



¡Que rico! The El Paso Food Scene

Unit Plan for the Borderlands Narratives NEH Institute

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Introduction

Food production, processing, marketing, and consumption has served as a bridge that opens exchange and communication between cultures since the beginning of time. The following unit plan is geared towards middle school students living in a rural midwestern town who have never visited the U.S.-Mexico border. They are taking Introduction to Spanish or Exploring World Languages and Cultures classes. The unit plan's purpose is to serve as a bridge for them to begin learning about Mexican culture and the experiences of the binational population living in the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez metroplex. Through contextualized lessons, students are invited to imagine a first-year college experience at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). They will explore restaurants, menus and local dishes. They also meet UTEP students through videos and are asked to consider how their imagined college friends' bilingual and bicultural upbringing have shaped their identities. No unit plan about food is complete without the opportunity to make an authentic dish. Students will prepare a local favorite called *elote en vaso* (corn in a cup).

Guiding Questions

What is food like along the border?

How is the El Paso food scene influenced by its proximity to Mexico?

What are ingredients typical to El Pasoan Mexican food and how/why are they used?

Instructional Objectives and Student Learning

Objectives:

Students will explore food products of the El Paso-Juárez region.

Students will conduct an ethnic recipe interview.

Students will prepare and taste a Mexican dish from El Paso, TX.

Students will use the screencastify app to create videos that demonstrate their learning.

Indiana State Standards: 1.4.1 Recognize basic routine practices and customs. 1.4.2 Identify products of the target cultures, such as fine arts, cuisine, holidays, etc. 1.4.3 Identify influences on practices and products, such as religions, history, geography, etc. 1.5.1 Describe basic objects and concepts from other content areas in simple terms. 1.5.2 Implement content area concepts and skills through relevant activities. 1.6.2 Use digital media and culturally authentic resources to study target cultures and language, such as photographs, magazines, commercials, and websites. 1.7.5 Compare daily living patterns of other cultures and the learner's own culture. 1.8.3 Experience and report on the cuisine, music, drama, literature, etc. from the target cultures.

Materials and Resources

You are invited you to delve into this interactive experience of El Paso, Texas, a city that sits across the border from its twin city of Juárez, Mexico. Yes, jump in! Let your taste buds dance and your stomach growl as you imagine the tastes and smells of the El Pasoan cuisine. Discover Mexican restaurants not as authentically Mexican as restaurants in Juárez. Visit American chains and some other groovy dives along the way. First of all we'll get a quick overview of El Pasoan restaurants and what Mexican food is like there. Okay, here we go.....

The El Paso Food Scene

Written by Christa Toohill

Tex-Mex style food is prominent in Central and East Texas, as well as in chains throughout the U.S. such as Chili's. This style of cooking uses flour tortillas and includes dishes that are not found in Mexico, such as *fajitas*. There are only a couple of restaurants in the El Paso area with food that could be called Tex-Mex. One example is Taco Cabana. Their steak taco is served on a thick flour tortilla that appears more similar to pita bread than its Mexican counterpart, the corn tortilla. The Mexican food in

New Mexico is also different from that found in southern Texas. They use more green chiles and cheese in their dishes. There are some unique El Paso Mexican restaurants that serve food not traditionally Tex-Mex or Northern Mexican. Chico's Tacos, for example, is what one El Paso native, Maribel, referred to as "an El Paso staple" where people could go together in the late hours of the night. They serve *flautas* with a tomato sauce and cheese on top. Traditionally, *flautas* are not made like this in Mexico. Another example is Lucky Café, which fries their *tacos*. One El Paso native and her family don't like this style of food and prefer other Mexican restaurants. Another El Paso native indicated that her American family members enjoy this type of fried food. There is a broad mix of restaurants in El Paso with ethnic food from all over the world, but the Mexican restaurants serve dishes most similar to those of northern Mexico. There are Mexican restaurants in El Paso that began across the border in Juárez, Mexico. These include a steakhouse called Corralitos. Taco Tote, which started as a food stand in Juárez, also now has chains in San Antonio and Las Vegas. Cattle ranches abound here and therefore, meat is an important part of meals. An El Paso student named Jorge shared that the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans here like their *carnitas*, which is specially prepared pork pieces. His own grandmother prepares a dish called *menudo* on Sunday mornings. There is also a long line outside of restaurants who serve this dish on Sunday mornings. *Menudo* contains cow or pig intestinal lining, tripe, red chile, hominy, and is served at a hot temperature. After quinceañeras or weddings on a Saturday, Mexican-Americans here will commonly eat *menudo*, *pozole* (soup with hominy), or *barbacoa* (cow's head) on Sunday morning.

