

Mexican = Hot and Spicy?

by Patricia Magdalena Redlin

As a child, I once overheard a man say to my mom that she must be “hot and spicy” after she said she was from Mexico. And then he added, “Ha-cha-cha!” I don’t remember when this happened, but it’s doubtful I was younger than around eight or nine years old because it was not until around that time in my life that I became aware of what “hot and spicy” means, or at least one of its definitions. But the “ha-cha-cha” thing? That I did not understand at the time, but I remember thinking that I didn’t like the look on the guy’s face as he said this, grinning weirdly. I was happy to see my mom turn away from him and go over to talk to several other wives.

My level of awareness of and sense of responsibility for things and life had increased by the time I was eight years old to the point where my mother put me in charge of cooking our family’s dinners most evenings. As she screamed out menu ingredients and directions from her dark bedroom during one of her frequent “bedroom vacations,” I gingerly handled pots and pans and cooking utensils, watching the blood from meat fry to the same brown color as the meat itself. Who knew that the blood cooked right alongside the meat and that we ate it like it was nothing but meat? Once I became the family “cook,” I knew this and it completely grossed me out. I could so easily have become a vegetarian at a very young age, but that’s an entirely different story. Suffice it to say that I was an unhappy, disgusted indentured cook in our household, starting at around the age of eight, and I learned – in a very stressful way – the basics of cooking and spicing foods.

More importantly – for this essay, at least – I also learned that my mom spiced her own foods differently than she spiced the foods she prepared for my dad, my siblings and me. Prior to her enlisting – well, enforcing – my questionable cooking skills, she would cook a meal and sprinkle the meat and sometimes the vegetables that my dad, my siblings and I were going to eat with just a bit of salt and/or pepper. But she carried out a completely different ritual in regard to spicing her own foods. She would sprinkle dried hot chili pepper flakes and other mysterious – but very hot – spices onto her own meat and vegetables. I was not aware of this ritual of hers until I became the family food slopper.

I have decided to call what I was enlisted to do in terms of meals for our family what it really was: slopping food into pans, burning it, and slopping it onto plates. Maybe I should call it food slop-burner. That’s a more descriptive term for what I was doing than “cook.” The burning part started deliberately. Once I discovered that the blood from meats I was slopping into pans to fry didn’t magically disappear, and that we were going to be eating that blood along with the actual meat, I decided to do something to fix this disgusting and completely unacceptable problem. I may have eaten cooked animal blood for most of my short life prior to that, but no more. After some thought, I decided that there were two alternatives to eating animal blood. One: Remove all blood from any meat whose preparation I would be directly involved with. This would have been difficult at best, and possibly impossible. I did try it, though. One late afternoon, after my mom had “recruited” me to cook dinner, screaming the ingredients to me at the top of her lungs – it was never any wonder to me that she always had a headache, what with all the screaming she did, but that’s yet another story – I got the package with a large, family-size steak out of the fridge. I carefully tore open the paper, trying my hardest not to touch the meat until absolutely necessary, which is how I opened every package of meat.

Long before I was aware of any warnings about bacteria in raw meat and how getting any of it – the raw meat itself, the blood, the juice, and whatever other gross thing – on your hands and

even close to your mouth could lead to the meat bacteria jumping down your throat and into your intestines, resulting in a horrible saga of diarrhea, vomiting and other extremely unpleasant symptoms, I was simply completely grossed out by touching meat, and had to force myself to hold it for the second or two it took to get it from the package into the pan. And then I would throw the bloody paper away and wash my hands thoroughly.

That day, however, I decided to try to remove all the blood from the steak before slopping it into the pan to cook it. This would entail holding the steak for longer than a few seconds, but I was prepared. First, I turned on the hot water in the sink and let it run until it was actually hot. Then I grabbed the steak out of the package and rinsed it thoroughly for about a minute. Then I dried it with a clean towel – which I threw into the laundry basket as quickly as possible – and slopped the steak into the pan and turned on the stove burner.

Yep, that should do it, I thought to myself. I rinsed all the blood away and we should have no more problems with eating blood. Wrong. Much to my horror, as I watched the steak begin to brown, I noticed red drops of blood sprouting and squeezing their way out of the meat – all over it. These drops then started to fry and brown the way they always did. Oh, grodie, I thought to myself. (That was the term children in central Illinois used instead of “gross” at that time. No idea why we didn’t just say “gross.” It’s not like that’s a bad word or anything. But it’s quite possible the nuns at our school made us substitute what they considered a swear word with a cute-sounding word.)

My “rinse the blood away” plan had not worked. Who knew that blood in raw meat hid inside the meat itself and could not be rinsed away? I did. I knew that now. More knowledge – just like anything to do with math – that I did not want to acquire and wished I could never make use of again. Oh well. Time to implement my second idea for dealing with the fact that anyone who eats meat is going to inevitably also eat animal blood. Idea two: Let the blood cook in the pan until it turns into black, charred crust that could then be scraped off and discarded. There was no way this would not work. It simply involved burning the meat, the blood, the juices and anything else in the pan at the time until it was all black and crusty. It probably was not a great idea to burn the meat itself. I knew – even at that young age – that some people like their steaks “rare” or basically almost raw, while others like their steaks to be “medium” or brown on the outside and pink in the middle. And there are also people who like their steaks “well done” or cooked to the point of being brown all the way through. But that day, I added another category to the list of how to cook steaks: burnt to a crisp. At least that way, you could burn the blood, scrape it off the meat, and avoid eating blood altogether. Goal achieved. And that is why I considered myself then – and ever after – to be more of a food slop-burner than a cook. That is also the moment I became the fourth category of steak eater – a category that I know is not typical and is a blasphemous sacrilege to true steak lovers. I am a person who always requests steaks to be “burnt to a crisp.”

