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BY CHARLES MONTGOMERY

A long way from the bustle of the big city, young Omar Dominguez plays on his father's family's land in the state of Michoacán circa 1983.

COURTESY OF CIRO DOMINGUEZ

MEXICO

A BEAUTIFUL MESS

When a Canadian writer goes to work in a taqueria in Mexico City, he discovers the passion of the proprietor, the foundation of the cuisine, and the song and soul of the capital.

Dusk fell on Los Dorados de Durango. Flickering fluorescent lights glowed inside the restaurant's open windows. One by one, the bohemians and their sympathizers drifted in from the darkened streets of Mexico City, past the flames of the *pastor* spit and the bubbling pots of beans and spicy *caldo* and *mole*, toward the table-size stage in the back room. First came the ancient cowboy with the pink electric guitar. Then the delicate crooner in his starched shirt and tie. Then the señora of a certain age with the wildly painted eyes and the gold fingernails.

Soon the first bars of a *ranchera* were echoing off the industrial-orange walls. The señora wailed her sorrows to the ceiling in a voice that sounded like it had been dragged along a gravel road. She stabbed an imaginary knife into her heart. Just when it seemed as though she would die from her wounds, she grinned, sashayed over, and embraced me: "I won't forgive you!" she sang in my ear.

The sad songs kept coming. So did the rum. Beef fillets and strips of nopal cactus sizzled on the grill. Waiters in baseball caps charged back and forth with trays of *tacos al pastor*, tequila, and rum. Telenovela beauties cursed each other on a wall-mounted TV. ›

TRAVEL

The proud proprietor in front of his restaurant's open grill

I would have done anything to win Don Ciro's approval. He knew it, and he seemed to take a perverse pleasure in it.

Ciro Dominguez, the restaurant's proprietor, worked the room, waving his short arms, slamming the cash register, touching shoulders, breaking into a wide rascal's smile when his regulars showed up. He treated his favorites to a firm handshake followed by a hearty, backslapping hug.

Finally, Don Ciro eyed the crowd, ran a thick hand through his graying hair, and deposited himself in a chair out in the front room, by the pop cooler. He pressed shreds of beef into his first tortilla, spooned in ripe crescents of avocado and a grilled green onion, then squeezed on lime. He paused, peered at his creation like an artist, then devoured it without a word. I wanted to talk to him, but this wasn't the time. His daughter Marisol leaned across the table toward me.

"I like to watch him eat," said Marisol. "It's the only time he really seems at peace."

"Come," he ordered me. "Sit. Eat."

I looked down at my hands, which were stained brick red. I had spent the day chopping chiles, pulling apart the soft flesh of cooked chicken, bathing pork fillets in *pastor* sauce and squeezing them onto the stainless-steel spit that now stood on the street. I would have done anything to win Don Ciro's approval. He knew it, and he seemed to take a perverse pleasure in it. "You owe me!" he had told me shortly after I arrived in Mexico City. "And you'll pay me through hard work—ha!"

I never quite knew when the guy was joking.

Don Ciro had been running this restaurant—essentially an outsize taqueria—in Colonia Roma, a neighborhood in the heart of the city, for more than three decades. His customers were mostly like him, country folk who had come to the megacity to make a buck and never left. The city had changed them all. They were rougher, louder, more aggressive, quicker on their feet. They were *chilangos*. He served them the dishes they knew from their villages: enchiladas drenched in black *mole*, *chilaquiles* heaped with green salsa and sour cream, and, of course, tacos stuffed with spiced pork or the thick stews, generously infused with chiles and garlic, known as *guisados*. He had the business figured out. But Don Ciro had other problems to deal with. For one thing, his son Omar had put down his dish rag a decade before and run off to Canada. Now Omar was back, with a boyfriend in tow. Me. There was no recipe for dealing with such a *locura*, such a craziness.

I followed Don Ciro around like an eager puppy, from the restaurant, through the streets and markets of Mexico City, even to the cornfields of his native Michoacán. At first I just wanted to win his respect. But as the weeks passed, the man and his taqueria became my window on the soul of Mexico City. Why did Don Ciro eat like it was an act of prayer? Where was the line between *alegría* and sorrow? Why was he happiest when surrounded by noise and haste? You could ask the same questions about the city itself.