Take a look at a few pictures from the [Taco Tote restaurant](#).

Instructional and Lesson Activities (Engage, Explore, Explain)

1. A Cultural Mix

Imagine, if you will, that your middle school days are over (can somebody say "yay!") and that you've actually finished high school as well. You're a newbie at UTEP and cruising down Mesa Street with some guys and gals from your dorm. You may not know it now, but these will eventually become your besties. "Hey, where are we gonna eat?" the driver yells out above the roaring Norteña music. Well....you know the scene that ensues and you have to pick your own top 3 choices or you'll all end up going to *El Super* (a grocery store) and having to fix your own meal! To help you decide, Check out these [El Paso food scene pictures](#) that show a mixture of Mexican, American, & other cultures.

For further reading about Ashley's, Inc. click these links:

[Remembering Ashley's: How El Paso helped spread Mexican food across the world](#)

[Ashley revolutionized Mexican Food](#)

2. Recipe Interviews

As you're entering November of your first semester, you're getting to know your roommate and a few people on your dorm floor especially well. Several of these girls/guys are 2nd and 3rd generation Mexican-Americans. During some of those deep conversations that last until after midnight (a.k.a. studying) you begin to discover that their bicultural upbringing has definite advantages! Not only are some of them bilingual, but they seem to have a strong grasp on their "ethnic identity". They talk about living in two different worlds and their own decisions to identify with certain aspects of their Mexican and American heritage. Food is a frequent topic and they share with you some favorite dishes and memories.

Watch these [video interviews](#) with UTEP students.

Interview a family member, community member, teacher, or classmate and create your own video. Ask him/her to tell you about their favorite Mexican dish and share a favorite memory related to that dish.

3. Elote en vaso

Finally! You've found it! You've discovered your favorite Mexican treat in El Paso. Here's how it happened, you were walking down El Paso street getting some shopping done (new sandals, a blanket) and saw people carrying small cups with spoons. Turns out, a man, an *elotero* was selling these cups from a grocery cart. *Elote en vaso*, it's called, and yes, you'd like the *chile* on top! You also find a Mexican food stand called [Doggo's that sells elotes](#). Check out the slides. It's such a deliciously simple treat that you decide to make some on your own. Hey, you may not be a professional chef, but this is about as simple as pouring a bowl of cereal and milk!

List the ingredients for *elote en vaso* below.

Translate these sentences to English:

En la calle El Paso un hombre vende elote en vaso desde un shopping cart. Dijo que el elote en vaso “viene de México, de Juárez!”

Create a screencastify video of yourself saying each of the ingredients in Spanish and English and then telling how it's made (in English). ¡Buena suerte! (Good luck!)

Ingredients: boiled/roasted corn, mayonnaise, butter, chile powder, Valentina sauce, cotija cheese powder

Target vocabulary: *elote, vaso, mantequilla, mayonesa, chile, salsa de Valentina, queso cotija*

Students prepare *elote en vaso* in the student kitchen.

Additional Learning (Extend, Elaborate)

Incorporate discussions about the Columbian Exchange to learn about the Old World/New World origins of ingredients commonly used in Mexican cooking

As a class, research how Mexican food differs across states and regions of Mexico

Take a field trip to a Mexican grocery store in your community

Find a recipes online for *el agua fresca, chamoy, and horchata*. These dishes require only a few ingredients. Find one you could make during class or students could make at home with their families.

Recipe assignment as shared by Dr. Monica Perales

Find a family recipe and analyze it for what it can tell you about your family's history

Interview a family member about the recipe and ask this information:

- Basic biographical info about the person being interviewed
- Tell me about this favorite family dish.
- Share your favorite memory about this dish.
- Tell me about when this dish would be prepared (e.g., holidays, Sundays)
- Tell me about a time.....
- What can you tell me about how this recipe changed over time?
- Where did the ingredients come from?

Assessment (Evaluate)

Use the [Student Video Grading Rubric](#) for grading recipe interview and elote en vaso videos.

Accommodations and Modifications

Adjust presentations and requirements as needed for older or younger grades.