It might have been easier and less horror-inducing (to true steak lovers) for me to become a vegetarian. But becoming a vegetarian as a child in my household would have been impossible due to its requirement of calling attention to myself, which I avoided doing at all costs. I could have simply not eaten any meat – ever – but when my mom cooked, she was always yelling at one or the other of my siblings for not eating everything on their plate. We were all light eaters at best and picky about what we put in our mouths. Someone was always being forced to sit at the dinner table, long after the rest of us had finished the meal, staring at the pile of lima beans or peas or whatever the person hated until at least one bean or pea or whatever had been chewed and swallowed. To avoid this hellish situation and also to avoid drawing any attention to myself from my mother whatsoever, I always forced myself to eat everything on my plate, even if it seemed

“grodie” or inedible. As a result, I developed a fairly well-rounded palate – unlike my brothers and sisters, at least until they got older and started actually tasting some of the foods they claimed they hated. Since there was always meat on my plate, and leaving my plate empty would mean my mother’s evil eye would skip over me, this meant I also had to remain a carnivore, even if the vegetarian lifestyle would have suited me better.

I probably could have simply not served myself any meat when I was appointed the family food slop-burner, especially if my mom didn’t even bother to get up for meals sometimes, but once I figured out that burning the blood from the meat and scraping it off the meat and into the garbage was a good way to avoid eating it, I found that I actually liked the taste of burned meat. I feel I should apologize to all steak connoisseurs who might be reading this. I am truly sorry for my sins related to sacrilegiously ruining – in your opinion – perfectly good meat.

Since the food my mom served to us, when she cooked, and that I served to everyone when I slop-burned meals, was never spiced to the point of needing to have fire extinguishers handy to hose each other down, I never really took much notice of my mom’s spice sprinkling ritual for her own food until she hired me on a regular basis to be the unpaid family chef/food slop-burner. But I did always wonder why she would start sweating and sniffing and almost crying every time she ate, while none of the rest of us displayed these symptoms. I tended to look at her as little as possible starting at a very young age, with the hope-filled goal of avoiding her attention. If I didn’t look at her, she wouldn’t look at me and start yelling at me for something. So it took me until I was the one doing most of the food slop-burning to realize that there was a huge difference between the way she spiced our meals and the hell-fire she put her own mouth through at each meal.

By trying to avoid looking at her, I was like a child who covers their eyes in a game of peek-a-boo and thinks no one can see them because *they* can’t see anyone. But it actually sort of worked, at least in avoiding as many scolding sessions as I could have been subject to. My way of not looking at her was to literally not look at her as much as possible, but also to leave the room if there was any way to do this without her noticing. And she mostly didn’t notice if I left the room, what with the chaos of six children and an absentminded dad and she herself screaming and out-of-control, which was a frequent situation at our house. One small girl disappearing into her bedroom or down to the basement or outside could and mostly did go unnoticed by my mom during at least some of these frequent chaotic times.

So when some man – I have no idea now who it was, but it was probably one of the husbands of the several husband-and-wife friend sets my parents had – said something about my mom being hot and spicy, I immediately understood what he meant, though not the “ha-cha-cha” part. What he had to mean by her being “hot and spicy” was that she used a lot of hot spices on her food. But later, when I thought about his statement more, I remember wondering how this man knew my mom was hot and spicy just from her saying that she was Mexican. I already knew that not all Mexican people spice their food to the point of putting themselves in danger of starting a fire in their mouths, based on our almost annual summer visits to stay with our relatives in Mexico. Did this guy know other Mexican people and their food spicing habits? I was fairly certain he had never eaten a meal at our house. My parents didn’t usually invite friends over for meals, just for later evening “highballs” and card games. Maybe with all the spices she ate, my mom actually smelled hot and spicy, instead of like her favorite perfume, Chanel No. 5? In any case, the guy was right. She was hot and spicy, and I thought it was mainly because she over-spiced her food.

Since this literal definition of being “hot and spicy” was the primary definition I had for this concept back then, only my mom could be hot and spicy in our family, even though I and my siblings shared half-Mexican traits. Whichever of my mom’s Mexican traits we had inherited, they

did not include liking to over-spice our foods. This dislike of spices had been reinforced by the accidental over-spicing of our hands, arms, mouths, and faces with the severely hot dried chili flakes we found in a large jar hidden in the basement once. We ended up with first-degree burns on all skin that had come in contact with the chili flakes from hell and I personally have never touched another chili flake since then.

But another of my own definitions of “hot and spicy” – also completely based on my mom’s behavior – was to be angry and hot-tempered all the time. And I thought this aspect of being hot and spicy might have its origin in eating very hot and spicy food. So she was also the only one in our family – at that time – qualified under this definition to be hot and spicy because she ate over-spiced foods, she was angry a lot and she screamed very frequently. What would be the results if I or my dad or siblings also spiced our food like my mom did? I thought that in addition to the sweating, sniffing and almost crying at every meal – all, to me, unpleasant things to avoid doing – we would also be angry most of the time, going into dark moods and spending days and sometimes weeks in a dark bedroom, only getting up to go to the bathroom, eat sometimes, and scream a lot at your family members. Some more unpleasant things to avoid doing. I thought over-spicing our foods meant we would also get really angry at neighbors sometimes for no reason that anyone could discern and go outside to yell at them. And we would also scream at neighborhood children when they tried to play in our yard or use our toys without being invited. I thought it meant that we would all turn into backseat drivers – in the same way my mother was a front passenger seat driver – and scream at my dad to put on the brake or honk the horn or drive slower or watch out for that idiot – all orders my mom would shout out whenever we all went somewhere. I thought it meant that – just like she did – we would also get mad at our friends periodically and yell at them on the phone, then not speak to them for a few weeks until one or the other would call and make things up. Yet more unpleasant things to avoid doing.