I invited myself along on one of Don Ciro's biweekly trips to the market. I thought it would be a quaint excursion, but there is no such thing in Mexico City. We bounced across the south side, through a collage of Day-Glo painted signs, car wrecks, Jesus graffiti, juggling clowns, and blue fumes.

"What a mess we've made," Don Ciro boasted as he jerked his dusty pickup back and forth in the flow, waving jovially as he cut off trucks and boxy minibuses. Sometimes he hedged his bets, straddling lanes. Sometimes we didn't move at all. Many of his fellow *chilangos* commute for two hours every morning through this chaos. Don Ciro seemed to regard it with a transcendent sense of awe. "To be human in this city, you must be adaptable. You must stretch, you must contract—it's a marvelous thing!"

We pulled into Central de Abasto, the 750-acre wholesale market that supplies Mexico City with 30,000 tons of fresh fruits, vegetables, and meat every day. Thousands of bodegas lined a grid of hundreds of corridors, all linked by bridges and surrounded by stampeding tractor trailers. We hired a scruffy-looking porter and set off for the produce halls.

"Hurry up!" Don Ciro bellowed as he charged along, waving his clipboard, barking price inquiries, greetings, and flirtations as he went.

Soon our porter's cart was piled head-high with nopal cactus paddles, bundles of cilantro, crates of tomatoes and green tomatillos, a side of pork, and two sacks of onions. We coughed and sneezed our way through a gauntlet of stalls selling chiles—"It's the *manzano* chile that makes you cry," a vendor laughed, waving one at me like a hand grenade. We picked up dried *árbol* chiles for making the house salsa and meaty green poblanos for stuffing, then followed the sound of music into a cinder-block passageway with crates of limes stacked to the ceiling.

There, a pair of cowboys were launching into a ballad from Mexico's northern states. One strummed a guitar. The other squeezed a battered accordion. They wailed a tune so bittersweet that suddenly the lime vendor was dancing, our porter had dropped his load, and Ciro was howling along with the music. ›

CHARLES MONTGOMERY

My eyes still watery from chile fumes, it struck me that *chilangos* prefer their toil, tragedy, and joy all stirred together, like the meat and spice and fruits that Don Ciro's cooks stir into their *picadillo*, their pepper stuffing. This is the story of Mexico City, and especially the story of Ciro Dominguez.

Don Ciro was born amid the cornfields in the state of Michoacán, the sixteenth largest of Mexico's 31 states. We went there, Don Ciro, Omar, and I. After a day's bus ride, we pushed through a forest of tall corn, hopped a stone wall, then followed a trail up over rocky ground to the two-room adobe hut where Ciro had spent his first years. I watched him draw a weary hand across those crumbling mud bricks. He said he could see it all again, just like a movie.

It was the dry season, 1964. The boy was barely 12 years old. He woke up hungry. There was nothing to eat, said his mother, but a chile pepper and the tortillas she was flapping in her hands. So Ciro ate his tortilla and his chile, and as he walked through the fields crying from hunger, he told himself: "I've got to get out of here, *muy lejos*."

Like millions of Mexicans, Ciro headed for the capital to look for a way to escape the hunger and uncertainty of the countryside. No wonder he opened a restaurant.

I left Los Dorados for a few days in order to explore Mexico City. In the past decade, the city has experienced a renaissance, both on its streets and in its kitchens. The metropolis has exploded to a population of almost 20 million people. Splendid colonial plazas and pedestrian malls have been rebuilt in the Centro Histórico. Lofts, hotels, and shopping arcades have sprouted on lots that had been derelict since the earthquakes of 1985. Some streets are converted into sandy "beaches" in the summer. In the winter, an ice rink appears on the Zócalo, the vast plaza in the center of the city.

Colonia Roma, Don Ciro's neighborhood, is being colonized by modern boutiques and espresso bars. Just down the Avenida Colima from Los Dorados, a sports-shoe boutique called Shelter displays $200 sneakers on glowing panels of translucent glass; kitschy Kong specializes in lowbrow art and design; and farther east, Tatei sells Hello Kitty–style clothes by Mexican designer Jaramara Mendoza.

