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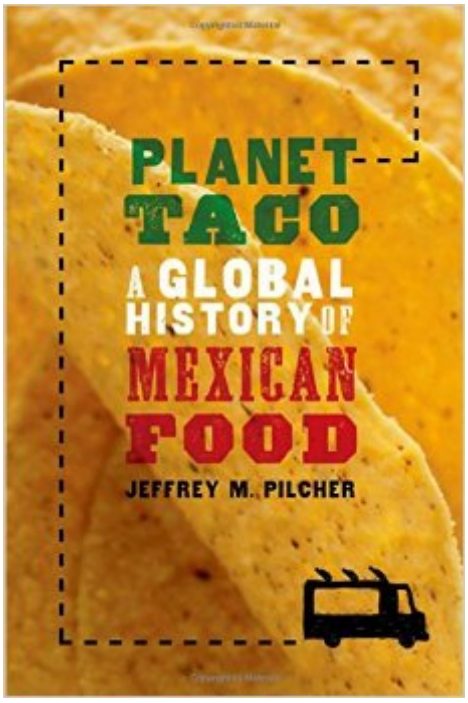
Planet Taco: A Global History Of Mexican Food



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Synopsis

As late as the 1960s, tacos were virtually unknown outside Mexico and the American Southwest. Within fifty years the United States had shipped taco shells everywhere from Alaska to Australia, Morocco to Mongolia. But how did this tasty hand-held food--and Mexican food more broadly--become so ubiquitous? In Planet Taco, Jeffrey Pilcher traces the historical origins and evolution of Mexico’s national cuisine, explores its incarnation as a Mexican American fast-food, shows how surfers became global pioneers of Mexican food, and how Corona beer conquered the world. Pilcher is particularly enlightening on what the history of Mexican food reveals about the uneasy relationship between globalization and authenticity. The burritos and taco shells that many people think of as Mexican were actually created in the United States. But Pilcher argues that the contemporary struggle between globalization and national sovereignty to determine the authenticity of Mexican food goes back hundreds of years. During the nineteenth century, Mexicans searching for a national cuisine were torn between nostalgic "Creole" Hispanic dishes of the past and French haute cuisine, the global food of the day. Indigenous foods were scorned as unfit for civilized tables. Only when Mexican American dishes were appropriated by the fast food industry and carried around the world did Mexican elites rediscover the foods of the ancient Maya and Aztecs and embrace the indigenous roots of their national cuisine. From a taco cart in Hermosillo, Mexico to the "Chili Queens" of San Antonio and tamale vendors in L.A., Jeffrey Pilcher follows this highly adaptable cuisine, paying special attention to the people too often overlooked in the battle to define authentic Mexican food: Indigenous Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food author Jeffrey M. Pilcher shows beyond a doubt that: "The history of tacos, like eating tacos, is a messy business." (Location 373) He researches the question: what is authentic Mexican food? What is mainly viewed as Mexican fare globally is actually an Americanized version of the cuisine - and beyond that authentic food is difficult to precisely locate because there are a variety of dishes that all vary by region.Pilcher researches the globalization of Mexican food, as most of us know it today. Along the way he also shares many interesting stories and historical notes in this very interesting, accessible account. Much of what is viewed as Mexican food is really Tex-Mex. For example, Pilcher shows that:"Following the movement of three basic ingredients from the Mesoamerican kitchen, corn, chilies, and chocolate, can help to reveal the emergence of material and cultural patterns that later contributed to the global reputation of Mexican food. Already in the early modern era, these foods acquired vastly different images among elite and popular sectors. The importance of social distinctions can readily be seen in the case of yet another New World plant, the tomato." (Location 635-638)For those interested in the history of a cuisine and how trade influenced the spread of it, Pilcher is thorough. He exams the history of Mexican food and follows it to today. Along the way he discusses how the cuisine was changed and how it spread world wide.For all the nonfiction fans out there who appreciate documentation and sources as much as I do, Pilcher includes 46 photos as well as a glossary, select bibliography, notes, and an index. (Yes!)Warning: you will be craving Mexican/ Tex-Mex food while reading.

Ask a non-Mexican to name a typical Mexican dish and be possibly prepared for a long pause and a few incorrect guesses. Maybe they will strike lucky and say tacos without really knowing what a taco is. Through this book you can soon become a "pop up expert" about this Mexican fast food and learn just how versatile it may be.In this fairly weighty work, the author traces the origin and development of the taco over time and considers its metamorphosis into an Mexican-American fast food that many people, in fact, think is a `Southern American' dish in its own right. Prepare to be surprised when you note the author's findings and consider how American influences have helped, or hindered, the dish in the name of globalisation and marketing.Described as a struggle between industrialised Tex-Mex foods and Mexican peasant cuisines and a battle between globalisation and national sovereignty, Pilcher suggests that things are even more tense due to American influences.

Of course, nothing is ever that clear-cut and black and white, as there are even `strident discussions' over the real nature and character of traditional Mexican food, the whys and wherefores to this situation and the various claims and counter-claims that lay behind it. Needless to say, there is not one single `authentic' cuisine but rather multiple variations of Mexican food. A typical Mexican may, should he or she choose to eat an authentic national dish, look bemused at some of the offerings being presented as `true Mexican fare'. Of course, the enthusiastic foreigner might know no difference and munch on in blissful ignorance!Make no mistake. This is no lightweight tourist or gastronomic guide to Mexican food.

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