

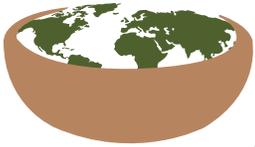
The San Diego Burrito

Authenticity, Place, and Cultural Interchange

By: Sarah C. Wyer

When I moved away from San Diego, California, I was not thinking about food. I was unprepared for how much I would miss Mexican food and how difficult it would be to find what I considered to be authentic Mexican cuisine in the fresh and local streets of Eugene, Oregon. The meat had no flavor, the rice was not yellow enough, and the salsa was bland by comparison. What I missed most was my favorite San Diego dish, the California Burrito. This food item is an amalgamation of Mexican food and San Diego culinary preferences, like French fries. Nothing reminds me of home more than the moment when I bite into a California Burrito. A salty, heavy flavor delights the taste buds with each bite, the combination of French fries and grilled meat richly complimented by the addition of cheese, sour cream, and guacamole. San Diego's California Burritos are often too large to hold without the aid of wrapped paper, which is part of the experience of eating one. Here I reflect on how the California Burrito constitutes "inauthentic authenticity." Although it occupies a liminal identity as neither Mexican nor American cuisine, for me it is an authentic reminder of my hometown and a regional identification marker as a trans-class food that is widely consumed regardless of socio-economic status.

The California Burrito is not strictly Mexican food. It is, in fact, a far cry from the palm-sized street tacos sold just across the border. It does not mimic traditional Mexican fare except, perhaps, in the addition of pico de gallo or how the meat (usually carne asada) is spiced and cooked. It is an incredibly localized, regionalized food dish. Burritos as a food genre barely qualify as Mexican cuisine within Mexico proper, prominent in border towns throughout the country but nowhere near the capital city. Small street tacos have a far greater claim to Mexican authenticity than any burrito, but the California Burrito is one step further away from "real" Mexican food. In her article on cookbooks in America, Liora Gvion touches on a point that resonates, albeit not as broadly, with the creation of the California Burrito. She says, "The social construction of national cuisines and national foods often involves the appropriation of food items" (2009:55). San Diego is a sister city to Tijuana, Mexico, and Northern Mexican cuisine regularly



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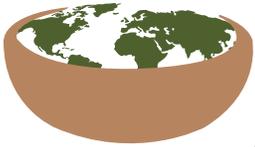
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jumps the border. The California Burrito is only one example of how Mexican food has been appropriated to assist in building an American-specific food identity in the city.

San Diego is the mecca of the California Burrito, but the food item pops up in Mexican restaurants throughout Southern California. Articles written on the California Burrito usually focus on its bastardization, claiming that it is a dish generated by the dominant surf culture of San Diego (see Mann 2010). As a San Diego native, I find this assessment misleading. Although it is sometimes scarfed up as a quick post-surfing lunch in many beach-centered communities within the city, a plethora of San Diegans eat it, including drunk college students at 3 a.m. The California Burrito is an after-work, localized, fast-food dinner, or a breakfast on the way to somewhere else. It has become an authentic, regional cuisine that differentiates San Diegan Mexican food from other regions. As Rachelle Saltzman says in her article “Identity and Food,” “The people from a particular place also identify with the particular food associated with that place” (2014:2). In my case, the California Burrito is a treat that I organize into my schedule whenever I visit San Diego. I always make it a priority to drop into one of several favorite locations to pick up the food dish that represents my strongest culinary sense of home.

The California Burrito, like the Coney Island hot dog of Michigan, represents the idea that “regional variants are important elements in the development of regional identities” (Lockwood 2012: 143). The Coney Island hot dog stands, prevalent throughout peninsular Michigan, are another example of how food serves as a marker of identity. Is the hot dog a traditional Macedonian food? No, but that is not what matters. The importance of the Coney dog is that it has become associated with a certain place, even a certain population. Whether or not Macedonians grilled up hot dogs on ancient stones hundreds of years ago is irrelevant, because history is not necessarily a hallmark of authenticity and immigrant populations in Michigan remain connected to the Greek and subsequent Albanian adoption of the Coney dog as a foodway. Authenticity is not something immemorial. In this case, especially, authenticity is something forged and remade, adapted and fluid. The California Burrito is authentic to San Diego because San Diegans recognize it as a place-based food. This also suggests that authenticity is something that must be particular to individuals, not a generalized podium of truth.