It's enough to make one fear for the future of the humble taqueria, especially given the evolution of the taco itself. A new wave of chefs is laying claim to the traditional foods that restaurants like Los Dorados have served to working-class people for many years. I found beef tacos and corn soup on the menu at Izote, in the sophisticated neighborhood of Polanco, and bankers munching on tuna tostadas at Contramar, in trendy Colonia Condesa. I first set eyes on the Aztec specialty *escamoles* on a crisp white tablecloth at El Tajín.

"They are the Mexican caviar," my friend explained, as he insisted I try them. What arrived was a glistening heap of ant larvae. I was horrified until I actually tasted them. Sautéed in butter to a chewy texture, the larvae were surprisingly mild, with a lightly smoky aftertaste. We spooned them into handmade tortillas: *tacos con escamoles*.

When I returned to El Tajín the following week, I met Alicia Gironella De'Angeli, the godmother of *nueva cocina mexicana*. She is a stately woman with silver hair and a long, severe nose.

"A taco is a medium in which to eat anything," she explained. "There is no special recipe."

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DETAILS

STAYING THERE

There's no better place to contemplate the endless cityscape than from an in-suite hammock in the ultra-modern **W MEXICO CITY** (011-52-55-9138-1800; starwoodhotels.com; from $499), a short walk from the National Museum of Anthropology. Just off the Parque España, in the heart of leafy and hip Colonia Condesa, **CONDESA DF** (011-52-55-5241-2600; condesadf.com; from $175) is a cleverly designed modern hotel wrapped in a 1928 exterior. No detail has been left unconsidered: Staff uniforms match the coat of the resident chocolate Lab. Borrow a hotel bike and explore the neighborhood's lovely parks and restaurants. In the heart of the Centro Histórico, the **GRAN HOTEL DE LA CIUDAD DE MÉXICO** (011-52-55-1083-7700; www.granhotelciudaddemexico.com.mx; from $160) boasts an Art Nouveau lobby that's almost as magnificent as the views of the Zócalo, the city's huge central plaza, from the rooftop terrace bar.

EATING THERE

Mexico City's best chefs have embraced—and sometimes played with—traditional dishes with spectacular results. **EL TAJÍN**, in colonial Coyoacán (Miguel Ángel de Quevedo 687; 01-55-5659-5759; eltajin.com.mx), showcases the passion of culinary anthropologist Alicia Gironella De'Angeli. Try the excellent ancho chile stuffed with seafood and smothered with tangy guacamole. A trip to **CAFÉ AZUL Y ORO** (New Faculty of Engineering Building, Ciudad Universitaria; 01-55-5622-7135) is both an architectural and a culinary adventure. Set on the campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the restaurant offers wildly original takes on traditional Oaxacan recipes. Popular with business lunchers, **CONTRAMAR** (Durango 200, Colonia Roma; 01-55-5514-3169; contramar.com.mx) serves fresh seafood with Mexican and international influences in an airy, Baja-style room. Reserve early or be prepared to wait. **PUJOL** (Petrarca 254, Polanco; 01-55-5545-4111; pujol.com.mx) offers impeccable service in one of the city's best-reviewed, most inventive, and pricier restaurants, combining *nueva cocina mexicana* with international fare. For a true *chilango* experience, hit the taqueria-cum-restaurant **LOS DORADOS DE DURANGO** (corner of Morelia and Durango, Colonia Roma; 01-55-5514-1583) on Friday, bohemian night.

BEING THERE

The **NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY** (Avenida Reforma at Gandhi, Chapultepec Park; mna.inah.gob.mx) overflows with treasures from Mexico's pre-Columbian past. However, the city's streets and markets offer an equally spectacular gastronomic experience. The **SAN JUAN MARKET** (Ernesto Pugibet, by the Plaza de San Juan, Centro Histórico; mercadosanjuan.galeon.com) supplies restaurants with "exotic" ingredients—from crickets and crocodile steaks to wild morel mushrooms. The vendors are quick to offer samples. Arrive in the morning to see fleets of departing bicycles loaded with freshly skinned goats. For a taste of where the locals shop, pay a visit to **LA MERCED MARKET** (near Merced Metro Station, Centro Histórico), a crowded maze of stalls selling everyday goods across four city blocks. More tranquil is the **FUSION BAZAAR** (Parque México, Colonia Condesa; proyectofusion.com.mx), featuring work by local independent designers of embroidered slippers, purses emblazoned with winged miniature buses, and Mexi-pop-culture T-shirts. On the southern edge of the city, the **CANALS OF XOCHIMILCO** become a de facto floating market on weekends. Rent a covered punt and spend the afternoon being poled through a traffic jam of drifting mariachi bands, quesadilla vendors, and picnicking families. **LUCHA LIBRE** is the wild version of wrestling that has become a national religion in Mexico. Check Arena México match times at www.cmll.com. —C.M.

