

# TACO LITERACY: LITERACY LEARNING AND MEXICAN FOODWAYS

By Steven Alvarez

**“If you really want to make a friend,  
go to someone’s house and eat . . .  
the people who give you their food  
give you their heart.”**

**—Cesar Chavez**

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**Abstract:** In this article, the author offers the example of a college-level writing course exploring Mexican foodways in the United States as a way to consider the “funds of knowledge” Latinx students, and all students, can use to explore communities. He argues that in a globally connected and multilingual world, the influence of foodways across the border is deeply connected to local experiences that extend beyond national borders. Food is an emotional part of the immigrant experiences, and in learning and writing about recipes as well as searching for local variations to preparation or presentation, and we can comprehend how food literacies situate different spaces, identities, forms of knowledge, and ways of languaging. Through the prism of food, we can better understand aspects of immigration and citizenship in ways that are welcoming, significant, and human.

**Keywords:** foodways, Mexican food, literacy, writing, bilingualism

The rich chocolate spiciness of mole poblano, from the Mexican state of Puebla, tastes overpowering to some, but like most anything else thickly sweet, one can learn to savor it. The mole poblano from señora Linda Carrillo in a small pueblo near Tehuacán, Puebla, tastes sweeter than what her son Ernesto found in Mexican restaurants when he lived in New York City, where he had migrated to when he was a teenager. Linda’s mole required over 20 ingredients and took days to cook to her experienced tastes.

As for his own cooking, Ernesto realized he could never match his mother’s mole recipe, and instead he would frequent a restaurant in East Harlem run by a family from his hometown. There, Juan Rodriguez, the owner, understood the necessary ingredients for mole poblano from their village, and through contacts in Mexico, he secured the more important and difficult to find ingredients in New York, such as coriander seeds, anise, five different types of required chiles, mulato, pasilla negro, ancho, chipotle, and puya. Juan was a second-generation Mexican American with roots in Puebla, who has inherited the business his father began. Juan also had connections to Puebla for ingredients, which he purchased from another friend from the region, Ramón Gutierrez who lived in Corona, Queens and sold Mexican products wholesale at his small grocery market. Ernesto eventually met and befriended Gutierrez and later became one of his business partners.

When Ernesto Carrillo eventually returned to Mexico after living in New York for over two decades, where he earned his high school

diploma, associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees and became a community activist, he completed a circuit in the network connecting Mexicans from this region of Mexico to New York City. Back in Puebla, Ernesto began working for Gutierrez in his distribution network, while attending university in Mexico. There, Ernesto maintained a connection to New York City professionally, culturally, and, as it were, culinarily.

These complicated networks that happen around food are not uncommon in the lives of transnational Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The material wealth around food has propelled some Mexican immigrants into the middle classes of the United States, and, as in the case of Ernesto, comfortable middle-class status in Mexico. These networks are also deeply emotional in the case of Ernesto's searching for the taste of his homeland when living abroad. This increasing orientation towards the theme of a transnational common good presupposes equitable institutional policies, support for members and immigrant participants who straddle national borders, and resources allocated for engaging the world beyond the United States. Indeed, this is one of the difficulties for conducting transnational research, though it is without reservation the richest forms of research because of its extensive scope and potential to link nodes within global networks.

It is from this frame that I approach what I call "Taco Literacy," an approach to studying Mexican foodways that begins with learning about people and their social relations and expressions through food across borders. For me, this research in foodways also connects to writing, literacy, and bilingualism in families from Mexico and the United States. This always implies, however, putting food in context, and is always connected with the people who make the food. When foodways are decontextualized, the potential to build walls that dehumanize people increases.

