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Lori A. Flores

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The career of Chef Zarela Martinez and a changing Mexican foodscape in New York City, 1981–2011

Lori A. Flores

Department of History, Stony Brook University (SUNY), Brooklyn, New York, USA

ABSTRACT

This article discusses Mexican food's proliferation in New York City from the 1980s onward and focuses specifically on the career of Zarela Martinez, an immigrant Mexican chef who achieved renown by serving haute regional Mexican dishes in her Manhattan restaurant. Martinez rose to celebrity through a confluence of circumstances and spent her career confronting stereotypes about Mexican food as inherently simple, fast, and cheap. Arguing instead for its elevation as a complex and refined global cuisine, Martinez became a culinary tastemaker and place-maker for Mexican-origin communities in New York. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an influx of migration from Mexico to the Northeast and wider United States, and many of these newcomers opened their own bodegas, bakeries, taco trucks, and tortilla factories throughout New York City's boroughs. Together with higher-end restaurants like Martinez's, these entrepreneurs helped constitute a blossoming and heterogeneous Mexican foodscape for a metropolis hungry for new and exciting food. Tracing Martinez's career against this backdrop of migration and a growing national obsession with Mexican cuisine, this article fills gaps in the histories of Mexican food's spread in the U.S. Northeast, Latinas' food-related labor and creativity, and immigrant entrepreneurship.

KEYWORDS

Zarela Martinez; Mexican food; New York City; Mexican restaurants; Mexican migration; Northeast; Tex-Mex; Latina; chef; entrepreneurship

In early 1981, Mexican mother and daughter Aida Gabilondo and Zarela Martinez traveled to New Orleans to take a cooking lesson together. Aida had been the longtime cook for her family in Sonora, Mexico, and Zarela had recently begun her own catering business in El Paso, Texas. The lesson was disappointing, so Aida suggested they dine around the city instead. They settled on the famous Cajun restaurant K-Paul's and Aida pressured Zarela to approach chef Paul Prudhomme, who was standing near their table and checking dishes from the kitchen. Immediately charmed by the women, Prudhomme invited them to cook there for the rest of their stay; he educated them on Cajun cuisine, while they taught him Mexican dishes in exchange (Anon 1989). Soon after, *New York Times* food critic Craig Claiborne asked Prudhomme to recommend a Tex-Mex cook for an April 1981 event hosting 130 French chefs at Tavern on the Green. Claiborne wished to showcase American regional cuisine – from Chesapeake seafood to Kansas City barbecue – for the European guests. Prudhomme promptly suggested Zarela and Aida and flew to Texas to help the shocked pair plan their menu. They shipped nine crates of

food to New York, including one thousand homemade tamales. They served crab enchiladas, ropa vieja (marinated and shredded beef), and picadillo (a spicy meat stew) on Mexican ceramic dishes adorned with flowers. “Everyone went wild,” Zarela remembered, and at the end of the event she received a standing ovation (Martinez 2009; Davis 1981).

The exposure Martinez gained through this event was career-launching, and the timing could not have been better. At the beginning of April 1981, the *New York Daily News* had published the article “Tex-Mex Fever Hits Manhattan.” Relying heavily on meat, red chile, cumin, pinto beans, and melted cheese, Tex-Mex cuisine was New York’s latest obsession. A larger cultural ethos was driving diners’ interest – chili contests were taking place across the country, *Dallas* was a popular television show, more people were listening to country music, and young professionals from the US West were moving to New York and craving dishes from home. At this time, a few Mexican restaurants existed in Manhattan. In 1959 Spaniards Louis Castro and Manuel Vidal opened El Charro in Greenwich Village, and Mexican restaurateur Carlos Jacott debuted El Parador in Midtown East. Mexican Village, a restaurant owned by a Mexican woman, had served the NYU area since the mid-1960s, and two Irish businessmen opened El Coyote near Astor Place in 1981 (Hamlin 1981).

To those who consider New York ahead of the culinary curve, it might be surprising that in the early 1980s it was a place where Mexican food was hard to find. Other cities like Chicago, San Antonio, and Los Angeles claimed larger Mexican-origin populations and a longer history of Mexican restaurants. Though it took time for Mexican food to become part of its culinary landscape, New York had been a longtime home for Latino communities. Spaniards had settled centuries prior and were followed by Cuban and Puerto Rican political exiles of the 1800s and early 1900s. Mexicans migrated to New York in the early twentieth century, arriving either by ship from Mexico or train after work stints in the cotton fields of Texas, stockyards and factories of Chicago, or auto assembly lines of Detroit. Though some public spaces offered Latin American food by the late 1930s – Cuban dining rooms existed near cigar factories in lower Manhattan, and migrant entrepreneur Juvencio Maldonado owned a Mexican restaurant in Times Square – they were few and far between. During the 1940s, when commercial travel became more affordable between San Juan and New York, Puerto Rican migrants increased the Latino demographic. Colombians and Cubans escaping violence and political chaos followed the next decade. Dictator Rafael Trujillo’s 1961 assassination spurred an exodus of Dominicans, and Ecuadorian and Peruvian migrants arrived during the 1960s and 1970s as well.

Though many histories can be written about culinary diasporas in New York, this article focuses particularly on how Mexican food proliferated and uses Zarela Martinez’s career as a lens through which to view important shifts in Mexican food’s availability and diversity. Using Martinez’s personal papers, interviews, and English and Spanish-language media, this article weaves discussion of Martinez’s career with the demographic and cultural changes that transformed New York into a home for many kinds of Mexican food and Mexican people. In the words of *Bon Appétit* (2006), Martinez “single-handedly changed New York’s Mexican food scene” during the 1980s by exposing diners to haute regional Mexican dishes. Her eponymous restaurant Zarela, which operated in Manhattan from 1987 to 2011, attracted an elite clientele and food critics’ attention, as did her later cookbooks, television show, and line of housewares. Historian Natalia Molina (2015) has described ethnic restaurateurs as “place-makers” who help define

neighborhoods as ethnic spaces and leave an indelible mark on cartographies and landscapes. Martinez's story enriches several histories including those of Mexican food's spread in the Northeast, Latinas' food-related labor and creativity, and immigrant entrepreneurship in the United States.

While Martinez's restaurant gained popularity, an influx of Mexican migrants to New York opened bodegas, bakeries, taco trucks, and tortilla factories during the 1990s and early 2000s. Even though Martinez enjoyed more career and class privilege than them, it can be productive to place their histories on the same plate. Whether haute or humble, food makers mutually constituted a blossoming Mexican New York and made their counterpart's cuisine more interesting. Martinez educated her customers on Mexican food's regional complexity, which primed them to embrace other migrant-owned Mexican restaurants and street food enterprises with great enthusiasm. Cyclically, modest food businesses kept public interest in Mexican food piqued, and higher-end restaurants like Martinez's remained relevant and special.

