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LEISURE TIME AND FOOD MEMORY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CULINARY TOURISM IN CENTRAL MEXICO

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Abstract

Purpose. To analyze how memory and desire influence the configuration of tourist activities related to traditional cuisine.

Method. The ethnographic method was used with interviews with key respondents to obtain the family memories of *barbacoa* (pit roasted lamb or mutton) producers and consumers. Fifty-five in-depth interviews were conducted, of which 25 were with *barbacoa* producers and 30 with consumers. The sample was determined using the snowball non-probability method.

Findings. It was found that food memory is a determining factor for reproducing the consumption of traditional food linked to territory. This was confirmed using cases where *barbacoa* has been consumed for over three generations, creating close bonds between territories and between consumers and producers, while favoring spaces for recreation and family integration.

Research and conclusions limitations. The research only focused on consumers living in Mexico City.

Practical implications. The results can be used by *barbacoa* producer associations to promote traditional practices in the preparation and marketing of *barbacoa*.

Originality. This is the first paper written to link the food memory of inhabitants of Mexico City with the consumption of *barbacoa* produced in the city of Texcoco.

Type of paper. Empirical research.

Key words: Culinary tourism, food anthropology, gastronomic heritage, food memory, Mexico

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Introduction

The study of the link between food and tourism as a local development strategy and as a mechanism to reproduce heritage has paid special attention to the territorial origins of food [Bessièrè 1998; Bessièrè 2013; Cohen and Avieli 2004; Avieli 2013; Siti et al. 2014]. While food is a strong marker of territory, and of particular interest for tourist activity, this process of identification is not inherent to the food itself, but rather to the ability of individuals and social groups to forge links with it through food memory.

This paper addresses the case of traditional *barbacoa* from Texcoco, a product tied to the territory that denotes a solid presence in the food memory of central Mexico. This is confirmed by the established urban-rural relationship that includes generations of consumers and producers associated with this dish.

Mexico City is one of the four largest cities in the world, with over 20 million inhabitants. Its strong integration with global markets has greatly influenced the transformation of its cultural patterns and lifestyles [Ward 1998]. One such change is the transformation of food patterns, consisting of a notable rise in the consumption of industrialized food [García and Bermudez 2014].

Paradoxically, certain segments of urban consumers now show an interest in consuming food produced and transformed using traditional techniques, given that these represent an element of social differentiation [Bourdieu 1987a] while also indicating the role of cultural heritage in maintaining quality of life in contemporary societies [Di Pietro, Glugliemetti and Renzi 2013].

Such is the case of urban visitors who travel every weekend to the rural outskirts of the city to consume traditional *barbacoa*. Texcoco is a small community located 40 kilometers east of Mexico City and its reputation for preparing *barbacoa* extends all over central Mexico (Fig. 1).

This research consisted of a qualitative case study [Stake 2000] in which the objective was to understand how memory and desire influence the configuration of tourist activities related to traditional cuisine. For this purpose, qualitative information was used regarding the family memories of *barbacoa* producers and consumers which was analyzed from an anthropological perspective. In 2013 and 2014, 55 in-depth interviews were conducted, 25 of these with *barbacoa* producers and 30 with consumers. The sample was determined using the snowball non-probability method [Goodman 1968].

Producers were selected using three criteria. They needed to: 1) be from Texcoco; 2) use the traditional pit cooking technique; and 3) be able to demonstrate a commercial relationship of three generations with the family of one of the selected consumers. Consumers needed to have the following

