

A Journey through Mexican Cuisine at *La Casita Mexicana*
By: Jesenia Bravo



(La Casita Mexicana, n.d.)

A. How were you addressed when you entered into the restaurant? Did you need to make reservations? How long was the wait before you were seated?

The cultural experience at *La Casita Mexicana* delights visitors with a vibrant and diverse culinary experience that transports customers to the pleasures of Mexico. Located in Ridgewood, NY, *La Casita Mexicana* is a restaurant that invites guests to explore the flavors, taste, aromas that represent the Mexican cuisine. Entering *La Casita Mexicana*, customers are warmly greeted by the hosts with a friendly *Bienvenidos Vecinos*, a warm welcome neighbor in Spanish that creates an immediate sense of hospitality and pleasantness. As stated by Brenda Sternquist in *International Retailing*, Mexicans have a strong sense of nationalism due to its history of revolutions which have created a strong sense of unity (Sternquist, 2007). No reservations are required to enter and be seated; however, the restaurant is rather small in dimension consisting of seating only about 20 customers at once. There was no wait time to be seated as the restaurant allows for customers to sit in the tables they prefer, while also offering an outdoor seating space for those who prefer to sit outside of the main interior space. The restaurant pays homage to the Mexican culture through various elements that allows for customers to experience a wonderful sensory journey.

B. What are the cultural differences you notice? (Use class notes) Using your five senses of taste, touch, sight, smell, & sound (remember Eicher & Roach-Higgins (1992) definition of Dress) describe some of the cultural differences that you are not accustomed to (in comparison to All-American restaurant or restaurant chains, but do not write the actual comparison to American restaurants). For example, one can describe but not limited to the sights in the restaurant décor, odors from unusual foods, and sounds from music. One should use all five-senses in this cultural experience in detail. Each of the five senses should be in a separate paragraph).

Upon entering the restaurant, the visual aspects of the space instantly grasp visitor's attention with the use of vibrant colors employed throughout the restaurant. The walls showcase traditional Mexican artwork such as a wall decorated creatively with Mexican sombreros and the use of decorative skulls on each wall that highlights the cultures admiration of *Día De los Muertos*. Visually, *La Casita Mexicana* is a celebration of Mexican artistry and culture, the use of vibrant colors and authentic décor through their Mexican pottery dinnerware immense customers in a setting that goes beyond just the aesthetics but also capturing the essences of Mexican cultural identity. The use of warm earth tone colors as well as vibrant pinks and pastel blues showcases the restaurants reflection of Mexican artistry to create a vibrant atmosphere.

The aromas of sizzling garlic, onions, cilantro, and various traditional spices creates an experience that transports diners to the heart of Mexican culinary traditions as soon as arriving. With the open access to the kitchen near the back of the restaurant, customers are exposed to the smells of grilled meats, lively aromas from spices such as cumin, thyme, oregano and cilantro that infuses into sensational aromas that fill the restaurants air while customers sit and indulge in the experience. In less than 5 minutes of taking in the ambiance one is immediately given menus

and offered beverages, which reassures the importance of customer service and attention. The ingredients being cooked and prepared in the kitchen fill the air with a unique blend of spices and scents that capture customers attention from my table. The restaurant allows for patrons to enjoy the view of cocktails being prepared right by the bar area which is at a nearby distance from where customers are seated.

The rhythmic beats and melodic sounds of Mexican music further enhances the experience that patrons are exposed to. The welcoming atmosphere is heightened with the lively music and coupled with the laughter and energy of workers and fellow customers alike. The music, carefully selected to complement the cultural ambiance, adds to the authenticity of the dining experience conveying individuals into an experience that feels like a Mexican home. The music with songs by Selena appealed to patrons, playing cumbia songs amongst other Mexican songs that installed the Mexican energy. The guitars, trumpets and accordions from the music amongst other native Mexican instruments adds to the ambiance bringing more of the Mexican familiarity for customers.

The taste experience at La Casita Mexicana is truly immersive, a great deal of Authentic Mexican flavors is experience through various dishes and drinks. From the first bite of the complementary dish of tortilla chips and salsa that is provided, customers are emerged into a space that truly exhibits Mexican cuisine and taste through most dishes. From the simplest to most intricate traditional dishes such as enchiladas verdes, the use of spices, the heat from chilies and combination of sweet sauces or mole are creatively used and blended into representing the Mexican cuisine and traditional flavors. Instead of customary Mexican hot sauce bottles such as Cholula's, the restaurant provided a home-made style hot sauce, deliciously flavored with various chiles that created a perfect balance of spiciness, tang and heat. The *salsa verde*, which accompanied the chicken enchiladas, blended together jalapenos, peppers, cilantro, limes, avocados and tomatillos to create an earthy vegetable based sauced that added a perfect extra layer of complexity and depth to tie in all the flavors on the dish.

