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Sobremesa: An Analysis of Food & Culture In Hispanic Communities

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If there's one thing I've always associated with my large Latin family, it is food. Gathering around a table large enough to sit twelve people, I would watch as my mother and aunts shuttled delicately prepared foods to the center of the table. However, it wasn't the food that I remembered most vividly from these encounters. Rather, it was the sense of community that permeated the atmosphere of the entire meal. It was an anchor in the midst of a hectic twenty-first century lifestyle. It was a sense of unity and inclusion that inspired me to pursue a study of the role of food in Hispanic communities. I became interested in interviewing members of the Hispanic community to see if their experiences mirrored my own. Mary Douglas informs us that "Food...is a particularly good boundary marker, perhaps because it provides ...the ability to transform the outside into the inside...food is about identity creation and maintenance" (as cited in Sutton, 2001, p. 5). Fueled by these thoughts on creation of an identity and community, I wanted to examine the importance assigned by Hispanics to meals in the household and delve further into individuals' associations with memories of eating.

In compiling my research questions, I began to wonder whether my interviewees, who span several generations, perceived a change in the role of the meal in the household. In an era where there is an increasing emphasis on individualism in American society and a prominent shift towards more women working and the average individual working more hours overall, I wondered what effects it would all have on food inside the home. This became the secondary focus of the study. I invited my interviewees to share their thoughts about any notable changes pertaining to the meal throughout the decades, whether or not they felt that the meal has been devalued, and what factors they attribute to any perceptible changes.



La Abuelita
Elaine Yang (11)

Methods

In conducting the study, I chose to interview a pool of eight individuals, consisting of six women and two men. The interviewees consisted of four second-generation Hispanics and four first generation Hispanic immigrants. It is important to note that the interview pool did not have a homogenized immigrant background. Rather, the pool consisted of four Mexican informants, two Cuban informants and two Dominican informants. For clarity in this paper, I will utilize the term 'Hispanic' as an all-encompassing label. The word Hispanic is "of or relating to the people, speech, or culture of Spain and Portugal; of, relating to, or being a person of Latin American descent living in the United States, especially Mexican, Cuban or Puerto Rican" (Mish, 2009). For reference here, I will briefly describe each interviewee. My Mexican interviewees consisted of four females: MH, age 25; LR, age 38; MD, age 60; and SD, age 79. My two informants from Dominican backgrounds were LS, age 42, and CMP, age 20. The final two informants were Cuban: LR, age 46, and EP, age 88.

Between all eight of the interviewees, the generational divide of the pool spans from 20 to 88 years of age. This was crucial to the development of a well-rounded perspective on changes in the role of the meal over the last few decades. My interviews were structured in a four-part manner. First, we discussed meals and an air of formality, examining table etiquette and customs, as well as the role of familiarity in structuring a meal. Secondly, we discussed memories attributed to food by individuals. Next, we tackled celebratory occasions and holidays and the resultant changes that ensued during these particular moments in the year. Finally, I broached the subject of meals and how they may have changed over time.

Food and Memory

When asking my 8 interview subjects what kinds of memories they associated with food, positive or negative, there was an overwhelming and unchallenged answer of 'positive'. As EP put it, "I can't think of anything more enjoyable than the food we had together." Deborah Lupton, in an article about food and emotion, states that "There is a strong relationship between memory and the emotional dimension of food...food is an element of the

material world which embodies and organizes our relationship with the past in socially significant ways..." (2005, p. 320). Indeed, food is a powerful and evocative medium for remembrance of the past. These past experiences, in turn, are the basis for structuring how many individuals think and act today within their own households. Lupton continues by informing her readers that preparation of a meal at a later point in life can evoke memories related to the food items consumed in the past and draw out emotions or recollections associated with that time (2005, p. 320). These experiences are something that individuals chose to share or avoid, depending on what was retained through previous encounters. Both MH and LR relayed stories to me, when prompted about memories associated with food, about watching their mothers cook in the kitchen and trying to integrate those preparation skills into their own work in the kitchen. LR told me that she still tries to imitate her mother's tamale recipes based on the little nuances that she recalls from dinnertime when she was younger. She says, "My friends ask me why I tie the tamale three times around when I invite them to dinner. I say, "Because its how my mother did it". I won't change it for anything." LR's anecdote exemplifies David Sutton's observations on 'doing' cooking. She embarked on an informal apprenticeship as a young girl and draws upon images and experiences that are stored in her memory versus a set of structured rules that were laid down or written (2001, 135). Sutton emphasizes the efficacy of memory recall in situational cooking. At least three of my other female informants mentioned in the course of the interview that their ability to cook more traditional Hispanic dishes comes from recollections of how their grandmothers, mothers, and aunts used to cook.