### The Taco Background Research

In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of scholarly works about Mexican food exploring multilingual, transnational, and cross-cultural issues in the humanities, including representations of Mexican cooking in film and literature (Soler & Abarca, 2013), food memoirs (Chávez, 2006), culinary histories (Arellano, 2014; Pilcher, 2012), and "taco journalism" (Neece & Rayo, 2016). In addition, scholarly works about Mexican food across disciplines range from important social justice issues in regards to cultural appropriation (Esparza, 2017), migrant labor (Purcell-Gates, 2013), targeted marketing (Carr Salas & Abarca, 2015), and the translation of indigenous cuisine for corporate consumption in different contexts (Peña, Calvo, McFarland, & Valle, 2017). Less explored, however, has been the influence of foodways and literacies across the US-Mexico border. Indeed, Mexican food in the United States is deeply connected to local experiences of global migration, and Taco Literacy fills this void by making the case that the history and networks of Mexican and Mexican American food in the United States demonstrate how transnational community literacies sustain emotional connections and local relationships among individuals building publics across borders and languages. Through the prism of food, students in the course probe issues related to immigration and citizenship in ways that are welcoming, significant, and human. Students examine how foodways comprise approaching culinary practices and eating habits as social research that intersects with translanguaging literacy studies, demonstrating how walls have never stopped foodways or languages from migrating freely. Likewise, students exposed to the extensive body of research about Mexican foodways as listed above

find directions to guide their own research to contribute to further learning about the cultural importance of food. As students dive deeper into Mexican foodways, they also write their way through learning, while discovering the art of writing about food in different genres and digital media platforms. Lastly, because I invited professional food writers to speak to students at different points in the semester, students were able to learn more about different fields of writing and how the digital writing they did in this course was reflective of trends in professional food writing.

### Finding My Way to Taco Literacy

This research is part of my larger book-length project called *Taco Literacy: Mexican Foodways in New York City*, which initially began as an upper-division college writing course I taught. The course had gained media attention in 2016 when I taught it at the University of Kentucky, and which gained national media coverage (from *BuzzFeed*, *VICE*, *The New Yorker*, National Public Radio, as well as from *Telemundo* and *Univision*). This opened important public audiences to the field of composition and rhetoric and the potential to learn from community literacies as foodways and teaching writing through foodways.

My writing pedagogy is grounded in understanding community literacies, since I have also taught and conducted research in afterschool programs, libraries, and other non-school spaces. I had taught English in Mexico as a graduate student before I had conducted extensive research among Mexican communities in New York City (2017a) and Kentucky (2017b), and well before Mexican foodways became a focus of my research. At this point in my career, I am better equipped as a teacher of both English studies and writing as well as a researcher well-versed in the literacy practices of Mexican immigrants. Studying Mexican foodways has also given me the opportunity to share my research with Mexican colleagues as well as to hopefully build more on the classroom practices of my teaching expertise in the foreign context—though I have since taught English courses in China. I am third-generation Mexican American, and returning to Mexico is always a study of my roots and an important aspect for my future research that will explore further the movement of families transnationally and how foodways literacies practice care over vast distances.

### Texan Mexican Food Appreciation

Studying Mexican food in Texas, of course, has the potential to dive into the long history of Mexican food in the Lone Star state. As with California, Arizona, and New Mexico, Texas has a long history of Mexican migration and a longer history when Texas was Mexico. I will not dive into the long history of what has become known as "Tex-Mex" cuisine, but bear in mind that such a topic would be worthwhile for students in Texas to write about with authority. In Texas there is also a strong culture of foodways appreciation for Mexican contributions. The organization Foodways Texas ([www.foodwaystexas.org](http://www.foodwaystexas.org)), for example, archives and celebrates the diverse foodways of Texas at an annual symposium, exploring the state's people and history through Mexican food. Further, Mexican food festivals in Texas such as Taco Libre in Dallas ([www.tacolibrefest.com](http://www.tacolibrefest.com)) showcase innovative approaches to tacos from around the state, and also bordering states in Mexico and the United States that flock to the event that celebrates Mexican culture, music, and food. With such a strong "mainstream" appreciation of Mexican food in Texas, it makes sense that a course like Taco Literacy would be a welcome way to approach studying writing through food, using food as a prism to understand Mexican migration to city and the

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United States, and the people who bring foodways and stories to new places, while also influencing—and being influenced by—foodways across borders.

In a globally connected and multilingual world, the influence of foodways across the US-Mexico border in Texas is deeply connected to local histories that extend beyond national borders. Food is an emotional part of Texan experiences, and in learning and writing about recipes as well as searching for local variations to preparation or presentation, we can comprehend how food literacies situate different spaces, identities, forms of knowledge, and ways of languaging. Through the prism of food, we can better understand aspects of immigration and citizenship in ways that are welcoming, significant, and human.

