about how they decide what to prepare based on where in a city they inhabit (Krishnendu, 2016; Lemon, 2015, 2016). Here, I take an ethnographic approach to listen to the voices of immigrant cooks. I ask them how they take into consideration their clientele's taste preferences to negotiate the socio-spatial dimensions of Austin. To this end, I contend that ethnic food practices not only engage existing social spaces, but the foods also become hybridized in the process. In sum, my objective in this essay is to illustrate how aspects of taste are spatially dynamic. And to address the ways in which changing ethnic cuisines contribute to, as well as reflect, the cultural contours of the city.

The paper begins by describing Austin's food truck scene. I expand on the operations of the two types of trucks/trailers found in Austin—those for Anglos and those for Latinos. I argue that while food trucks function as symbolic capital, taco trucks are emblematic of an estranged cultural practice. Next I interview two Mexican immigrant taco truck entrepreneurs about their food philosophies. They explain how demographic attributes factor into their cooking practices and what Mexican food means to them and their clientele. The paper concludes by evaluating the ways in which traditional taco trucks fit into the city's undulating social topography.

### Austin's Food Truck Scene

Ordinary landscapes reflect human values and everyday routines (Groth 1997), as well as economic flows and global processes (Mitchell 2000; 2008). The presence of food trucks superimposed upon commercial strips and vacant lots comes to symbolize Austin's creative capital, and seem to contribute positively to Austin's quality of life. Austinites rave about the diversity of the city's 1,400 artisanal food trucks (Gaar 2014). To be sure, Austin is not a city that has had heavily heated issues concerning food trucks. Part of this is due to Austin residents' receptive and progressive outlook.

Austin is a city where uniqueness is ubiquitous. Its weirdness was once its main attraction. However, the slogan "Keep Austin Weird," which was devised to combat corporations moving into the city, ended up commoditizing its counterculture to drive development (Long, 2010). Certainly, Austin may be a "weird city," but it is predominately a white city. Its individuality stems from its open-mindedness, not its racial diversity. Austin is 68 percent white, 35 percent Latino, and eight percent black (US Census 2015). It is one of the most racially divided cities in the United States (Trettor et al., 2016). Its racial and ethnic divisions often coincide with Interstate 35 and Oltorf Street.

Moreover, gentrification is making the city whiter. The gourmet food truck movement in the late 2000s became part of Austin's alternative identity and has helped to further gentrify the city. Their image as symbolic capital often becomes a trope for urban development. Take South Austin. It is one of the city's most desirable and fastest gentrifying districts. The neighborhood is now inundated with large modern apartment complexes, boutique shops, and most certainly food trucks. In the past ten years, property values have doubled and taxes have steadily increased. Consequently, many working-class Anglos and Latinos have been driven from their homes due to exorbitant costs. Today, middle class Anglos prominently comprise the neighborhood's demographic. To be clear, boutique food trucks do not cause gentrification, but they are a good indicator that a neighborhood is ripe for redevelopment. Then, in the shadows of the city, the taco trucks that have catered to the Latino working-class community go largely unnoticed by middle-class, Anglo Austinites.

In the 1990s, Austin started to absorb Mexican migrants leaving their country due to various socioeconomic circumstances. This was also the time traditional taco trucks began to manifest. These trucks reflect Mexican migration patterns as well as aspects of Mexican identity. Accordingly, the foods the *taqueros* serve mirror more recent food trends in Mexico. Austin has approximately 30 traditional taco trucks and/or trailers throughout the city.<sup>1</sup> They represent foods from Mexico City, Guanajuato, Tamaulipas, Michoacán, Guerra, Veracruz and Jalisco. Regardless of a food truck vendor's cultural background or ethnicity, it is fairly easy to operate throughout Austin.

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<sup>1</sup> Not including the trucks that park at the market on weekends.