The burrito itself is considered Mexican-American food. There are many variants of the burrito’s birth as a food, and they all seem to contain a donkey. Donkeys, or burros in Spanish, served frequently as pack animals. Donkeys carried blankets in rolls, the textile tightly rolled up and strapped to the animal. As one of the legends



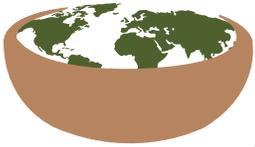
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goes, a donkey inspired one man to roll up his food to keep it warm, using a flour tortilla. The burrito—food of the little donkey—was born (Duggan 2001). Claimed as a traditional food by Ciudad Juarez, a Northern Mexican border town, the burrito crept into Mexican-American foodways in the 1920s and 30s, finally receiving attention from U.S. Media for the first time in 1934 (Smith 1999). Does this make burritos a liminal food, in-between one cuisine and another? If burritos are not strictly Mexican, can their use be seen as an appropriation of Mexican cuisine? Applying the concept of liminality to food is difficult, as food items by themselves do not constitute ritual and the California Burrito is not specific to any particular ritual either.

The burrito's popularity has only continued to grow. There are regional variants to the burrito as well, from San Diego's California Burrito to San Francisco's Mission Burrito, containing entirely different ingredients. An interesting addition to the playing field of burritos associated with California is El NorCal, a burrito hailing from Northern California designed specifically after the San Diego's classic California Burrito. It lists, as its defining feature, "the drizzle of our super secret & super sexy salsa de Espresso," and ends its introduction with "it's gnarly good, bro!" (Havlicek 2012). While this appropriation is far more recent than the hypothesized invention of the California Burrito, this specific example is attempting to connect El NorCal with San Diego surf culture, the perceived consumer of California Burritos. This type of intra-state marketing is not unusual, but it shines a false light on who the consumers of the California Burrito actually are. My fieldwork confirms that California Burritos are eaten by people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds; I interviewed San Diegans across income levels and all my informants indicated the California Burrito as a food they eat regularly, making it a trans-class food that crosses lines of socio-economic status. This suggests that the California Burrito is a marker of San Diegan identity regardless of class distinction, a curious trait for a food that is primarily consumed outside the home.

Unlike more nationally recognizable foods (the Philly Cheesesteak, Chicago Deep-Dish Pizza), the California Burrito is spreading its mantra of "there must be fries" without retaining its San Diego-given name. Variations exist, like the El NorCal burrito, but it has not yet reached a level of popularity that crosses state borders. In his article considering whether or not American food constitutes as an authentic cuisine, Sidney Mintz says that "local variation in cuisine is under continuous pressure from commercial enterprise aimed at profiting by turning into a national fad every localized taste opportunity" (2002: 27). While the California Burrito is growing in popularity and notice (San Diego is a huge city—how could it not?), the food item itself still retains its localized identity. I have traveled



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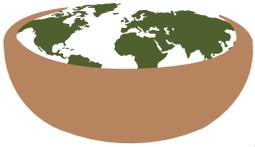
extensively throughout the United States and have yet to see a California Burrito look-alike anywhere else. I once asked, to the horror of the waiter, for a California Burrito at a sit-down, restaurant-style Mexican food diner in Tennessee. When he did not know what it was, my surprise must have been palpable because he offered to check with the chef in the back. I ended up special-ordering my burrito, unaware of the various stylistic and ingredient changes that occurred within the kitchen. What I received was a huge, wet burrito (topped with enchilada sauce) filled with cubed potatoes, long strips of flank steak, and lettuce. It was this moment that made me reflect on the California Burrito as a place-based food, a special food item that did, in fact, have a home in Southern California.

My fieldwork and research make it apparent that French fries are the key ingredient to the California Burrito. They cannot be potatoes in any other form. The local San Diegans I interviewed were clear about this distinctive ingredient. “There needs to be fries,” my informant, Patti, clarified (Wilson 2014). An article in the San Diego publication *The Reader* confirms this, describing the ideal situation all California Burrito-eaters hope to find themselves in every time they take a bite:

But it’s the fries that really bring it home. They do it in a way that regular potatoes just can’t manage. How can this be? After all, aren’t fries just potatoes, cut into strips and fried? I think the answer is in the kind of fries that are used. Taco shops tend towards prepared french fries cut to a medium thickness. When viewed outside the confines of a burrito, it’s plain that the fries are exceptionally crispy, more so than regular fried potatoes have a right to be. This is because a lot of commercially available french fries are coated in a thin batter. It’s nothing like the batter that surrounds fried fish. It’s the thinnest of veneers, applied before freezing, that gives the fries a crunch coating when they’re cooked (Pike 2012:??).