Many of my interview subjects associate memories with specific sensory experiences of consumed food items. LS recalled how she associates the smell of fresh baking bread with her mother and neighbors baking in the Dominican Republic. This sensory marker triggered a tangential recall of the relationship between her neighbors and her family on the island. CMP tells me that whenever he smells *bacalao a la viscaína* simmering on the stove, he immediately thinks of Christmas. *Bacalao*, or codfish, is a dish eaten traditionally on *Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve) in many Spanish-speaking countries. Indeed, the smell becomes a reminder and marker of the holiday, even if his family is making it during some other point in the year. These observations mirror Marcel Proust's commonly quoted anecdote about how he remembered his childhood with a simple taste of a Madeleine cookie (as cited in Sutton, 2001, p. 88). Proust's story emphasizes the ability of a sensory part, such as smell or taste, to evoke memories of the whole of the events surrounding these individual experiences (Lupton, 2005, p. 320).

In addition to sensory and cognitive experiences, food entered the realm of memory for my subjects in the form of a structured meal pattern at home. Mary Douglas' work, *Deciphering a Meal*, has been highly regarded in anthropology for its study of the basic structure of the meal. Douglas argues that a meal must recall the structure of previous meals in order to cement what metonymically constitutes a meal (1975, pg. 237). Meals are a repetition of key themes that can be elaborated and expanded, but are grounded in a centralized definition of what and who makes up the meal. When inquiring about memories and food in their homes, I asked my interview subjects to recall the structure of their lunch and dinner meals, if any. This included asking about table preparation, etiquette, time, place, etc. in relation to eating a meal. Out of the eight interviewees, six indicated that the meal was connected with a specific time in the home and all interviewees said that meals took place around a table, usually in the kitchen space or a dining room space. A good example came out of my interview with EP. She stated: "We always dined in the dining room, around the table. Never in another place. And at 12:00 we had lunch and at 7:00 we had dinner. From 7 to 8. My mom would say 'if you aren't here, you don't eat.'" The only exceptions to these rules seemed to be during celebratory occasions. LP told me that he recalls specifically how on Christmas and New Year's Eve, the family was not allowed to eat before midnight. Even the change in meal times and structure during holidays and special occasions, however, followed an established pattern, according to LP. The repetitious nature of the meal during holidays develops into a symbol itself: the observation of these specially structured meals indicates the arrival of these annual holiday periods. In interviewing my subjects, it was evident that the symbiotic relationship between memory and the meal plays a large role in remembering the past in the present.

Food as a Method of Socialization

Food has a unique ability to be a definer of one's individuality and affiliation with a specific place in society (Anderson, p. 124). The foods eaten and customs followed by individuals acquire a level of familiarity that becomes embedded in their identities. In an article entitled *Identity and the Global Steer*, Allison James asserts that

shared patterns of consumption mark a distinction between one group and another (2005, pg. 374). Consumption sets up a series of boundaries between what is culturally accepted as edible or tasteful and how it is eaten, standing apart from all that can be consumed in the world. E.N. Anderson echoes this same sentiment, speaking about how food is second only to language in terms of communicative functions (2005, pg. 126). Words are of little importance at the table. Rather, more information is transmitted by observance and integration of the social transactions occurring over the table than what is said verbally. This spans a broad range of interactions. Basic table etiquette falls within this category, but also rules about who is served first, who sits next to the host, food distribution and so on. LS commented on such categories when asked about preparation and etiquette at the table: "Usually my mother or my aunt would serve the kids. If there were a lot of kids, it was expected that the kids would be relegated to a smaller table and adults would occupy the main table. Kids were expected to be polite, quiet and to talk amongst themselves." Four of my successive interviewees spoke of similar experiences regarding social divisions between adults and children and the manners expected at the table.