As a child, I thought that my mom’s “hotness” and “spiciness” was the result of over-spicing her food and it manifested not only in the smelling like hot spices way, but also in the angry, screaming and dark moods way. I had no other way to explain her behavior. Neither my dad nor I and my siblings ever ate any hot spices and we almost never screamed at each other or at friends and neighbors, then or otherwise. We were all fairly quiet and calm most of the time, except for one of my brothers, but it turns out he had the same illness my mother had. But both her illness and his were not caused by eating spicy foods.

In fact, this illness was bipolar disease. Although I connected its symptoms with being Mexican and/or eating hot and spicy foods, I eventually learned that it is not caused by either of these and can occur in any person from any country, no matter what they eat. Although I am fairly certain my mom was never diagnosed and never treated for it, my brother *was* actually diagnosed as bipolar (called “manic-depressive” in the oh-so-enlightened 1970s). Once diagnosed, there were attempts to treat his disease, but none of them ever worked very well and he never let any of these treatments last very long.

But if my mom was ever properly diagnosed and/or treated, I never saw or heard anything about this. And I thought I would have seen or heard about any diagnoses or treatments because – as a first-rate hypochondriac – my mom loved being ill and her various illnesses was one of her favorite topics of conversation with anyone who would listen, or just with anyone within earshot, listening or not. I knew all about her angina pectoris, high blood pressure, sciatica, terrible headaches, periodic intestinal problems and many other real illnesses that she had – either all at once or in various combinations. I also knew all about her imagined illnesses. She was convinced that if she was sick all the time, everyone around her would pay her a lot of attention and feel

extremely sorry for her, take care of her and generally wait on her hand and foot, as if she were a sick queen. This may have worked during her childhood and adolescence, growing up in a fairly rich Mexican household with maids to cater to your every need, but it didn't work in our household – at least not that I was ever aware of. Instead of dropping everything every time my mom screamed that she didn't feel well and then promptly took to her bed, my dad, my siblings and I all basically ignored these screams. They were really no different from the screaming she did when she felt well or just in general. We all learned that if we ignored her screams or simply left the general vicinity so we couldn't hear them quite as well, she would eventually stop screaming. Although there may have been a time – before I was ever aware of it – when my dad would pay attention to my mom's claims of this or that pain or illness and try to do something to make her feel better, by the time I was eight or nine years old, he didn't really pay much attention to her during these "screamy" times any more. He had to work, after all, and therefore could not spend all his attention or time catering to her every need, or the fact of not having any money would have inspired screaming by my mom for a real reason.

I finally figured out that being "hot and spicy" did not result from eating severely spiced food and it really had nothing to do with being angry and screaming most of the time. Then I discovered another potential meaning of "hot and spicy" when I was older. I was dating a guy in college and we went to his parents' house for me to meet them for the first time.

"So, what does your dad do?" asked Boyfriend's Dad.

"He's an accountant," I replied.

"Oh, that's good," said Boyfriend's Dad. "And what does your mom do?" And he started guffawing because what a joke it would have been for a wife to "do anything" back in the oh-so-enlightened 1970s. But I – being the almost dangerously naïve person I was back then (which, sadly, has not changed all that much) – didn't realize that BF's Dad did not expect an answer from me. He was just making a joke that he was the only one who found funny. So, being the ever-obedient person I am, who is also too naïve to realize someone is telling himself a joke and not expecting an answer to a stupid question, I answered the question.

"She doesn't work," I said. I stopped there because I didn't make it a practice to tell anyone what my mom actually did. Which was mostly not clean our house, not cook, not do laundry and not take care of her children. Those tasks had been mine when I still lived full-time at home and this work had been taken over by my two younger sisters ever since I had left for college. What my mom did, much of the time, was cry and yell, sleep, complain about her endless (and mostly imaginary) illnesses, and scream some more. Why would I tell anyone that? So I said not another word in answer to his question. But then I started to worry because that's what I do when someone asks me a question and I can't or don't want to give them a full answer.

Would he now ask me what I did? If I answered, would he start guffawing because what woman actually *does anything*? But I was prepared for any further questions he might have – at least regarding what I did – so there was no real need for me to worry. That doesn't mean I didn't worry anyway. To try to abate this worry, I started listing – in my head – how I would respond to BF's Dad's question about what I do: I am a full-time college student; I have two part-time jobs to help pay for college; and I intend to finish my college degree and start a career. I don't yet have any idea what kind of career I will have with my fluency in Spanish and a bachelor's degree in French, but I most definitely will not put all my eggs into your son's basket and make him work hard while I sit at home eating bon-bons and otherwise doing nothing. I intend to—

BF's Dad interrupted my wildly racing imagination, but he didn't want to know what I was doing or intended to do.

“Well, has your family always lived here in Springfield?” BF’s Dad asked.

“Yes, at least my dad has. My mom is from Mexico,” I replied. And cringed slightly, knowing that one of the many inevitable questions or observations about this fact would soon be landing slam-dunk on my head for me to wriggle out from under and answer.

“Mexico, you say?” BF’s Dad smiled slightly and then continued, “I bet she’s hot and spicy, eh?”

I looked up at BF’s Dad in surprise. This was a comment I had heard a man ask my mom when I was a child, but no one had mentioned this since around the time I started my hellish, unpaid job as the terrible child chef/food slop-burner for our family. But now at least I was old enough to know that there was no way BF’s Dad was referring to the extremely strong spices my mom liked to flavor her food with, and since he had never met her, he couldn’t possibly know about the anger and screaming that also made her “hot and spicy” in one of my definitions of the phrase. Then I started to feel really uncomfortable because there could be only one meaning of “hot and spicy” that BF’s Dad was referring to. And even though I knew exactly what “hot and spicy” meant under this definition – “hot, sexy, sassy” – how do you answer a question like that from the father of your boyfriend the first time you meet him when you are the daughter of the woman he is referring to as “hot and spicy”? In my case, being the ever awkward, anxious and shy person I am, I blushed bright red and came up with the best answer to the question I could think of at the time.