### **Taco Literacy: Linking Foodways, Writing, and Learning**

Taco Literacy is a writing course exploring Mexican foodways in the United States as a way to consider the “funds of knowledge” Latinx students, and all students, can use to explore communities, while challenging dehumanizing notions of walls. As I have developed the Taco Literacy course, I have formulated what I feel to be more explicit writing outcomes and learning goals. I asked myself what projects students would be working toward over the semester, and from those, I identified key markers to achieve and which would be measurable. I focused on specific verbs related to literacy and composition (edit, revise, formulate definitions, publish) that could be accounted for in the texts students produced for the term. For the learning outcomes, these include:

- Students will contextualize global perspectives of Mexican foodways to local varieties of Mexican foodways.
- Students will write about personal connections to Mexican foodways and articulate their sense of what Mexican food means culturally as part of American and global cuisine.
- Students will edit writing and reflect on their writing process.
- Students will revise a body of informal writing into larger researched projects.
- Students will formulate definitions of foodways from different sources.
- Students will maintain WordPress and Instagram digital platforms to publish fieldwork and research.

For the course, students constructed WordPress websites where they archived their work for the course (directly meeting outcome 6). On these websites, students produced a substantial amount of text, approximately 7,000 words of informal writing published as 24 “blog posts” and 60 Instagram posts, which students then developed into five formal, polished essay texts, which among the five essays totaled around 8,000 to 9,000 additional words. The theme of Mexican foodways was the topic students explored in their research, which deepened based on their interests that emerged over the span of the course. With the 15,000 words composed by students, outcomes 1 through 5 became important as students improved the quality of their writing with the quantity of informal writing paired with formal writing as well as through sharing work with classmates and receiving timely feedback from me. I was able to engage their writing in constructive ways for their growth as writers.

### **Mexican Foodways Writing Project Outline**

Students had their own WordPress site and linked Instagram account where they created and maintained an archive of their low-stakes writing. From these platforms, students revised this material into more polished work, the higher-stakes digital essays. The research project was a term-long portfolio project completed in stages—assignments 1 through 5 and published as a WordPress website. Students’ assignments focused on issues discussed in class, or their reflections responding to readings/documentaries/writing from the course. All assignments were published on individual student websites, which by the end of the semester became their digital portfolios archived online, and linked to the class website. Students’ revised larger projects developed with the additional information and insights they gained through their fieldwork and as they became more familiar with Mexican food, literacies, and local issues. With a research assignment like this, students were free to add information and observations gained over time instead of feeling that earlier assumptions and conclusions were set in stone. Students used the readings in class and their instincts to guide their topic choices and how they connected all five assignments.

#### **Connections to Mexican Food**

Students wrote about their personal connections to Mexican food and their sense of Mexican food as part of US and global cuisines. Each student composed a photo-essay reviewing a local Mexican restaurant, following a particular dish they researched. Using the models of reviews read in class, each piece told a story and captured aspects of taste and emotion connected to food literacies and the location. The foodways narratives of the Southern Foodways Alliance archive were demonstrative in this respect and models to emulate. Students’ photos told a story that gave voice to flavors. They also had to include five translations of words from Spanish and describe the roots of words, making note of indigenous loanwords.

#### **Food Politics**

Students engaged with food politics by researching the production of ingredients in a second dish as well as the history of this dish. Students researched into variances, local varieties, and the movement of the dish to different locations across Mexico and the United States. In addition, students also researched the production of ingredients and preparation of the dish. Students’ projects included ten photographs/images that depicted the dish as well as preparation and migration maps. The texts were 1,500 words and included MLA citations and hyperlinked sources.

#### **Research**

Students conducted a literature review of a topic related to their research interests in Mexican food, ranging from topics as diverse as tortillas to agricultural labor. Students researched five articles and included reviews for each article they uncovered. For each article, students summarized key points or ideas that connected to their previous two assignments. Students evaluated the quality of the sources and included quotes with which they practiced close-reading analysis of both culinary research methods and key findings. Students produced a 2,000-word text that included MLA citations and hyperlinked sources.

