

Chapter 10

Mexican Meat *Matzah* Balls: Burciaga as a Culinary Ambassador

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José Antonio (Tony) Burciaga was a unique artist, multi-talented, equally able with the paintbrush or the pen. He wrote newspaper columns, poems, painted murals, drew cartoons, wrote short stories, and collected and translated *dichos* (sayings). His interests ran the gamut from Quetzalcoatl to linguistics. One could say that for him borders and boundaries were to be crossed or ignored. A pioneer in the Chicano Arts community, Burciaga won an American Book Award for his book of poetry, *Undocumented Love*. He was also one of the founding members of Culture Clash, a Latino comedy troupe. His iconic mural “The Last Supper of Chicano Heroes” was painted on the wall of Zapata Dormitory at Stanford University.¹ The evidence of his varied talents is telling. At the end of his too-short life he was awarded the Hispanic Heritage Award for Literature.

In addition to his many artistic talents, Burciaga was, in contemporary parlance, “a foodie.” Food was an abiding passion and in Burciaga’s explorations of the boundless possibilities of consuming culture, he explored postnational and boundary-less possibilities. As he famously quipped: “We did not cross the border, the border crossed us,” a statement that encapsulates his postnational sensibility. Food was omnipresent in his conscious and unconscious perspective.

Two of his book titles reinforce that concentration. Notwithstanding its double meaning, *Spilling the Beans* (1995) begins with a chapter of that same name, which is about both beans and divulging and revealing bits of truths. When he chose the section titles for his first book *Weedee Peepo* (1988), the symbolic connotations of food were also embodied in them. “Tortillas and Tequila” starts out the collection

although the only essay remotely connected to that title is the story of his Tio Pancho and the creation of the margarita.

Another section is titled "This Side of the Tortilla" followed by "The Other Side of the Tortilla." *Drink Cultura* (1992), with its well known parody picture of the coke symbol, carries the double meaning that one can drink for nourishment both of the body and the soul. Also, among his poems, cartoons, paintings, and essays Burciaga keeps returning to the subject of food. Besides his uniqueness as an artist, combining the variety of talents, both verbal and visual, Burciaga was also blessed with a distinctive biography. He is the only major Chicana/o artist to be raised in a Jewish synagogue, which may explain the genesis of his role as a culinary ambassador. One of his essays, "An Anglo, Jewish, Mexican Christmas" traces the path of tinfoil-covered chocolate money pieces given to the children at the synagogue on Hanukah to the Christmas *posadas* (inns) in Juarez, Mexico. Thus not only are national borders blurred, but also those between religions. One of his favorite paintings—in fact he had postcards made of it—was Frederick's Carter's scene of two nuns dragging some Christmas trees along the snow-covered street in front of Congregation B'Nai Zion, the synagogue he grew up in. Burciaga celebrated *la mezcla*.

Tony Burciaga's propensity for seeing intercultural culinary connections begins with his first book, *Weedee Peepoo*. In a chapter labeled "I Remember Masa," punning on the title of the hit novel and film "I Remember Mama," he provides, among other things, a recipe for *albóndigas*, which he calls Mexican meat matzo balls. For anyone who has ever made matzo balls, the process is tellingly similar. Both mixtures are refrigerated, made into small balls, and added to soup, but only a writer with Burciaga's particular context would think to make the comparison. When he writes about playing with tortillas as a child, he remembers clowning around by biting eyeholes into one and wearing it as a mask at the dinner table. At another time he would wear one on his head "like a yarmulke," the skullcap worn in the synagogue. Who, but Tony Burciaga, would think to make a *yarmulke* out of a tortilla? Who, but Tony Burciaga, would know the correct Yiddish name for a skullcap?

In my copy of *Drink Cultura* the inscription refers, among other things, to "un sentido de íntima conexión por medio de familias, padres, amigos" (a sense of intimate connection through families, parents, friends). Of course, all the Burciagas and Reisels (my maiden name) knew each other growing up, the children running here and there in the synagogue. Tony recalls in his memoir what a great place