Carmen Gallegos of El Paso learned to make tortillas from her mother in Durango when she was twelve years old. In April 2001, *Texas Monthly* called Carmen’s “The Best Tortillas in Texas.”
A TORTILLA IS NEVER “JUST” A TORTILLA
by Lucy Fischer West of El Paso

On my mother’s stove, there sat a comal, a flat, round, cast-iron griddle with a handle, always ready to heat tortillas for at least two meals out of the daily three that she would prepare. On days when she was not too harried, those tortillas came not out of a plastic bag from the corner grocery store, but rather were hand-patted from lime-soaked and finely-ground nixtamal. Occasionally, she would use either a wooden or cast aluminum tortilla press lined with wax paper to speed up the corn tortilla-making process. For her flour tortillas, she’d use a red-handled rolling pin that she’d gotten at the old Cuahtémoc Market in Juárez. I remember vividly that whenever she worked in the kitchen, I was at her side; that she would hand me my own child-sized ball of masa to make my own tortillas de maíz; and that I had a child-sized rolling pin with which to turn my wad of flour dough into a tortilla de harina. I developed a healthy respect for the hot comal on which I placed my creations. It was my job not only to watch over my own creations, but also to mash down her flour tortillas with a round wooden press when they puffed up.

Growing up as I did on the border, in a home heavily infused by my mother’s culture, the foods that were our mainstay were Mexican. I took great pride in participating in the preparation of food and contributing to the simple family meals eaten on our red and gray formica table with the chrome frame—you remember—the kind with the faux marble pattern. That unmistakable aroma of a fresh tortilla browning on a cast-iron surface is evocative of a
treasured childhood in the kitchen. I’ve eaten tortillas since my four front teeth came together to take bites out of them, but I had never given much thought to their history, or their significance until lately.

Within the last three years, I have discovered complexities of the kitchen and food in ways that I never imagined existed. I would say in jest that perhaps I have been stuck in the kitchen far too long and that my education has suffered, but that would not be an accurate statement, nor would it be fair to what I believe about what I have chosen to do with my talents in what amounts to a “traditional” household setting. A fortuitous introduction to food studies is helping me articulate what I have done over the years and place a greater value on it.

Meredith E. Abarca received her Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from the University of California at Davis in December 2000 and has been teaching at the University of Texas at El Paso since January of 2001. Her dissertation is titled “Voices in the Kitchen: Hearing Subaltern Women Speak.” It speaks to how countless women throughout the ages have created a space for themselves in the kitchen that is their domain. It speaks to how the kitchen is the “room of their own” in which women could exercise their acts of agency, manifesting that agency through cooking. It speaks to how those acts of agency in the kitchen have empowered women to find modes of self-expression, sometimes only within the confines of the kitchen, but in ways no less valuable than women writers and artists. I wholeheartedly believe, as Dr. Abarca does, that “the practice of cooking is a mode of expression just as valuable as the written word or the painted image.”

Dr. Abarca’s dissertation combines the analysis of literary works with a series of “charlas culinarias,” culinary chats, with twenty-five working class Mexican and Chicana women from the ages of twenty to sixty-five living in Laredo, northern California, Michoacán, Veracruz, Jalisco, and Puebla. As I read the dissertation, it occurred to me that it is a fascinating way to tie together folk ways and oral tradition with literary works.
Dr. Abarca begins her dissertation as I began this paper, with a tribute to her mother. Liduvina Vélez, a woman with only two years of formal schooling, went from answering questions either monosyllabically or with “yo no se hablar” (“I don’t know how to speak.”) to becoming a field assistant conducting academic research alongside her daughter. “Duvi,” as she is known to everyone who meets her, was married in Michoacán, Mexico, at age sixteen to a man she scarcely knew and, as was the custom of the time, went to live with her husband’s family. In that rather intimidating setting, she had to find her place and create her space. She did that in the kitchen. Specifically, she did it by making tortillas.

Duvi remembers that her mother-in-law and sisters-in-law made “really ugly corn tortillas . . . ugly, too thick, full of holes.” She, on the other hand, with an already practiced hand, made “beautiful ones, thin ones, puffy ones.” She’d put her tortillas bonitas, her beautiful tortillas, in a basket as part of her contribution to family meals. Her tortillas became “the subject matter of her artistic expression,” her source of pride. And thus, she began to find her place and create a space for herself. She affirmed “her self, and asserted herself as a teen-age woman to face her life’s circumstances.” While tortilla-making might seem like a simple task, those of us who have ever attempted it know it is an art. More importantly, however, it is significant to recognize that when Duvi describes both the process of making masa and creating tortillas out of it, she is making a connection with her cultural-ethnic, ancestral past.

Corn tortillas were an integral part of Mesoamerican diets thousands of years ago. Chicano essayist José Antonio Burciaga says that “over the centuries, the tortilla has served as the spoon and the fork, the plate and the napkin.” Their origin predates Mayan civilizations:

According to Mayan mythology, the great god Quetzalcóatl, realizing that the red ants knew the secret of using maize as food, transformed himself
into a black ant, infiltrated the colony of red ants, and absconded with a grain of corn. Quezalcóatl then put maize on the lips of the first man and woman, Oxomoco and Cipactonal, so that they would become strong.³

