

# HOW THE TACO CONQUERED AMERICA



**The story of a Mexican food  
that became an all-American favorite**

**BY LAUREN TARSHIS**

**I**t was 1951 in San Bernardino, California, and 28-year-old Glen Bell was grilling up burgers and hot dogs at his roadside stand, Bell's Drive-In.

For weeks, Bell had been watching the restaurant across the street, the Mitla Café. Bell's place was always bustling, but Mitla's was packed. At lunchtime, people lined up around the corner waiting for a table.

What was happening in there?

Bell had to see what the fuss was about. He went to Mitla's and stood in line, the only white person in a crowd of mostly Mexican immigrants. He was warmly welcomed and served the house specialty: a taco. Few non-Hispanic Americans had ever tasted this Mexican treat, a fried corn tortilla shell stuffed with meat and cheese and topped with a spicy tomato sauce.

Bell picked up the taco, breathing in the delicious scent. He took a bite. *Crunch.*

Bell nearly fell off his chair in ecstasy. Not only had

he just found his new favorite food, he had also tasted his future.

## **A Taste of Home**

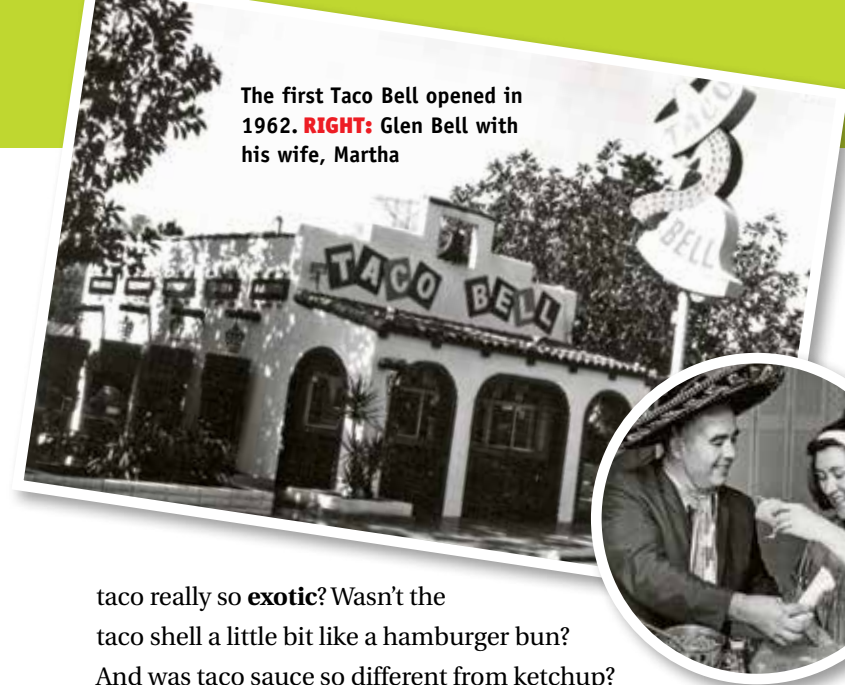
For decades, Mexican immigrants had been pouring into Southern California, bringing with them recipes for their favorite dishes. In many Mexican-American neighborhoods, the air was thick with the aroma of meats spiced with dried chili peppers, woody cumin, and chocolate-tinged mole [MOH-lay] sauces. By the 1950s, there were dozens of small restaurants like Mitla's, modest establishments serving up tacos and other dishes for Mexicans longing for a taste of home.

Non-Hispanic Americans rarely ventured into these restaurants. Most were not adventurous eaters; many worried that Mexican food would be too spicy or would make them sick. But Bell sensed that Americans might be ready for something new. And was the





The first Taco Bell opened in 1962. **RIGHT:** Glen Bell with his wife, Martha



taco really so **exotic**? Wasn't the taco shell a little bit like a hamburger bun? And was taco sauce so different from ketchup?

Bell was determined to introduce his new favorite food to a wide American audience and started making plans to open his own taco stand. His first challenge was to speed up the preparation process, to satisfy the American craze for "fast food." It was no problem to prepare the beef fillings in advance. But each taco shell had to be fried moments before being served, or it became soggy.

Bell spent his evenings experimenting in his kitchen, finally devising a method of crisping taco shells in advance. He concocted a taco sauce that was milder than a typical **piquant** Mexican sauce. He designed his taco place to be modern, more like a fast-food joint than a homey Mexican taco stand.

Bell's first taco restaurant, Taco Tia, opened in 1954. It was an immediate success. Most customers were new to tacos and thrilled with Bell's version. Within the year, he opened two more restaurants. By 1962, he had sold Taco Tia and founded fast-food chain Taco Bell.