A rare Mexican immigrant recognized in American fine dining, Martinez is a provocative businesswoman around whom a history of Mexican food in the US and Northeast can be told. "In the vast literature on immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurship in the United States, relatively little attention has been paid to Latino entrepreneurship, perhaps because Latinos . . . tend to be perceived as labor migrants," Laura H. Zarrugh has argued (2007, p. 240). Martinez presented herself as a Mexican chef from an elite background to cultivate greater prestige in the 1980s. Whereas someone else might have claimed a longtime immigrant struggle, she self-assuredly positioned herself as a peer of highly-regarded chefs, male or female. Admittedly, as this article details, she owed a significant portion of her restaurant and cookbook success to lower-income women in Mexico who shared their culinary techniques with her during research trips and inspired her recipes. What Martinez then executed on their behalf was speaking up for the value and sophistication of Mexican cuisine. Long before cultural critics like Anthony Bourdain, she attempted to counter a spreading and discouraging national discourse about Mexican food being inherently casual and inexpensive. The long colonial and exploitative relationship that the US had enjoyed with Mexican land and labor since the 1800s, as well as American tourism in Mexico that peaked at midcentury (by 1953 Mexico was the most common travel locale for US tourists), had shaped perceptions of Mexico as a vacationland where sex, alcohol, and spicy food could be consumed cheaply (Márquez 2018, 480). Martinez realized that she and her business were not immune to consumers' false equivalency of Mexican "authenticity" with low prices. In this way, the fate of her restaurant and the food enterprises of her less-privileged immigrant counterparts were bound up together.

Becoming the "Hot Tamale" of Manhattan

Maria Zarela Martinez Gabilondo was born in 1952 in Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico to José Martinez Solano and Aida Gabilondo, who both hailed from Arizona but moved to a Mexican ranch after getting married. "My mother cooked all sorts of foods," Martinez remembered of the family's formal candlelit dinners. "We would have rabbit provencal one night, [then] Chinese almond chicken, lasagna, curry" (Martinez 2009). Like others

living in the Texas-Mexico borderlands, the Martinez family had a transnational domestic routine, crossing the border into El Paso to go to banks, doctors, and supermarkets. What distinguished them from many Mexicans, however, was their financial comfort and social networks. “We moved in very different circles. We basically hung out with high society people from Juarez,” Martinez said (2020a). After obtaining a university degree in mass communications in 1971, Zarela moved to El Paso and became a social worker for its Department of Welfare. She married parole officer Adolfo Sanchez, a widower with three children. When Zarela became pregnant with twins, she decided to earn extra money by selling produce, baking for friends and family, and establishing a catering business (Figures 1 and 2).

As a social worker and caterer, Martinez exposed herself to two different Mexican American communities living in El Paso – those desperately in need of resources, and those who employed servants and hired her to cook for glitzy gatherings. Her most intense workdays consisted of catering a meal for an individual or corporate client, going to her day job as a social worker, selling produce in the evening at a store, and sleeping for a few hours before doing it all again. As her catering business gained steam, Zarela craved moral support from her husband but found exactly the opposite. He became emotionally and physically abusive, turning to alcohol and extramarital affairs. Deciding to intervene, Zarela’s mother gifted her a series of private cooking classes in California to distance her from the abuse. Zarela eventually left Adolfo in the fall of 1980 and began traveling around the country with Aida for cooking classes. During these travels, they met Prudhomme and later impressed hundreds at Tavern on the Green. When Craig Claiborne (1982a) decided to profile Zarela for the *New York Times*, Zarela gained business from both El Paso and New York catering clients. Claiborne also invited her to cook at a party for himself and prominent cookbook authors including Diana Kennedy (a white expat in Mexico who published the best-selling *The Cuisines of Mexico* in 1972), Penelope Casas (a Spanish chef), Marcella Hazan (Italian), Madhur Jaffrey (Indian), and Florence Lin (Chinese). They, along with guests like food critic Gael Greene and chefs Jacques Pepin and Alice Waters, formed an incredibly valuable network (Claiborne 1982b).

In addition to Claiborne’s endorsement, Martinez’s career was being boosted by the nation’s ever-growing fascination with Mexican food. This had taken time to develop; during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, middle-class and elite white diners in both the US and Mexico circulated negative stereotypes that Mexican food was unhealthily spicy and unhygienically prepared. Certain items, however, became popular. In the late nineteenth century, tamales (rolled and steamed cornmeal pouches stuffed with meat or vegetables) became a street food fad in Los Angeles and then at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago. African American vendors introduced them to the South, and tamales appeared in late-nineteenth century New York City as well (Arellano 2013, 43, 58–59, 126; Pilcher 2009, 164). This tamale obsession fizzled out in the mid-1910s, in part due to concerns about unsanitary street food. This fear tangibly affected food vendors, among them the popular “Chili Queens” of San Antonio who sold chili, tamales, rice, and beans to miners, soldiers, and townspeople in public squares and markets (Flores 2020). Ironically, as xenophobic anti-Mexican discourse raged and deportation drives occurred during the 1920s and 1930s, more Mexican restaurants (with white owners) opened across the nation in places like Washington, D.C and the Midwest. During World War II chili con carne became a staple at US army bases, and commissaries delivered Mexican food to soldiers in Europe. Mexican food achieved a global reach as



Figures 1 and 2. Zarela Martinez with her parents at her debutante party in the 1960s. Box 3, Folder 6, Zarela Martinez Papers; Zarela Martinez, blog post, “Mi Papi – José Martínez Solano,” November 9, 2018, <http://www.zarela.com/mi-papi-jose-martinez-solano/>.

restaurants opened in London, Paris, Amsterdam, Budapest, the former USSR, and Australia's Gold Coast (Pilcher 1998, 131, 2009, p. 163, 168–69, 2012, p. 145–46, 163, 166–67, 2014, p. 449; Arellano 2013, 30; Gabaccia 1998, 159–60; McNamee 2017, 186–87). At midcentury Mexican food joined the “TV dinner” revolution in the US as taco kits and plates debuted in Texas and California. The Ashley Company, for instance, sold a taco dinner kit for \$1.89 in 1955 that came with canned tortillas, beans, taco sauce, and a hand-held taco fryer. That same year Los Angeles shoppers could buy TV dinners consisting of an enchilada, tamale, refried beans, and Spanish rice (Pilcher 2012, 145–46). By the early 1960s multiple companies like McCormick, Ortega, Van De Kamp and Del Monte were selling Mexican spice mixes and microwaveable platters. The marketing and packaging decisions of corporate food producers strongly influenced ideas that Mexican meals were cheap, convenient, and plentiful. In addition, fast-food chain restaurants like El Torito (founded in 1954) and Taco Bell (founded in 1962) were steadily increasing their franchises.

In the US Northeast, however, the search for Mexican food remained tricky. TV dinners took longer to appear in supermarkets, and Mexican restaurants were still rare; when two New York housewives opened a taco shop named Tic-Taco in the Bronx in 1966, it made news. New Hampshire welcomed its first Mexican restaurant in 1970, and Boston claimed a few successful eateries over the following years. Of the 2,500 Mexican restaurants counted in the US in the early 1980s, only 150 were in the Northeast (Arellano 2013, 164; Long 2007, Bianco ND). Restaurant owners accommodated customers' desire for heaping combination platters, but this style garnered harsh critique from food writers. “[T]he public is paying for an awful lot of stomachache and heartburn,” chided Diana Kennedy, while *New York Times* food critic Bryan Miller characterized Mexican food in New York as “one gastronomic Alamo after another” (Bianco ND, Miller 1986). It was the perfect time for Zarela Martinez to carve out her niche in Manhattan with more muted cuisine that highlighted Mexico's regional diversity.