“Um...”

Fortunately, Boyfriend came to the rescue.

“Hey, if we don’t get going, we’re going to miss the movie.” He took my hand and started to lead me out of the house. Oh blessed Boyfriend.

“See you later,” he said to his parents as we turned to go. And then I realized that Boyfriend’s mom had been standing behind her husband throughout the entire uncomfortable – and fortunately brief – conversation, with thunder on her face. Not literally. More a look of thunderous anger. I had forgotten about her and only now noticed her thunder face. The only words she had said the whole time were “Nice to meet you” when Boyfriend introduced me to her. Then her husband had taken over with his questions and rude observation. I was glad to be leaving and immediately started figuring out ways to not be in BF’s Dad’s presence ever again. Even though I really liked Boyfriend, if I could not figure out a way to prevent his dad ever asking me anything as uncomfortable as whether my mom is “hot and spicy” again, I would probably have to dump Boyfriend. But this problem was solved by Boyfriend a few months later, when he dumped me instead, after getting back together with his childhood girlfriend. I was sad and heartbroken for months, even years, but I was eventually able to wish them well and hope that Boyfriend’s Childhood Girlfriend was not the daughter of a Mexican woman.

However, it was highly unlikely that Boyfriend’s Childhood Girlfriend was the daughter of a Mexican woman. That was a rather unique thing to be in central Illinois when I was growing up. There were only a few Latinos in Springfield at that time, and they were not all Mexican. My parents were friends with a Colombian family, a Venezuelan family and a Mexican family. My mom was also friends with some Latina nuns who worked at the Catholic schools that we did not attend. (We attended other Catholic schools that had no foreign nuns.) I think these nuns from the other schools were from El Salvador. And later, long after I had moved away from Springfield, only returning for infrequent visits, my mom became friends with some older ladies who had moved to Springfield with the son of one of them, and they were from Guatemala. There probably

were other Mexicans and Latinos living in central Illinois when I was a child and adolescent, but we didn't know them,

So it was a rare thing to encounter someone whose mother was Mexican at that time in that location. But even though it was not very likely that the natives of this extremely central Midwestern town would ever encounter a Mexican or anyone else directly from another country, for that matter, they sure had strong stereotypical ideas about what Mexicans – and probably any other “furriners” – were like. And apparently, Mexican women were supposed to be “hot and spicy” but not in a spice your food too much way, and not in the way that I defined as one of the ways to be hot and spicy, which was to be angry and yell at your children and husband frequently, and periodically at the neighbors, the neighbors' children, and your friends.

No, this third definition of hot and spicy had something to do with “hot Latin blood” and sassy sexiness. But if BF's Dad or that long ago man I overheard as a child could have seen my mom eating her over-spiced food, sweating profusely, blowing her nose, with tears running down her cheeks, but loving every burning bite...or if they could have seen her and heard her lying in her dark bedroom for days on end, screaming at me and my siblings, but not actually getting up and taking care of us...only coming out of the room to eat and complain about all her illnesses...would they have asked or commented if she was hot and spicy? In the way that meant sexy and sassy? Very doubtful.

None of these images of my mother would have inspired comments or questions about her being hot and spicy. But there actually *were* things about her and her personality that *would* have inspired this question or comment. So I have decided to add more definitions to my personal dictionary of what it means to be hot and spicy and for several reasons. Firstly, it's not really fair to limit my description of my Mexican mother only to someone who over-spiced her food, was usually angry and/or depressed, and didn't take care of her house, her husband or her children. She was not always like that...well, she did always over-spice her food, but she was not always angry and/or depressed, and she could be a fantastic wife and mother, at times. She had many other personality traits than just the negative characteristics I described above.

If you have any experience with or knowledge of bipolar disease, then you know that there is more to it than just dark, angry, depressed phases. It was originally referred to as “manic-depressive” disease, which – though kind of politically incorrect or just plain mean sounding – was more descriptive than “bipolar” disease. After all, the two poles of being bipolar could refer to anything. You could be cynical, mean and sarcastic during one phase and switch to sweet, innocent and kind in the other phase. You could be absentminded, spacey and lost during one phase and switch to alert, attentive and focused in the other. One phase could involve being funny, charismatic and a “people person” and the switch could turn you into a boring, unpleasant and awkward loner. There is probably an infinite number of possibilities for what the two poles of bipolar disease could refer to, but “manic-depressive” pretty much sums up what the actual two poles in this disease are. And I don't think anyone could have come up with the newer, more politically correct – and less “mean” – term of “bipolar disease” without it first having been referred to as “manic-depressive” disease. This original designation was a good description of what this disease involved: two polar opposite phases that people afflicted with it go into. One where they are “manic” and one where they are “depressive.” The meanings and manifestations behind these two terms and phases can vary greatly from person to person and can also involve other, possibly less visible extreme phases and characteristics. In fact, many things about this disease vary greatly from person to person – of those who have it – but there is still one designation for

the disease, no matter how great the differences between its manifestations and symptoms from person to person.

My mother had this disease, and her Mexican family members now all freely acknowledge that this is what she was afflicted with (among other things), even though she may have never received a diagnosis or treatment for it and even though my Mexican relatives did not speak much of my mom's problems and illnesses when I was younger. Because her disease – manic-depressive, later changed to the designation of bipolar disease – manifests with two primary phases that are basically opposite of each other, of course my mother did not spend every second of her life sleeping and being depressed and angry in her dark bedroom. She wasn't always this ugly and negative and destructive. She didn't constantly see the neighbors and their children doing horrible things in our yard – things that no one else could see or figure out – and yell at them, much to their bewilderment.