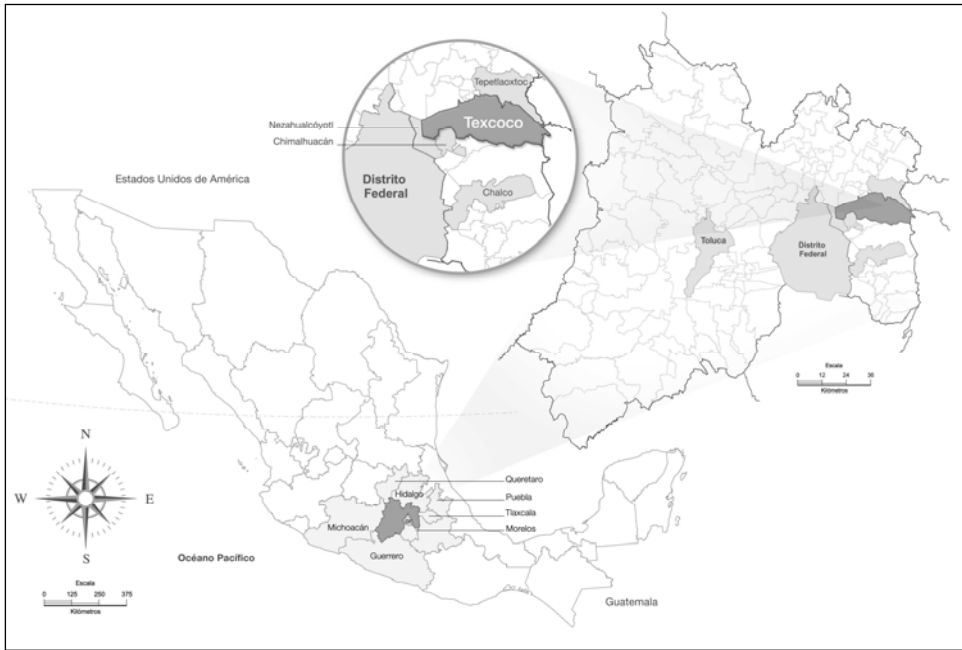


Fig. 1. Location of Mexico City and Texcoco

Source: Own preparation based on INEGI [2010]

characteristics: 1) to be from Mexico City; 2) to visit mainly for the consumption of traditional *barbacoa*; and 3) to have maintained a relationship of three generations with one of the selected producers.

The interview questions were answered according to the availability of each informant since they were members of a production unit (in the case of producers) or a family unit (in the case of consumers). The questions focused on: 1) family memories regarding the consumption and/or production of *barbacoa*; 2) consumption dynamics at the market; and 3) the relationship between producers and consumers. The Texcoco food market was selected as a study unit since it specializes in the sale of *barbacoa*, with producers who enjoy a tradition of over 100 years preparing the dish. In addition, it is less than 50 kilometers from downtown Mexico City.

The article is structured into four parts. The first offers an analysis of memory as a source of information regarding the food phenomenon from an anthropological perspective; the second discusses the relationship between food and tourism as a renewed interpretation of culinary consumption; the third covers the case of Texcoco *barbacoa*; and finally, the results of the research are presented and discussed from the perspective of the contemporary production and consumption of traditional cuisine.

The importance of this research is based on the idea that tourism can function as an economic activity that, while also having a multiplier effect, serves to reproduce the everyday heritage of developing countries where the economic circumstances do not allow for the design of specific policies for its conservation. Similarly, communities and local tourist businesses can benefit from the use of a scientific approach to objects and attractions that have occupied a marginal position in tourism studies [Timothy 1997].

It is concluded that nostalgia and memory are two important elements for maintaining the territorial identity of food. These aspects, as well as providing a spatial reference for the identification process of a local culinary heritage, represent a deep symbolic and psychological significance that influences the attraction exerted by local food on urban consumers through tourism. For this reason, analysis is constructed in the liminal space that exists between production and consumption.

The Anthropology of Food as a Perspective in Culinary Tourism Analysis

Since its emergence, social anthropology has focused on trying to understand all cultural manifestations of human societies. Food, understood as a biocultural process [Harper and Le Beau 2003], is a clear example of these manifestations. Studying the culture of a society through this biocultural process raises important issues for discussion, such as divisions between social classes [Weismantel 1988], ideas regarding the aesthetics of the human body [Pérez et al. 2007; Popenoe 2005] and the link between humans and their environment [González 2001; LaRochelle and Berkes 2003], among other.