In 1983, Martinez was confident enough in her budding New York career that she transferred her El Paso catering business to her sister and moved with her sons Aarón and Rodrigo to Manhattan. She booked a steady stream of catering gigs where she impressed celebrities including Paul Newman, Glenn Close, and Meryl Streep, and received overwhelmingly positive press. Meanwhile, Claiborne continued his mentoring magic by recommending Zarela as a chef for President Ronald Reagan's May 1983 Economic Summit Conference in Williamsburg, Virginia. There she made chili con carne and cornbread, pork and fish tamales, and stuffed beef filets and poblano chiles for heads-of-state including Margaret Thatcher, Francois Mitterand, and Pierre Trudeau. *USA Today* deemed Zarela the “newly crowned high priestess” of Mexican regional cooking, and *Cuisine* called her “a culinary star preaching the gospel of *real* Mexican food, distinct . . . from the muddy, searingly hot Tex-Mex version Americans know” (Claiborne 1983; Brown 1983; Hamlin 1983). Martinez gained a stronger foothold in Manhattan's food scene the next year when Chinese restaurateur David Keh hired her to consult and develop recipes for his new Mexican restaurant Café Marimba. When it opened in December 1984, one reviewer affirmed that Marimba could stand beside restaurants Cinco de Mayo and Rosa Mexicano (both owned by Cuban-born and Spanish-raised chef Josefina Howard) to “signify the beginnings of a long-overdue coming-of-age of Mexican cuisine in New York City” (Jacobs 1985, 30, 32) (Figure 3).

In January 1985 *Food and Wine* magazine declared that “America’s love affair with spicy foods” was in full bloom (Anon , 49). *New York Magazine* similarly heralded, “Amigos: The city is gripped by Mexican madness. Never before has there been such passion for Mexican food, or so many places to enjoy it” (Costikyan 1983, 22). Fort Worth natives June Jenkins and Barbara Clifford owned the popular Tex-Mex establishments Juanita’s and The Yellow Rose Café respectively, and restaurants with names like Santa Fe, Pancho Villa’s, Margaritas, and Tortilla Flats dotted the city. Due to her own gastropolitics, Martinez chafed at being lumped in with Tex-Mex chefs in the press, but she knew she needed to spin herself within the genre to stay on diners’ radars. Martinez’s stance is an important reminder of the diversity of Mexican-origin people’s tastes and culinary production in the United States. While she and others considered Tex-Mex greasy and unrefined, its proponents regarded it as historically complex regional cookery. Tejana entrepreneur Ninfa Laurenzo, for example, gained renown for her restaurant Ninfa’s which opened in Houston in 1973 and grew to a chain of thirteen restaurants by 1980 (Sharpe 2001, May ND). No matter their specialty, successful Latina food entrepreneurs were rare. In Los Angeles, single Mexican immigrant mother Natalia Barraza owned El Nayarit, which drew working-class Latinos and celebrities alike during the 1950s and 1960s (Molina 2015). In the Northeast, Josefina Howard and Zarela Martinez were perhaps the two highest-profile Spanish-speaking women in the food industry.



Figure 3. Martinez meeting President Ronald Reagan at the May 1983 Williamsburg economic summit. Box 7, Folder 2, Zarela Martinez Papers.

Interestingly, though she was a Latina immigrant, Martinez never portrayed herself as struggling with barriers related to citizenship, race, culture, or gender. This differentiated her from many women chefs trying to climb the ladder of fine dining. Rampant sexism in the industry created vast disparities in professional advancement between men and women – even chefs’ jackets, stoves, and knives presumed a taller, larger male body (Ray 2016, 140). In a 1985 article entitled “America’s Great New Women Chefs,” Zarela was featured alongside pioneers like Anita Lo and Alice Waters but vehemently denied that she experienced any sexism. “There is no discrimination,” she often told reporters. “I’m a Mexican. I’m a woman. I’m short. And sometimes I’m fat. Don’t tell me you can’t make it” (Villas 1985, 212, 214; Carroll 1992). Martinez further distinguished herself from other women chefs by embracing food critics’ exoticization and sexualization of her. One review, for instance, called her “. . . a hot tamale. Sassy, sexy, small, dark-eyed, dark-haired, she’s always prepared to party.” Another deemed her “notorious for the bravura of her cleavage, all in black and lariats of rhinestones” (Schwartz ND, Greene 1987, 90). Instead of being bothered by the “hot tamale” trope historically used to stereotype Latinas as fiery, volatile, and sexually available, Zarela seemed flattered by it and even created a flyer for her catering business reading, “Have Your Next Affair with Zarela: the ‘Hot Tamale’ of Mexican Food.” This breezy acceptance might have been due to her upbringing in Mexico and perceiving the phrase as more humorous than harmful. Or, as Madeline Y. Hsu (2016, 683) has explained of ethnic food entrepreneurs’ choices, Martinez saw its strategic value:

To attract a broader range of customers seeking the enticingly unfamiliar yet acceptable, purveyors of ethnic foods may adapt ingredients, cooking techniques, decorative schemes, and even their own personas to present some manner of the recognizably exotic Gaining recognition and visibility often accompanies, perhaps inescapably, self-exoticization.

Rather than wearing chefs’ whites for press photos, Martinez preferred circulating photographs of herself in off-the-shoulder blouses or dresses with heavy makeup and jewelry. This style was also a way for Martinez to establish her identity as a public-facing restaurateur, rather than a cook confined to the back of the house (Figures 4, 5 and 6).

Martinez’s identification as a Mexican with an elite upbringing invites interrogation of how class operated in her interactions with others. As she acknowledged herself, several of her recipes were inspired by less-privileged women she met in Mexico. In 1985, Zarela took two months’ absence from Café Marimba to travel to Oaxaca, Yucatán, and Veracruz to gather new recipe ideas and anecdotes for an eventual cookbook. She took copious notes in a diary about the dishes she ate, musing upon how she would alter or improve them. Reflecting upon her first meal at a friend’s home in Mexico City, cooked by a woman named Luz Barrera, Martinez wrote: “[Luz] is a quietly assertive, self-possessed, amiable woman who though quite still the ‘servant’ as is traditional in Mexican homes is self assured and proud of her position” (Martinez , 1–4). Zarela took Barrera’s dessert that night – a mango pudding made with condensed milk, lime, and rum – and duplicated it for Café Marimba. Another Zarela trademark – a red snapper hash made with cinnamon, cloves, scallions, tomatoes, cumin, and jalapeños – was “immediately appropriated” from a *botana* (cocktail snack) at a bar in Tampico that used crab (Martinez 1998). Conventionally, in the food world, recipes “exist in a perpetual state of exchange” and the alteration of just one ingredient or technique can



Figures 4, 5 and 6. Press photos of Martinez in her signature off-the-shoulder dress, contrasted with her chef's whites. Zarela Martinez Papers.

make a recipe one's own (Tippen, Hakimi-Hood, and Milian 2019, 6). At Mexican markets and festivals, Zarela persuaded local women – from market sellers to restaurant owners – to share their recipes and techniques, but first showed an interest in their personal stories to earn their trust.

