

Manuel Chavez
Taco Torro – Memphis, TN

* * *

Date: June 16, 2017

Location: Taco Torro

Interviewer: Simone Delorme

Transcription:

Length: Twenty-five minutes

Project: Latino Memphis & Oxford

Delerme: This is Simone Delerme with the Southern Foodways Alliance. Today is Friday, June 16, 2017, and we're here with Manuel at the taco shop here at Getwell Road, and we're here to talk a little bit more about the stories behind the food, and we're going to learn a little bit more about your establishment. So to start, would you just say again for me your full name and your occupation, what you do here?

[0:01:01.1]

Chavez: Well, my full name is Manuel Bernard Chavez, and I used to do construction before I started doing this business like two years ago. Three years ago, I started doing this business. I start like playing, you know, I mean my full income was construction, in the construction. I do this only on the weekends. I used to do this only weekends to get extra money. I'm playing, you know. But with the time, I start seeing this was a good business, so I start spending more time cooking, and actually I told my mother-in-law, "Help me out with the cooking." So she helped me, like probably a year, year and a half, cooking for me and teach me how to cook, and from there up to now, I'm doing very good.

[0:02:06.3]

Delerme: So you said it's been about three years.

[0:02:07.7]

Chavez: That's right. Three years I'm doing this, yes.

[0:02:11.1]

Delerme: And it started with you just playing around.

[0:02:12.8]

Chavez: Playing around.

[0:02:14.1]

Delerme: This is full-time now?

[0:02:15.7]

Chavez: Now it's full-time.

[0:02:16.1]

Delerme: What are your hours?

[0:02:17.6]

Chavez: Well, I work from Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday 6:00 to 11:00, and Friday and Saturday 6:00 to 3:30 in the morning. This is a bar [points next door]. This is a nightclub, so they open at 9:00 and close at 3:30 and 4:00 o'clock in the morning.

[0:02:38.0]

Delorme: And you're open throughout that whole time?

[0:02:39.3]

Chavez: That whole time.

[0:02:39.8]

Delorme: Okay. So when are you busiest? In the evening is when you get—

[0:02:43.6]

Chavez: Evenings, yes.

[0:02:44.8]

Delorme: Okay, okay. I understand now. And before, had you ever worked in the food industry or had family that did?

[0:02:53.8]

Chavez: No, not really, but right when—before I left Mexico to come right here, I had a couple businesses, small business like this, but I wasn't cooking nothing. I mean, my wife was cooking and helping me out a little bit, but I always want to have a business like this, always, always. But when I came right here to United States, I started in

construction twenty years ago, and then I get in the construction, make some money, wa-wa-wa, but, I mean, I wasn't happy. Now I'm happy, happy, yeah, selling tacos.

[0:03:37.2]

Delorme: Tell me a little more about the food. What exactly is on the menu? How do you prepare it?

[0:03:43.1]

Chavez: I just sell tacos and quesadillas. I got steak tacos. Everywhere got steak tacos. I got pork tacos. Everybody got pork tacos. Chicken, everywhere got chicken. The things I got, so few people cook these tacos, these intestines, chitlins, tongue, *lengua*, and brains, pork stomach, it's called *buche*. And what else I got? This is suadero. It comes from the cow. It's like the grease of the cow, put together and cook that one.

[0:04:41.3]

Delorme: Okay, okay. So that makes you very unique, then.

[0:04:42.6]

Chavez: Yeah.

[0:04:43.1]

Delorme: That you are able to serve that on your menu.

[0:04:46.4]

Chavez: Mm-hmm.

[0:04:46.6]

Delerme: Okay. And without giving away your secret recipes, how do you prepare that? How do you prepare the tacos? For someone who doesn't know, who's never been here before, what can they expect?

[0:04:57.4]

Chavez: Well, let me tell you something. Let me tell you something. Everybody say this—not everybody, but a lot of people say this, that helped me to keep going with the business, they say, “Hey, man, I’ve been in a lot of taco shops in Memphis. I’ve been in a lot of taco shops in Memphis, and this is the best tacos I’ve ever tried. I feel like I’m in Mexico eating in the streets.” So that—I mean, I don’t know. I mean, like I say, I haven’t had a food business like this in my life, I started like three years ago. My grandma helped me out. We had to do this, had to do that. My sister-in-law helped me out with the salsas. And that is the secret, the salsas. That is the secret, the salsas.

[0:05:56.7]

Delerme: What are the salsas that you have?

[0:05:59.2]

Chavez: I got tomatillo green sauce, tomatillo with jalapeno peppers, and the red sauce is—how you call? Is chile de arbol, is red, with tomatoes. So that's unique salsas. It's real good. I never try it. But in the family, we always cook that one. Every time we eat tacos in the family, I say if I sell these salsas in the streets with the tacos, I mean, it be fine. I'm always thinking like that, you know, when we cook in the house. So it's what I start thinking and putting in the business.