From a cultural point of view, food involves a body of knowledge required to produce, store, cook and consume what a given society considers edible. Therefore, food reflects the identity of a territory or a population sub-group [González-Turmo 2001]. At the same time, there is a symbolic charge that allows for ways of eating to be self-reproduced [Adapon 2008] despite the innovation, adoption and adaptation of new elements as a consequence of globalization [Rebato 2009].

One way of approaching the consumption of food, beyond studies focusing on it as a way of making a living, is through culinary tourism. Anthropology has ventured into this field using two perspectives. Firstly, it studies the origin of certain forms of creating tourism in which the unit of analysis is the tourist [Kazimierczak and Malchrowicz 2013; Michalska 2014]. Secondly, it studies the impact of tourism through analyzing the local population in the tourist area as a unit [Stronza 2001; Gascón 2014]. This paper proposes a third argument which connects both units through food and memory [Holtzman 2006; Sutton 2010].

Food memory plays an essential role in the reproduction of cuisines of any scale. The clearest example of this comes from the relationship between identity and migration [Ayora 2010; Bajic 2013]. When individuals are located outside familiar territory, no matter what the reason, they may suffer a form of culture shock that materializes in the desire for foods they are biologically and culturally accustomed to. In other words, food culture reaffirms territorial identity. In this respect, food memory mobilizes cuisine, ingredients and people.

One of the references that helps construct identities inscribed in a given food system is the indissoluble anchoring of foods in their place of origin. The association between space and food heritage creates an opportunity to use territories in which an emblematic product serves as a tourist destination. This comes in response to growing demand related to increased interest in the combination food-authenticity [Bessièrre 1998].

However, it would be wrong to believe that the link between food and its place of origin is sufficient in itself to attract people in search of authentic products. Certain studies indicate that traveling is the result of the desire for an authentic experience, a return to origins, and an attempt to escape the stresses of urban life and re-encounter a forgotten culture [Bessièrre 2013; Cohen and Avieli 2004; Avieli 2013].

From the above it can be seen that food memory emerges from the consumption of food anchored in its territory of origin. This is formed by a private memory, a shared historical identity, and a reading of the present through the imaginary of the past, which at all times involve food [Holtzman 2006]. In this way, the preference for certain foods, ingredients or cuisines produces sensory experiences that settle into the subconscious of individuals [Berger and Luckmann 2011; Sutton 2010] and evoke a state of pleasure and comfort that can be either physical or psychological [Wansink, Cheney and Chan 2003].

Culinary Tourism: The Recreational Dimension of Local Cuisine in the Context of Globalization

The productive restructuring of rural space and the transformation of its relationships with urban space can be read from the perspective of globalization [Beck 1998]. The frame of reference for the global world allows us to understand the substantial changes undergone by rural areas that are no longer exclusively used for the production of raw materials since they now fulfill important environmental and cultural functions [*Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Synthesis Report*, 2005]. In the 21st century, these areas serve as an important counterweight to the increasing homogenization of society.

One of the principal cultural services rural areas offer society is as reservoirs of local cultural heritage, which in large cities is usually diluted due to the pressures of the global world. One of the most important expressions of this is food heritage, with the rural outskirts serving as one of the scenarios where it is possible to find this heritage in its most authentic form.

The loss of culinary knowledge in urban societies leads us to think about traditional foods from the perspective of cultural consumption. In this respect, the consumption of these foods, as well as their nutritional functions, become a culinary experience that involves entertainment [Warde and Martens 2000].

The above, when added to the crisis of the Latin American agricultural sector [FAO 2014], has influenced the use of rural space for tourism. One of the forms of rural tourism enjoying the largest growth globally is that occupying a space between the production and consumption of traditional cuisine. The development of this emerged from the reconceptualization of the economic and social functions of culinary resources, seen as tourist capital [Thomé-Ortiz 2015].

Culinary Tourism is understood as the pursuit of unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences that reflect local cuisine, heritage and culture. Local food as a marker of regional identity, combined with travels, can be effective tools for promoting tourism and rural development [Besière 2013; Timothy and Boyd 2006; Avieli 2013].