On one hand, these exchanges might have felt flattering to Mexican women who could imagine their names and knowledge being shared in the US. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1988, 7) states, “recipes sometimes move where people may not.” On the other hand, Martinez would ultimately be the one to shape the narrative of the recipe and profit from it in her restaurant and future cookbooks. These women were invaluable to Martinez, not only for their recipes but because they offered her an intimate experience of Mexico that strengthened her self-presentation as an expert on regional Mexican cuisine. “I finally got in touch with my Indian heritage,” Martinez later said of her time in states like Oaxaca and Veracruz (DeMers 2002). She was certainly not the only chef to engage in this cross-class dynamic. Literary critic Anne Goldman contended that many of Diana Kennedy's recipes were “based on the meals the . . . maids cooked for her,” while Santa Monica's famed Border Grill owners Mary Sue Milliken and Susan Feniger learned several dishes from a Mexican employee's mother who, in their words, “would walk us through all of it” (Goldman 1992, 171, 192; Druckman 2012, 156). Martinez affirmed she paid homage to these women by properly attributing recipes to them and sending them copies of the books. Indeed, her first cookbook cited women she met in Texas, California, and Guadalajara, while the next two credited Mexican acquaintances (including Luz Barrera), cooking instructors, and market vendors. As philosopher Lisa Heldke (cited Abarca 2006, 119) has observed, “cuisines are always a patchwork of borrowing and lending, undertaken at various conditions of liberty and bondage.” Yet the wider the

chasm between a less-privileged source of a recipe and a profitable food venture that receives credit and prestige, the more possibility there is for culinary colonialism or appropriation to occur.

By late 1985 Martinez had been promoted from consultant to Executive Chef at Marimba, but she struggled with leading a kitchen and meeting the demands of a 180-seat restaurant. She far preferred being the face in the front of the house rather than working on the production line. Unluckily, *New York Times* reviewer Bryan Miller (1986, p. C22) noticed and critiqued Martinez for neglecting her kitchen crew and gave the restaurant one star. Martinez (1986) faxed Miller a striking and prideful response:

Bryan:

One of the things that separates me from the average Mexican is that I don't cower meekly before injustice and I have been wronged, unjustly, by your rating. . . . Like Paul Prudhomme, I also like to be on the floor at night. . . . Your rating has devastated me and plunged me into severe depression. It has demoralized the staff and riled the customers. It has disenchanted me and dealt me the first blow by an industry that has been exceedingly kind to and supportive of me. It has also probably precipitated the death of the restaurant.

This review, in addition to conflicts between Keh and Martinez over finances and menu items, led to Zarela leaving the restaurant and Keh shutting it down in 1987. Martinez decided to open her own restaurant that autumn and convinced all of Marimba's staff to follow her including head chef Gary Jacobson, pastry chef Edward Bonuso, and every runner, bartender, and busboy. Financed by a \$20,000 loan from an aunt, Martinez pushed back against skepticism from bank lenders that she had enough resources to open her own business. "At that time most people in this country thought of Mexicans as migrant field laborers and restaurant dishwashers and rarely came in contact with legitimately wealthy Mexicans," she said (Martinez 2020b).

Located in Manhattan's Midtown East near the United Nations building, Zarela featured dishes such as chicken tamales with mole sauce, a chile relleno with walnut cream and pomegranate seeds, Yucatan-style pork shoulder marinated with achiote and sour oranges, and a margarita cheesecake. The more intimate sixty-seat space was packed every night with energetic customers and musicians performing nightly on the staircase. Critic Bryan Miller returned, gave it two stars, and declared Zarela "arguably the best Mexican restaurant in New York City." The 1988 *New York Zagat Guide*, which went to press shortly after Zarela opened, praised Martinez as "one of the best Mexican cooks north of the border" and included her establishment among the twenty-five Mexican and Tex-Mex restaurants surveyed that year (Greene 1995, 38, Martinez NDb, Bonuso 2021; Miller 1990, 1988; Zagat 1988).

The festive atmosphere at Zarela was powered by the hard work of a diverse and largely immigrant staff. In the back of the house, dishwashers worked in heat and steam, prep cooks cleaned and chopped food, line cooks worked under pressure, and sous chefs supervised plates and managed inventory. In the front of the house, busboys cleared and replenished tables, waitstaff attended to customers, and hosts greeted and ushered patrons. Though one might assume Martinez's workforce was mainly Latino, this was not yet the norm in New York restaurants. Filipino chefs Romy Dorotan and Amy Besa (2019), who owned and operated the restaurant Cendrillon, remembered that in the late 1980s New York restaurants employed mostly white, Asian, and Haitian workers in their

kitchens. In the early days of Zarela there were a few Latino employees – a dishwasher/porter named Jose was of Mexican descent, and a Dominican employee named Hilario worked his way up from dishwasher to line cook and then chef – but the majority were immigrants from Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the waitstaff was made up of young aspirants in show business (Bonuso 2021). When asked to reflect on her employees' treatment, Martinez recalled she paid them high salaries and held an annual party for them at which she cooked and workers could bring their children and dress in traditional Bangladeshi clothing. Martinez believed her satisfying paychecks and social rituals eclipsed any fringe benefits like vacation days or health insurance (Martinez 2020a, Sánchez and Ferrari 2019, 31). Outside the restaurant, Martinez had the help of a Salvadoran nanny named Adella who cooked and cared for her sons. Adella's cooking was so impressive that Zarela hired her to work at the restaurant, and one employee recalled that Adella made all of the restaurant's coveted tamales (Bonuso 2021) (Figures 7, 8 and 9).

With its “roaring house party” atmosphere, Zarela's attracted a mob of young professionals, international visitors associated with the UN, and celebrities including Bette Midler, Richard Gere, Mick Jagger, Salman Rushdie, and Diane Sawyer. The restaurant also catered private events and parties for well-known figures like Joan Didion and Linda Ronstadt (Miller 1991; Bonuso 2021; Anon 1991; Costikyan 1989). Martinez regularly offered gossip about her famous patrons to newspapers in El Paso or Spanish-language publications like *Hoy* or *Vanidades*. This was not only a way for Martinez to stay connected to her former homes, but to keep her image and reputation circulating beyond New York. The restaurant itself remained connected to the Southwest early on for ingredient procurement; Martinez and her managers shipped in tortillas from Texas or California as producers in New York remained scattered. Casa Moneo, a store in Chelsea, was reputedly the only place in Manhattan where one could find tortillas, chiles, and other Mexican ingredients. Two tortilla factories existed – opened by migrant cousins from Puebla, Mexico – but were located further away in New Jersey and Brooklyn (Kugel 2001). The lack of convenient suppliers was surely frustrating, and food critics lamented that the city's food scene remained stunted because “relatively few Mexicans have chosen to make their home here” (Asimov 1992). With few exceptions, Manhattan's Mexican eateries continued to be stereotyped as casual Tex-Mex dives to be enjoyed more for their “lethal margaritas” and boisterous crowds of college students or yuppie customers (Zagat 1988).