Food preparation methods similarly serve as a method of socialization. Cuisine, according to Maria Elise Christie, author of *Kitchenspace: Women, Fiestas and Everyday Life in Mexico*, is among the most important markers of ethnicity. It is a means of asserting cultural identity and the way food is cooked imbues it with ideas of who these individuals believe they are, where these individuals live and what they believe their place is in the world (2008,



p. 31). The kitchenspace is where individuals learned about who was expected to cook and how, according to my interviewees. LR and LS both stated that meal preparation was the responsibility of all the female family members. If you were a young girl, you were expected to watch in the kitchen and once you were old enough, you could start to help. LR elaborated: "It would start that my mother would hand me corn husks and have me dampen them. Then I would learn how to cook the *masa*, how to prepare the *picadillo*, how to fill and wrap them. It was a process but, by the end, you were prepared to do it in your own kitchen." As Christie puts it,

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"kitchenspace appears to provide a refuge for culture, allowing the reproduction and reinvention of "*lo nuestro*" (what is ours) or core elements of collective identity" (2008, pg. 259). Kinesthetic information, the motions and actions of cooking, are thus transferred from mother to daughter, aunt to niece, cousin-to-cousin. But, beyond the understanding of practical physical mobilizations of resources, these actions must be stored as part of the collective memory of the interactive experience in order to be actualized later in life (Sutton, 2001, 127).

The other side of the equation, the consuming of the finished food products and meals, plays a further role in solidifying the socialization of an individual. People begin to be known and also to identify themselves with social standards of the foods they eat, just as they come to know what religion to follow or what language to speak (Mintz, 2003, pg. 23). Individuals also assimilate what types of foods should be eaten during holidays and ceremonial occasions in contrast to everyday meals. LP recalled his grandmother's Cuban *eggnog* during Christmas and how it was the one time during the year that the older children were allowed to drink some alcoholic beverages with their parents. MH said that celebratory meals were particularly distinctive because she

and her siblings were raised without dessert during the rest of the year. *Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve) signaled a brief moment of indulgence in sweet treats. MH also related a powerful example of how Spanish food is defined by regularly structured consumption and how introduction of "foreign" foods disrupted her family's eating patterns. She noted:

Food during special occasions was always pozole or tamales. We only had turkey once, when my Aunt wanted to imitate a Martha Stewart thanksgiving recipe. Nobody liked it. It was odd tasting and poorly cooked because it wasn't something she was used or trained to make. We didn't have it again, thank God! Clearly, there is a boundary between what individuals associated with the traditions of their respective Hispanic culture and what seems foreign. My interviewees all recognized that culturally defined preferences for food and methods of preparation labeled what was an inside food versus an outside food, serving as a boundary marker. Socialized meals convey strong messages about identification with the Hispanic world.

Linking Food and The Creation of A Communal Identity

EP emphatically informed me that "*Comida y familia es lo que se necesita en la vida*". In translation, the statement says that food and family are all you need in life. Humans are social feeders and there is emphasis placed on the solidarity of the unit that meals support. When asked if mealtime was a solitary event or a family gathering time, all eight of my interview subjects responded that mealtime was for the family. All interviewees agreed that meals were a time set apart from the rest of the day and that there was a sense of obligation behind being present at the table. LP said, "When food was ready, everyone was at the table. We were expected, father included, to sit at the table. There was no such thing as saying 'oh, I don't feel like eating now.'" Food is invariably linked to family, according to my subjects. Commensality is a key role to defining family and opening up discussion between family members. In fact, refusal to eat at the table or with others is regarded as a serious form of social isolation in traditional households (Counihan, 2004, pg. 7). The informants in this study all remarked in one way or another about how it was unacceptable to be late or to eat away from the rest of your family, unless you had a viable reason. If you chose to voluntarily isolate yourself from the table, it was understood that this action underscored some form of tension or a willingness to separate from the communal identity.

