

Panadería la Loma Presents: A freshly baked history of Mexican American Bakeries

In an ideal America, warm air filled with freshly baked *pan dulce*, colorful piñatas hanging from the ceiling, softly playing Mexican radio, and metal tongs in your hands that choose from an array of pastries all culminate in an understanding embrace of ethnic differences at Panadería la Loma.<sup>1</sup> A truer rendering of this Mexican bakery in Southeastern Minnesota, however, likely reveals a range of customer perceptions: an exotic destination, a nostalgic taste of home, or simply a place to buy quality bread at a reasonable price. Writing on ethnic foodways in America, Susan Kalčik states: “By ingesting the foods of each new group, we symbolize the acceptance of each group and its culture.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, the complex differences among Panadería la Loma customers and employees suggest that the typical “us and them,” insider-outsider dichotomies in the field of ethnic studies offer only a surface-level introduction to an exceedingly rich cultural history. In search of deeper meaning, this essay seeks to use the idea of gender and ethnicity as “performance” to prod Americans beyond a symbolic acceptance of static individual differences, toward a better understanding of race and gender as things that “we do.”<sup>3</sup> A historically grounded concept of ethnicity presented through the lens of “gender as performance” allows for a richer connection between the sameness and differences lived out by the unique range of Panadería la Loma’s customers and employees. Rather than merely representing ethnicity, Panadería la Loma performs an evolution of ethnicity based on Mexican

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<sup>1</sup> *Pan dulce* in Spanish literally translates to “sweet bread” in English and refers to a variety of traditional rolls and pastries that are quite popular in Mexico.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Kalčik, “Ethnic foodways in America: Symbol and performance of identity” in *Ethnic and regional foodways in the United States: The performance of group identity*, ed. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Vicki L. Ruiz, “Citizen Restaurant: American Imaginaries, American Communities,” *American Quarterly*, 60.1 (March 2008), 18.

and Mexican American history that interacts with other players, such as gender, in interesting, complex, and even familiar ways.

Before delving into a brief history of Mexican breads as relevant to an understanding of personal identities in America, we must first become familiar with how both gender and ethnicity can be “performed” and how this performance relates to food. Within the last few decades, American cultural scholars have appropriated the theatrical verb, “perform,” to imply “a process whereby physical bodies accrue social identities” to underscore “how some bodies become legible as ‘masculine’ or ‘black’...while other bodies become legible as ‘feminine’ or ‘white.’”<sup>4</sup> This theoretical framework ties the concepts of gender and ethnicity “rehearsed” at Panadería la Loma to the their respective cultural and historical constructions. Consequently, the physical space of the bakery serves as a stage upon which complex social identities are performed. Sherrie A. Inness introduces her anthology on the politics of gender and food by stating that our consumption, preparation, and acquisition of food communicates parts of our identities, such as ethnicity and gender.”<sup>5</sup> As a locus of the baking, buying, and eating of traditional Mexican pastries in the United States, Panadería la Loma provides a historically significant place in which to study the performance of gender as it contributes to the collision of similarity and difference in America. The relatedness of gender and ethnicity emphasized through the performance framework allows us to move beyond a comfortable study of symbolic unity and into a more productive realization of our culturally produced assumptions about the “strange but similar” Americans of our everyday interpersonal encounters.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Manning, “Performance” in *Keywords for American cultural studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 177-178.

<sup>5</sup> Sherrie A. Inness, ed., “Introduction: Of Meatloaf and Jell-O...” in *Cooking lessons: The politics of gender and food* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), xv.

<sup>6</sup> Kalčík, 60.

An understanding of Mexican American bakeries and their cultural contexts draws on the history of *pan dulce* in both Mexico and the United States. Bread made from wheat flour may seem to conflict with the quintessentially Mexican corn tortilla; however, rich and poor Mexicans have been eating bread since the Spanish Conquest. In Mexico City, Spanish-owned entrepreneurial bakeries, or *panaderías*, employed entirely by laborers from the Mexican working class increased threefold between 1877 and 1898.<sup>7</sup> With time, Mexican bakers transferred their breadmaking expertise to the United States where many opened their own *panaderías*, naturally catering to Mexican immigrant communities but also advertising to other population demographics. One 1975 Hispanic newspaper in California contains a profile of Mr. Pablo Galindo's "Mi Panadería" bakery that advertises, "french bread [sic.]" in addition to "Mexican bread."<sup>8</sup> Despite the prevalence of bread made from wheat flour, a discussion of Mexican bread and gender would not be complete without a brief mention of the corn tortilla as it traditionally relates to the performance of femininity for Mexican women. In *Qué Vivan Los Tamales: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity*, historian Jeffrey Pilcher explains the dominant male perspective that recognized a woman's worth and identity through the taste and texture of her homemade tortillas.<sup>9</sup> The grinding and shaping of tortillas solidified the performance of a Mexican feminine identity in a way that contrasts with the male association of the entrepreneurial baking of *pan dulce*. One Mexican American woman living in Arizona during the Great Depression lists three male relatives who worked at a neighborhood *panadería*, laughing when the interviewer asked if "local people" made their own *pan* at home: "No, we

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Weis, "Immigrant Entrepreneurs, Bread, and Class Negotiation in Postrevolutionary Mexico City," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 25.1 (Winter 2009), 76-77.