Nueva York: The 1990s Boom in Mexican Migration and Food

The next decade changed everything in terms of demographics and the availability of Mexican food. Along with Central Americans fleeing civil wars, an influx of Mexican migrants came to the US during the late 1980s and 1990s due to a series of events. The Mexico peso had suffered devaluation; a 1985 earthquake devastated the states of Michoacán and Guerrero; the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) legalized certain categories of undocumented immigrants; and the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) sunk the price of Mexican corn so low that the agricultural working class felt compelled to migrate north for work. Specifically, migrants from the state of Puebla moved to New York City in droves, motivated by word-of-mouth and chain migration networks. According to sociologist Robert Smith (2006, 15), migrants from Puebla's Mixteca region made up two-thirds of all Mexicans in New



Figures 7, 8 and 9. The façade of Zarela's restaurant in Manhattan's Midtown East and photographs of some of her kitchen staff (Brooklyn-born Italian American pastry chef Edward Bonuso and two younger unidentified Bangladeshi employees) and waitstaff in 1998. Box 41, Folder 5, Zarela Martinez Papers; Personal collection of Edward Bonuso.

York. The U.S. Census counted 61,722 Mexican New Yorkers by 1990, up from 23,761 in 1980, which made Mexicans the fastest-growing Latino population across the five boroughs of the Bronx, Manhattan, Staten Island, Brooklyn, and Queens (Greene 1995).

Unlike the smaller waves of 1970s and 1980s migrants who settled in the Bronx or Brooklyn, 1990s Mexican migrants gravitated to Queens. By 1990 there were 381,120 Latinos living in Queens, including 100,410 Puerto Ricans, 63,224 Colombians, 52,309 Dominicans, 35,412 Ecuadorans, 18,771 Cubans, 14,875 Peruvians, 13,342 Mexicans, 10,893 Salvadorans, 4,050 Panamanians, and 3,607 Hondurans (Ricourt and Danta 2003, 4). Many of these newcomers took jobs in factories, construction, domestic service, and restaurants but experienced exploitation by employers who paid low wages and counted on workers' economic desperation or fear of deportation. Restaurant work demanded twelve hours a day, six days a week, for a weekly salary of \$200 or less. In construction, Mexican workers were commonly paid forty or fifty dollars for two or three days' work (Castano 1994).

Some migrants, however, were able to establish their own food businesses. They opened taco trucks and tamale pushcarts in Brooklyn and Queens, panaderías and bodegas in East Harlem and the Bronx, and modest hole-in-the-wall restaurants in Manhattan. A tortilla “boom” also occurred between 1990 and 1993 as more than twenty new tortilla factories were established. On the streets or in bus and subway stations, food vendors enticed passersby with their pushcarts and steaming aluminum pots of one-or-two-dollar tacos, elote, and tamales. They often moved with the rhythms of New York citygoers, stationing themselves throughout business and tourist districts during weekdays, outside churches and nightclubs on weekends, and near parks during soccer season and Mexican holidays (Greene 1995, 44). As historian Andrew Sandoval-Strausz (2019) argues, Latino migrations have revitalized many urban spaces in the US, and street food vendors have played an important role in that process. *Ambulantes* transform the visual, olfactory, and auditory landscape of a neighborhood through their quick and affordable food provision. These vendors – along with stores that imported Mexican products – began making Italian, Greek, or Chinese neighborhoods into “Mexican” ones as well.

In addition to food trucks and carts, culinary change happened in New York as fledgling Mexican restaurants became fixtures in unexpected places. In East/Spanish Harlem, a long-time Puerto Rican neighborhood, Mexican Mario Olmedo opened a taco stand in 1987 and then a bodega and taquería in the 1990s. Initially nervous from witnessing “a lot of Puerto Ricans chasing Mexican guys down the street to beat them up,” Olmedo’s businesses paved the way for others (Siegal 2000). In Sunset Park, Brooklyn – a neighborhood known for its mix of Scandinavian, Irish, Chinese, and Vietnamese residents – Pueblan immigrant Jaime Oliván opened the still extant taquería Tequilita’s in 1990. Other restaurants found strategic locations to serve both curious non-Latino consumers and nostalgic Mexican migrants. Mario and Estella Ramirez’s restaurant Rinconcito Mexicano, which opened in midtown Manhattan in July 1993, became quickly beloved by Mexican workers in Garment District sweatshops. Mario knew their struggle – he had migrated from Puebla in 1973 and washed dishes in New York hotels before working as a sous-chef at the Russian Tea Room and making enough money to buy land upstate, where he grew his restaurant’s vegetables (Carter 1993; O’Neill 1993). The proliferation of Mexican food establishments in the 1990s not only excited New York’s dining public but brought comfort to Mexicans living in a metropolis that did not always feel comfortable.

Meanwhile, the 1990s marked a peak in the nation’s fascination with Mexican food. In 1991 salsa surpassed ketchup as the best-selling condiment in the country, a fact mentioned in an episode of *Seinfeld* (1992). The number of Mexican restaurants rose 58% from 13,034 in 1985 to approximately 20,600 in 1994. Wonderbread developed tortillas called SoftWraps and encouraged Americans to begin wrapping tortillas around hot dogs, spreading peanut butter and jelly on top of them, or layering tortillas in “cross-cultural” lasagnas (Gabaccia 1998, 219; Carter 1993; Greene 1995; de Silva 1993). Historically denigrated as field workers’ food, tortillas were now a desirable and fun item that could be rolled, folded, and fried into various configurations. Taco Bell (4,000 franchises strong) and McDonald’s won the public over with soft tacos, and Chipotle gained fans of its hearty, customizable burritos.

Back in Manhattan, Zarela Martinez felt validated by the public’s obsession with Mexican food but saw a downside to the growing number of street carts, fast food chains, and taco trucks. “People got used to eating cheap tacos and it ruined all the

restaurants,” she remarked (Anon 1993). As more Mexican eateries opened near her business, Martinez felt greater pressure to keep a clientele and struggled against popular notions about what the price point of “authentic” Mexican food should be. Forbes (1993) remarked Zarela’s “a-la-carte prices [were] steep for fiestas” while another review stated, “When the check came, alas the Mexican fantasy faded, and I was jolted back to high-priced Manhattan. For a casual restaurant, Zarela is pretty pricey” (Milchman ND). Zarela priced entrees between \$15 and \$20 and charged for rice, beans, and guacamole to meet the costs of labor and ingredients. Though Martinez’s food was far from casual, her restaurant had the fiesta-style atmospherics that many American diners assumed came with low prices. In a letter to Martinez, a customer scolded her for charging \$4.75 for a side dish of rice with sour cream and asked, “Why can’t beans and rice come as part of the meal, as they do in Mexico or anywhere else? How do you charge so much money for your inauthentic Mexican food?” (Gemmer 1994, Marimba menus). In this letter, the accusation of inauthenticity was specifically tied in with cost. As Mexican food historian Jeffrey Pilcher (2012, 201) contends, “Very few Mexican restaurants can command prices comparable to those of French restaurants, even when using the same fresh ingredients and, in many cases, the same Mexican workers. Customers have simply refused to consider the two cuisines as equals.” Martinez affirmed the same to the *New York Times*: “Mexican food is just as elaborate as French or Italian cuisine, but it’s still perceived as something that’s cheap. I use exactly the same ingredients as Le Cirque does, the duck, the sushi-quality tuna!” (Asimov 2000, 6) Critics’ reviews and diners’ comments were alarming; no matter how refined her restaurant’s menu was, customers would balk at or question her prices because of assumed price ceilings for “real” Mexican cuisine.