Food and Memory as Markers of Territorial Identity in Culinary Tourism

The tourism associated with traditional cuisine is inscribed within a set of cultural consumption practices involving the contemporary use of the past [Ashworth 2003]. Such consumption practices present a material bias of heritage, as a tourist resource, linked to a market focus predominant in general studies of leisure [Ashley et al. 2007]. In this study, however, our interest centers on knowing how a food resource is marked as heritage from the symbolic connotations of the consumption of leisure time in urban societies.

The study of memory as a component of personal history helps us to understand authenticity as a subjective construction conditioned by the social, economic and cultural position of the individual. This implies that the heritage value and the quality of traditional foods cannot be studied as an intrinsic quality of products, but rather as a more complex event influenced by the personal experiences of the consumer and the message transmitted by the tourism offer [Wall and Xie 2005].

According to Timothy and Boyd [2006], new trends in heritage tourism include the resignification of ordinary landscapes and ordinary people, with ordinary heritage being an object of tourist interest. This is where local food can be found. Also involved in this process is the need to place traditional cuisine on the scale of cultural consumption goods that operate as representations of cultural heritage and serve as territorial markers for the tourist, thereby becoming a focal element of contemporary urban leisure [Timothy 2005].

One of the areas that has been least studied in heritage tourism is the way personal heritage and individual identities influence tourist practices. In this respect, the link between the dynamics of leisure time and the family heritage held in memory is interesting [Timothy 1997]. Therefore, the study of culinary tourism invites an analysis of social, historical and psychological links between the heritage objects of tourism and individual identity [Timothy and Boyd 2006].

The personal scale of heritage carries a restorative effect from the past, connecting its heirs with simpler pleasures and reflecting uncommon values in today's societies [Squire 1994]. Tourism studies have dedicated significant space to the study of heritage, given that this is its fundamental material, but little study has been dedicated to personal heritage as a travel motivator in the context of a more personalized and interactive tourism [Strietska-Ilina and Tessaring 2005].

Family histories are a significant factor in any understanding of personal heritage linked to tourism since family journeys and their motivations are a vitally important material used for approaching the nature of certain forms of heritage tourism that have rarely been studied [Timothy 1997].

Traditional Texcoco *barbacoa*: A Territorial Specialty

Texcoco *barbacoa* is a dish with pre-Hispanic roots, whose meticulous preparation process and characteristic taste have resulted in a product highly valued in central Mexico and a source of income for its producers. It is a dish that complies with the characteristics of traditional cuisine indicated by Henchion [2014], based on the singularity of its culinary methods and with an emphasis on the traditional nature of its preparation.

Its peculiarity lies in the use of the Mayan slow cooking method called "pib," where a hole is dug in the ground and heated with firewood for three hours. Then, the entire animal is wrapped in maguey leaves and placed in the hole where it is left for six hours, during which time the meat is cooked and the consommé obtained [Thoms 2009]. *Barbacoa* is a festive food reserved for special occasions or weekends and is accompanied by the most characteristic products of Mexican gastronomy: corn, chili, beans, avocado, tomato and wild herbs [Rubio et al. 2004; Adapon 2008].

More than just a ritual, the preparation of *barbacoa* constitutes a culinary technique where quality is related to physical labor, mastery in the preparation and virtuoso knowledge of the product, all of which leads to the creation of an example of local culinary excellence. This has guaranteed the dish a place in the highest hierarchy of Mexican cuisine [Adapon 2008]. The product, the producer and the superiority of their knowledge are fundamental features of the traditional nature of this dish.

A study of the sensory evaluation of consumers, for which three types of meat were used (*criollo* sheep, crossbred and imported sheep) showed no significant differences [Rubio et al. 2004]. This helps to demonstrate that the quality of the *barbacoa* is directly linked to the skill in preparation rather than the type of meat used.

We can therefore state that the origin of this food has a sociohistorical character based on cultural memory, which is to be found in the know-how of the cooks who are usually men. This is a substantive feature when classifying the space as an enclave of culinary tradition, something that illustrates what was described by Moon [2008] in South Korea with regard to local dishes as territorial markers.