Other than a Mobile Food Vending Permit, food trucks are not regulated by strict codes in Austin (City of Austin Mobile Food Establishments 2014). For a food truck to get a health inspection and receive a permit, it must prove its mobility. Therefore, the Austin Health Department requires the trucks and/or trailers be moved to the Health Department once a year for a health inspection. The food truck owner's demonstration that their operation is mobile is the central criteria to obtain a mobile food-vending permit. Because the City of Austin has a *laissez-faire* approach to regulating food trucks—food trucks can park almost anywhere they want at any time they want.<sup>2</sup> The gourmet trucks tend to park in food truck courts. The lots have an ad hoc aesthetic and the majority are not landscaped. These gourmet food trucks rely on Twitter and Facebook to promote their businesses. Conversely, traditional taco trucks park along arterial roads on the city's east and south sides. Their strategic locations attract Mexicans moving between jobs and home. In sum, two distinct food truck spaces are produced in Austin. There are trucks that cater to the Anglo, young, middle-class demographic and those that cater to the Latino day laborers. In other words, the landscape spatial order of food trucks derives from an underlying logic of taste preferences.

In the next two sections, I interview the *taqueros* at El Wuero and Cheke's Takos. I selected these establishments because they best exemplify the heterogeneity of taco trucks/trailers throughout Austin. Tacos El Wuero is a *torta* (a large sandwich) truck whose owner is from Mexico City, and its place on the east side of Austin is distinctly associated with recent Mexican immigration from Mexico City. The other taco trailer, Cheke's Takos, straddles the Latino-Anglo spatial divide along Oltorf Street.

### Tacos El Wuero

Tacos El Wuero is parked just east of I-35 on Cameron Road and 51st Street. Jaime Malendez is from Mexico City and owns and operates the truck.<sup>3</sup> I spoke to Jaime about what his food culturally represents to his patrons.

Jaime explained he had been cooking his whole life, but he moved to the United States to find better economic opportunities. He opened a restaurant in the 1990s in Giddings, Texas. When his restaurant folded in 2005, he decided to open a taco truck in Austin. He bought a little yellow school bus and converted it into a taco truck in 2007. Jaime comes from a long line of *taqueros*.

*I've cooked my whole life. I've cooked for about 30 years. Since Mexico my father has had a food business. And I learned from him. My father has had his business for 46 years. My whole family cooks, works with food, or sells tacos. In Mexico I have uncles who have*

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<sup>2</sup> Communities can petition the City Planning department to regulate business hours near residential neighborhoods. Mobile food vending operation times correspond to distance from residential buildings. (City of Austin. Planning and Development Review Department 2014).

<sup>3</sup> He named the truck El Güero after his son. *Güero* means white in Spanish. But after Austin's established Guero Taco Bar took notice, they sent him a legal letter asking him to change his name. So Jaime changed the spelling to a "W."

*been in the cooking business for 40 years (Multiple personal interviews, Jaime Malendez, October 2010).*

Jaime stated that he primarily sells *tortas*. He explained that *tortas* are very popular in Mexico and the ingredients are continuously changing. Jaime divulged that he periodically calls his father in Colonia Iztacalco, a neighborhood in the north of Mexico City, to find out about new types of *tortas* that are popular in the capital. He emphasized that it was important the foods he sells represent Mexico City's flavors.

*At my food truck I sell 15 to 20 different types of tortas. The main torta I sell is the cubana, which I sell the most of... We also have something that is not very common here [in Austin] "tacos de suadero," but in Mexico City they sell a lot of them. In Austin people want fajitas. But no one [Mexican immigrants] comes to my place for that, because people demand the suadero... [laughs to himself]. Here in Austin there are many people from the capital [Mexico City], from all parts of the republic [of Mexico]. But I am cooking food Federal District style. That's what people want. When they taste it, they know that it is from the capital. Our taste preferences are very different than here... Mexican food is important because we miss our food.*

Here taste of place creates space. This is to say that Jaime's business strategy is to use his foods flavors to evoke an emotional response from his immigrant clientele. The taco truck becomes a space that acts as a cultural wormhole to Mexico. The foods reflect the flavors of a city 750 miles away. In so doing, they stir memories of home. Jaime puts it this way, "If you sell something similar to what people eat in Mexico, they will eat more, and buy more. And they enjoy it! As they eat it, they remember lots of things. They remember where they lived, where they went shopping, who they were with. There are all sorts of things people remember!" Foods not only spark memories; they also remind people who they are. In other words, Mexican food is part of an immigrant's identity. The vast majority of Jaime's clientele are from Mexico City, although there are many from other parts of Mexico as well. I spoke to one elderly couple who had just arrived to the truck after attending Mass. They explained the Mexican street food was part of a cultural practice that reminded them of home as well as who they are as individuals. The couple emphasized aspects of eating as a way of reminiscing. *"I lived in Mexico City for 20 years. And this is our tradition; we always eat this way there. There are many things we won't forget. We look for these memories. The culture. For example, we don't want to forget our roots. All the experiences that we lived during our youth. And the food. Especially the food."*

Another family who had just sat down to eat reiterated the same points. *"We are from Mexico City, the Federal District. We miss the flavors from there. When we are here we want to taste something that tastes like it is from Mexico. From the Federal District, more precisely."* The food is important not only to one's recollections of another place and time, but also to the atmosphere and the environment surrounding the truck.