This key ingredient is essential to another San Diego special: Carne Asada Fries. To keep it simple, Carne Asada Fries are what you get when you dump the contents of a California Burrito into a box and add more French fries. They were voted (in *The Reader*) San Diego’s most iconic food item and are distinctive to Southern California. Like the California Burrito, Carne Asada Fries have unknown origins; both dishes simply started appearing on San Diego menus in the 1990s.

My husband, also a native San Diegan, has strong connections to the California Burrito as a symbol of home. When asked to describe the San Diego classic, he said, “it is a wondrous combination of Norteño Mexican food and Americana cuisine that



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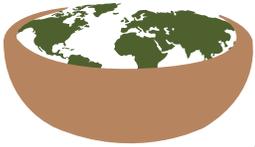
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could have only happened somewhere where these worlds combine. The farthest away you can find it is in Anaheim; you won't find it in L.A" (Wyer 2014). Several Mexican eateries claim to have invented it but the true mother of this syncretic food dish is unknown. Where the best California Burrito is served is an equally disputed topic. My husband prefers the small local chain of Santana's, based in Point Loma and San Diego's East County. For two people with similar tastes we agree to disagree when it comes to this topic. The best California Burrito I have had comes from Cotija's, another small, local chain with a couple of locations throughout the city.

There are many variations on the California Burrito, from the thickness of the French fries to whether pico de gallo is included in the mixture. The classic consensus seems to include carne asada, pico de gallo, guacamole, cheese, and French fries. The consistency in ingredients suggests that while the California Burrito may not be traditional Mexican cuisine, it is authentic as a regional dish for San Diego. Nancy Yan stated that "we must accept that there are multiple versions of authenticity that have the potential to be equally valid" (2012:92). The California Burrito might insult some sensibilities, but it is the syncretic outcome of two regional foodways that have culminated to create a San Diego local and authentic food dish. San Diego's immigrant population, primarily Hispanic, likely created the California Burrito as a way to cater to American food preferences, thus the inclusion of French fries (or sometimes potatoes). The GQ Magazine Online has an article focused on the California Burrito, making the point that "[it] is a hopeful sign of serendipitous, irreverent cultural interchange. It's an equalizer: a cylinder the size of an infant, full of Mexican-American meats and starches, that beachcombers, migrant workers, and teenagers all eat side by side in identical particleboard booths across San Diego county" (Sobel 2013). The California Burrito, as well as Carne Asada Fries, have succeeded in creating the "culinary local" from the "culinary other." They contribute to the San Diegan identity by acting as place-based foods, are trans-class foods that are consumed by a spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, and, serve as inauthentic authenticity for San Diego.

California Burrito Recipes

The California Burrito is a dish that is rarely made at home, so recipes for it are hard to come by. I have listed a few recipes here, but for an "authentic" experience, one really needs to purchase the California Burrito from a Mexican restaurant. The experience is incomplete if the dish is made at home. The simplest way to enjoy a California Burrito



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is to have carne asada, potatoes or French fries, cheese, and pico de gallo rolled up in a large, burrito-size tortilla. The quality of the tortilla is very important. It needs to be gummy and thick not bland or flakey. Here are a few recipes from the Internet.

From Food.com:

Ingredients:

- 1/2 cup carne asada meat or 1/2 cup pollo asada meat, chopped up
- sour cream
- 10 French fries (should be larger softer French fry not hard and skinny.)
- 2 ounces shredded cheddar cheese
- 1 flour tortilla

Directions:

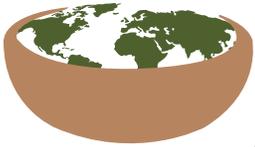
1. Make sure meat, French fries and tortillas are fresh and warm.
2. Fill tortilla with carne or pollo asada add fries, sour cream and cheese.
3. Serve immediately.
4. Enjoy!

Ballistic BBQ Recipe Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y70-v5guC6o>

Descriptions of the California Burrito on various menus from San Diego eateries:

Vallarta Express: fries, cheese, guacamole, sour cream, salsa fresca and steak or chicken.