This late-twentieth century devaluation of Mexican food arguably happened in tandem with more Mexican immigration to the United States. As smaller immigrant-owned food enterprises like taco trucks, street carts, and taquerías became more prevalent in New York and other cities, this reinforced consumers’ ideas that Mexican food was inherently casual, fast, and low-priced. Speaking about Chinese cuisine’s historical valuation, Krishnendu Ray (2007, 104–05) observed that the *New York Times* dropped coverage of Chinese restaurants considerably once that year’s Hart-Cellar Immigration Act produced an influx of Chinese immigration. Ray suggested “an inverse relationship between the prestige of a cuisine . . . and the number of immigrants.” As New Yorkers saw more Mexican immigrants taking on a variety of low-wage jobs throughout the city, the notion that these newcomers were grateful for *any* wages they made in the US (because they were inevitably higher than in Mexico) made it more challenging for *everyone* along the Mexican food-providing chain to persuade diners that their ingredients and labor deserved certain compensation. Determined to keep a high position in the Mexican food scene, Zarela pushed herself to keep innovating. In 1993 she began featuring state-specific menus inspired by Quintana Roo, Tlaxcala, Jalisco, and Oaxaca. Additionally, her breakout in the cookbook world finally came with *Food From My Heart* (1992) and *The Food and Life of Oaxaca* (1997). Zarela also wrote guest pieces for *Saveur*, *Food and Wine*, and *The Los Angeles Times* and consulted for Goya Foods, which was headquartered in Secaucus, New Jersey.

In 1996, the Spanish newspaper *La Prensa* asked Martínez what message she had for Hispanics in the United States. “There is no discrimination. I am a Mexican woman . . . and look at me . . . this is a type of place where it doesn’t matter who you are, you can succeed,” Martínez replied (Vega 1996). Her perspective, however, did not square with many of her co-ethnics’ experiences of exploitation and precarity in the food industry during the 1990s and early 2000s. Restaurant work, a common first job for many migrants, held the risk of violent robberies and fights, wage theft, and sexual harassment (Vega 1993, 2008). In May 1994, for instance, a group of Mexican immigrants protested in front of popular Times Square restaurant *México Mágico* to demand owner Raymond Posadas pay them \$100,000 in back wages. Female employees also accused Posadas and restaurant manager Javier Alcalá of sexually harassing and assaulting them. The workers obtained a lawyer from the *Centro por los Derechos de los Inmigrantes*, who sent letters to the New York Department of Labor and Mexican consulate to intervene (Soria 1994). At *Selena*, another Manhattan Mexican restaurant, 20-year-old Guerrero immigrant Cristina Pinzon brought public complaints against her boss, who had not paid her for five months. Pinzon worked as a waitress for twelve hours a day, six days a week, for \$100 a week (\$1.39 an hour, less than the national \$2.13 minimum wage for tipped workers). Without a paycheck she had to live off paltry tips, borrow money for essential medicine, and endure sexual harassment from her supervisors and male customers (Ledo 2001). Continuing wage theft controversies in restaurants were reported by both Spanish and English-language media, with some of the clashes occurring between Mexican workers and Mexican employers.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, despite their contributions to multiple sectors of New York’s economy, Mexican migrants’ income lagged behind – in fact, their per capita income had dropped precipitously since 1980. The average Mexican man (who tended to work in food service/retail, construction, or manufacturing) earned \$15,631 annually, approximately half of the typical male resident (\$29,155). Mexican women (many of whom worked in domestic service, factory work, or pink-collar occupations) earned on average \$11,731, less than half of female New Yorkers (\$24,469) (Smith 2006, 25; Rivera-Batiz 2004, 43). These earnings are partially explained by lower educational attainment levels and a lack of English proficiency that prevented job advancement, but anti-immigrant discrimination and exploitation of vulnerable undocumented workers certainly factored.

Turn-of-the-Century Tastes, Trends, and Transitions

Between 1990 and 2000, all five New York boroughs had undergone striking Latinization. In fact, the city’s new nicknames “Puebla York” and “Manhatitlan” signaled the noticeable presence of Mexican and specifically Pueblan residents. In the Bronx, the number of Mexican immigrant residents increased by 180% and Latinos increased by 21.3% overall. Manhattan’s Mexican population increased by 178%, with Spanish Harlem now dominated by Mexican-origin people instead of Puerto Ricans. On Staten Island, a longtime Italian and “ethnic white” borough, Latinos increased by 64% and the Mexican population shot up by 566%. In particular, migrants from Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl (a city of more than 2 million people outside Mexico City) had settled in the declining Port Richmond neighborhood and transformed it into a bustling “Neza York” with bakeries,

flower shops, taquerías, and supermarkets. In Brooklyn, due to gentrification and rising rents, many Latinos left except for Mexicans who increased by 218% and clustered in Sunset Park and Bushwick. In Queens, Mexican residents increased by 334% and settled in Astoria, Jackson Heights, Elmhurst, and Corona. In sum, Mexicans experienced the highest rate of growth (236%) of any major racial/ethnic group in New York. Citywide estimates counted 300,000 residents of Mexican descent living alongside 830,123 Puerto Ricans, 579,269 Dominicans, 250,000 Colombians and Ecuadorans, and the others who comprised a total of 2.2 million Nueva Yorkers (Miyares 2004, 56; Ricourt and Danta 2003, 4; Avendaño 2010; Kugel 2004) (Figure 10).

With continuing Mexican migration and a concurrent demand for Mexican food, the culinary landscape of New York by 2000 was completely different from the one Martinez found in the 1980s. “[N]ow a Mexican mother can go to the store, pick up a bag of tortillas made in the Bronx, fill them with chorizo from a factory in Queens . . . and follow them with panque (Mexican poundcake) made in a big panadería in Park Slope,” declared the *New York Times* (Newman 2001). Against this backdrop, Martinez felt confident she could open another restaurant focusing solely on the coastal European and African-influenced cuisine of Veracruz. To drum up excitement, Martinez published a Veracruzana cookbook and acquired a 13-episode television show, “Zarela! La Cocina Veracruzana,” on PBS. Martinez’s restaurant Danzón opened in Manhattan in the summer of 2001 but went unfavored by critics and only survived until May 2002. Zarela then pivoted to designing a “Casa Zarela” line of housewares decorated with vibrant Mexican flower, lotería, and chili pepper iconography. She pitched this product line as “an affordable, accessible, yet stylish lifestyle [collection] that will make Latino customers proud of their heritage yet have immense crossover appeal.” By February 2005 Casa Zarela was being carried in hundreds of stores across the nation, most prominently at Wal-Mart and Bed Bath & Beyond (Martinez 2003, 2005).