The sensory connection to the Mexican culture is further enhanced through the feeling of crispness of tortilla chips as well as the soft homemade tortillas that charms each customer. The Mexican culture traditionally has used tortilla as one of its main food components. The wooden tables and chairs bring about homely, comfortable seating arrangement. The soft *servilletas* (napkins) where the *tortillas* were served in came adorned in colorful straw baskets. While sipping on cocktail, one enjoys the sweet and salty beverage with a surprising hint of crunchy textures of picante added to the rim from the tajin garnished glass brim. This chile powder was the perfect kick of spicy to warm up the body, while also providing creamy to crunchy textures and everything in between for customers. The location is kept in a warm temperature setting that provides further warmth as the soft tortillas and hot searing plates are served to customers.

C. Look at the menu. What are the types of foods they offer? What are *some unusual* food items? Do they describe the ingredients in the food? What are the ingredients? List various food items from the menu. What menu items did you order? Is there more than one language used to describe the foods on the menu? Please write in detail.

Once seated, the hosts provide the table with mason jars filled with water while passing out the food and drink menus to commence the dining experience. Both the food and drinks menu are filled with a variety of Mexican dishes from the appetizers such as, *guacamole* with chips, *nachos* and most popular *esquites* (Mexican corn) as shown in fig. 3, to the main entrees such as 10 different tacos options with different meats like *carnitas*, chicken, shrimp, steak and vegetable options. The menu is written only in English, while the names of the dishes may be in their original Latin Mexican name, the ingredients beneath each dish are described in English. Traditional Mexican servings such as tacos (fig. 1), thirteen different choices of burritos and seven distinctive quesadillas are offered but so too are unique servings including a Mexican burger, steak *tampiquena* (a creative spin on traditional *enchiladas*) and stuffed chile peppers called *chile poblanos* as shown in fig. 8. *Aguacate relleno*, an avocado topped with shrimp, onion, cilantro in pink sauce puts a creative spin on the avocado excitement. The *Queso fundido* as shown in fig. 2, platter also encompasses popular Mexican ingredients using melted *manchego* cheese, with a choice of meat, jalapenos, *pico de gallo* and avocados.

To start the dinner, we started with a Rosa Mexicana tequila drink and a Modelo beer that was accompanied by complementary chips and salsa. For the appetizers we ordered *taquitos* (shredded chicken, cheese and a side of guacamole rolled up inside of flour tortillas and fried), *esquite* (Mexican street corn with mayo, *cojita* cheese and chipotle sauce and their tortilla soup (soup made with fried corn tortilla and seasoned tomato broth). We followed this up with ordering a “wet” burrito (a burrito filled with rice, beans, steak and lettuce covered in red tomato sauce and mozzarella cheese) and chicken *enchiladas* (rolled corn tortilla) served with rice and beans for entrees. For dessert we ended the evening with an order of strawberry Nutella quesadillas paired with a coffee, a fulfilling culmination of this Mexican culinary experience. Every item ordered was creatively plated and delicious, providing incredible palette with each bite that conveyed the Mexican influence.

D. Is a traditional salad offered? If not, describe what is offered. What types of breads are offered (flat, pita, tortilla chips)? What type of desserts (cheesecake, fortune cookie, coffee)? What are they like? Describe each in detail.

Traditional salads are provided such as caesar salad and a kale quinoa salad but too are Mexican inspired versions such as the tortilla taco salad or traditional tortilla soup. Breads include both corn and flour tortillas used in various dishes. A *torta*, a chicken sandwich between two soft baguettes includes a bean spread, cheese, lettuce topped off with Mexican *crema*, a sour cream comparable spread. The restaurant also provides a great selection of traditional Mexican desserts composing of *tres leche* cake, *churros*, *flan* and a unique creative dish of strawberry Nutella quesadillas. The *tres leche* cake uses whole milk, condensed milk, evaporated milk layered with heavy cream to create a wonderful blend of sweets within the cake that reminds people of Latin sweets. The *churros*, fried dough browned with sugar is another Mexican staple dessert that is offered by this restaurant. The *flan*, a caramelized custard pudding that is soft to taste with a very sweet savor that comes from the caramel, vanilla and sugar. The local favorite and restaurants unique dessert was the strawberry Nutella quesadillas, made from flour tortillas fried with cheese

and Nutella spread inside, paired with strawberries that created a creative distinctive blend of traditional Mexican dish turned into a new dessert.

E. What types of beverages are offered? Do they have an alcohol menu? What is not typically offered in an American chain restaurant? Describe each in detail.