My mother also had a side to her personality that shone like a happy sun in our lives when her disease allowed her to let this sun escape from behind the walls of darkness inside of her. She had a silly sense of humor and could be the funniest clown ever. She had a huge smile and a hilarious laugh that could make any grouch smile if they heard it. She could be welcoming to my and my siblings' friends, impressing them with her interest in their lives and families – if they could understand her heavy Spanish accent when she asked them questions. She would bring out her old, no longer fashionable clothes – that also no longer fit her – to let me, my sisters and our friends use to play dress-up and pretend we were beautiful, alluring Mexican *señoritas*. She drew pictures of beautiful women by making a few pencil strokes on a piece of paper and cut out paper dolls for me and my sisters, and paper trucks for my brothers. She taught me, my sisters and our friends how to bake delicious cakes and other desserts from scratch. Box cakes were boring and tasteless to her, so she put together her own ideas of what cake ingredients should be and produced moist, dense masterpieces that could melt in your mouth. She even invented a new dessert: Jell-O with cream cheese, fruits, marshmallows and other “surprises” gelled into it. She tried out new dishes to cook if she learned about them from her friends and even though they didn't always work out – she was a fairly bad cook, though a fantastic baker and dessert maker – at least we didn't always eat same-old, same-old meat and potatoes, like most other Midwesterners ate at almost every meal at that time.

Although my mom had not cared to learn much when her mother and the “kitchen maid” were teaching her and her sisters how to cook – because they would have to take on the role of cook for their families once they married American men, who would not be able to afford three maids to do all the cooking and housekeeping – some of these lessons must have stuck in her brain, and she also taught herself how to cook other delicious Mexican dishes, and they all usually tasted good. Unlike our American friends and relatives in the central Midwest, our family had Mexican rice with most dinners. Our meals sometimes also included chilaquiles and – occasionally – tamales. We ate tostadas and tacos and quesadillas and lots of beans...though they were never “refried.” They were just boiled until a lot of the water evaporated and they turned into soft beans soaked in their own delicious bean juice. We ate all of these dishes when they were almost unheard of in that part of the U.S.

I don't remember ever going to any Mexican or other Latino restaurants in my hometown in central Illinois as a child, though there may have been plenty of Latino restaurants in Chicago...but we never went there except to board the plane to go visit our relatives in Mexico most summers. And even Taco Bell would not show its fake Mexican face anywhere besides southern California – where it was founded in 1962 – until sometime in the 1970s, but I don't

remember a Taco Bell in Springfield until after I had moved away in the early 1980s. And Taco Bell has never really served authentic “Mexican” food anyway. More importantly, though, they have never really served good food of any nationality...but that’s just my opinion and – once again – not what this particular story is about. A “Mexican” restaurant chain called Taco Gringo opened in Springfield while I was still in high school. Their dishes included giant burrito-like things called “sanchos” that were truly delicious...but again, not really an authentic Mexican dish. Our meals at home – when my mom was feeling well and able to cook, and we didn’t have to rely on my resentful, horrible-tasting food slop-burning – usually included something Mexican in them, mostly Mexican rice, but they were not limited to your typical Midwestern meat and potatoes meals.

So my dictionary containing the single term or phrase “hot and spicy” now includes the following definitions:

Hot and spicy:

1. Adjective: Used to describe food that has had hot or piquant spices added to it for flavor and for starting a hell-fire in your mouth. The spices aid in beneficial perspiration, tear duct cleansing, and sinus clearing. Using these spices also brings pleasure to the palates of people who love to feel the burn when they eat.
2. Adjective: Used to describe a person who has a hot temper, is quick to anger, and whose rages flare up and dissipate quickly, but not without leaving collateral burning and long-term, sometimes permanent damage in their wake.
3. Adjective: Used to describe a person – usually a woman – who is of Spanish, Portuguese or Latin American origin, who has a tendency to drive men – especially American gringos – mad with her innate sexiness, charm and sass.
4. Adjective: Used to describe a person – a woman or a man – who is of Spanish, Portuguese or Latin American origin, who has a hilarious, creative, interested and interesting side to his/her personality; someone who can make everyone around them laugh hysterically, even if all the person is doing is laughing their infectious laugh.

Although I loved it when my mom was in a happy “sunshine” phase, I hated it when she spent long time periods in a dark phase. I knew I had inherited some of her traits, but I sincerely hoped that bouncing back and forth between these two extreme phases was not something that I was doomed to also do. Even if I never made anyone laugh or never bubbled with an outgoing personality; even if I never created anything fun or interesting in my life; even if I could make no one else laugh with a smile or my laugh that might not be infectious at all...if I at least never spent days in a dark bedroom, screaming at my family members and being sick and miserable, I would be perfectly happy.

But then I overheard a conversation that made me add to my list of constant worries. And this was that I might “turn into my mother” as an adult. The reason behind this worry was hearing someone say – when I was in high school – that girls “become their mothers” and boys “become their fathers,” so if a girl’s mother is pretty, thin, nice and a good housewife and mother, the girl would eventually be the same. And if the mother is fat, wrinkly, a screamer and a terrible housewife and mother, unfortunately, the girl is doomed to also be the same as an adult. When I heard this, it was in the form of a warning one of the guys in my group of friends was giving to another guy – that he should meet his potential (or actual) girlfriend’s mother before letting the relationship get too involved to see what his girlfriend would eventually become.

Again, this was the not-very-enlightened 1970s, but I – as the extremely naïve and worry-filled person I was – added this to my long list of worries, instead of questioning this statement.