The main purpose of the meal, in accordance with my informants, was to bring people together and affirm a level of solidarity in social ties and family dynamics. This network *sobre mesa* (over the table) is large in Hispanic communities. Meals are not always centered on the nuclear family. Family extends far beyond to include aunts, uncles, cousins and other visiting or nearby relatives (Christie, 2008, pg. 252). Meals then expressly serve as a social facilitator for the rekindling of ties, exchange of information, and a reaffirmation of belonging to a group – whether a specific family or a larger connection to the Hispanic community.

Sharing the Table with A Stranger

Just as cultures create classifications for what is food and non-food, so the world is divided into kin and non-kin (Anderson, 2005, p. 125). The dynamics of the meal, according to my interviewees, does change somewhat when the table is shared with outsiders (people who are not relatives/kin). I inquired whether or not there was a difference in the meal or mealtime structure when individuals who were outside the family partook in eating within the household. LS informed: "With family, there was a sense of being more relaxed. But there wasn't really a huge difference – it's very customary to invite whoever was around or on the street (neighbors) to eat. It's a very Spanish thing. We take pride in sharing food." Clearly, folks from the Hispanic community or who shared some sort of cultural identification with these families were accepted and treated as though they belonged at the meal always. In contrast, MH and MD stated that there was never someone they didn't know at the table. It was almost exclusively family and relatives because, they said, meals equaled sharing time with your family. Other individuals should be expected to do the same with their families.

In probing my interviewees further, I made inquiries as to what, if any, changes occurred if the person attending the meal was not a member of the Hispanic community. CMP responded that the change would not be on his family's side, but rather an adjustment made by the visitor. EP elaborated, "We serve you what we serve our family. You are expected to at least try what we have made, because it is very important! We are offering you a piece of our home." In this way, my interviewees indicated that in being invited to a meal in a Hispanic household, it was necessary for outsiders to detach themselves, at least temporarily, from their given identities. The food consumed

during the period of the meal is imbued symbolically with the Spanish identity. The guests who voluntarily eat this food are assigned, for the interim, the position of being in the family and being a transitory member of the Hispanic community. Likewise, my interviewees noted that there was some level of heightened awareness at the table about how foods that are typically served in a Spanish household can become "exotic" in the presence of an outsider. At least four of my interviewees mentioned during this inquiry that one of the greatest offenses an outsider can make is refusing to take food from the hosts of the meal. Refusing food is intricately tied to rejection of Hispanic cultural values and identity. CMP remarked, "You don't make it really obvious, but deep down, you get a little irritated and upset that someone doesn't want to accept your food and hospitality. Then again, I guess that's just how we were raised. It's a cultural difference". Undeniably, this interaction between strangers and the Hispanic family exemplifies the tremendous power of food to take on valued meanings and generate subjective commentary (Sutton, 2001, pg. 6). As much as these interactions are based around the symbolic value of the food, acceptance of food can also be tied to notions of hospitality. Just as David Sutton informs that hospitality is something that must be repeatedly witnessed, in order to have a solidified social effect, hospitality is something that must equally be acknowledged by the recipient in the Hispanic community. You are encouraged to remember the generosity of your host.

Meals and Generations: Valuation or Devaluation?

The last section of my interviews with my informants focused on an opinion-based look at how the concept of the meal may have changed over time. I asked my interviewees if they felt that the role of the meal in their households had changed over their lifetime and whether they felt the meal was more or less important now than in the past. LS responded, "Meals are less important because we've lost traditions along the line, the planning and the large gatherings of people has diminished as people move out, leave the homeland, and so on." LS continued on to say that she felt as though food has become more streamlined, less labor intensive and more modernized. MD echoed a similar view of these changes in today's meal. Laura Shapiro, in an article entitled *Do Women Like to Cook*, explores the rise of quick, streamlined meals as a response to the decreasing amount of time women have to prepare meals for a family (2005, pg. 157). In a world where more and more women are becoming partially or entirely the parent whom brings in the family income, women cannot take as much time as before to both plan and prepare the meal. The result has been an increase in the mass marketing of pre-packaged products, easy bake foods, and even a growth in the reliance on restaurants and outside food providers to feed the family (Shapiro, 2005, pg. 158).