Victor and Mary Lau Valle, food journalists and professors of history, call tortillas the “pillars of American civilization.” I quote from their book Recipe of Memory: Five Generations of Mexican Cuisine: “From about 1000 B.C. until the 1930s, the technology of tortilla making had gone quite well with simple Stone Age technology.”⁴ In other words, with the metate, what Dr. Abarca calls the “Aztec blender.”⁵ Duvi’s way of making tortillas in her youth is identical to the way women have made tortillas since pre-Columbian times. Fray Bernardino de Sahagún’s Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España supports the idea that the culinary arts were in the hands of women, since men are rarely mentioned as cooks.⁶ It was women who “dedicated themselves to the artful presentation of food,” according to Jeffrey Pilcher in his ¡Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Cuisine.⁷

Food for the Aztecs was not merely a source of nourishment for the body. The act of eating was associated both with pleasure and as a source of virtue and an act of goodwill. Quoting once more from Dr. Abarca’s work:

In Nahuatl, the word cua means to eat [and] the adjective cuali means [both] beautiful and something good to eat. The etymology of these roots is found in the Nahuatl phrase that describes a woman who knows how to make beautiful and good tortillas: cual-tlaxcalchihuani-ni. The act of making tortillas in pre-Columbian times was seen as an act of virtue and good will.⁸
While Tonacaltecuhtli, a male Aztec god, is credited with creating corn, it is Xilonen, the goddess of maize, who nurtures its growth. Once again, for me, the connection is made between ancient civilizations and Duvi’s tortillas bonitas, which nourished her children.

Long after the tortilla’s origin and long before Duvi came into the world, the Mexican government trespassed into the kitchen. It was during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz at the turn of the century that “The Tortilla Discourse” took place, changing the course of history. It was Díaz’s intent for the discourse to modernize Mexican cooking and elevate it to the standard of European cuisine by exchanging wheat for corn, and prohibiting the consumption of corn tortillas. In 1899, Senator Francisco Bulnes had published El Porvenir de las Naciones Hispano-Américas (The Future of the Hispanic-American Nations), in which he divided people “into three races: the people of corn, wheat, and rice.” He determined that the “race of wheat is the only truly progressive one,” and that maize “has been the eternal pacifier of America’s indigenous race and the foundation of their refusal to become civilized.” Bulnes decreed that women’s cooking habits needed changing in order that all indigenous and mestizo people could become civilized. While this century-old argument may sound far-fetched today, Dr. Abarca points out that a similar effort took place in the United States during the Thirties and Forties when a federally funded program was organized to assimilate Mexicans to mainstream cultural habits, substituting white bread for tortillas, arguably because Mexican children did poorly in school due to their inadequate diet of beans and tortillas.

Even though wheat did become a part of Mexican cuisine, it certainly did not replace corn. What did happen was that the focus of colonization changed: the new target for colonization became the method of converting corn into masa for tortillas. In 1899, Don Luis Romero Soto was one of the first inventors to obtain patents for a tortilla machine called “La Malinche,” named after
Hernán Cortés’s native mistress who assisted in the conquest of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlán. The selling point for the mechanical mills was the idea of liberating women from the arduous task of grinding corn on a *metate*. The purpose of modern technology in rural areas was to improve the well-being of peasants. Hand-made tortillas were indeed replaced by factory-made ones during the 1930s.

Women, however, did not own either the corn mills or the *tortillerías* and lost whatever control they might have had in the tortilla industry. The “tortilla discourse,” and the replacement of the stone *metate,* tampered with a centuries-old cultural practice. While it freed women from the chore of grinding corn for tortillas, it made them slaves to a male-dominated capitalist society in Mexico; decades later, men still control the very profitable tortilla production industry. I cannot buy factory-made tortillas without considering the struggles inherent to producing them, nor witness a woman slapping *masa* into tortillas without admiration. While Duvi struggled to find her place in a household that was not hers to manage, women along the border and elsewhere continue to struggle to make decent wages in all areas of food production.

I enjoy both cooking and eating Mexican food as millions of people throughout the country do, whether it be a beautifully presented plate in a restaurant or a warm tortilla wrapped around a fresh *azadero* and wedges of avocado at home. Uses for tortillas are endless. I liken the basic tortilla to an artist’s palette from which creations emanate. Sandwiching Mennonite or *azadero* cheese and slivers of long green chili between two of them and heating them until the cheese melts creates a *quesadilla*. *Tostadas* (The literal translation is “the toasted one.”) is a tortilla that has been fried either in wedges or whole. Tostadas appear on restaurant tables with accompanying *salsa* or *chile con queso* to keep you happy while you wait for the main course. A *tapatía*, or *topopo*, is a whole crisp tortilla which serves as a showpiece for a slathering of beans to keep the subsequent layers of meat, the ubiquitous iceberg lettuce, tomato, and grated cheese from sliding off into your lap. *Tacos* are traditionally made by putting the chosen filling onto one half of a
tortilla and folding it into shape as it fries, adding lettuce, tomato and cheese at serving time. Tortillas first softened in hot oil, then dipped in red or green chili sauce, then filled with meat, chicken, or cheese and onion, then rolled or stacked flat and topped with cheese and baked, become enchiladas. “Patricia Quintana wrote in her 1989 cookbook *Feasts of Life* that ‘Tortillas are to Mexican cuisine what the sun is to the day and the moon to the night.’” I agree.

For those of us who grew up in homes where the tortilla was an integral part of our meals, the aroma of a fresh, hot tortilla evokes memories that are infused with profound significance. Exploring their historical roots deepens the connection with the people of corn like my mother, Duvi, and myself. To know the struggles of the people who provide them for our tables gives me a deep sense of appreciation for their labor.

For me, a tortilla is never “just” a tortilla.

**Endnotes**

3. Ibid.
5. Abarca, 162.
8. Abarca, 8.