Santana's: Carne Asada, Carnitas, Adobada, Achiote or Grilled Chicken with potatoes, Mexican salsa & Cheddar cheese.



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Sombrero Mexican Food: Carne Asada, fries, cheese, pico de gallo.

Many restaurants do not include a description of the California Burrito on their menu, merely displaying the name.

Field Work

I have asked several friends and acquaintances who live in or are natives of San Diego this question: “Think to the last time you ate a California Burrito. Now, tell me if you think it is a food particular to San Diego, what should ideally be in a California Burrito, and where you think the best place to get one in San Diego is?”

I received eight responses and made a table to un-package the results of my questions.

Table 1 Collected Field Work, Questions on the California Burrito



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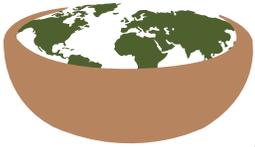
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Informant	Is it a food particular to San Diego?	What are the ideal ingredients in a California Burrito?	The best place to get a California Burrito in San Diego?
Lisa	I think it's a SoCal thing, not necessarily a San Diego exclusive.	It should have carne asada, fries, guac, and salsa in it.	At the moment my favorite place is Vallarta Express, although El Cotixan is where I grew up getting them.
Ben	Cali Burrito is a San Diego thing.	Carne, fries, pico and cheese are the basics. Some add beans, sour cream or guac.	They are all different. It really depends on if you like a chewy tortilla, lots of cheese, really fresh cuts of meat, etc. Not all carne asada is the same.
Pito	It is a food particular to San Diego. Everyone I know who leaves San Diego tells me that they miss it.	Ingredients must be fries, carne asada, pico de gallo, shredded cheese, and all of it wrapped in a flour tortilla.	Best place would be in the shadier part of the city, where the taco shop itself is an old A&W Root Beer stand. Said taco shop is open 24 hours a day, and no matter what time you go, there will always be a line. Always.
John	It is a San Diego thing, no where else.	All a California Burrito is is a carne asada burrito with fries.	No answer.
Konahl	Not particular to San Diego, but I think it has its origin here.	Beef, French fries, guacamole, and pico de gallo.	Roberto's Taco Shop.
Joe	It is most certainly a food particular to San Diego. This is evident by the fact that how commonly it is found outside decreases the further outside San Diego you go.	French fries, carne asada and cheese are necessary. Sour cream is great and guacamole is optional.	Santana's or Roberto's are the best.
Dan	Not sure of the origin, but definitely a part of Southern California.	Wholesome goodness. The California Burrito is a mixture of two main things: a carne asada burrito (which is a burrito containing diced meat with Mexican Salsana and Cheese) and freedom fries (French fries).	Vaqueros, also known in the common tongue as the barrel.
Patti	It's particular to at least Southern California, certainly a prominent San Diego food.	Carne asada and fries. There needs to be fries.	The Barrel.

My informant Dan sent me a rather poetic email about the California Burrito, which I cannot resist including. It reads as follows:

“A Burrito Experience Cali Style” by Beastmandhan

I have lived I good old Cali for many a year and in that time have eaten many foods.



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The one particular food that comes to mind at the mention of California is a burrito that contains the name of this fine state. Now, I am not sure of the Origin of the Cali burrito but I will tell you this, it is not a food you want to miss if you were to travel to southern Cali. The real question is “what’s in this fantastic mystery burrito?” and to answer that I will say “wholesome goodness.” The Cali burrito is a mixture of two main things. 1: a carne asada Burrito (which is a burrito containing diced meat with Mexican Saldana and Cheese) and freedom fries (French fries). In the better part of my journey through life I have been to multiple locations and tried many of these exotic burritos. One of the most memorable places is a place known as Vaqueros, also known in the common tongue as The Barrel. (This is because the shape of the building is that of a barrel). This location is 24 hours and is typically always crowded. I go to this particular establishment at least once a week. Sometimes if I get lucky a specific taco shop chef is in whom my friends and I have entitled the “burrito sage”. This sage makes burritos the size of the forearm of a guerrilla. Now usually size doesn’t matter but in this case it does. The burrito sage is a burrito maker beyond his time.



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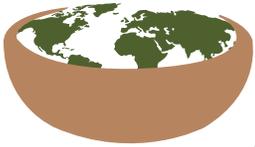
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