Women didn't question much said by men at that time and I was no exception in that regard. Besides, what this guy was saying seemed wise and true to me. So I simply thought about my fate: that I was apparently doomed to become my mother. Since I had been avoiding my mother's attention to the extent possible for as long as I could remember, except when she was in one of her "sunshine" phases, not knowing that she was "manic-depressive" and needed medical help, but definitely being well aware that she was somehow different in the wrong way from other "right" mothers, I began to worry that I had not been paying enough attention to her myself over the years in order to watch for what I should try hard not to become. But really, I thought to myself at the time, I should not worry about this. Avoiding someone's attention is not mutually exclusive to observing that person carefully. You can be the "invisible observer" and I realized that is exactly what I had been doing all along.

After I heard these pearls of wisdom about children "becoming" their parents, I realized that the "plan" I had focused on for several years by that point, which was to be invisible but observant of my mom when she was being her nastiest, screamiest, angriest and most depressed self – and always strive to do everything exactly the opposite – was a very good plan, very much on the right track, and it would ensure that I never became that version of my mom in any way, shape or form. That was comforting – that I had figured out, on my own and a long time previously, how to overcome the huge potential problem of eventually turning into my mother – and I patted myself on the back in my mind, reinforcing my vow to continue to do everything the exact opposite of my mom. Well, except for when she was in a sunshine phase.

My plan of course did not involve watching her smile and laugh, ask interesting questions of our friends, make jokes, be the clown, draw for us, bake delicious desserts, and all the other nice things she did during these sunshine phases, and doing the exact opposite of all of this. But I was usually so mentally and emotionally exhausted when I was around my mother from staying observant regarding what not to do that when she was in a sunshine phase, instead of observing her closely to see "the good way to be" as a woman, wife and mother, I simply relaxed for a while and let myself bask in her sunshine. But always with a wary eye and ear, anxiously attuned to any slight clue that the sunshine phase was on its way out, soon to be replaced by the "dark hellish" phase.

So if my carefully engineered plan – to invisibly observe my mom when she was being her worst ugly, mentally ill self – was apparently a great plan to avoid the potentially inevitable fate of becoming this version of her as an adult, did this mean that I would also completely avoid any chance of becoming hot and spicy in the good ways I had defined in my one-term/phrase dictionary of the meanings of "hot and spicy"? If I didn't carefully observe what she did to charm the grouchiest grouch and all of our friends when she was in a sunshine phase, did this mean I would not learn how to be this bubbly, fun person myself? Would this way of being "hot and spicy" simply pass me over and not become part of my personality because I was too exhausted to observe my mom carefully to learn from and emulate her during these good phases? Did I care if I never became the good kind of "hot and spicy"? Not really. My focus was to avoid being the ugly kind of "hot and spicy." If I ever developed whatever thing it was that made men get a strange look on their faces and say things like "ha-cha-cha," that would be fine...as long as I never did anything related to the bad kind of hot and spicy.

In high school, I was definitely not focused on becoming "hot and spicy" in the "hot, sexy and sassy" way. I certainly liked boys and had several boyfriends throughout those years, but I was, and intended to remain, a virgin for as long as possible, being an anxiety-ridden Catholic girl, afraid that just sitting on a boy's lap would get me immediately pregnant. So I forbid myself – to

the extent possible – from even thinking about sexiness or hotness or letting any snippet of sassiness emanating from me entice some guy into thinking I must be hot and spicy if I am half-Mexican. So whether I would become this definition of hot and spicy eventually was actually something I tried hard to avoid thinking about during high school.

However, I did not want to avoid and miss out on being what I considered to be the best version of hot and spicy – the one that involved being funny, happy, interesting, creative – and with an infectious laugh. But I didn't start forcing myself to laugh infectiously. I didn't sit around, trying to think of interesting questions to ask people, and attempting to come up with creative ways of turning boring Jell-O and other desserts into delicious masterpieces. I also didn't spend hours trying to draw as well as my mother could, or bring out old clothes and invite my sisters and friends to play dress-up with me.

Instead, I continued to avoid being noticed by my mom as much as possible. I stopped spending every second when I was not around my mother worrying about potential things to be anxious about. I instead forced myself to relax some and let a bit of my real personality squeak out once in a while. And I found that this was a good thing. Instead of focusing on my worries about anything and everything, I focused on what my friends were saying and doing, at school, at parties, and just when we were generally out on weekends. I hung out with a group of friends that included the “brainy” girls at my all-girls Catholic high school and guys from the all-boys Catholic high school, and a few guys and girls from other high schools in town. They were fun, funny, smart but not boastful, open to talking about anything and everything, and daring enough to do the tiny but powerful adventures we came up with.

I watched these fun people be relaxed and happy – seemingly at every moment – and I learned how to let myself relax and be happy, at least while I was not in the presence of my mom when she was in her dark phases. And I discovered – much to my surprise and delight – that I also have some hot and spicy in me, in a good way. Some kind of dry, silly and extremely funny wit started to push its way beyond the worries and fears in my mind and I found myself saying just the right thing to make everyone burst into laughter periodically. I found myself laughing a deep belly laugh when other people also made hilarious comments. I found that one of the things my body spontaneously did when I wasn't watching carefully was to burst into crazy dancing if a really good song came on the radio or played on the stereo. I could no more stop my body from dancing at these times than I could stop the clouds from raining during a thunderstorm. So I didn't try to stop dancing when I couldn't help but do otherwise.

I found that I had a beautiful low alto singing voice and I became one of the “lead” altos in our award-winning high school choir. Fortunately, being a lead alto simply meant standing at the top of the bleachers, above all the other altos, and singing every note in my perfect pitch voice so that the other altos could simply hear and sing the same notes I was singing and we would always be in tune. If being a lead alto would have meant singing solos sometimes, I would have found myself melting into the floor out of fear and stage fright. But all it meant was being the “alto guide” for everyone else in our section of the choir, which I was happy to do.

