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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey M. Pilcher. *Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xv + 292 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-974006-2.

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From the origins of maize cultivation to the current prevalence of genetically modified corn, Jeffrey M. Pilcher covers much ground in this work. The focus of *Planet Taco* is on multinational adaptation and globalization of Mexican food—especially tacos—and corporate appropriation of it. Mexicans in turn seek to retain its culinary uniqueness as a marker of modern national identity. This is a history of the “insurgent taco” versus Americanized and constructed Taco Bell versions. Along the way, as the author’s previous work demonstrated, readers may be compelled to partake in a poultry dish steeped in *mole* sauce, some tacos *al pastor*, or even chili con carne. However the final statement made in this text is a serious one, lending itself to scholarly debate on the value of ethnic customs and cultural sovereignty in a world of borderless global trade. This book also contains the kind of historical details, insights, and curiosities that popular readerships—and college undergraduates—often find appealing.

This book is a globalized extension of Pilcher’s important work, *Que Vivan Los Tamales! Food and the Making of Mexican National Identity* (1998), albeit adapted for a much wider audience. As a scholar who has been at the vanguard of food history, he made liberal use of cookbooks, food critiques, news accounts, websites, personal observation, and oral histories in *Planet Taco*—piecing together Mexican and Mexican American culinary traditions and various adaptations of them in Europe and Asia. He displays vast knowledge of culinary historiography and has become an international taco connoisseur, conducting interviews in Paris and in Japan. Although largely based on secondary sources, the author has also unearthed original material, such as uncovering the apparently inaccurate claims of Taco Bell founder Glenn

Bell of being the inventor of taco shells; and the invention of San Antonio’s “chili queens” by the press of the early twentieth century.

In the book’s first two chapters (part 1), Pilcher describes “proto-tacos.” He includes a historical survey of maize cultivation: an ancient, complex, and ingenious process of genetic modification. This work was also gendered; domestication appears to have resulted from the efforts of women. During New Spain’s colonial era, corn tortillas were a food of the lower classes, mostly composed of mixed-race and indigenous peoples. This section also highlights the early global spread of Mesoamerican foods including maize, chiles, and chocolate. Maize, while popular as animal fodder, was not uniformly viewed as a human staple in other parts of the world and was considered distasteful by many Europeans. However, this did not prevent tortillas and early “tacos” from appearing on tables in such far-flung places as Guam even before the modern global spread of Mexican cuisine. Pilcher also describes the growing popularity of flour tortillas and burritos among Mexican Americans of the Southwest and their integration into regional meals and restaurant items. Ultimately, Pilcher argues that tacos are a relatively recent culinary phenomenon and that regional variations, such as “Tex-Mex” and “Cal-Mex” recipes, are distinguishable from native Mexican cuisine. For instance, the author is careful to make the distinction between the two forms “tamal” (Mexican) and “tamale” (Mexican American).

In part 2 (“National Tacos”), Pilcher revisits his earlier work on the perception of maize in Mexico and its eventual acceptance as a national staple after the Mexican Revolution of 1910. During the century after Mex-

ican independence in 1821, wheat and breads were promoted in cookbooks as healthy and “civilized” alternatives to maize. Elites of the authoritarian Porfirian republic in the late nineteenth century preferred (poorly imitated) French haute cuisine. The first Mexican literary references to tacos appear during the same era. By the 1920s, male migrants looking for work in Mexico City created opportunities for women to manage the now-familiar tradition of street taco vendors and *taquerías*. In the “tortilla discourse” on the relative merits of maize, recognition of its nutritional value led to broader acceptance. With the revolutionary philosophy of *indigenismo*, which acknowledged a Mexican indigenous heritage, tortillas and tamales became proudly incorporated into a national cuisine.

In this same section (part 2), Pilcher introduces a recurring theme in this book: civic battles over street vendors in the U.S. Southwest. In chapter 4, readers may be titillated by the story of “chili queens.” In late nineteenth-century San Antonio, female chili vendors attracted numerous customers, both Anglo and Mexican. By the 1920s, press depictions of seductive Latinas hawking Tex-Mex food conjured up images of promiscuity and spicy food. Although an interesting episode, the apparent lack of documentation into the reality of the chili queens as depicted in press accounts begs further examination as Pilcher argues that in reality the chili queens were simply women taking advantage of a new economic opportunity. Pilcher documents successful civic efforts to drive away the chili queens from central San Antonio. Such local disputes regarding street vendors (and later taco trucks) also took place in Los Angeles at around the same time and have continued into recent decades.

By 1970, the popularity of Mexican American foods in the United States led American migrants to take the cuisine global. In his last section, Pilcher describes “global tacos,” documenting through interviews the spread of Mexican food around the world and the emergence of a new approach to Mexican indigenous cuisine as a reaction to such globalization. Entrepreneurs from across the Americas brought different strains of Mexican-style

cuisine, adapted to local tastes, to the European populace, while military personnel stationed around the globe spread it over an even wider area (the author includes a snapshot of one restaurant in the Balkans!). Much of this cuisine was of the Tex-Mex or Cal-Mex varieties. The spread of Taco Bell and other chains and the corporatization of traditional products led Mexicans to create a niche market in “Mexican haute.” This fresh approach features such delicacies as *xumiles*, edible insects prepared in the new style: *nueva cocina* (new kitchen). It is in this last section that Pilcher comments on the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). For example, the agreement created favorable conditions for American corn farmers but often led small Mexican farmers to lose their livelihoods and seek work in the United States.

The author’s use of nonconventional historical sources might make some purists cringe. Pilcher makes ample use of websites including Wikipedia. However, he possesses established scholarly credentials and his use of multiple sources—archival, secondary, personal, and items derived from print culture—tends to reinforce his broad assertion that Mexicans and supporters of “authentic” Mexican cuisine have tried in various ways to reclaim this culinary tradition in the face of commodification and globalization. The topic of U.S.-Mexico trade relations, and the damaging demographic and environmental effects on the latter, is not directly related to his central argument, but informs it. Cultural history, after all, is not quantifiable.

As a work designed for a broad audience, the book is accessible, written concisely and at times rather humorously: “Powerful men, who ordinarily would have squished *xumiles* with their Gucci loafers, were eating the bugs with guacamole,” for example (p. 191). As such, the book would be useful in undergraduate classes of all levels, whether in Latin American or world history. At the graduate level, *Planet Taco* would be helpful in world history seminars that include Mexico among the topics. Beyond the historical argument, which is an expansion of the work Pilcher began many years ago, this book is quite informative and enjoyable to read.

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