An important change to Martinez’s health, however, threatened to complicate her career; she began experiencing bodily tremors and was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease. During her nightly visits to the restaurant, she recalled, her face and mouth became so rigid that she could not give her customers her usual smiles and smooth conversation. “Nothing has been as humiliating and I suffer deeply,” she wrote as she processed her experience (Martinez ND). She even drafted a treatment for a television program that, by following her journey and interviewing expert guests like her friend Dr. Oliver Sacks, would shed light on how people with Parkinson’s could battle depression, isolation, and physical pain. Arguably, what Zarela’s pursuit of media opportunities demonstrates is that she had a continuing need to tell her story. This became even more pressing as the city kept changing and new Mexican eateries at different price levels crowded her restaurant’s turf (Figure 11).

In autumn 2006 the *New York Daily News* proclaimed, “New York is finally a city with great Mexican food” (Wharton 2006). People could easily find tamales, cemitas sandwiches, and Mexican candies in Bronx bodegas or street carts in Queens. On the weekends, people of all backgrounds swarmed the taco stalls along the soccer fields of Riverside Park in Manhattan and Red Hook, Brooklyn. Meanwhile, some tortilla factories were nixtamalizing corn themselves (boiling it in slaked lime) to create fresher tortilla dough on their premises. Martinez, who fielded countless e-mails from customers searching for masa, referred them to Tortillería Nixtamal in

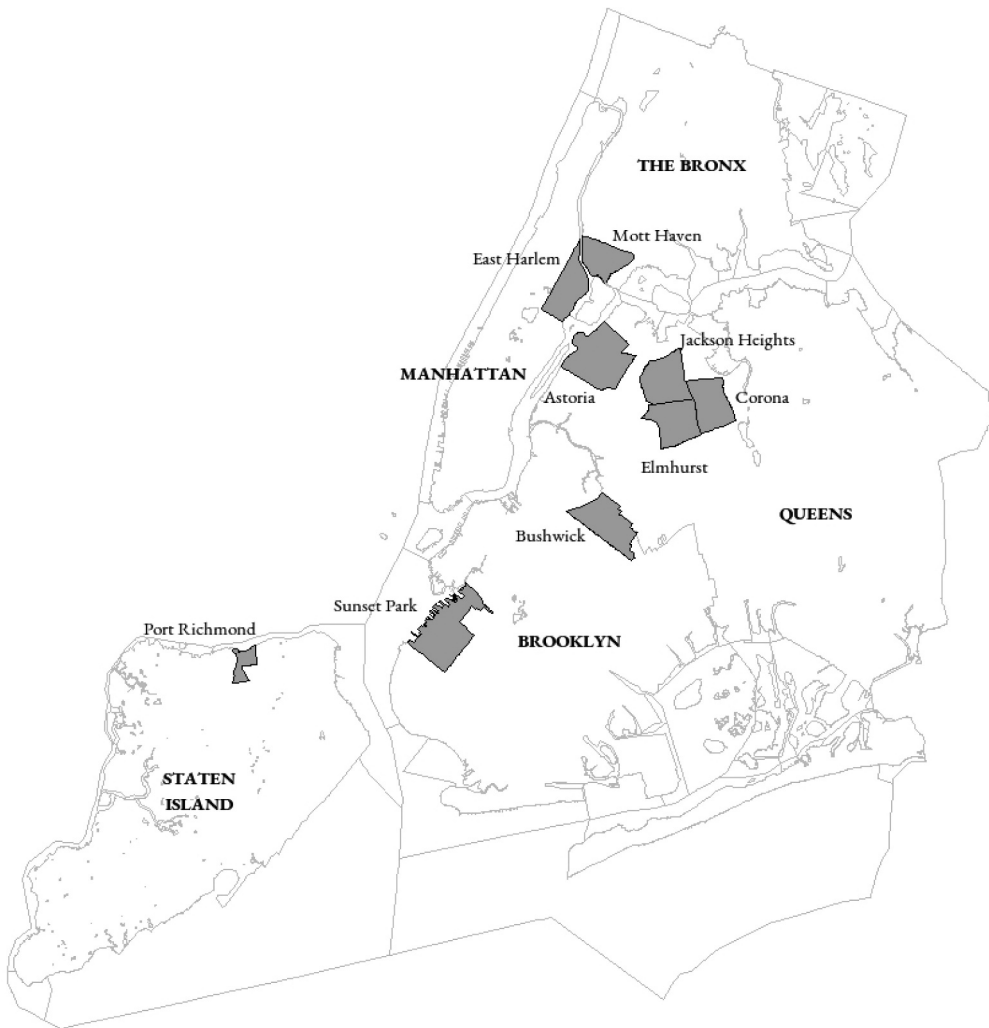


Figure 10. Mexican resident enclaves in New York's boroughs in the 1990s. Map by Galo Falchettore, Russell sage foundation.

Corona, Queens when it opened in 2008 (Saltzstefn 2009). Migrants had indeed created a *México de afuera*, or a Mexico outside of Mexico. By 2010 the greater New York City metropolitan region was home to over half a million people of Mexican origin, with about 377,000 in the city proper and significant numbers in Westchester and other Hudson Valley counties (Badillo 2009, 107). Amidst these demographic shifts, a small pantheon of Latina chefs and restaurateurs had emerged in New York. Sue Torres, Julieta Ballesteros, and others acknowledged their work would not have been possible without their culinary *madrina* Martinez, who – in Torres's words – “has been trying to make Americans and New Yorkers understand the cuisine for so many years” (González 2010). Martinez had been not just a place *maker* for Mexican New York but a place *taker*, unafraid to stake territory in a