Attributes of the urban environment make their way into the street food flavors. The family members explained enthusiastically about some of the odd environmental factors that made the ambiance of eating tacos on the street a more vivid experience. *“The ambiance is the smoke, the contamination, because we are used to eating on the street. At times the taco stands are in the middle of the air-polluted streets [he shrugged his shoulders], but we eat there. And in some way it gives the food a certain flavor...that I don’t know how to describe. The majority of the people eat in the streets.”*

Food practices become enmeshed in the urban environment. In so doing, the food and the spaces around the food become a medium of transport. Mexican immigrants search for flavors from home they like and an urban atmosphere that reminds them of consuming such foods. Clearly, Jaime’s taco trailer operates as a traditional taco truck that recreates place through taste.

### **Cheke’s Takos<sup>4</sup>**

Pedro Mendoza owns and operates Cheke’s Takos, a trailer along Oltorf Street. Pedro grew up in Mexico City. He moved to Austin with his parents in 2006 at age 13. Pedro speaks Spanish fluently and English fairly well. Pedro is an ambitious entrepreneur. He told me that he has always desired to be a chef and own a restaurant. Pedro’s dream was to go to Le Cordon Bleu to become a chef, but he could not afford the tuition (personal interview, November 25, 2014). Because of his self-determination and his passion for cooking, he decided to open his own taco trailer, serving traditional Mexico City street food to Anglo South Austinites. In November 2013, he purchased a trailer with a full kitchen for \$16,000 and pays \$925 per month to park it in a food trailer lot. He has now been in operation for almost three years and his business has been fairly successful.

Pedro’s trailer is parked in a food truck lot with a Moroccan *souk* trailer and a pie trailer. Because his trailer is tucked behind a building with the other food trailers, his operation functions more like a boutique food truck than a traditional taco truck. Accordingly, Pedro uses social media to solicit Anglo customers. Additionally, his food is hybridized. He makes Mexican street food with his own gourmet interpretation. I asked Pedro about his food philosophy and his patrons.

Pedro explained that in Austin, most Anglos just eat Tex-Mex. He said he wanted non-Latino Austinites to experience some of the wonderful flavors of traditional Mexican street food. He said he could of course cook traditional items for Mexicans, but he wanted to experiment a bit and also use high quality ingredients. Therefore, he decided to create artisanal Mexican street food for Anglo Austinites. His menu is simple. He offers *tacos pastor*, beef fajita tacos, *cevina* tacos, and *bistec* tacos. He also offers mushroom *quesadillas* served with an

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<sup>4</sup> The name “Cheke” is derived from Salvador’s (Pedro’s father), nickname as child. Cheke is an English loan word (slang) in Mexican Spanish that means check, short for paycheck.

anchovy salsa, *pambazos* (similar to a *torta* but served with potatoes and the bread is dipped in *chile de árbol* salsa), and *tlacoyos* (a corn patty stuffed with *quesillo*, a type of string cheese). On weekends, Pedro cooks lamb *barbacoa* as a specialty.

I asked Pedro how he composed his menu. He explained that before he started his taco trailer, he flew to Mexico City and spent a week with his grandfather, who operates a *taquería* in Colonia Tacubaya. He took mental notes while he watched his grandfather cook. He also roamed the city sampling its neighborhoods' street food flavors, jotting down what combinations he liked the best. He then returned with his notebook to Austin, where he experimented with ingredients. He placed basic tacos on the menu and made sure to cook with traditional ingredients. For example, he uses *achiote* paste for his *pastor* tacos, a rarity in Austin. He also wanted to add some unique Mexican street foods that one typically does not find in restaurants or at taco trucks in the United States. So he added the *pambazos* and *tlacoyos*.