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As laissez-faire as this may sound, Doña Alicia is a stickler for certain rules. I learned this firsthand when I used my index finger to sample the *chilmole* sauce that drenched the sea bass she served me. I parsed out burnt red chile, garlic, cloves, anise, coriander …

"Don't use your finger for that!" she said sternly. "Use your tortilla."

The tortilla, she said, is the foundation of Mexican cuisine and should be respected as such. Tortillas must be served hot. And most importantly, they must be strong and pliable. She ordered a fresh plate and vigorously rolled and folded one of her own handmade tortillas. It survived. Then she did the same to a machine-made tortilla, which tore after a few tugs.

Taquerias like Los Dorados deserve to survive the gentrification of districts like Colonia Roma, she said—but only if their tortillas are worthy.

"You go back to Los Dorados and check and see if that tortilla is strong," she told me with the authority of the cooking teacher she was for many years. "You roll it. If it breaks, the place is no good. Okay?"

Doña Alicia's food was glorious. Her waiters were gracious. But after a few days of the white-tablecloth scene, I missed the flawed glory of Los Dorados: the racket, the Christmas lights, the telenovelas and rambunctious emotions that bounced off its very well-worn walls. And I missed Don Ciro.

I returned on a Friday evening, just as the bohemians were arriving. Smoke was billowing from the grill. Maura Gómez, the lady with the wild eyes and the gold fingernails, grabbed me by both hands. "Tonight," she said hoarsely, "I'm going to sing you *unas canciones chingonas*—some bloody great songs!"

And there was Don Ciro, finishing a plate of beef-tongue tacos. His granddaughter Fernanda sat at his side, coloring with crayons.

"Sit!" he ordered me.

"Bring it," he ordered the cooks.

He pushed his bare plate away and gazed at me. I pulled a warm tortilla from the basket in the middle of the table. As he spoke, I rolled it, folded it.

"You know, Chuck, I grew up here," he said. "I aged here, inside these walls. My liver is scrubbed on these walls. This is where I have known all my joy, my angers, and my deceptions."

I realized that to walk into Los Dorados is to inhabit the song of Don Ciro's own life, and now I had become a part of that song. Which is why I almost wept when my plate arrived: a plump green poblano chile drenched with almond cream sauce and sprinkled with red pomegranate seeds. The three colors of the Mexican flag made this *chiles en nogada* the most symbolic, and unsubtle, of dishes. You don't serve it to just anyone.

He watched me slice through the poblano. The *picadillo*, a blend of ground beef, pineapple, dates, pear, whole garlic, and gentle green chile, poured out. It smelled like Christmas cake and tasted like love.

The speakers in the back room crackled to life. Maura's gravelly lamentations issued from the speakers. "I have cried drops of blood," she howled. "Poor me!"

One after another, the bohemians gushed and wailed about the searing pain of life, of everything they had lost over the years, and it was a euphoric kind of sadness I'll never quite understand. The grill hissed and crackled, and the waiters passed around the tacos and tequila and rum. Fernanda tugged at Don Ciro's arms, but he was already on his feet.

He grabbed my hand. He shook it hard. Then he yanked me in for the backslap hug. One slap. Two slaps. The full embrace. He smiled his rascal's smile, and then he was off to the next table.

I looked down at my hand, and there was the tortilla: rolled, folded, crumpled, and gloriously intact.

A TASTE OF MARCH

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▸Bake until a wooden skewer inserted into center of cake comes out clean, about 1 hour. Cool in pan 1 hour, then invert onto a rack and cool completely, about 1 hour more.

▸Beat cream with confectioners sugar and vanilla extract using whisk attachment of mixer until it just holds stiff peaks. Serve cake with whipped vanilla cream.

COOKS' NOTES: **If you have green cardamom pods, you can grind the seeds using a mortar and pestle or an electric coffee/spice grinder.**

• Cake keeps in an airtight container at room temperature 3 days.