The recipe interview can be used for a variety of ethnic dishes that are family favorites.

College and Career Readiness

See the Indiana State Standards for World Language Instruction in the Works Cited section.

Additional Resources

Gulf Coast Food Project

University of Houston - Food Studies

www.uh.edu/gcfp/

Houston Eats - student-created documentaries

Pass the Naan

Eat to Live

Works Cited

Panza llena corazón contento. (1982). El Paso Council on Aging, Inc. El Paso, TX.

Mexican Menu Magic with Ashley's Brand Fine Mexican Foods. Ashley's, Inc. El Paso, TX.

Dr. Monica Perales, University of Houston

Presentation at the 2017 NEH Summer Institute: Borderland Narratives from the Chihuahuan Desert

Oral Interviews:

Eva Ross

Volunteer at UTEP Library

C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department

Andrés Lucero
Born & raised in El Paso
Work Study at UTEP Library
C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department

Francesca Alonso
El Paso native
B.A. in History from UTEP
High School History Teacher

Students at UTEP

[Indiana State Standards for Spanish Language Instruction](#)

Reflection

Last Sunday, I was trying to visit an *Iglesia Cristiana* (Spanish-speaking church) on the eastside of El Paso. I mapped out a couple of bus routes using the Sun Metro “Plan Your Trip” page. Small caveat that Sun Metro warned me about on their web page, but I failed to notice. They’ve adjusted the routes because of construction in *el centro* (downtown). Long story short, I was dropped off at a location and had no idea where I was. I ended up walking about twenty minutes in the hot morning sun. When I finally found a transfer route bus stop that was serviced, I had about 45 minutes until the next bus came. Walking down that street I happened upon a Mexican restaurant, *Paquime*, whose name I had seen earlier on Google Maps. I was soooooo thirsty. Stepping inside I saw a large chalkboard menu on the wall. Of course *el agua fresca* sounds heavenly. I ordered *el agua fresca de piña y nopal* (pineapple-cactus fresh water). I told the owner I only had 10 minutes, so would take it to go.

Taking a front seat near a window, I sat back, listened to the music and took in the ambience. In the next room over sat 4 people engaged in light conversation. The waiter brought them a tray of *pan dulce* with square butter pieces atop. The only other person in the small restaurant, I started to look over the breakfast menu and slowly decided this may be a place to spend more than 10 minutes. Another Sun Metro bus would come an hour or so later.....so why not just order breakfast and enjoy myself? The waiter brought out the entire pitcher of *agua fresca de piña y nopal*. I was certainly refreshed. This felt like an oasis for a weary traveler. Throughout the course of my breakfast I would drink the entire pitcher! I also ordered *un café con leche* (coffee with milk) and the number 1 on the menu, *Ricardo’s Breakfast*. To my delight, I was served

a plate of *frijoles* (refried beans), *una quesadilla de jamón y queso* (ham and cheese quesadilla) topped by 2 *huevos* (sunny-side up eggs), and *salsa verde* (mild green chile sauce). “Delicioso,” I told him, when I paid the bill. Turns out the restaurant has been there 9 years.

Arguably my favorite restaurant and 1 of my favorite memories of my time in El Paso, the entire story from its unfolding, unexpected delight, and fulfilling conclusion parallels my experience creating the [¡Que rico! The El Paso Food Scene Unit Plan](#). I had a general idea of the direction in which I was headed. Our middle school Ethnic Cooking Club and overall student interest in ethnic food were my inspiration for choosing to explore food and restaurants. Through the guidance and helpfulness of the NEH Institute directors, guest speakers, participants, as well as the UTEP Library Special Collections Department, the project began to take shape. A classmate from El Paso took me to El Super and answered questions about products I’ve never seen at international grocery stores in Indiana. My roommates walked with me to the Doggo’s food stand the first week and we enjoyed *elote en vaso* and Mexican hotdogs. Local restaurant waiters and waitresses were friendly, allowing me to take pictures of menus and answering my questions. Eva and Andrés in the Special Collections Department searched for cookbooks and menus, then shared names of El Paso restaurants and Mexican dishes eaten here with great detail. Now, towards the end of this journey, I look forward to taking these lessons back to Indiana and inspiring students to discover for themselves the rich variety and cultural mixing that make El Paso an exciting place to eat. *¡Que rico!*