Eventually, ever so slowly, but inevitably, I also discovered that I have the “hot and spicy” element in my soul that means “hot, sexy and sassy.” I am not sure if it is the result of being half-Mexican, but it is definitely the result of being my mother's daughter. When my mom was in a sunshine phase and we had guests at our house, men tended to gravitate towards her when she was telling funny stories. They may have been trying to get closer to her to better understand what she was saying in her Spanish-accented English, but I am not completely certain they were even paying attention to her words. Just looking at her – even if you couldn't understand a word – could be

enough to make you want to be near her. She glowed in a good way during these times and loved being the center of everyone's attention...in a good way. I would sometimes wonder why she didn't realize that calling attention to herself this way – by being silly, funny, happy and laughing a lot – would work every single time, while trying to get your family's attention by whining, screaming and crying about how sick you were would only make them try to get away from you. But I now know that there is sometimes no logic or rationality behind a mental disease. It just *is* in all its illogical, irrational, painful glory.

These men gravitating towards my mother were not just enticed by her good sense of humor and hilarity. There was also a certain glow and look in these men's eyes. Once I knew that “hot and spicy” could mean “hot, sexy and sassy,” I could almost see these men's thoughts leaping out of their eyes, imagining how fun it would be to spend “intimate” time with my mom. That's not a very comfortable thought to have about your mom, so I would usually try to stay away from these men and their “unholy” interest in my mom.

But I eventually realized that if I somehow got beyond my usual worries and anxieties and just let myself relax and be, I also had this element of sexual, sassy attraction to men. I was funny and fun, creative, interesting, all those “innocent” and good things. But I was also attractive to men in what I thought of as a “good Catholic virgin girl could get in trouble if she let this go too far” way – a “bad” way – without even being completely aware of how or why.

I now know part of it was simply my physical body. I was tiny – around five feet, three inches tall and I only weighed around a hundred and five pounds. Though my curves and boobs were also tiny, not all men are “curves and boob men.” Some are “butt men” and I had a cute, round, slightly too big butt that looked really good in jeans. I and my sisters all had this butt and we called it the “Hernandez butt” because most of our Mexican female cousins also had one. I had long, curly, light brown hair that would get natural blond highlights in the summer, and although my extremely white German-Irish skin looked as though it would burn and peel under too much sun, the Mexican skin pigments would appear and I actually tanned really well. (It was still the oh-so-enlightened 1970s, remember, when getting the darkest tan possible was every college kid's goal in the summer.) I had no car, so I had to walk everywhere at school, where I spent most of the year. I was still trying to avoid being around my mother most of the time, so I would usually stay at school taking summer classes, when most other college kids were glad to go home for the summer. All that walking around a fairly big campus meant I was always in good shape. And it helped that I usually included at least one sports or dance class in my schedule each semester.

I also discovered during those years what I like men to be, both physically and in terms of personality and intellect. In terms of my preferences regarding the physical attractiveness of a man, I am a “butt woman,” obviously meaning that I love men's butts. I am also a legs, eyes, hair, height and muscles woman. I prefer tall, blond, blue- or green-eyed men, with long legs and a muscular, but fairly thin build. In terms of personality, if a man is not naturally funny, kind, gentle and sweet, and also fearless when courage is required and strong in his convictions, then he is not the man for me. He does not have to have a PhD or be a rocket scientist, but if he has discovered what work he is good at and does it well and with strong motivation, that is just fine. He doesn't have to be able to hold a long discourse on any boring topic in law or finances, but he does have to be able to talk about subjects he is interested in, listen to my thoughts and opinions about things I am interested in, and share at least some of those interests. As my idea of my ideal man gelled, I found that men can also be hot and spicy in the “hot and sexy” way. But saying that a man is “hot and spicy” just didn't sound right. Instead, I referred to this element of hotness and sexiness in certain men that I liked as “hot and hunky.” (It was the 1970s – remember?) In any case, attraction between

people goes both ways and politically correct or not, if a person is not physically attracted to another person, but only likes them for their personality and intellect, they most likely will never “mate” and produce more people with their traits. That’s how the somewhat politically incorrect laws of nature work. It may not be the 1970s anymore and we might be cautious about saying anything that could be insulting to someone, but the laws of attraction don’t care about political correctness. They just are. And they are based on physical and emotional and intellectual traits.

In addition to the fact that my two jobs as a bartender at a wild, fun college bar on campus and as a food preparer and server at a “fast food” Greek restaurant meant lots of standing, walking, serving and almost never sitting, keeping me in good physical shape, they also allowed a “parade” of men to enter into my focus on a daily basis. Bartenders in general tend to be fun, fast workers who can mean the difference between lots of people spending lots of time and money at the bar and no one wanting to go there. I became a good bartender and made a ton of money in tips by working really hard and being just flirty enough to keep the guys interested, but never letting any of them think I myself was interested enough to form any kind of relationship with them beyond my job. This flirtatiousness was somehow innate to my personality, when I was not anxious and worried...basically when I was not around my mom.

Based on their “hot and hunky” traits, I found many of these men attractive but not really enough to pursue anything with them. Besides, most of the time I had a boyfriend while I was in college. And the previously mentioned “Boyfriend,” whose dad made me feel so uncomfortable the first time I met him, was the most important boyfriend I had back then. Unfortunately for my heart, he dumped me the summer before my junior year. But fortunately for my allure, all the misery and sadness I felt for months about losing him somehow came through as very attractive to men. Maybe it was simply my complete lack of interest in them. I was hard to get and they wanted to “get” me. But for the first few months of my junior year, I mostly ignored all guys, except to fill their drink and food orders.

Eventually, I stopped obsessing about getting Boyfriend back somehow. By the time I had to go home for spring break that year, however, I was still more interested in being alone, so that meant that I wasn’t interested in going to Florida with a few friends who were going to meet guys and party their asses off, even though it would mean getting to stay away from home and mom for that week. But an inkling of paying attention to a few of the men around me must have snuck out of my brain when I wasn’t looking. And one of these men was a guy who came to the Greek restaurant I worked at fairly frequently. He was tall, very good looking and...as it turned out, also from Springfield. When I got into the back seat of my friend Jim’s car after throwing my duffle bag into his trunk for the ride home on the first Saturday morning of spring break, I looked over at the guy sitting next to me and it was the guy I recognized from the Greek restaurant.