[0:06:50.3]

Delerme: So these are your recipes or your family's recipes?

[0:06:52.7]

Chavez: My grandmother.

[0:06:53.9]

Delerme: Your grandmother's recipes.

[0:06:55.6]

Chavez: I'm sorry. My mother-in-law.

[0:06:58.1]

Delorme: Okay. So these are your mother-in-law's recipes that she shared with you and that you cook.

[0:07:03.9]

Chavez: Like I say, she helped me like probably a year, year and a half, and we cook together, but one time say, "Well, man, you have to do it by yourself." So she teach me how to cook everything.

[0:07:19.6]

Delorme: What have been some of the challenges that you've faced, the biggest challenges having this business?

[0:07:25.1]

Chavez: When I started, you know, you don't have a lot of customers. My wife, she tell me—because at one point I had to quit construction. I had to say, "That's it." And then when I quit, nobody believed me, so it was my challenge, a big challenge that I had to get the income I have in the construction and make that one on selling tacos. So my wife always say to me, "You'd better quit doing that. You don't go nowhere with the tacos." Because sometimes I don't make any money, make like 60 bucks, 80 bucks a night. It's nothing. So my wife say, "Man, the bills is filling up. I mean, how you gonna pay the bills? How you gonna pay the rent?" At that time, I had to work a little bit construction and come work in the afternoons right here. But, now I do a little construction here and

there, but just for friends. I'm 100 percent time on the tacos. That was the big challenge, get it started, I mean, quit the construction and risk everything.

[0:09:06.6]

Delorme: And how did you grow your base? Who are your customers and how did you grow that customer base?

[0:09:16.8]

Chavez: Okay. Most of the customers, when I started, they come from the bar, okay, but now all day all the people tell the other people, so they come from another clubs, you know. They close, they leave the club hungry, and they looking a place to eat. Nobody's open at 3:30 in the morning, so if you come right here at 3:30 in the morning, this place is packed, you know. So it's why the people know me. People tell the other guy, "Hey, where we gonna eat now?" They're hungry, they been dancing, drinking. So one guy, "Hey, they sell tacos over there." When they come right here at night, they come through the week because they taste it in the night, hungry, "Good!" Because you hungry. But they come through the week after work. "Oh, they're really good." You taste it. Even you not hungry, you just want to taste it, they're good.

[0:10:31.4]

Delorme: So connected to that, what have been some of the most memorable, most positive experiences that you've had, the successes?

[0:10:40.9]

Chavez: Well, like I say, when the people say—like the other day, every night they tell me, “These tacos are really good. They’re really good.” I’m not lying. I mean, I’m telling you people say, “I feel like I am in Mexico eating in the street.” That’s what keep me going, you know. And you see it’s nothing big. It’s just a 16 -by-6 space. And I’m thinking with the time, you know, open another one and another one and another one in different parts of Memphis, because I know the tacos are good. I know the tacos are good. It’s why they—

[0:11:40.7]

Delerme: You mentioned Mexico. How long have you been here? When did you come to Memphis?

[0:11:45.6]

Chavez: Twenty-three years ago. My son is 23. Yeah, 26 years ago.

[0:11:51.5]

Delerme: Okay, okay. So you moved directly from Mexico and the first place you went was Memphis.

[0:11:55.4]

Chavez: Memphis.

[0:11:56.1]

Delorme: Why Memphis, of all places?

[0:11:59.6]

Chavez: Why Memphis, because I got a sister-in-law right here. So her husband work in construction. That's why I start in construction. I tell him, "man, is there a job over there?" And he said, "Yeah, come on!"

[0:12:12.9]

Delorme: Have you seen a lot of change in the Latino community since—

[0:12:16.8]

Chavez: A lot, a lot.

[0:12:18.6]

Delorme: What kind of changes? Can you tell me a little?

[0:12:20.0]

Chavez: Right here, to go eat some food, Mexican food, close enough to Mexican food, like tortillas or meat, whatever, we have to go to Chicago. You don't believe me. We

have to go to Chicago and get it, or Atlanta. So the challenge is right here we don't have any Mexican store at that time, any Mexican store. So little by little, you see the changes, a lot of restaurants, Mexican stores, Mexican people.

[0:13:05.5]

Delerme: Okay, okay. So the stores and the restaurants, was that really the sign that showed you something was changing?

[0:13:11.2]

Chavez: Something was changing, yes.

[0:13:14.5]

Delerme: Okay, okay, okay. So just to ask a little bit more about you, how does life here compare to life back in Mexico?

[0:13:23.1]

Chavez: Well, right here it's kind of easy. You just have to work eight hours a day and make a lot of money, and over there you have to work, I don't know, 12, 14, 16 hours a day and make not—if you want to buy a TV over there, you have to save probably a year and buy your TV, and right here you just need a check, the first check, and you just go buy a TV. You want to buy a car, you save some money six months, a year right here, you're going to buy a car. You're going to buy a car over there, I mean, you have to—

the bank don't give you any credit over there, so it's hard. You got the money or if you want to buy a house over there, I mean, it's hard to buy a house. You have to build it. You have to build it instead of buy it. Yeah. And right here you just buy a house. I mean, in this time I already buy two houses. You know. I mean, it's easy. You just work right here and make it real easy.

