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America's New Favorite Food

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Introduction:

It's no secret that Americans like to dine out. Hamburgers have long been touted as the signature food of the United States, but how much longer will America's heart be held in a pair of sesame seed buns?

While the 6,278 Taco Bell locations in the U.S. pale in comparison of McDonald's 14,027 restaurants, the growing number of Mexican-American food chains shows something stirring in the mouths of those living in the United States.

Overall, the fast-food restaurant industry was valued at about \$798 billion in 2017, according to a report from Statista.

This year, 66 percent of Americans visited a McDonald's for their fast-food fix. Right behind the classic burger chain, Taco Bell was also the choice of 48 percent of respondents, according to Cint Insight Exchange.

The shift from burgers and fries to tacos and burritos shows a countrywide movement for food that embraces what was once considered foreign cuisine.

Mexican cuisine finds a place in American households thanks to a growing Mexican immigrant population. In 2017, there were almost 11.5 million Mexican-born people [living in the United States](#), a 23 percent increase from 2000, according to the U.S. Census. Midway through last year, there were more than 59,800 Mexican restaurants in the U.S., making it the second most popular menu type in the country, even beating out pizzerias, according to [data](#) from CHD expert.

We followed three individuals from Chihuahua, Mexico, and a restaurant owner in Bronx, New York, who celebrate culture within their meals in day-to-day life.

The first is Antonio Vilchis Garcia, a restaurant owner in the Bronx who resists temptation to fuse traditional flavors in order to keep up with food trends. Next, is Oscar Lorea Aguilar who owns a family-run tortilla business in Chihuahua, Mexico, where he's spent his life perfecting the craft. Following Lorea Aguilar, is Martha Elizabeth Gutierrez Salas, who holds a degree in gastronomy and is an expert about Mexican cuisine. She understands why people in the U.S. might be fearful to try new foods but encourages the importance of trying something new. Finally, we hear the story of Maria Elena Murga, a Chihuahua native who has been cooking for her family with recipes that have been passed down for years.

Each of these people give an in-depth perspective into Mexican recipes, spices, trends and business shifts that have crept their ways into the American household.

The Original Taco:

Taco Bell is the fourth largest food chain in the United States, undoubtedly stemming from their beloved ground beef and hard yellow-shelled tacos - but they didn't always look this way. In Mexico, tacos, which by definition are any food wrapped in a tortilla, are served in a soft corn tortilla, typically without cheese.

Tacos Al Pastor serve as a classic example of what a "traditional" taco is made of. The pork is cut from a spit, similar to shawarma. Atop the pork is a serving of onion and cilantro, both of which are common garnishes for Mexican dishes. Unique to Al Pastor tacos is the addition of pineapple slices, whose sweet and tangy flavors complement the meat and savory vegetables.

This augmented reality model is made of a collection of photos from actual tacos served at Los Tacos #1 in Manhattan, New York. The model allows you to get an up close look at the small slices of meat and grainy texture of the tortillas.

Where Trends Come and Go, Tradition Stands:

Antonio Vilchis Garcia is the owner of Mexicosina in Bronx, New York. Mexicosina which translates to “Mexican kitchen” is a place where Antonio weaves traditional Mexican cuisine with educating people about culture and what his food stands for. He prides himself on sourcing his ingredients from Mexico to create dishes that people can connect with and reminisce. He doesn’t want to follow trends of fusing Mexican food with other cuisines in order to cater to American taste and wants to stand out in the humongous melting pot that is New York City.

The House of Tortillas:

Oscar Loera Aguilar has been the owner of Tortilleria La Colegiala (The Collegiate) in Chihuahua, Mexico for over 20 years. His family-run tortilleria (tortilla bakery) is managed by his wife serving customers in the front of the store, while he makes tortillas with his machine towards the back.

He knows the flavor of the tortilla is one of the most important aspects of serving a good meal, whether they become part of a tacos, burritos or enchiladas. It’s all about a good foundation.

In 2016, Americans ate over 4.5 billion tacos, according to NationalTacoDay.com,

which equals the weight of two Empire State buildings or enough tacos to stretch across the United States-Mexican border 246 times. That's a lot of tortillas.

Try It, You Might Like It:

Martha Elizabeth Gutierrez Salas is a gastronomy expert who creates traditional recipes and also experiments with them by adding personal touches.

After working in the U.S., she knows the way Mexican restaurants in America sometimes alter the flavor of a recipe in order to cater to inexperienced tastebuds - but sometimes it takes away from the original dish. She strives to help people be open to trying new things and giving new foods a chance before passing judgment. "If you're given a grasshopper taco, don't be afraid to try it," said Martha Elizabeth. "It's something the world eats and you shouldn't be afraid to try it."

This Prized Ingredient Can't Be Bought:

Maria-Elena Murga is a home cook who has been in the kitchen ever since her mother taught her and her sister to lend a hand around the house. Her passion for cooking comes from seeing people enjoy her food and appreciating recipes that have been passed through generations and are still alive in kitchens around Mexico because of people like her.

When asked what her secret ingredient is, she just had one word — love.

Dessert is a Worldwide Craving:

A Mexican meal is traditionally finished with a cup of coffee and something sweet. People who associate with Mexican culture are familiar with pan dulce (sweet bread) and the best way to eat them.

These breads come in many different forms and flavors, from molasses-and-spice-flavored puerquitos (little pigs) made to eat as a snack, to pan de muerto (bread of the dead) and rosca de reyes (ring of kings) that are eaten in respect on Day of the Dead and in celebration on Three Kings Day.

Out of over 1,000 varieties of pan dulce to choose from, one of the most popular and easiest to find is the concha which translates to "seashell" due to its colorful, crumbly pattern on top of the bun.

This particular bread is thick and slightly sweet, perfect for the tradition of tearing off a piece of the loaf and dipping it in either coffee or hot chocolate, so the liquid can absorb through its spongy crevices.

Keep Exploring:

We have only scratched the surface of what real Mexican cuisine has to offer the world. Chihuahua is the northernmost state of the country and follows closely with trends in the United States, so the foods aren't extremely unfamiliar to someone who has never reached outside their comfort zone. However, Mexico is a large and unique country, full of deserts, rainforests and all the climates in between, which all come with distinct regional foods that have sustained its people for centuries.

The next time you visit a Mexican restaurant, don't be afraid to ask questions: What region is this from? What spices are important in this dish? What is the story behind it?

Most importantly, think of the faces and hardworking families who have taught their children the value of where they come from, and the food that carries them through.