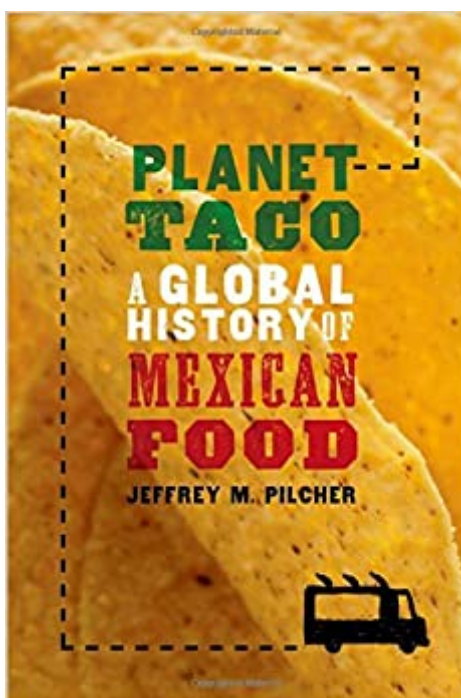


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Planet Taco: A Global History Of Mexican Food



Synopsis

As late as the 1960s, tacos were virtually unknown outside Mexico and the American Southwest. Within fifty years the United States had shipped taco shells everywhere from Alaska to Australia, Morocco to Mongolia. But how did this tasty hand-held food--and Mexican food more broadly--become so ubiquitous? In *Planet Taco*, Jeffrey Pilcher traces the historical origins and evolution of Mexico's national cuisine, explores its incarnation as a Mexican American fast-food, shows how surfers became global pioneers of Mexican food, and how Corona beer conquered the world. Pilcher is particularly enlightening on what the history of Mexican food reveals about the uneasy relationship between globalization and authenticity. The burritos and taco shells that many people think of as Mexican were actually created in the United States. But Pilcher argues that the contemporary struggle between globalization and national sovereignty to determine the authenticity of Mexican food goes back hundreds of years. During the nineteenth century, Mexicans searching for a national cuisine were torn between nostalgic "Creole" Hispanic dishes of the past and French haute cuisine, the global food of the day. Indigenous foods were scorned as unfit for civilized tables. Only when Mexican American dishes were appropriated by the fast food industry and carried around the world did Mexican elites rediscover the foods of the ancient Maya and Aztecs and embrace the indigenous roots of their national cuisine. From a taco cart in Hermosillo, Mexico to the "Chili Queens" of San Antonio and tamale vendors in L.A., Jeffrey Pilcher follows this highly adaptable cuisine, paying special attention to the people too often overlooked in the battle to define authentic Mexican food: Indigenous Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

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Customer Reviews

The Evolution of the Taco

The Original Taco The origins of the taco are still disputed. Some attribute it to the ancient Aztecs; others say the term came from Spain. I have found evidence linking the word to the silver mines of eighteenth-century Mexico, where it referred to a stick of dynamite! Whatever the source, the taco shop first became common in working-class barrios of Mexico City at the end of the nineteenth century. The most popular versions then were barbacoa (pit-roasted beef or lamb), carnitas (fried pork), tripitas (tripe and assorted organ meats), and tacos de minero (miner's tacos), which were filled simply with steamed potatoes and salsa and are now called tacos sudados (sweaty tacos).

The Mexican Taco During the twentieth century, the taco traveled from Mexico City to the provinces, acquiring new flavors such as cochinito pibil (Yucatecan pit-roasted pork) and carne asada (Sonoran grilled beef). Other versions were invented by new immigrants to Mexico. In the 1960s, the children of Lebanese migrants created tacos al pastor by adapting their parents' vertical rotisserie of shawarma or gyros (originally called tacos árabes or "Arab tacos") to tasty Mexican pork. Tacos al pastor were part of a 1960s taco renaissance in trendy Mexico City neighborhoods such as Condesa. Fashionable young people ended a night on the town with tacos al carbon (grilled tacos), which replaced plebeian variety meats with more expensive cuts such as bistek (beef steak) and chuletas (pork chops). Chefs of the nueva cocina mexicana (nouvelle Mexican cuisine), a gourmet movement that started in the 1980s, created their own tacos. Patricia Quintana, for example, served simple guacamole tacos not on corn tortillas but rather on thin rounds of jicama (an apple-flavored indigenous root). Thus, the Mexican taco continues to evolve.

The Mexican American Taco In contrast to the Mexican taco, the Americanized taco was supposedly invented in the early 1950s by Glen Bell, the founder of Taco Bell. A hotdog vendor in San Bernardino, California, he claimed inspiration from the McDonald brothers' fast food hamburger restaurant, which opened there in 1949. Bell began experimenting with tortillas and frying baskets to create the "taco shell," a U-shaped, pre-fried form that could streamline the production of Mexican food. The problem with this creation myth, whereby Yankee ingenuity transformed a Mexican peasant food, was not only that the Mexican taco was itself a product of modernity. In fact, the original patent for a taco shell had already been awarded to Juvencio Maldonado, a Mexican restaurateur in New York City. Mexican American cookbook author Fabiola Cabeza de Baca Gilbert also gave a recipe for taco shells in the 1940s. Clearly the idea was already present in the Mexican American community.