The beverage menu offers a variety of drinks including Mexican soda *Jarritos* while also offering American beverages such as Coca Cola amongst coffee and tea choices. The alcohol beverages menu has drinks catered to fit the Mexican inspirations, most drinks using tequila, a cultural Mexican liquor choice, while also providing Mexican beers such as Corona and Modelo. A drink that's a favorite and promoted by the hostess is the authentic Mexican drink of *horchata*, a sweet rice milk beverage infused with cinnamon and vanilla that highlights the Mexican identity. Mexican inspired drinks such as Rosa Mexicana that uses Mexican tequila as its main ingredient garnished with edible flowers and spicy rim covered in *tajin* (chile powder). Mezcal or tequila are alcoholic spirits that are cultivated from the agave plants which grow plentifully throughout Mexico. Their signature drinks *La Ultima y Nos Vamos* and *The Letty Cocktail*, are 48 oz. alcohol drinks that join frozen margarita with 2 coronitas beers flipped upside down, one using passion fruit, mezcal and agave while the other just uses margaritas priced fairly at \$30 for an enormous size which can be also be shared by two individuals.

F. How is the food reflective of the cultural geography and the economic geography (Use class lecture notes for each definition)? (i.e. spices are abundant in India which is rich in spices & fish (sushi) is popular in Japan & it is part of the G8). Describe approximately where in the world (continent & location) and from country this culture's food is best known. Be sure to research the country about geography, spices, foods, etc.....Be sure to use APA in-text citations and references.

La Casita Mexicana's food and environment is a reflection of both cultural and economic geography. *La Casita Mexicana's* cuisine is deeply rooted and represents the authentic traditions of Mexico. While providing new Tex-Mex Americanized cuisine, the restaurant prides itself in providing and preserving the traditional Mexican flavors and recipes that reflects the rich culture of its inspiration. The use of ingredients such as beans, chile, corn, cilantro, avocados and tomatoes are significant in most dishes, providing authentic flavors and spices with each dish that doesn't stray away from its cultural and geographical location of Mexico. These ingredients are abundant in the Mexican region, becoming staples within the Mexican cuisine as its easily accessible and affordable for native Mexicans, and essential products that are traded into the United States allowing for their relevance here as well.

Though clever partnerships and agreements such as NAFTA, the U.S. has helped in establishing trade and fostering a better economic development of the once underdeveloped Mexico. Under NAFTA, Canada and the U.S. are exempt from quotas in trade with Mexico, allowing for unlimited quantities of goods to be traded between partners (Sternquist, 2007). This free trade agreement allows for an influx of products like the ingredients that are habitants to Mexico to be easily traded and transported to restaurants such as *La Casita Mexicana*, being able to provide

fresh produce that originates or is native to Mexico. The geographical location has allowed for the Mexican culture and influence to spread easily into the United States as many Mexicans have immigrated into this country and adopted their culture with them. Mexican cuisine is representative of the diverse landscape and climate found in the immense land. Corn or *Maize*, is a staple within Mexican cuisine as the climate accommodates the agriculture of corn throughout the region. Avocados and chile's are also abundant in Mexico, allowing for these products to be important exported goods from which they are able to trade.

Mexico, although not part of the seven most developed countries in the world (G7), has similar retailing practices practiced with the adjacent and main trading partner United States. According to Sternquist, "Mexico is a developing country with a mixed retail system" (Sternquist, 2007). Geographically these two countries border on another in North America, but their economic standards and industrializations are vastly different. The economic geography of Mexico has allowed for its nation to prosper while also influencing its cuisine through the trading that allows for ingredients to be exchanged for other goods. Being the leading exporter of avocados within New York City it's also a culture that's familiar and continued through the many Mexicans that have travelled into this state. Visible with the vast options of restaurants and street vendors that provide the Mexican cuisine and influence into Tex-Mex food as well that blends traditional Mexican food with Americanized fusions. In 2023 according to the USDA, the U.S. imported 1.12 metric tons of avocados, with Mexico being responsible for nearly 90% of the volume (Karst, 2023). The trading relationship between these neighboring countries is prevalent and helps both parties benefit including in facilitation the transfer of ingredients and food to accommodate the growing Mexican population and it's culture within the U.S.



Fig 11. Map of Mexico (World Atlas, 2023)

G. Describe the dress? (Dress is inclusive of all five senses – you smell perfume, hear jewelry, see make-up, etc....) What are the employees, such as hostesses or wait staff wearing? Please use Eicher-Roach-Higgins (1992) article to define dress and answer appropriately. This must be used and written in at least 2 paragraphs with correct in- text citations and references discussing all five (5) senses.