[0:14:43.6]

Delorme: Have you been able to preserve certain parts of your culture from Mexico that are near and dear to your heart, now that you're here in Memphis?

[0:14:51.1]

Chavez: Like what?

[0:14:52.9]

Delorme: Are there certain traditions you had in your family back in Mexico, for instance?

[0:14:57.2]

Chavez: All of 'em. I mean, we haven't missed anything. I mean, the way we cook in the house, my wife cook, I mean, it's Mexican food. It's Mexican food. Every day we eat tortillas; every day we eat rice; every day we eat beans. I mean, we celebrate the holidays in Mexico right here and we haven't missed anything. We haven't missed

anything. We gain some America—so we haven't lost any culture. We gain. We put everything together.

[0:15:40.8]

Delorme: Okay. Do you see any similarities, being here in the South, between southern culture and Mexican culture or more differences?

[0:15:48.6]

Chavez: More difference, a lot difference.

[0:15:53.6]

Delorme: Okay, okay, okay. Have there been challenges just adjusting to life here or for others in the family that you see, others in the community, perhaps?

[0:16:03.1]

Chavez: Well, with my kids, I mean, they been together with a lot of American people, American kids, so they don't got used to the Mexican food. I mean, they love tacos, they eat, but they don't really like to, like, dance salsa, cumbia. I mean, they don't like to listen to Mexican music. That's what they're missing. They listen to Mexican music because I play Mexican music all the time, and they know and they speak English and Spanish, but they know the songs, but they don't listen in their cars and their radios. They don't listen.

[0:17:01.6]

Delerme: Okay. So you've seen the second-generation changes.

[0:17:04.8]

Chavez: Yes, changes. And when they got their kids, I guess their kids, they're gonna miss everything.

[0:17:12.9]

Delerme: Okay. And how about food for the second generation? Have they embraced and do they get involved, for instance, with the business?

[0:17:22.1]

Chavez: Yeah, they—I mean, my daughter come and help me out. My wife come and help me out. They love tacos. They just love it. They love it, yes. So on that part, they just still the same.

[0:17:39.5]

Delerme: All right. Before you moved to Memphis, what did you know about the area? Did you know much? Did you have any expectations?

[0:17:54.8]

Chavez: About this area?

[0:17:57.5]

Delerme: Yeah, about the area.

[0:17:59.1]

Chavez: No. I mean, like I say, I got 23 years living in Memphis. Getwell Road was the first Mexicans—I mean Hispanic store.

[0:18:15.3]

Delerme: Really? Right here? Getwell?

[0:18:17.3]

Chavez: Getwell Road, yes.

[0:18:19.0]

Delerme: What kind of store was it?

[0:18:20.0]

Chavez: I can't remember the name, but they sell everything, I mean like tortilla. They make their own tortillas, so it's where we start buying the tortillas, beans, meat, all kind of stuff, yeah. It's here I start right here. I mean, another thing I try to do is get more

American people get tacos. Every time—I got a bunch of black people coming, and they come back. They come back and they ask for steak tacos and chicken tacos a lot, I mean a lot, a lot. But I want to get white people. I got a few. They come back, they come back. Not many. I think the area is not really help me out, but it's where I try to move. I try to move to—I stay, keep this business and move one in Collierville or Germantown.

[0:19:28.7]

Delorme: Okay, okay. And what area is this? What is the name of this? Is this considered Hickory Hill?

[0:19:35.1]

Chavez: No.

[0:19:36.0]

Delorme: What is this considered? Just East Memphis?

[0:19:38.1]

Chavez: East Memphis, East Memphis, yes, East Memphis. It's kind of real bad. You hear gunshots here and there, police cars all over the place.

[0:19:51.7]

Delorme: Have you ever felt in danger?

[0:19:53.9]

Chavez: No, thanks God. No, no.

[0:19:58.1]

Delorme: So you feel safe and have been successful in business here.

[0:20:01.6]

Chavez: Yeah.

[0:20:03.5]

Delorme: Is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview that I missed, anything about the food, food that maybe is part of your culture, tradition, that people don't know about, Americans, that you'd like people to know about?

[0:20:18.6]

Chavez: Well, like all the taco shops, if this is real, real Mexican food, I mean, they want to try it, welcome. And one thing I can tell is everything's good—I mean, I cook very good. Every day I wake up in the morning, go for that day. Everything is for that day, everything. Like today I gonna finish all—I had to wake up in the morning and cook more for the next day, so everything is fresh, fresh.

[0:20:57.7]

Delerme: Okay, okay. Thank you so much. That's all the questions I have for you.

[End of interview]