



Pupusas: A Salvadoran Tradition

Honorable Mention 2016

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TLN-Telelatino Essay Prize

December 20116

TLN – Telelatino PRIZEWINNING ESSAYS

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Pupusas: A Salvadoran Tradition

For many Latinos living outside of their homeland, traditional foods are a delight to see when passing by a restaurant in an urban North American city that may remind them of home. Amongst these Latinos is a significant Salvadoran population. A large influx of Salvadorans immigrated to the U.S., mainly to Texas and California. Many Salvadorans also settled in other states such as Virginia, Maryland, Washington and New York.¹ Dispersed Salvadorans are rooted throughout North America as a result of the Salvadoran Civil War of the 1980s. In Canada, Toronto is home to approximately 14,000 Salvadorans and counting.²

The primary source I examined is a colourful painting depicting Salvadoran women preparing pupusas in pupusería (a small restaurant where pupusas are sold). Many online sources indicate that the exact painting hangs inside various pupuserías in the United States (i.e. the Bronx), as well as restaurants in El Salvador in areas such as Concepcion de Ataco. Since the painter is unknown, an alternative primary source was interviewed in an attempt to find out the background of the painting. The interview was conducted with a Salvadoran gentleman who prefers to go by his nickname of Smokey. His family owns a restaurant called Tacos el Asador. Though their restaurant is presented as ‘Mexican,’ as other pupuserías in Toronto are (such as Pupuseria Salvadoreña), the family owners are from El Salvador. While food traditions could be lost, as Salvadorans have assimilated to Western culture, pupusas serve as a drive for economic, social and cultural means. Salvadoran food traditions, mainly pupusas, allow family ties to strengthen within family businesses, expanding social interactions (amongst other

¹ “Salvadoran Immigrants in the United States,” Migration Policy Institute, accessed May 21 2016, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/salvadoran-immigrants-united-states>

² “Salvadoran,” UReach Toronto, accessed May 21 2016, <http://ureachtoronto.com/content/salvadoran>

cultures), while maintaining indigenous cultural traditions.

Pupusas are more than just El Salvador's well-known national dish. Pupusas are also a way for families to gain a source of income. The painting represents the Salvadoran women working together in the street pupuserías of El Salvador to prepare pupusas. Tacos el Asador is one of many popular Latin family owned restaurants in Toronto. While my original intent was to discover the artist of the painting, the interview also included a discussion of the background of pupusas and the restaurant.

I opened by asking Smokey, what can you tell me about this painting? He replied, "That painting is from El Salvador. I don't know who paint it but somebody sit down and paint it."³ Though he didn't know the origin of the painting, he was able to talk to me about the beginnings of his family's restaurant. What inspired you to open this restaurant? "It's a family business," he explained. "I first came to Canada as a cleaner. My niece buy the space and then I took the opportunity to work here."⁴ What is the difference between the pupusas you make and the ones that Salvadorans make back home? The primary difference was in the availability of ingredients. Pupusas are made with a thick dough and are stuffed with cheese, beans or meat. They are served with curtido and salsa roja. "Animals is free in El Salvador. Ingredients are different. They are more fresh. Here, animals are not free. Don't get it wrong. I buy fresh beef, chicken and pork here. But in El Salvador, the animals free there. That's the difference."⁵ Can you tell me where the best pupusas are in El Salvador? "*Olocuilta Pupusen*as. Everybody in El Salvador knows there. They are the best!"⁶

³ 'Smokey', interview by Christine Gotera, *Tacos el Asador*, May 17, 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

As the interview continued, a rush of people entered the pupusería. Pupusas at *Tacos el Asador* are sold at \$3.15 each. With fair prices and filling portions, the open concept kitchen is crowded with at least four women and two men preparing all of the restaurant's food. The family's teamwork is apparent as they communicate in Spanish, all smiles while staying on course with physically demanding tasks (such as slapping the pupusa dough) for the customers' orders.

The preparation and selling of pupusas enables family businesses to improve their financial situation, quality of life and provide security, in comparison to lower wage jobs members may have when they first immigrate to urban cities. In other cities such as LA and New York, selling pupusas is a way of life and means of survival. "Although the exact numbers of informal street vendors in Los Angeles is difficult to ascertain, the number appears to be growing, following the recent economic rise. While street vending is illegal, approximately 50,000 vendors may be seen throughout the city selling goods ranging from bacon-wrapped hot dogs and pupusas, to clothing, flowers and jewelry."⁷

Pupuserías are far more than a source of income, however. Like many other foods, pupuserías bring people together. People of various ethnicities, whether they are first-time visitors to a pupusería or not, are drawn towards pupusas since it is El Salvador's most popular dish. In Red Hook, Brooklyn, families have established their own vending businesses and the majority of them have been serving patrons for about ten years.⁸ "Families of countries of origin include El Salvador, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Chile, Argentina and Colombia."⁹

⁷ Kristina Graaff and Noa Ha, *Street Vending in the Neoliberal City: A Global Perspective on the Practices and Policies of a Marginalized Economy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015) 27.

⁸ Ibid, 27.

⁹ Ibid, 27.

In addition to the social influence of the popular Salvadoran dish, pupusas also bring street vendors together. Examples of this occur throughout the cities where Latinos do food street vending. “Vendors note that interactions between these different nationalities were initially characterized not only by conflict or by competition, but curiosity over the different kinds of foods and cooking practices each group brought to the park.”¹⁰ Relations within the family also grow, as pupusas bring members closer together as traditions in preparing pupusas and how to cook them are passed on. This was also true of Smokey’s family. “I learned with my mother,” Smokey explained, “We make them (pupusas) with dedication and love.”¹¹

Lastly, cooking pupusas maintains the historical roots of indigenous culture. Smokey spoke with pride about the traditional value of Salvadoran food that was made by the nations Aborigines. Due to the surge of brutalities in El Salvador, most of the indigenous Pipil population were massacred in 1932 as violence reached rural areas.¹² Speaking the Pipil language (a language closely related to Nahuatl, language of the Aztecs which survives today in many local varieties) was later prohibited, which sped up its decline.¹³ Despite the cultural genocide of the Pipil tribe, astoundingly, the indigenous Pipil language has survived along with the tradition of making pupusas.

While pupusas have become widespread in parts of North America, the future of pupusas is questionable. Smokey expressed concern for future of El Salvador’s national dish. “Everybody eats in the cans. You can buy soup in cans. Now the technology is in

¹⁰ Ibid, 27.

¹¹ ‘Smokey’.

¹² Lyle Campbell, “The Pipil Language of El Salvador,” *Lingua*. Vol. 73, Issue 4, (1987): 330, accessed on May 21, 2016, doi:10.1016/0024-3841(87)90027-1.

¹³ Ibid, 330.

the way. Yes, it will be a lost tradition.”¹⁴ It would be a huge loss if this comes true. Pupusas have served to provide economic stability for families, promote togetherness within communities and preserve the memory of Pipil traditions. Hopefully, Salvadorans will maintain this distinctive dish for future generations to come.

¹⁴ ‘Smokey’.