Pedro is a stickler for having fresh ingredients. And he makes every item from scratch. His corn tortillas are made by hand as they are ordered. He also may make multiple trips to the grocery store throughout the day to ensure he has fresh produce. He would rather run out of an ingredient and make more purchases throughout the day than have too much of something and have to use it the next day.

At first Pedro's customers were primarily middle-class Anglos who lived nearby. Then he started to attract crowds from across Austin. Pedro uses Facebook as his primary method to advertise. He writes his announcements in both Spanish and English. I have been eating regularly at his truck since the month he opened, and I have noticed his demographics shift over time and at different times of the week. Although Pedro is making an artisanal version of Mexican street food, he is staying true to the traditional flavors. Therefore, he has started to attract a large number of Mexicans who live in the area as well, especially those from Mexico City. Because Cheke's Takos is located on Oltorf between a Latino neighborhood and a gentrifying neighborhood, Pedro has been able to capture two clienteles at different times of the week.

Pedro explained that during the week he relies on an Anglo clientele to eat at the truck, and on the weekends, he attracts the Mexican immigrant clientele. On Sundays, Mexican families who reside in the area go to his trailer to eat his lamb *barbacoa* after attending Mass. On weekends Mexican families speak Spanish and enjoy themselves, and there are many children running around; whereas during the week it is mostly Anglo couples and friends eating together. I asked Pedro if he changed the menu on Sundays. He replied that in addition to his specialty lamb *barbacoa*, he made his salsas spicier. He also prepares a habanero salsa, which he makes with chopped onions, oregano, salt, and lemon. He explained that Mexicans want to be able to taste the ingredients in the food:

Mexicans like simple food. They want to taste the quality of the ingredients. And they like it fresh and they like it spicy. I may modify the recipes, but I am cooking with the ingredients in a way that they are still familiar with the flavors.

Pedro's taco trailer connects two demographics through food flavors. Pedro cooks in a way that may be familiar to Mexican immigrants, but he markets the food in a way that Anglos want to try them. He does this by using contemporary street foods from Mexico City, which are rarities to an Anglo's palette. In sum, Cheke's is a symbolic capital masquerading as a traditional taco trailer.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout this article I demonstrated what urban space tastes like in Austin, Texas. I brought together landscape transformation and food hybridization to argue that one could better understand the underpinnings of how social space shapes taste, and how taste comes to represent place across a city. To this end, I examined the ways in which the taste preferences of Austin's residents impacted immigrant cuisines.

My interviews with the two taqueros illustrated how their idiomatic and idiosyncratic culinary practices produce urban space. In order for their business practices to stay afloat, they must adjust their foods to the evolving social spaces and budding taste preferences of the city's residents. For Jaime, who parks east of I-35 within a Latino dominated district, this means staying current with Mexico City's street food trends to induce a contemporary sense of place to his Mexico City counterparts. Conversely, Pedro straddles a Latino district and gentrifying South Austin. His foods hybridize, as his trailer has symbolically become part of South Austin's developing identity. Pedro's taco truck is symbolic capital camouflaged as a traditional taco truck. Strange as it may appear, because of Pedro's ethnic roots and devotion to Mexican flavors, he eventually attracted a Mexican immigrant clientele. Thus Pedro's truck truly blurs the boundaries between what constitutes a boutique trailer and a traditional taco trailer.

Both the gourmet food truck and the taco truck varieties are transforming Austin's landscape symbolically as well as through the foods they offer. Gourmet food trucks function as markers of symbolic capital and taco trucks are emblematic of a population in flux. And while boutique food trucks have the luxury of devising new hybrid cuisines, taqueros are limited to what they cook because of the Mexican heritage they represent. Significantly, all food truck operators must take social landscape factors into account when marketing and making their foods. This is what it means to say that social space can augment cooking practices and in turn can change cuisines as well as customs. Given these points it evident that food practices are spatially contingent, and cuisine and landscapes are intricately interwoven.

Considerably, this paper contributes to the epistemology of landscape through addressing the ways in which emigrant cooking practices adapt in tandem with urban transformations. Through the process of investigating food as part and parcel to landscape change, I have reasserted social spaces into food studies to affirm that place is still relevant to taste. This study should advance



the ways in which scholars consider how cooking and eating at the micro scale relate to the macro morphology of a city.

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