#### **Exploring Local Foodways**

Students explored local foodways through community voices by conducting team interviews. The teams of classmates interviewed



an individual with deep connections to Mexican food and culture. The teams conducted an interview and used its transcript to compose a written profile. Students' profile quoted directly from the interview, while also engaging sources from their literature review. Students' portraits focused on their interviewees' lived experience connected to culture, history, geography, and migration. Students also included four photographs from the interview and four relevant videos or maps that connect to what they uncovered. Students also included a short slideshow (published on YouTube) that represented part of the interview. The published text was 2,000 words and included MLA citations and hyperlinked sources, published on both partners' blogs. Students also provided a signed interview release form, which we collectively made in class before conducting interviews.

### Critical Reflection/Argument

Students reviewed their previous research and fieldwork as they composed a critical reflection that engaged a scholarly argument concerning a topic or topics from their previous assignments. These texts were the capstones for students' semester-long portfolio where they offered insight into each assignment and where their research had travelled up to that point as well as potential directions for future research. Students included ten images from their semester-long research that best encapsulated themes they presented in their reflection. This final text was 750 words and included MLA citations and hyperlinked sources. Included in this assignment, students also finalized the visual preferences for their WordPress sites, including (1) updating header images and background colors and personalizing website titles, (2) updating their "About" page to include their contact information as well as their class Instagram username, (3) creating a single references page to house all the sources from their previous assignments, and (4) adding an Instagram feed on their blog where they gave a sample of their own images, followed by a 100-word reflection on using Instagram for foodways writing.

Early in the term, I made it clear that students would depend on their classmates, tutors in the Writing Center, and me as readers who would help them make decisions about how to present material and how best to interest their audience, but ultimately that they would become the experts on their particular study of their chosen topic. I also made it clear that students would spend a lot of time developing and revising, working on certain aspects of their writing, and all of this effort and expertise would be reflected in their final project and grade. That meant I also focused students' attention to revision and

awareness of their own work habits, strengths, and weaknesses in their writing processes.

All students who committed to doing the work for the course did well. Students who did not complete the required writing for the course were the ones whose reflected less output, and because of that, less meeting of the course goals. Because so much of the class is writing-focused with the goals, students who did not complete the work did not fare well in meeting the benchmarks. Fortunately, nearly all of the students engaged with the topic enthusiastically, and as the research became more self-directed, their enthusiasm increased. These, of course, were my evaluations of students, and what I thought they learned about writing through Mexican food in Taco Literacy. As the evaluations and comments by Taco Literacy students below attest, students found writing about Mexican food worthy of academic research, while also being attuned to their own literacy practices.

### Voices of Taco Literacy Students

In this section, to further explore the content of the class, I offer the voices of two students from the course and the written reflections they composed as the preface to their digital portfolios. These reflections examined their thoughts on the course and each of the assignments. Rather than explicitly expressing what Taco Literacy has been intending to do myself, I let the voices of the students who learned about Mexican foodways express what they gained from the course.

#### Student 1

"After a semester-long of taking the course Taco Literacy I can finally say I am completely taco literate. Being taco literate to me means having a deeper understanding of different components that go into Mexican food such as its history, the people, and their stories. Issues such as politics, racism also topics that arose in class really frequently and as a result, I understood the importance of identity and unity. It's about the food and the people. While food is great and we love Mexican food in the United States, we also have also failed to recognize where the food comes from. Behind every ingredient, there is a history behind it and we should be recognize it.

Besides the human factor behind the food—food has the ability to be flexible, which allows it to cross regions and alternate as well as it allows to cross borders and adapt evolve and even branch out to new species. Depending where you are its okay for food to be alter to better suit its crowd in other places. This is to say that Tex-Mex food is not to be frowned upon it is a branch from Mexico, and a regional kind of Mexican American food. A dish being "authentic" doesn't mean that there is only one way of cooking it. I have come to conclude that Mexican food undergoes adaptations in the United States because ingredients change, and contact with different people changes foodways. Whereas my original thought process was that authenticity only lied in Mexico, and that nachos were an Americanized idea of Mexican food, I came to learn that there is still history behind nachos connected to the border in Texas, and deeply connected to Mexico in the corn tortillas and beans."