Barbacoa is relatively expensive and is sold at 20 to 40 dollars per kilo. Its distribution is exclusive to the traditional food markets, where at around midday the product is bought and sold. The high prices and exclusiveness of the distribution coincide with what was reported by Henchion [2014] in the case of traditional food in Ireland. This is a widely popular food that invites social interaction and for which consumption includes aspects of taste and economic position.

Culinary Memory through Leisure Time

Memories of Production

One aspect mentioned by the producers interviewed is how ingrained the practice of preparing *barbacoa*, or being a “*barbacoyero*”, is in the family. The ability to produce high quality *barbacoa* serves as cultural capital [Bourdieu 1987b] incorporated through practices that are learned and become second nature within the families of producers:

“As a child I helped my grandmother sell lambs feet and consommé. When I was older, I accompanied my grandfather to the Apan plains to get the lambs. He taught me which firewood to use and how to heat the maguery leaves, but you had to be stronger to do that.”

Food memory, deployed in the preparation of *barbacoa*, functions on the basis of the transfer of a body of empirical and technical knowledge that is

assimilated by producers. Therefore, the knowledge required to prepare the dish is translated into a set of physical skills and practical abilities. Very few aspects are verbalized in the teaching and learning process:

“My father spoke very little; he was a man of few words. You had to pay a lot of attention to everything he did because afterwards he didn’t want us asking questions.”

When very young cooks are with more experienced ones, they must pay attention to the procedure until they can prepare their own *barbacoa*. The trade is passed down from generation to generation, like a mechanism for inheriting a way of making a living for younger family members. Teaching is reserved for family members or people related by marriage:

“My father-in-law is the one who knows most about *barbacoa*. When I married my wife, he gave me a job and taught me all his secrets.”

The preparation and sale of the product are activities that require a lot of work, so often all family members are involved in the process. The roles are clearly defined by age and gender, with young men in charge of preparing the dish, given that handling the lamb and preparing the oven require greater physical strength. Women and children usually take on tasks that have to do with preparing the accompaniments (tortillas, salsas, and *nopales* or paddle cactus) and serving customers. The most experienced male is in charge of cutting the meat in accordance with the preferences of each consumer:

“We all work here. My dad dispatches the meat, my brother and I prepare the *barbacoa*, the women make salsa and tortillas and the children wait on tables. We’re always short-handed on Sundays.”

Each producer jealously guards the secret to preparing *barbacoa* with his personal stamp. Substantial differences can be seen in the seasoning of the meat, the type of firewood used, the preparation of the oven, the selection of the lamb and the temperature used for cooking. These processes help create a tenderer and juicier product with more or less fat and more or less salt, with each variation serving to satisfy the expectations of a clientele whose tastes are already identified.

“I like cooking the meat medium rare. If it’s cooked for too long it dries out. A lot of salt kills the flavor. It’s important for the customer to know he’s eating *barbacoa*, since that’s what he’s looking for in Texcoco.”

The “*barbacoyeros*” cannot change their recipe, ingredients or how they prepare the meat. If they do, they run the risk of losing customers who,

over time, have become used to a certain flavor since *barbacoa* is not only consumed with the senses, it is also consumed with the memory. As mentioned previously, the construction of sensory experiences that settle in the subconscious of consumers leads to the emergence of desire and combines with current demands (quality and service).

One feature inherent to the analysis of the sedimentation of memories associated with the production of *barbacoa* is directly linked to why Texcoco remains an enclave of culinary know-how. From our perspective, this is for at least three reasons: 1) it is a profitable activity that serves as a way of making a living for its producers; 2) the cohesion of producers' families guarantees the existence of a social structure in which culinary know-how is reproduced; and 3) the skill of a "*barbacoyero*" is positively valued, which fosters a sense of belonging and identity:

"Before, everyone in the family made barbacoa. Now there are fewer of us, but those who dedicate themselves to this are never short of work. My nephews prefer to study and not get a job. I don't want that for my children. You can make a good living from this and you are your own boss."

In the case of Texcoco, it is important to point out that the motivation of visitors is related to the culinary know-how of the *barbacoa* producers, this being an immaterial resource linked to territory that persists in the collective memory of the families who produce this dish.