The dress at *La Casita Mexicana* further emphasizes the cultural experience and reflects the cultures identity, traditions and hospitality. Visually the décor expresses the warm inviting energy and atmosphere that Mexicans value. The staff is wearing all black attire that has the logo of the business bold on the front. Dress supplements these individuals to the community and network they represent. The unity displayed and carried by these employees embodies great Mexican hospitality and embracement of others kinship (Eicher & Roach-Higgins, 1992). The hosts all Latin girls, apart from the male chefs and male bar workers wore a beautiful red lipstick and freshly painted and shaped red manicures. The looks were paired with stacked rings and attractive makeup, showing cleanliness and sanitary importance, team identity and an overall look that aligned with Mexican distinctiveness. The staff all embodied the welcoming, hospitality drive, continuously smiling and providing great customer service as they worked throughout the restaurant.

The host, all females dressed more to their gender, they were very accessorized with attached earrings, suspended chains. They also provided a great fragrance of floral perfume that also presented great deal of adoration. As a customer, you hear the sound of the jewelry clinging before the hostess arrives at your table and the smell of the flowery perfumes lets you know when they have arrived to check up on your dining. The few males that passed by were less expressive, signaling specific gender roles within this establishment that features the females to welcome and hosts the guests while the males worked in the back and were less visible. There was never a time throughout the dining experience where patrons didn't have a beverage, whether that be water refills or asking if one were ready for the next round of drinks. The attention to detail from the dress follows the values represented by the restaurant in all other facets.

H. Rate your experience as a food critic (as in the LA Times or Houston Chronicle). Ratings should be dependent on taste, service, décor, cleanliness, authenticity, quality and price and should range from A-F (“A” being the best). Explain why you chose this rating. Be thorough and detailed in your explanations. Be sure to write at least 2 paragraphs. Use details to explain.

As a food critic, *La Casita Mexicana* would receive an overall “A” grade. To start the review, from the exterior details to the interior's beautiful décor, this restaurant presents itself very aesthetically pleasing. It provides customers with a beautiful representation of Mexico's influence in various ways including the visual aspects on top of the food and sensory aspects. Their foods induce many wonderful aromas and taste that stimulate the senses wonderfully while

maintaining the authenticity and traditions of Mexican cuisine. The flavors are exceptional, bold flavors, spicy yet sweet that delivers a home cooked meal experience. The commitment by this restaurant to stay authentic to its roots is delivered in the dishes it provides while the fresh ingredients, great quality and skill preparations adds to the overall quality and A grade for taste. The quality of the food also receives an B+ grade, the freshness of the produce an ingredient can be savored, the meats are well cooked and deliver great flavor as do the drinks and desserts that was savored, the only lacking aspect would be the chicken was a bit bland in taste lacking some salt as opposed to the steak that had great savory.

The service and cleanliness would also receive an A grade, the hosts and workers all provide welcoming, hospitable energy and the restaurants cleanliness as well as their appearances showcases their importance to main a safe, sanitary environment for customers. The pricing at this restaurant was well assessed, especially during this inflationary period, it offers a great variety of options at different prices ranging from \$9 appetizer plates and soups to their most expensive entrée being priced at a reasonable \$33 for the Mexican *Molcajete*. The food portions for these prices is also extremely generous, each plate provided large servings with their “Wet” burrito priced at \$18 delivering a gigantic burrito that easily can feed two individuals. An overall A grade would be given to this restaurant from the dining visit, it provided a great ambiance, great drinks and food and an overall great Mexican cuisine experience.

I. What did you learn from this experience that you could contribute to a multi-cultural experience in a class discussion? Give details in your writing of a complete paragraph

From this multi-sensory experience as a food critique, it was great to observe that foods and restaurant experiences goes beyond just taste and plates served, but the dining experience entails a lot of connections, values and stories that align with the culture’s influences. It also teaches the importance of exploring and trying the diverse and multicultural atmosphere and environment that New York City provides. There are so many cultures that are represented and recognized through various local restaurants within the Queens borough, each bringing its appreciation for their personal culinary traditions and cultures. Though these restaurants and the unique foods, people can enjoy beautiful representations and expressions of many cultures without having to physically go to these locations. *La Casita Mexican* delivered a wonderful journey through their Mexican cuisine that exhibits authentic and traditional food and culture of Mexico with their restaurant.

Works Cited

- Karst, T. (2023, November 8). *USDA stats show extent of Mexico's dominance in U.S. avocado volume, value*. The Packer. <https://www.thepacker.com/news/produce-crops/usda-stats-show-extent-mexicos-dominance-us-avocado-volume-value#:~:text=Mexico%20accounted%20for%20most%20U.S.,87%25%20in%202017%2D18>.
- La Casita Mexicana NYC. [@lacasitamexicananyc]. [Instagram profile]. (n.d.). <https://www.instagram.com/lacasitamexicananyc/?hl=en>
- Roach-Higgins, M. E., & Eicher, J. B. (1992). *Dress and Identity. Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*
- Sternquist, B. (2007). *International retailing* (2nd ed.). Fairchild Publications. New York, New York
- World Atlas. (2023, July 25). *Mexico Maps & Facts*. <https://www.worldatlas.com/maps/mexico>