<sup>8</sup> "Mi Panadería," *El Chicano*, March 13, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> See a summary of Pilcher's *Qué Vivan Los Tamales* in Benay Blend, "'I am an act of kneading': Food and the making of Chicana identity" in *Cooking lessons: The politics of gender and food* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 44.

would buy it. I never made *pan* at home.”<sup>10</sup> The apparent absence of a cultural expectation for Mexican women to bake *pan dulce* makes Panadería la Loma an interesting site in which to study the performance of ethnicity and gender today.

Panadería la Loma continues the trend of male operated and owned Mexican bakeries in the United States, offering a subtle challenge to the typical association of freshly baked bread with white American housewives. Bakery worker and cashier, Alejandra Jiménez explains that the bakery is run by two brothers, Fernando and Tomás, who come in early every morning to mix dough, form pastries and decorate special-occasion cakes.<sup>11</sup> Besides the ethnic charm of the bakery’s sugar-topped *conchas* and gingerbread *marranitos*, Panadería la Loma also offers a platform for an overlooked performance of masculinity that contrasts sharply with established ideas of pastry baking promoted in twentieth-century children’s cookbooks in America.<sup>12</sup> For example, *Young America’s Cook Book* (1938) pictures girls frosting cakes and boys carving roasts. Other cookbooks explicitly note that girls appreciate “delicate,” “sweet,” and “pretty” foods, but boys have “little or no interest in how food appeared” and prefer “plainer recipes.”<sup>13</sup> Inness’s research uses American children’s cookbooks to explain adult conceptions about cooking and its relationship to gender and contributes an additional piece of historical context for the introduction of Mexican baking to the United States.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the eye-catching ethnic component of businesses, such as Panadería la Loma, can often mask these gender complexities that are equally tied up with the performance of American identities.

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<sup>10</sup> Emily Garcia Alonzo, “Los recuerdos del barrio en Flagstaff,” oral history interview with Delia Ceballos Muñoz, October 29, 1997, Northern Arizona University Archives, [http://archive.library.nau.edu/cdm4/item\\_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/cpa&CISOPTR=63133&CISOBX=1&REC=3](http://archive.library.nau.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/cpa&CISOPTR=63133&CISOBX=1&REC=3).

<sup>11</sup> Alejandra Jiménez, oral history interview with Elise Gurney, Rachel Kittaka and Max Timm, April 28, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Both very traditional, *conchas* are oval, “seashell-shaped” sweet rolls with decorative sugar topping and *marranitos* are pig-shaped molasses cookies.

<sup>13</sup> Sherrie A. Inness, “‘The enchantment of mixing-spoons’: Cooking lessons for girls and boys” in *Kitchen culture in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 129, 123-124.

<sup>14</sup> Inness, “‘The enchantment of mixing-spoons,’” 119.

Notwithstanding the gendered instruction of baking in United States history, the men of Panadería la Loma excel in the creation of delicate, sweet, and pretty foods. Fernando's "choco-flan" exemplifies a creative fusion of layered chocolate cake and Mexican custard that has become one of the bakery's most popular specialty items. His artistic brother, Tomás, handles beautifully complex cake designs, "a special gift" that Alejandra admits is beyond her possession.<sup>15</sup> Though not intentionally, Fernando and Tomás use Panadería la Loma as a space to perform gender and ethnicity in ways that do not conform to the respective American ideas of women baking cakes and Mexican people eating tortillas. Seeing this bakery beyond the intentionally ethnic elements that tantalize our senses, we are challenged to rethink our assumptions of ethnicity and gender and consider how a superficial acceptance of difference may be transformed into a deeper understanding of one another.

Panadería la Loma offers a place to witness the performance of ethnicity and gender in the creation and consumption of food. Oral history, material culture objects, and historical sources all contribute to the conclusion that the performance link between ethnicity and gender allows for a deeper study of the simultaneous sameness and differences in American identities than would have been possible through an analysis of ethnicity alone. While the "object" of food provides a comfortable entry point for many Americans to symbolically accept different cultures, the "performance" of food changes the focus from the "artifacts" of culturally mediated actions to the people who create those artifacts. With cultural history as its guide, this performance-based analysis of Panadería la Loma takes an important step backward to consider the social construction of our labels of difference. At the same time, it also moves forward to confront the superficiality of our everyday, interpersonal interactions based on ethnicity and gender to challenge Americans toward a richer understanding of the strange similarities that we share.

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<sup>15</sup> Alejandra Jiménez, oral history interview with Elise Gurney, Rachel Kittaka and Max Timm, April 28, 2011.