

Migrant community building through ‘underground’ food imports

by Andrés M. Garza Vela

As an immigrant myself, I find that anytime I go back home, I am requested by family members, and members of the same country/region of origin, to bring back something from home. They miss something from home, a flavor of home. This is not unique to me, but a phenomena that spreads through time, place, and cultures. I want to explore this through the ways dispersed communities continue to establish social bonds through the import of food that are inaccessible in the areas they migrate to, then how it can transgress from an ‘underground’ to a wider market. This, of course, is something I am unable to condense into a small blog, though I will attempt.

I will be using ethnographic notes from the relationship I have established with my friend and coworker, Niza. He comes from a small village in Oaxaca called Quiechapa which has a decreasing population of around 720 people. A 2003 article from *La Opinión*¹ states the migratory index from Quiechapa to be 91%, and while the article is outdated, it falls in line with comments Niza has made. He tells me that only about 5 babies are born a year in the village, and that most of the young have left and continue to leave the village as he and his brothers did. The ties he has to the village continue to be very strong. Quiechapa’s main source of income is through the harvest of maguey and the production of mezcal, which Niza’s family-in-law partakes in. The members of this community have remained in touch throughout their time in the states and continue to help one another through many different forms. They have a village group chat on WhatsApp, a Facebook group where they post often, and village gatherings in the U.S. a few times a year. The migrant community is dispersed throughout the United States, Texas being the center which most of those who have migrated reside.

At work, Niza has brought certain items from home that he indulges in, *chapulines* primarily, which he crouches behind the sushi bar to snack on, hiding from customer’s view. Mezcal, which is produced by his wife’s family who are unable to import it in large quantities for

¹ Robles, Francisco. "EL SUEÑO AMERICANO CON ROSTRO INDIGENA." *La Opinión*, Feb 17, 2003. <http://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/docview/368379900?accountid=7118>.

they are still attempting to obtain certain certificates to sell in the States. This example, being unable to sell certain imported foods, is one that peaks my interest. He tells me that the most common case for the mezcal produced in the village and others surrounding, is that most producers have to sell their product to ‘others’ who then process it and are able to submit to the legalities to export it to the U.S. and elsewhere. In his words, “*los productores siempre quedan chingados*” or “the producers always end up getting fucked”. A quick example is the mezcals found in high-end Mexican restaurants such as Suerte in Austin, where they serve some mezcals such as *Del Maguey Single Valley*, owned by California born ‘artist’ Ron Cooper. Where he credits himself on his website for, “introducing the world to previously unavailable artisanal mezcal produced the original handcrafted way”². A wild claim. So, Niza gives me a drink at work, the ‘rustic’ mezcal, that which is only able to be transported limited quantities at a time from family members.

The *chapulines* play a crucial role in this piece, for those unfamiliar with them, *chapulines* are grasshoppers which have been an important part of some regional Mexican cuisine, but very important to Oaxacan cuisine. They come out in the rainy season, hopping around the milpas since their microclimate is great for them. After they’re captured, they are starved for 24 hours then boiled to get rid of their bitterness. Their color turns red and they are then laid in the sun to dry. They are then cooked different ways, commonly fried and flavored with garlic, salt, lemon, and chiles, as this article highlights their history.³

Chapulines, Niza tells me, is integral to the identity of the people of Quiechapa. They also happen to be the logo of the food truck, which he and his brothers own called, *Mi Sabor Oaxaqueño*, where they sell ‘authentic Oaxacan food’. On the previously mentioned Facebook groups, there are posts of people living in the U.S. reaching out to other members of the community to bring mezcal from the village. Niza is a key figure in the ‘underground’ or digital market bringing these products to Austin, and there are similar figures in other cities throughout Texas. The mezcal shipments he receives are usually not sold, only kept for extended family and members of the village, but the shipments of chapulines, and some other regional products, are

² Del Maguey, Inc. "Del Maguey Single Village® Mezcal." Del Maguey. Accessed May 14, 2019. <http://delmaguey.com/>.

³ "Chapuline, A Mexican Delicacy." The Art of Eating Magazine. January 17, 2018. Accessed May 14, 2019. <https://artofeating.com/crunch-chapulines-crickets-grasshoppers-and-locusts-a-mexican-delicacy/>.

sold to others through Facebook groups and Craigslist. The chapulines he has are brought similarly, through a member of the community in a limited quantity to avoid import tax, and are off-menu, only available by request. The prices charged are incredibly affordable, \$10 for a tlayuda, a large, thin, crispy corn tortilla filled with *chapulines*, which many online sources classify now as a “Mexican delicacy”. Also, many high-end Mexican restaurants will sell and charge a premium for, such as La Condesa and Comedor in Austin.

I visited Niza recently at his food truck since he told me he had a shipment in, and as I’m sitting there, eating a quesadilla filled with delicious and salty chapulines, I see few other people order and ask if he has any left. The taste of these products imported ‘underground’ build a migrant community through the intimate transactions that a traditional market lacks. This post is inspired by Liselotte Hedegaard’s article, *(Re)Tasting Places*⁴, where she carries a phenomenological investigation of how links between food and place are established. The breakdown she offers of taste-experiences is fascinating and worth a read. I, never having been to Oaxaca, am playing with my imagination, projecting the taste of the cultural practices that make these ingredients so distinct to a specific community. The name of the truck, *Mi Sabor Oaxaqueño*, plays with this identification of place-tied taste where it constructs a space with certain boundaries of inclusion. These methods of import, while familiar to many of us, immigrants, can be a form of resistance to those who exploit the producers of certain goods while binding displaced communities abroad.

Images below for Reference;

⁴ Hedegaard, Liselotte. "(Re)tasting Places." *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies* 18, no. 1 (2018): 66-75. doi:10.1525/gfc.2018.18.1.66.

**Familia de @oaxaca Quiéchapa
San Pedro Martir m urge m
envíen unos mezcales, por fa !!**



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Aurelio
March 28, 2016 · Austin

Llegaron sus productos oaxaqueños como son MOLE, CHAPULINES, PAN DE YEMA CHOCOLATE TEJATE Y QUESILLO :::PARA MAS INFORMACIÓN llamar a [redacted]

[See Translation](#)



Chapulines mole en pasta tlayudas quesadillas de flor de calabaza y huitlacoche picaditas

78753

\$10

Los esperamos en mi sabor oaxaqueño..lunes a jueves de 5pm a 10pm viernes de 5pm a 11pm sábado y d...

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