### American Makeover

Some have criticized Bell for "Americanizing" Mexican food. But what is "American" food, anyway? Most of the foods we eat have roots in other lands. Recipes for apple pie and meat stews came from England with early colonial settlers. Italians brought pizza to the U.S. in the late 1800s.



And then there is the most American food of all: the hamburger. It was born in Germany, a land long famous for its sausages (made from ground meat) and brought to the U.S. by German immigrants in the 1800s. Ground beef was cheap, and German factory workers enjoyed lunching on beef patties tucked inside sliced rolls. At the time, most Americans avoided ground beef, which tended to be a mash-up of spoiled meat, fat, and parts of the animal that nobody would knowingly eat.

Like the taco, the hamburger got a makeover that turned a traditional immigrant food into an American classic. In 1921, a diner cook named Walter Anderson teamed up with a businessman named Billy Ingram to open a restaurant specializing in burgers. To help customers overcome their fear of ground beef, diners were allowed to peer into the kitchen and watch hunks of fresh beef being ground into patties. Advertisements emphasized the cleanliness of the restaurant and the wholesomeness of the ingredients. The eatery was given a name that suggested a sparkling-clean restaurant fit for a king: White Castle.

### What's Next?

Like Taco Tia, White Castle was a hit. By the 1950s, the hamburger was the most popular food in America. Thanks to Glen Bell, the taco isn't far behind. Today, there are 5,500 Taco Bell restaurants in the U.S. Even Bell's critics agree that he succeeded in introducing Mexican food to picky Americans and establishing the taco as an all-American favorite.

So what's next? Will it be the *samosa*, a crusty Indian meat or vegetable pie? How about Lebanese *kibbe*, spicy lamb covered with fried bulgur wheat? Or Filipino *kwek kwek*, fried quail eggs?

Right now, there are hundreds of delicious ethnic favorites simmering in American kitchens. Soon enough, one of them will win your heart—and your stomach. ●

## ESSAY

# Holding on to Heritage Before It Slips Away

BY RACHEL L. SWARNS

Mention the Bahamas and most people envision **idyllic** seascapes with pearly beaches and turquoise waters. For me, though, any talk of my mother's homeland brings to mind the tang of sour limes and the sweetness of freshly cut coconut, the tastes that flavored my childhood.

My mother left the Bahamas as a little girl. Our ties to the islands **dwindled** over the years as relatives migrated or died, but we maintained our connections in other ways, sharing meals of **conch** fritters and coconut candy with friends and family.

Now, in my 40s, I feel those ties slipping away. My husband prefers pasta to pigeon peas with rice, and my two little boys turn up their noses at fried plantains. Suddenly, I've found myself **grappling** to hold on to something I never imagined I might lose. I want to recapture the way food once connected me to my Bahamian grandmother and great-aunts. I want my boys to **savor** the flavors that simmered in their pots.

### The Old Ways

We often celebrate the **culinary** treasures that

immigrants have carried to these shores, the pastas and biryanis; the tamales and noodle soups; the strudels and jerk chickens. But change and loss are also part of the immigrant experience. Over generations, **palates** evolve and customs fade. The old ways of cooking are quietly forgotten.

In the early 20th century, some social reformers tried to suppress immigrant enthusiasm for traditional dishes, particularly for spicy foods. In settlement houses, immigrant women were urged to embrace blander, more "American" meals. Sometimes change came from the newcomers themselves. For instance, impoverished Italian immigrants, who rarely ate meat in Italy, added meat to their menus in the U.S.

"Foods we associate with immigrant groups in America are often American riffs on foods they would have known back home," says Hasia Diner, a history professor at New York University.

In other words, immigrants have changed America, but America has also changed them.



Papaya, a popular fruit in the Bahamas

### Memories

After my grandmother died, my mother baked raisin pound cake again and again. Her mother had perfected that buttery cake. When my mother tried it, the cake fell almost every time. We all laughed about it, but I believe her quest reflected her longing to be close again to her mother.

After all, food is never just food. It stirs so many memories: the smell of grouper bubbling on my family's stove meant that my tart-tongued Bahamian grandmother had arrived with a suitcase full of frozen fish and fresh fruit. Sweet mangoes on the kitchen counter marked the start of summer, the time of year when my mother could find some of her favorite tropical fruits.

Most children of immigrants have memories like that. I wish my children did too. I feel guilty that I have not done more to help them savor the tastes of their heritage. So I will hold on the best way I know how. I will sing the songs of the islands to my boys. I will call my mother to learn how to infuse our Sunday afternoons with the sweet smell of coconut candy. I will try to make peace with the notion that some of my favorite flavors may end with me. ●

## WRITING CONTEST

Swarns writes, "Immigrants have changed America, but America has also changed them." Using details from both texts, explain what she means. Send your response to **FOOD CONTEST**. Five winners will get *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah* by Paula J. Freedman.

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