



Adán Medrano, executive producer and narrator, in the opening scene of "Truly Texas Mexican." Photo by Gabriel Bendahan.

FOOD NEWS

Don't Call it Tex-Mex: 'Truly Texas Mexican' Shines a Light on South Texas Cuisine

San Antonio native Adán Medrano's latest film dispels the misconceptions surrounding Texas Mexican cooking.

BY Edmund Tijerina

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When Adán Medrano founded the Chicano Film Festival in 1976 (now called Cine Festival), he wanted to spotlight stories that weren't being told about the Latino community. After a career in films, a certification from the Culinary Institute of America-San Antonio and a more recent move into culinary endeavors, he has released a new work that combines his skills as a filmmaker and a chef.

This documentary, *Truly Texas Mexican*, focuses on Texas borderland cuisine and has just been released on Amazon, Apple TV and Google TV.

Here, Medrano takes a few moments to discuss the film, his books, the cuisine of Mexican Americans that we all love and why San Antonio is at the heart of what Texas is all about.

How have people responded to the film?

It's been surprising, overwhelming, humbling. Much greater in numbers and intensity than I had expected. It's gone worldwide, it's gone all over into Latin American and Mexico. There's both an English version and a Spanish-language version.

There are three components to the audience: The first is the one that's closest to the story. That's the Tejano/Chicano/Mexican American community of Texas. That's the Rio Grande Valley, San Antonio and people in Boston and Chicago and Aspen, Colorado who are originally from Texas and know this. They have been writing me about the depth of feeling they have. They use phrases like awesome, amazing, I'm in tears.

Another is Latinos in general. The film critic Chon Noriega [Director of the UCLA Chicano Studies and Research Center] wrote to me that "it's soulful." It's a soulful sense that's missing from the other documentaries out there, except for the occasional segment that Anthony Bourdain used to do.

The third group is journalists who aren't Latino, who aren't from this area, who are using the word 'art.' One said he was blown away at the way the film gets into people's lives, and how genuine the people's voices are when they begin to speak. This type of communication from the people themselves in such an intimate way is new.

I think it speaks to the character of the movie, the way it's constructed and the newness of it. This is a story that has been untold before.

One thing I think is wonderful is how this film combines your background as a filmmaker and your training at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA)—it brings it all together.

To me, it's one in the same, my filmmaking career and the food. In my filmmaking career, I spent most of my time telling stories about our community. When I founded the film festival in 1976, the reason I did it was the same reason why I did this film, why I did the book: Our stories were not being told and the producers and the writers who were making them were in the shadows. They weren't being recognized by the major festivals. That's why I started the festival: to shine a spotlight on all the writers, the producers and the directors like me who were doing wonderful work but who weren't being recognized in the least. Now, every major city has some kind of Latino film festival. It is very, very nice to come back to filmmaking. It felt very natural to return to it.

What's the importance of the term 'Texas Mexican' as opposed to Tex-Mex?

The term Tex-Mex is different from Texas Mexican and the reason I make the distinction is that there are two separate types of food, and sometimes the word Tex-Mex is used for both of them.

A lot of times Mexican Americans will use the term "Tex-Mex" to describe the food their mothers cooked and I call that food comida casera (homestyle cooking).

A lot of non Mexican Americans, Anglo people, use the term Tex-Mex to describe the type of cuisine that has its beginnings in places where customers wanted Mexican food without being too close to Mexican people. It was a racist attitude that made Tex-Mex food with the cheese and all of that—that is a restaurant conception that took off and became very popular.

It was so popular that Mexican Americans took it, like Mario's—a legendary West Side institution that has long since closed—and they also developed it. But that is restaurant format food. Lots of cheese, very heavy on the comino, using chiles for heat—that's not the home cooking of Mexican American indigenous people of Texas. We have fideo and carnitas and all of these other more sophisticated things. I make the distinction between the two because I don't want them to be confused.

I don't want for my *comida casera*, that for generations has been handed down to us, to be confused with the yellow cheese products. I don't have anything against yellow cheese. I use it. We use it in our cooking. The two are different and should be recognized.

Now everybody talks about Tex-Mex and all the goo and our food is completely relegated to the shadows in the popular discourse. Not in our community, as you can see in the film. In our community, our food is strong and everybody knows it's delicious.

What's the biggest misconception of our food and our culture that the film dispels?

To put it simply, the film dispels the stereotype that our home cooking is two-dimensional, unnuanced and unhealthy. It does away with that, because our food is very nuanced, it's multi-dimensional and if you cook it without all that frying, which is a more recent invention, it's very healthy, and it's seasonal and it's local.

What is the role that San Antonio plays in the story of Texas Mexican Cuisine?

I think the film rewrites Texas history, putting us in our rightful place. San Antonio is the major voice in that rewrite. San Antonio has been the cosmopolitan center of civilizations for 15,000 years and continues today. The origins of the real San Antonio spirit and food is this *comida casera*, what we call now Mexican, which is indigenous.

We are redrafting the contours of Texas history and the San Antonio voice is core. San Antonio has a major voice—in the film, of course, but I would go further than that and say that San Antonio has a major voice in what Texas is all about.

Nationally, Mexican and Mexican American foods are getting more attention and more popular. What's missing from the story?

I wrote in an article that the taco is a type of totem. A totem is so important to the indigenous peoples of North America. A totem is an art object that represents ancestry and is deeply connected and relates back and forth in the becoming of a community, and I think our food is there. What is missing is the thing that a totem does: it asks you to look at the deeper context of the meaning of a community, and *los antecedentes*, the life project of that community.

First of all, there's the recognition we are hip, not because all of a sudden some writer in New York did this or that—we are hip because more of us are having a voice, and the reason more of us are having a voice is due to the struggles, and the fights, and the pain and blood that so many Mexican Americans have fought. Union organizer Emma Tennayuca, Willie Velasquez with Southwest Voter Registration—all of these Mexican American fighters for justice who have preceded us have made it possible for us to speak and that's why we're hip.

The other thing that's missing from the story is the preponderance of women in the history and the lack of women in the telling of the history. And it shouldn't be.

What we're going to hear more of, is how complex not just Mexican gastronomy is, but the Mexican gastronomy of this region. How complex it is, and how the flavors are very nuanced and sophisticated. That, I think we'll start to get more of.

San Antonio

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