One of the most interesting responses I got on the value of the meal was from MH. She thought that the role of the meal as a central unifier for the family has not changed, but the consumption patterns have morphed over time. MH told me that she believed that meals are more important now than ever in the sense that it's the time of the day when families can get together. Efforts must be made on behalf of the family to honor and keep a hold of the symbolic value of the meal on the table. MH continues, "I think it is a great way for people to retain that part of our culture – have everyone sit down for even 30 minutes, for God's sake." She expressed her increasing frustration with the fast-paced twenty-first century culture, due to the fact that her family can no longer be at home every day around the same time to share a meal, even if it was quick-prepared food. For MH and her family, she says the real value of the meal lies in sharing it with those you love and care about. LR's commentary adds to this idea: "That point of constant daily contact becomes a reminder that we are a family, a unit. If I have children in the future, I would make every effort to have us sit around a table." Desires to retain the value of the meal as central part of family unification parallels the ideas of Carole Counihan's book on food in Tuscany. The Italian family she focuses her studies on similarly expresses the fundamental importance of the meal as a method of forging and cementing familial relationships and as an open forum of discussion (2004, pg. 125).

I gave my interviewees the chance to speak their minds about what factors they believe have led to this overall devaluation of the meal. The most common response out of my eight interviewees was that in losing the elders of the community, many traditions and recipes have been lost. Those recipes that remain are too prep-intensive for the twenty-first century lifestyle and thus, commodified food becomes an acceptable alternative. Another factor attributed to the role of the meal changing over time was the migration and exodus of family members. My informant EP is 88 years of age and has thus seen several years worth of a shift in migratory patterns, changes in food preparation, and in societal values and norms. She related her dismay at the separation

of her family over time: "Everybody took a different path. Nobody eats together anymore. After marriage, my sisters wouldn't come by. As my brothers worked longer hours, different shifts, they couldn't make it to lunch any more. It was sad and the table grew empty. When I left Cuba, I felt like I was the last to disperse. We would never really be together as a family again". She is not the only individual who responded in such a way to my inquiries. Several other of my interviewees spoke of a distancing over time in relation to individuals leaving the family home or neighborhood. SD told me that her daughter now lives across the United States and they see each other only on rare occasions. Indeed, migration and transnational displacement has become a growing concern for the preservation of cultural identity and tradition. David Sutton explores this idea in his book *Remembrance of Repasts* in which he describes how migration has led to the erosion of food-based memories and the social significance of eating (2001, pg. 64). What is lamented by these individuals is that as society has changed, and thus affected modern lifestyles, people feel that they have little control over these changes and less of an ability to retain identity trans-nationally.

Sobremesa: Conclusions & Final Thoughts

Sobremesa is defined as the time after a meal where the family may sit around a table and discuss with each other. It is a time for reflection and discussion and a time to simply be immersed in the presence of the family. It is clear from my interviews that food plays a variety of roles within the Hispanic community. First and foremost, food becomes the vehicle by which my interview subjects remember their families, their communal experiences and their cultural past. The table is the forum at which young children observe and learn from their parents the skills that will fully integrate them as members of the Hispanic community and that they will later, ideally, use at their own tables. Foodways become predictable and comprehensible as methods of socialization, facilitating the entry into an ethnic identity (Anderson, 2005, pg. 113).

But, ultimately, my interviewees have supported the notion of the meal as the symbolic placeholder and unifier of the family. In sitting around a table and sharing food as a common denominator, the members of the Hispanic community recognize the meal as a mark of social existence both within the household/family and within the greater network of Hispanic communities (Christie, 2008, pg. 252). Individuals who commit to the unwritten rules of mealtime are formally establishing the boundaries between themselves and others. The fear today for many, including my interview subjects, is a deterioration and disassociation of individuals with any particular identity. The movement of people and food in greater volumes and more quickly due to increased globalizations has begun to deteriorate the ties between place, food and group. Only in making a conscious effort to recognize the symbolic nature of food can individuals hold onto a sense of ethnic pride, no matter where they are or where they are headed. Identity is not a fixed set of memories or specific ideas, but rather a never-ending assimilation of memories and practices that define what we believe is our own individual place on the planet.

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