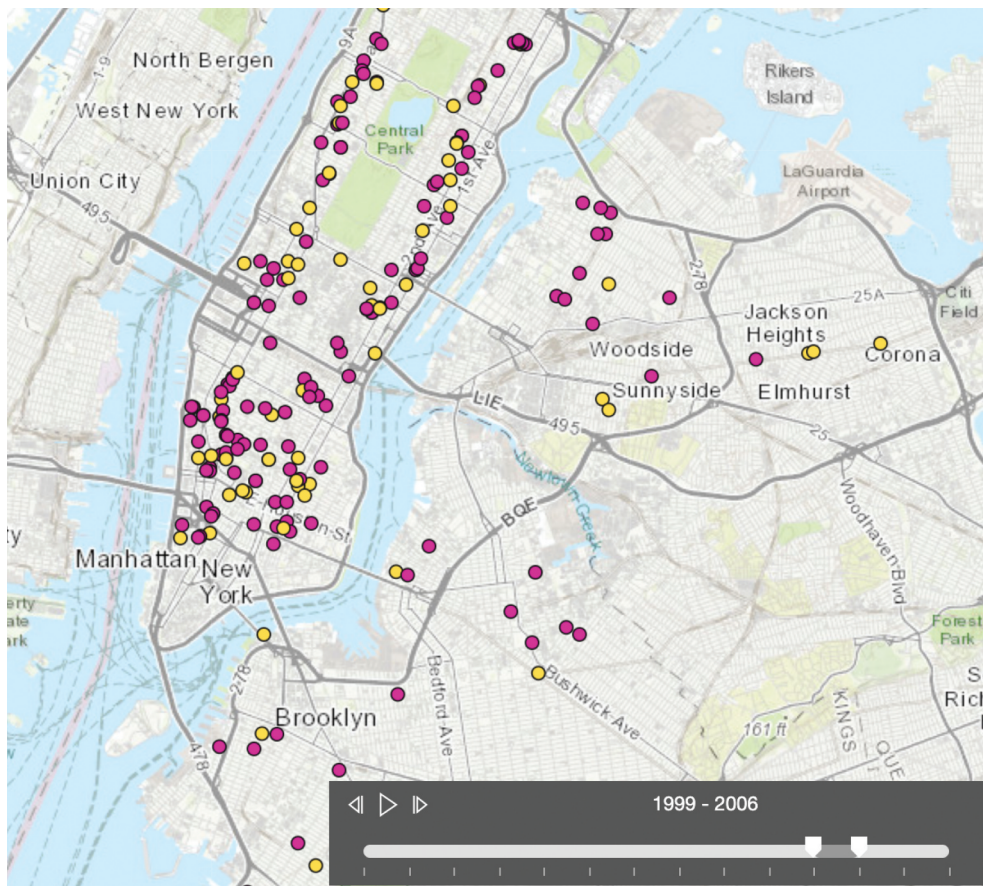


Figure 11. GIS analysis of the growth of Mexican restaurants (both individual and chain) in New York from 1999 to 2006. Screenshot from *The Mexican restaurants of New York City StoryMap* created by Lori A. Flores, Fernando Amador II, and Ximena Lopez Carrillo, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/5d130c3dc16b4a86a5066c36b3b72b16>.

competitive industry. Zarela finally closed its doors in February 2011. Its rent had skyrocketed to \$20,000 a month and, as Martinez told reporters, “There are six Mexican restaurants nearby, most of them fast-food. And the young people would rather go to a taco truck instead of out for a Mexican meal” (Fabricant 2011). Though there was sadness in closing after almost 25 years of business, this was a rare milestone for any New York restaurant to reach. Zarela’s lasting legacies would be the existence of many other Mexican restaurants – one estimate counted 40,000 nationwide at this time – and the flourishing career of her son Aarón Sánchez, who by this time was a well-known Nuevo Latino fusion chef and telegenic presence on multiple Food Network shows (Ray 2016, 95).

Another lasting yet disturbing legacy in the world of Mexican food has been its continued devaluation in the US through rhetoric about “authenticity.” Social media has facilitated faster and wider circulation of people’s opinions about food and what certain cuisines’ price points should be. Much like Chinese food, Mexican food has been unable to escape the notion that it

should be inexpensive to be “authentic.” On the review site Yelp, where disproportionately young and white users “are constantly assessing the alleged verisimilitude of a restaurant’s food, atmosphere, and even the ethnicity of its employees,” customers look for nonwhite patrons, humble or nonexistent decor, and low prices to affirm the “realness” of a Mexican restaurant (Gottlieb 2015, 39–41; Kay 2019). As scholars across disciplines have agreed, authentic food is not a stable or monolithic thing. “There is no such thing as a cuisine untouched by ‘outside influences,’” philosopher Lisa Heldke (2005, 388) has argued. Cuisine is constantly altered and dependent on geographies of access to ingredients, technology, and transport. Moreover, what is deemed authentic can change across regions, generations, and time. Consumers’ desire to freeze Mexican food in a “traditional” state of cheap or humble production leads to, as historian Monica Perales (2016, 691) puts it, “these ideas [fusing] onto the people.” What if a Latinx food entrepreneur wants to escape inherited conditions of poverty or precarity, and elevate their product and its cost? What if they have ambitions to be upwardly mobile and financially comfortable? Zarela Martinez felt entitled to these rewards, but many Latinx restaurateurs still encounter pushback to these goals. This obstruction is even more structural for immigrants excluded from the social and legal privileges of citizenship, and restaurant workers who remain invisible in the back of the house. Meanwhile, elevated Latino cuisine can exist unquestioned in the hands of white chefs who almost never have to qualify their decision to charge certain prices.

Over the last decade, some high-end Mexican chefs and restaurateurs have gained fame in the United States. Mexico City restaurateurs Enrique Olvera and Gabriela Cámara respectively opened Cosme in New York City and Cala in San Francisco to rave reviews. In 2013 Carlos Gaytán became the first Mexican-born chef to earn a Michelin star for his Chicago restaurant Mexique. In 2019 Daniela Soto-Innes became the youngest person to be named “World’s Best Female Chef.” While buzz around Mexican cuisine is now expected, Zarela Martinez deserves attention as an earlier immigrant entrepreneur who claimed the authority to raise Americans’ consciousness about Mexican cuisine. In an industry that did not invest much in women or people of color, she took advantage of fortuitous mentorship and professional opportunities. Her achievements as a chef, restaurateur, cookbook author, food television host, and product developer and merchandiser made her a pioneer in the art of multi-platform celebrity. The story of her career fills in essential gaps in food history, the history of Latina entrepreneurship in the US, and the story of how Mexican cuisine permeated New York. To preserve her legacy, Martinez sold her personal papers to Harvard University’s Schlesinger Library. This was a very intentional decision; she knew it was a repository for the papers of accomplished American women like Helen Keller, Julia Child, and Amelia Earhart. Her archive explicitly brings a Latina’s life into a space of whiteness, reverence, and prestige.

Martinez’s story also reminds us that Latinx people have historically had, and continue to have, diverse experiences in the food world. Whether employer or employee, activist or apolitical, their gathered stories matter in making American food history more nuanced and accurate. A bifurcated reality remains in which a small echelon of Latinx chefs and food celebrities achieve commercial success while the majority of Latinx workers perform hard and often invisible labor lower on the food chain. This article – in reconstructing how New York changed from a city of scarce Mexican food to a metropolis where migrants of varying classes made it more available and diverse – gives credit to both groups for creating the “multiple Mexicos” in the US that people consume on a regular basis (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Zarela Martinez in caricature, by Olaf Hajek. Box 3, Folder 10, Zarela Martinez Papers.

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Notes on contributor

Lori A. Flores is Associate Professor of History at Stony Brook University (SUNY), where she teaches courses on the histories of Latinos in the United States, American labor and immigration, the U.S. West, and the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. She is the author of *Grounds for Dreaming: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the California Farmworker Movement* (Yale, 2016) which was named Best History Book by the International Latino Book Awards and Best First Book by the Immigration and Ethnic History Society. She is also the co-editor of the updated and revised 4th edition of *The Academic's Handbook* (Duke, 2020). She has written about Latino life, labor, and immigration for publications such as *The Washington Post*, *Food52*, *Public Seminar*, and *The Detroit Free Press*, and has received honors for her work including residencies at the Russell Sage Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy. She is currently working on a new book about the history of Latino food workers in the U.S. Northeast region from 1940 to the present day.

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