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PANADERIAS

TRADITIONAL MEXICAN BAKERIES

Kneeling at a mini-altar in the basement of San Antonio's Mi Tierra cafe and bakery, Señor Ricardo Montalvo prays to Our Lady of Guadalupe. *El maestro* (the master baker) rises dutifully, cinches his white apron, and begins another long, hot day of baking. He bakes, say those who study his style, *con cariño* (with tenderness), transforming the basic ingredients of the trade--flour, shortening, eggs, sugar, fruit fillings, and spices--into heavenly delights.

Everyday across Texas, other maestros reverently perform culinary feats at traditional Mexican bakeries called *panaderias*.

While the popularity of red-hot Tex-Mex food sizzles on the front burner, outside the Hispanic community familiarity with panaderias rises slowly in the oven. That makes their cornucopia of deliciously different breads, pastries, and cakes one of Texas' best-kept eating secrets.

At the threshold of Austin's La Reyna Bakery, encompassing aromas of fresh baked goods spiced with cinnamon and anise make you a believer: Man cannot live by tortilla alone.

From tall open racks, large aluminum trays bulge with crusty *bolillas* (small French loaves) and *pan de huevos* (light yeast buns with patterned sugar toppings).

Each time the clerk opens and closes the expansive glass counters, sweet smells ebb and flow from a technicolor sea of cookies, candies, cake squares, and fruit-filled pastries.

"Give me five dollars worth of *reposteria*," an early morning customer asks, smiling as the clerk bags a mixed sampler of cookies and pastries.

Back in the bakery, a tape player belts out lively conjunto music. Owner Jesus Becerra and two helpers wrap up the day's baking ritual which began at midnight. Without speaking, they deftly, quickly, almost instinctively mold dough into *pan dulces* (sweet breads) of many shapes and whimsically descriptive names: thick fruit-filled pastries called *canastas* (baskets), cinnamon, crescent-shaped brioches named *cuernos* (bull's horn), and turned-up cookies called *risas* (smiles).

"The panaderia offers our culture's own traditional versions of the delicate pastries found in the coffeehouses of Vienna and other cultures around the world," says San Antonian historian Mary Ann Guerra. She adds that panaderias serve up a wide variety of baked goods with a decidedly European twist.

Indigenous peoples of Mexico made breads from native plants--corn, and ground seeds and roots--sweetened with raw honey. Spanish missionaries later introduced not only their customs and religion, but also their staff of life--wheat. They grew wheat in the highlands above Mexico City and first used it in communion wafers.

Nuns taught native women the art of cake baking and candy making. Since convents across the land used egg whites to clarify sherry wine, nuns stirred interest among local cooks to incorporate the left-over yolks in inventive new breads and desserts.

Interest in French baking peaked from 1864 to 1867 during the short-lived French rule of Mexico under Maximilian. The imposed emperor and wife Carlota insisted on the breads and pastries they had loved in Europe. Following the new

fashion, 50 French bakeries, more than 100 pastry and chocolate shops, and dozens of confectioneries popped up in Mexico City alone.

European baking influences live on in the panaderia's bolillas (also called *pan francés*), egg-rich pan dulces, and sugar-coated pastries flavored with native Mexican spices.

The legacy of the panaderia recalls not only the hearth of Mexican cooking, but also the heart of traditional Mexican life.

For generations, shoppers made (and still make in many parts of Mexico) daily rounds of specialty shops--to *carnicerias* (meat markets) for meats, to *tortillarias* for tortillas, to *mercados* (markets) for fruits and vegetables, and to panaderias for *pan* (bread and other baked goods).

Before breakfast and again at *merienda* (afternoon snack time), *canasterios* (peddlers who delivered baked goods in large baskets) carried fresh bolillos and reposteria door-to-door.

Canasterios sold bolillas six for a nickel in the Austin neighborhood where Rudy "Cisco" Cisneros grew up. Himself the son of a master baker, he pedaled his own bicycle route selling bolillas and Mexican doughnuts called *churros*.

Back from military service in November 1945, Cisneros helped his father open a new bakery on Austin's east side.

"One cold winter day some guys from the garage across the street came over for coffee," recalls Cisneros. "Our cook had made biscuits to go with her coffee, so I gave some to the workers. They came back with friends, and we had to set up tables to meet the demand."

Moving to a larger location on Sixth Street, the bakery and cafe, now called Cisco's, stumbled onto another serendipitous success.