Memories of Consumption

Tourists who travel to Texcoco from Mexico City make the journey with their families, in other words, three to five people from the family unit. Food memory emerges from the moment the family decides to make the journey. Some respondents pointed out that when they were children they saw the journey from Mexico City to Texcoco as a way to enjoy their leisure time, often in the company of their families:

"When we were children, my dad would take us to Texcoco to eat barbacoa. It was a really long trip for me. Each time I come back here, the memories of those times come flooding into my mind, as if my parents were here. Now I only come with my wife and daughter."

Today, urban families tend to be smaller. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography [INEGI 2010], the average number of inhabitants per home in Mexico is 3.9. The above is reflected in the reduced consumption of *barbacoa* per family unit. However, the family memories and the desire from the past preserve the custom of leaving the city to eat, which also performs a structural function in the cohesion of consumer groups, regardless of their size.

The consumption of *barbacoa* is related to the persistence of objects and spaces which, according to the respondents, has not substantially changed. The existence of these physical elements serve as points of support for maintaining memory:

“Before, barbacoa wasn’t sold at the market. The stands were set up in the arches and you could buy it by the kilo and eat a taco in the square or go somewhere else. When I walk through the arches and see them empty, I imagine what used to be there. It’s as if you took everything that’s now at the market and put it along the long corridors.”

The taste for traveling and eating is acquired and transferred from parents to children. The respondents acknowledged that they eat the same *barbacoa* their parents ate, who in turn ate the same *barbacoa* with their parents. In other words, three generations reproduce a form of tourism that is conditioned by the experience of the journey and a taste for traditional local food. This point deserves special attention since it connects the know-how of “*barbacoyeros*” with the food memory of consumers:

“Ever since I can remember we bought barbacoa from the Trujano family. They’ve known me since I was a child and always keep us a little bit of shoulder and some tripe. Since they know us, they weigh the meat properly and even give us a little extra.”

The relationship established with *barbacoa* producers transcends the purely economic and, in some cases, is based on the existence of affective ties. The loyalty of consumers is linked to the trust built over several generations, based on treating them well and fairly, and the offer of a very high quality product. The same families of consumers keep buying from the same families of producers where, despite sociocultural changes, a system of traditional production has been maintained.

Conclusions

Mexico City, like many other megalopolises in the world, shows significant transformations in the food consumption patterns of its inhabitants. The above points to an imminent process of restoration of culinary heritage in the context of globalization, which is debated between the permanence of tradition and the processes of transformation.

The territorial origin of food is one of the most powerful markers for identifying what nourishes the human body and the social body, but this is not reduced to the location of the food in a given space, but rather involves analyzing the way in which identifying with local products triggers a strong

psychological component that regulates the relationship between people, places and products.

Food memory is the element that links the past to the present through the celebration of practices, objects and spaces relating to self-defining foods. At the same time, tourism functions as a mechanism of cultural contact and the transfer of food culture. Together, food memory and tourism create close ties between the territories of consumers and producers, encouraging family interaction and community integration.

For the consumer, these kinds of tourist practices reflect a process of sociability that enables them to incorporate values from their identification with a food culture localized in time and space. Eating outside of the city not only involves the satisfaction of a physiological need, it also entails an experience that is usually related to a distant past which reproduces fragments of the personal history of consumers.

For producers, memory is a reservoir of empirical and technical knowledge whose intergenerational transfer contributes to the development of a sense of belonging, through which the territory becomes an enclave of culinary know-how translated into an intangible local capital able to attract visitors every weekend.

A subjective signification, which is food memory, corresponds to the spatial expression of the link between territory and food. It is a symbolic interior space that connects people with food and their places of origin, from a liminal relationship between production and consumption.

This case serves to illustrate how local culinary resources translate into significant experiences for urban visitors, an aspect that indicates the need for further research into future scenarios for traditional cuisine in the context of a changing world. Such research is necessary since it is assumed these resources and their associated knowledge will serve as substantial elements for the quality of life of future societies from a food, cultural and psychological perspective.

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