#### Student 2

"As the semester comes to an end, I would like to thank Professor Alvarez for a wonderful and interesting class. Because of this literacy class, I now have more knowledge about the Mexican culture and history than I did before, which was very minimal. Whenever I see

a taco or a Mexican restaurant, I have questions in my head. I always think ‘I wonder what the story is about the people that work here’ or ‘how long has this place been around’ or ‘is this place passed down by a family for generations?’ or ‘what part of Mexico is everyone from?’ The reason why I think about these questions is because I have learned that there is a backstory to every restaurant. Because of this class, I have become less ignorant and more appreciative about the Mexican culture and the people. Before this class, my only relationship with Mexican food and culture was tacos, elote, and my friendship with two friends who are Mexican.

Besides learning about food and the history of it, we also made connections to American immigration and being mindful of cultural appropriation. One of the goals in this class was to study the global perspectives of Mexican foodways. To achieve this goal, Professor Alvarez brought in guest speakers who shared their story of how they started their food business in the United States. Besides importation, the main reason why we have Mexican culture in the United States is because of the people who emigrate from Mexico. These stories reminded me of my parent’s story, even if we are not from Mexico. The sacrifices, hard labor, and emotional rollercoaster they’ve been through for my sister and me.”

### Taco Literacy Is Literacy

Taco Literacy was an undergraduate senior seminar, a course description that permitted me to offer a course that explored students’ literacies through foodways, and how I taught the course was very much of my own design. With that, I infused writing at every stage, but I left the class open to a range of disciplines, ranging from journalism, sociology, history, anthropology, and cookbooks.

The topic of study, of course, is what first engaged students, and from what I learned from the students in Taco Literacy, though they loved learning about Mexican food in the US, they wanted to learn more about the cuisines and traditions of their families. To do this through writing, I believe, is an effective way for students to pose critical questions about how what we eat, how we eat, and where the food we eat comes from are pivotal questions that have an everyday basis, but yet go unasked too often. With the explicit focus on Mexican food, I asked students to turn to something inherently human, that is, food, to understand better humanizing practices associated with the food, in particular among immigrant communities. As we can gather from the students, this approach to thinking about the living expressions of culture and the dignity of communities is a valuable way of thinking about language, literacies, and writing.

Foodways literacy explores deep social, cultural, and emotional registers linked to culinary history and contact with different traditions. In what could be read as learning through flavor and intensity, foodways literacy socially situates visceral experiences and languaging. I connect all this to literacy as the critical orchestration of foodways as a locus of meaning making. The food that powers the body is a central network of meaning. It’s involving, embodied, and consuming. In the registers of visceral experience, foodways literacy engages culinary practices and eating habits as social research that intersects with language literacy.

### Additional Reading

With all this body of research, it is clear that studying Mexican food is academically rigorous. For this reason, organizing a class around the theme would not prove difficult in terms of readings. In fact, as the list below attests, one could easily organize a series of Taco Literacy seminars (or perhaps a program of study in Tacology).

Nieve Pascual Soler and Meredith Abarca’s *Rethinking Chicana/o Literature Through Food: Postnational Appetites* (2013).

Denise Chávez’s food memoir *A Taco Testimony: Meditations on Family, Food and Culture* (2006).

Jeffrey Pilcher’s *Planet Taco* (2012).

Gustavo Arellano’s *Taco USA: How Mexican Food Conquered America* (2013), and Paula Morton’s *Tortillas: A Cultural History* (2014), and “taco journalism” mixed with regional oral histories and recipes in Jarod Neece and Mando Rayo’s *The Tacos of Texas* (2016).

Carole Counihan and Valeria Siniscalchi’s *Food Activism: Agency, Democracy and Economy* (2013) to decolonial approaches to indigenous cuisines in Luz María Calvo and Catriona Rueda Esquibel’s *Decolonize Your Diet* (2015).

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To see more about Taco Literacy, as well as links to student websites, see <http://tacoliteracy.com> and also @tacoliteracy on Instagram.

