Where did ‘Tex-Mex’ come from?
The divisive emergence of a social category

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What is ‘Tex-Mex’?

Food style that emerged & developed in US Southwest

Fashioned from Mexican ingredients and flavors but not food from Mexico

Examples: Nachos, *chili con carne*, cheese enchiladas

Ingredients: Yellow cheese, cumin, corn chips, chili powder

- Fajitas
- Combination plate
- Chile con queso
- Frito pie
Tex-Mex as Social Category

- A social category is an institutionalized set of expectations associated with a label.
- For example, ‘Steakhouse’ is a category for restaurants associated with certain food, décor & service.
- Organizations & cultural objects associated with a category receive rewards & punishments from audiences.
- Association with a category implies taken-for-granted conformity with expectations unless a violation is obvious.
- Many diners & others associate the Tex-Mex label with certain food items & service practices.
- Tex-Mex category is taken-for-granted & does not typically require explanation.
- Tex-Mex label has diffused.
Theories of Category Emergence

**Activist Theorization**

- Social movement entrepreneurs advocate for a category (Rao et al. 2003)
- ‘Theorization’ of category rationale and benefits
- Institutional logic of action and practices

**Similarity Clustering**

- Domain enthusiasts see entities & group together on basis of similarities (Hannan et al. 2007)
  - Side-by-side comparisons of objects by features
  - Labeling
  - Schematization
Mexican food combines indigenous traditions with ingredients & practices of Spain

High regional variation of food in Mexico

Mexican-American food emerged in the border regions of US in early 20th century

*Chili con carne* sold at outdoor stands by ‘chili queens’ of San Antonio

Mass industrialized products & fast food chains e.g., El Chico, Chi Chi’s, Fritos, Pace salsa
Tex-Mex
Social History

Called ‘Mexican’ until Diana Kennedy argued that ‘real’ Mexican food differed & higher quality

Mexican government & some leaders concurred

Tex-Mex became a label built on disparagement

Tex-Mex emerged as a social category and its usage diffused, as did associated places & items

Ethnic activists re-appropriated the label & enhanced its image

Other immigrant foods did not typically develop new hybrid labels despite being adapted
Reconciliation with Theory

- Much Tex-Mex history does not conform to theories
  - Timing of label emergence is too late
  - Emerged without activists advocating it
  - Emerged with strong negative connotations
  - Shows no trace of clustering in authenticity valuations
Reconciliation with Theory

- Tex-Mex history suggests other factors behind emergence
  
  - Ethnic dynamics and racism
  
  - Mass industrialization
  
  - Geographic agglomeration
  
  - Geographic adjacency to origin place