Glen Bell built a taco empire not on modern technology—the McDonaldization myth—but rather by selling exotic foods to people who may not have wanted to visit Mexican neighborhoods. Instead of the fast food taco, we should call it the Mexican American taco as a tribute to the hard-working cooks who adapted the Mexican taco to their American lives. The Multiethnic Taco Some of the most popular tacos in Southern California today are not Mexican but Korean. Roy Choi's Kogi Korean BBQ taco trucks have used Twitter to attract long lines of people hungry for short rib tacos and kimchi quesadillas. Choi and other new immigrants chose tacos in order to "Americanize" their cooking, and they were not the first to create multiethnic tacos. The Kosher Burrito was founded in Los Angeles in 1946 by a Jewish man who married a Sonoran woman; it sells pastrami tacos and burritos as a kosher alternative to pork carnitas and chorizo. Taco shops also opened in African American neighborhoods of Watts and South Central Los Angeles in the 1950s, often with catchy names such as Taco Throat Town. One such place served black-eyed peas in a taco shell as "African Tacos." More recently, Midwestern Americans have welcomed the taco to one of their most beloved institutions, the state fair, where you can now find deep-fried tacos on a stick. The Scandinavian Taco The taco is a national dish not only in Mexico and the United States but also in Norway. The globalization of the taco was started in the 1960s by Americans, particularly military personnel stationed abroad and surfers looking for the perfect wave. Having eaten Mexican American food in the Southwest, they could not imagine life without it. But as a result, it was Tex-Mex and Cal-Mex versions that set global stereotypes. In Norway, Fredagstacoen (Friday tacos) have become a domestic ritual, stuffed with the usual Cal-Mex combination of ground beef, lettuce, tomato, and mild salsa as well as such novelties as white cheese, sour cream, cucumber, and canned corn. Mexican travelers are understandably annoyed at such liberties, but they can take heart from the recent spread of tacos all around the world. The taco shell was merely the first course, whetting a global appetite for Mexico's regional cuisines.

At least north of the border, the taco has become Mexican cuisine's standard, ubiquitous staple. But just as American pizza displays only the most meager resemblance to its Neapolitan forebear, today's prefabricated, industrial, portion-controlled, fast-food taco has little to do with the artisanal, freshly made, delicately creased, and inventively stuffed corn tortilla of its native land. As Pilcher discovers, the taco is a relative newcomer to the Mexican diet, the first references appearing only in the late nineteenth century. Moreover, the taco represents only one aspect of a sophisticated cuisine that has evolved into a major influence in world cookery. Nevertheless, tacos

now appear in cities all around the globe, and hardly a food court or restaurant row exists anywhere that doesn't have some sort of taco-based item on a menu. Pilcher's detailed history rests on meticulous research, as evidenced by the comprehensive bibliography. Glossary of Mexican cooking terms included. --Mark Knoblauch

I liked this book. I liked the information in this book. But it's not a quick read. I didn't expect it to be so dense. It reads like someone's doctoral dissertation with a pretty cover slapped on the front. A large part of the book is dedicated to simply the pathway maize took around the world more than 500 years ago. For me, it picked up as we enter the 20th century but it's a long way there. I struggled between 3 and 4 stars. I ultimately chose 4 stars because I did learn quite a bit (though I worked for every nugget of information).

This book is properly informative, and covers a breadth of history that I originally did not expect when I made my purchase. While on the whole it does an excellent job of explaining globalization of Mexican food, I found the writing style to be a bit droll and overly academic in places. At times, it can feel unnecessarily filled with details that provide only mild coloration. Of course, it will be up to another reader to evaluate on their own terms as well.

Fascinating book on Mexican food and how it has been affected by culture and how culture has been effected by food and the ingredients. My only criticism is that, for me, it bogged down in a few places, but is still an interesting topic and worth the time

Enlightening, and interesting from a historical perspective. Although it does read like a lengthy, academic, historical read, I still found it to be very enjoyable. If you love to read and love to eat "Mexican Food", you'll like this book.

A nuanced and well informed historical approach to the taco as a product of Mexico and globalization. It's written at an accessible level for any non-historian to enjoy.

Good book! Would highly recommend it

Came when expected and now I'm ready to ace that reading exam. Food history isn't hard, but there's a lot of hunger and reading in it.

The author, Mr Pilcher has done a wonderful job and gathering research and putting together a very informative yet interesting book about Mexican culture, history and explains how the Taco came about. It's a great read for any food enthusiast!

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