“Hi, my name’s Brian,” he said and smiled at me. I smiled back and told him my name. Jim also introduced me to the guy in the passenger seat, but after saying hi to him, I had nothing to say to anyone except Brian. We talked about everything under the sun for the hour and a half drive to my house. I was the first one to be dropped off. Brian got out of the car in my driveway, grabbed my duffle bag from the trunk and walked me to the door to our house.

“Can I ask you out?” he asked. Well, hell yeah, I wanted to say, but just said, “Yeah, that would be fun.” And that relationship was what finally brought me out of my miserable funk over losing Boyfriend to his former Childhood Girlfriend. But it also finally cemented in my brain why I could definitely be considered “hot and spicy” in one of the good ways. Brian found my Mexican mother fascinating – of course, I only let him ever come to our house when she was in a sunshine phase. This meant he also found me fascinating and, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, because he

found me fascinating, the fascinating side of my personality blossomed. And bloomed and stuck around permanently.

Part of his fascination had to do with my “sexy body, mostly butt,” as he referred to it, quite blatantly. But it also had to do with my silliness, the fact that I was already fluent in Spanish and French – my major – and working towards fluency in German and Italian, and the fact that I was not like most other college women at that time, whose major was finding a husband. Brian was completing an engineering degree, which meant a lot of studying time. Although I didn’t have to work quite as hard on studying my languages, I did have a lot of actual work hours at the bar and restaurant. So Brian and I had no time to spend more than an evening and night together once a week or so for the final couple of months of the semester. When it was time to decide if I would stay and take summer classes, I decided to stay. Even though Brian was going home to Springfield for the summer, he would be working the construction job he worked every summer and would be really busy. I didn’t really want to go home and I couldn’t just tell the bar and restaurant owners that I would not be able to work for the summer. So I stayed at school, took a couple of summer classes, and worked a lot. Brian came to visit me every weekend in June and I went home every weekend in July. Then in August, one of my sisters told me she had seen Brian flirting with and kissing some other woman at a bar in Springfield. I immediately felt the familiar doom and gloom of losing a guy I was in love with steal into my heart. And that’s exactly what happened. Brian left my life and I was sad for months again. But he didn’t take the good hot and spicy aspect of my personality with him. It just went into hiding for a while. After I eventually got over Brian, a few other boyfriends came along over time. Some lasted years, others only a few months. There was even one who lasted exactly half a date. He kept picking fights with me over nothing and being really crabby, so I told him I had to go to the restroom at a bar we were arguing at, and simply walked home instead.

Yes, that “hot and spicy” flirtatious and sassy aspect of my personality stayed and grew stronger and more confident, inducing more confidence in the rest of my personality. I didn’t have to flirt to get jobs after graduating with my French degree; I just had to be confident that of course I could do the work required and say just the right words to convince the person I was interviewing with that I would be a great asset to his or her team. Based on that confidence, I added one more definition of “hot and spicy” to my one-phrase/term dictionary:

Adjective: Confident, motivated, eager to use the talents, skills, experience and education a person has to get a good job and do it well.

Does that really fit in with the other definitions of “hot and spicy” in my dictionary? You might not think so, but I feel that it does. And I also feel that it does actually have something to do with being half-Mexican, though nothing to do with eating hot, spicy foods because I don’t do that. There is no more “hotness” or “spiciness” in my half-Mexican blood than there is cold “iciness” and “blandness” in a Scandinavian person’s blood. Even if I over-spiced my food, I would not be “hotter” or “spicier,” just as a Swede would not be “colder” or “more bland” because they eat cold fish. Just because my mom came from a country with a mostly hot climate does not mean that she and her descendants literally have “hot” blood. Just as a Scandinavian does not literally have “cold” blood.

What we – I, my siblings and all of our other half-Mexican cousins – do have is a certain silly and hilarious sense of humor, creativity that manifests in many different ways, the ability to gather and hold people’s attention with our topics of conversation and interest in listening to what they have to say, and yes, a certain sassiness or flirtatiousness that can be endlessly attractive to people we are attracted to. If I am not attracted to someone, I will be kind, funny if the situation is right

for that, a good team player, etc., etc. But you will not see any hint of sassiness or flirtatiousness if I am not attracted and/or if letting that side of my personality out is wrong for the situation and – for more than thirty years now – simply because I have been in love with one man for all these years and he’s the only one who gets to see the sassy and flirtatious side of my personality. He was not initially or really ever attracted to me simply because I was half-Mexican, and I have no idea what he initially or has ever thought about my ethnic origins. It has also never occurred to him to ask if I am hot and spicy. Since my mom died before he could meet her, he of course never asked her if she was hot and spicy. And I have never heard the weird phrase “ha-cha-cha” come out of his mouth. Fortunately for him.

I do know, however, that he was initially attracted to me – and remains so – because of my strong independence, my talents and skills, my ability and willingness to work very hard and do a really good job, my silliness and naivety (which he takes advantage of sometimes, but in a really funny way), my strong intellect, my patience and calm amid our sometimes chaotic situations, and even some of the attractive physical traits that remain from my youth. All of these things that he loves about me are actually what make me “hot and spicy” in a good way. And they are all based on growing up with a Mexican and mentally ill mother who was “hot and spicy” (in both the good and the bad ways), and on my ways of coping with and overcoming any and all difficulties my childhood and adolescence brought. I could have ended up a pathetic, insane lump of anxiety. Instead, I am me – a hot and spicy half-Mexican, half-American independent, successful woman. Ha-cha-cha!