

MEXICO: CROSS-CULTURAL FOOD

By Jack Keogh

An interesting story in broke on the newswires [October 10, 2007](#). It says Taco Bell is opening restaurants in Mexico. By changing the branding strategy – “Taco Bell is something else” – the company will attempt to distance itself from comparison to Mexico's taquerias. Taquerias sell traditional corn tortillas stuffed with an endless variety of fillings, from spicy beef to corn fungus and cow eyes. Taco Bell plans on selling the same menu items as in the United States. It's like bringing ice to the Arctic,” complained pop culture historian Carlos Monsivais.

Carlos Monsiváis is Mexico's leading cultural critic, and Mexico City's greatest living chronicler. He has written extensively and in evocative journalistic detail about Mexican history, culture and politics. He was born May 4, 1938, in Mexico City, and studied philosophy, economics and literature at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

Because Taco Bell's version of “Mexican food” is so unrecognizable to Mexicans, it is being promoted there as American fast food. That's a change, since Taco Bell uses Mexican themes in the US to sell how “authentically Mexican” it is. One of the company's many slogans will work in both countries — “Make a Run for the Border”.

“Taco Bell wants to take advantage of the perception that if something comes from the United States, it tastes better, that a country that has been Americanized is willing to Americanize food that is central to its cuisine,” Monsivais said. “It is an absurd idea, and given that it's so absurd, it may just be successful in upper-class areas.”

It is worth noting that Taco Bell is aiming at a different demographic – opening in the solidly middle-class Monterrey suburb of Apodaca, an area where residents may not have traveled to the United States. US services and products are well accepted in the wealthy suburbs, but this is an interesting approach that Taco Bell is taking as part of its plan to become an international franchise. “We want to appeal to consumers who haven't tried Taco Bell, for whom this would be their first experience with Taco Bell,” said Javier Rancano, the company's director in Mexico.

Mexico's colonization by Spain and later by France, compounded with its three-time invasion by the United States, (to whom it was forced to cede half of its territory) has all fed a general distrust of foreigners. Mexicans reserve their most conflicting attitudes for their neighbor to the north.

They view North Americans as cold, materialistic and overbearing; at the same time, they admire US-style democracy, material prosperity and advances in technology. The “American Way of Life” has become common in Mexico, especially in the bigger cities thanks to the barrage of mass media, consumer products and cross cultural interaction. Still many Mexicans are wary of “cultural imperialism”. They are extremely proud of their country's heritage, their art, their history and their music and, by and large, they

don't feel that foreigners, especially North Americans, show enough appreciation and respect. Mexicans view themselves as a people with strong moral and spiritual values. They are quick to be critical of their own failings and will sometimes express the opinion that their country is backward and corrupt. However, they do not enjoy foreigners commenting on these perceived weaknesses.

In Mexico, U.S. fast-food chains, like KFC and Chili's Grill & Bar, have been wildly popular. But perhaps the most successful has been Starbucks, which has expanded to over 150 stores in five years, even though its "venti chai latte" costs almost as much as a day's minimum wage. While there is a multitude of Starbucks outlets in Mexico, they are mainly in wealthier neighborhoods.

The U.S. accounts for most of Mexico's foreign trade and investment activities, but it is generally regarded as a bully rather than as a good neighbor. Mexicans view the US as a country that values business and political interests over friends and interpersonal relationships.

Mexicans are outraged by the poor treatment their compatriots must endure across the border. Moreover they see some aspects of US policy toward Mexico as disrespectful and aggressive interference in Mexico's internal affairs. Former Mexican president Vicente Fox, who earned a reputation for tactlessness while in office from 2000 to 2006, has written a gossipy, [English language autobiography](#). He tells how his grandfather, an American from Cincinnati, came to Mexico to seek his fortune in the 1890s. Joseph Fox worked his way up from night watchman at a carriage factory to prosperous plantation owner. He never learned to speak Spanish. "Here's my grandfather, coming from Cincinnati without a penny in his pocket, seeking his American dream," Fox said. "That says something about the universality of immigration".

Since leaving office, Fox has had to defend himself in a congressional investigation into his wealth and suggestions that he improperly enriched himself in office. "I'm absolutely clean," he said in the interview. That seems to be par for the course for former Mexican Presidents. Corruption is still rampant in all sectors of society.

In office, Fox was faced with a Congress controlled by rival parties. He failed to achieve many promised changes. The book largely glosses over those failures, as well as the uneasy relationship between Fox and his successor, President Felipe Calderón.

Meanwhile, in his own autobiography, *The Disobedient Son*, current President Calderón accuses Fox of forcing him to resign as energy secretary in 2004 after Calderón revealed he wanted to run for President

A contemporary cause of stress for Mexicans wishing to visit the US on vacations or for business is the process that they must undergo to obtain a US visa. First, they have to request an appointment to visit the embassy. The appointment can be scheduled as far out as six months. Before entering the embassy, they have to form a line outside. On a typical day they may have to wait from two to three hours. No cell phones, books or

newspapers are allowed. They have no remedy other than to stand in the rain or hot sun, depending on the season. Once they get in to meet the consular officials, they may or may not be granted a visa. Many now prefer to visit Europe or South American destinations like Buenos Aires in Argentina instead.

Mexicans are a warm and hospitable people. By and large they are very welcoming of foreigners and are usually willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. Any visitor who tries to speak a little Spanish and who takes the time to learn something of the culture of this incredible country will be amply rewarded whether the purpose of the visit is business or pleasure.

Meanwhile, opening in Monterrey is a tiny step for Taco Bell, which has almost 5,800 locations in the U.S. and 278 abroad, including other Latin American countries, Europe and Asia. It remains to be seen if Mexico's relatively youthful population of 107 million, and its proven taste for fast food could make it an attractive business.

[Keogh & Associates Consulting, LLC](#) has an office in Mexico City where we specialize in cross-cultural training, executive coaching and business consulting.