"Our dishwasher had brought homemade ranchero sauce to pour over her fried eggs, so we served it to our customers with our biscuits and sausage and added *frijoles*

(beans) on the side," the charismatic Cisneros boasts. "Today, they call me the 'Father of Huevos Rancheros.' It is one of the things we've become famous for."

The other is politics. Cisneros, a longtime leader in Austin's Mexican-American community, gradually reduced his repertoire of baked goods (keeping bolillos and, on weekends, pan dulces). But he turned up the heat on Cisco's reputation as a mecca for East Side political deal-making. Lyndon Johnson frequented the cafe so much that, once in the White House, he regularly ordered his favorites flown from Cisco's to Washington.

Politics aside, panaderias historically produced inexpensive breads and sweets for the common folk. "El que hambre tiene en pan piensa," a Mexican saying goes. (He who is hungry thinks of bread.)

Especially on Sunday mornings after mass, families religiously packed neighborhood panaderias. They still do at the granddaddy of Tex-Mex bakeries, Mi Tierra, in San Antonio's famed Market Square.

"Like always, families stop by after church to get barbacoa and pan dulces for their traditional Sunday brunch," explains Mi Tierra's Maria Rosales. "During the week, people come by early in the morning for coffee and baked goods, and then again after work to take some home."

In the early Fifties, Pete Cortez started Mi Tierra (my homeland, in Spanish) as a all-night cafe serving Mexican food and pastries to the growers and buyers at the downtown farmers market. Now one of San Antonio's most popular eateries, Mi Tierra draws tourists and locals 24 hours a day for traditional Mexican foods, troubadour music, and a festive atmosphere.

Until ten years ago, Señor Ricardo Montalvo, Mi Tierra's master baker for 42 years, worked alone with what he considers God-given talents. Now, two eager apprentices study his time-tested techniques.

Simple bread dough becomes bolillos (Spanish for little bobbins), crusty on the outside and chewy inside. Yeast dough becomes pan de huevo topped with *vetun* (colorful sugary toppings). Delicate French pastry dough becomes flaky pastries like *campechánas* that fall into a thousand pieces when broken. A stiffer dough called *pan fino* (literally, fine bread) easily shapes into many bread forms, often flavored with fruit filling.

To keep the taste authentic, Señor Montalvo imports ingredients like chocolate and vanilla from his native Mexico.

Some Tex-Mex panaderias, on the other hand, believe their offerings are superior to "back home."

"We get better flour here than in Mexico and can afford to use more shortening, so our items are richer," says Nacho Garcia who owns panaderias in Tyler and Longview. "I sent some pan dulces to Monterrey where I'm from, and my friends there said my stuff had more flavor."

At Garcia's Panaderia Nuevo Leon each customer takes a tray and tongs--just like in many Mexican bakeries--and serve themselves from racks and counters jammed with baked goods. "People waste a few sometimes by accidentally dropping them, but when they're helping themselves to these beautiful foods, they tend to buy more," he grins.

Pan fans often snack throughout the day on the light sweet breads. Bakeries turn out rich, dense cakes (less leavening than American cakes) and decorated breads and cookies for special family celebrations and Catholic fiestas.

For *El Día de los Muertos* (All Saints Day, November 2), many panaderias take orders for *pan de muerto* (literally, bread of the dead) to commemorate deceased loved ones. Families often serve *café con leche* (half coffee, half hot milk) with this traditional round semi-sweet loaf, decorated on top with dough in the shape of bones and tears.

During Yuletide, panaderias stock racks of crisp *buñuelos* (deep-fried wafers coated with sugar and cinnamon), usually enjoyed with Mexican hot chocolate.

El Dia de los Reyes (Epiphany, January 6) recalls the coming of the three wise men to Bethlehem. For this fiesta, panaderias create *Roscas de los Reyes* (King's Rings)--fruit-filled yeast breads baked in a ring and crowned with jewels of candied fruits and nuts. Inside each large rosca, one tiny plastic doll (once ceramic) represents the Christ child. At neighborhood rosca fiestas, whoever finds the doll in his or her piece promises to hold another party for all present on February 2, *El Dia de la Candelaria* (Candlemas).

Meaningful Mexican-American celebrations and delightful baked goods rise to the occasion naturally. As the festive holiday season approaches, both arrive *con cariño* ...with all the tenderness of a master baker.

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