

The Pollo Campero Express

On transnational herbs and spices (tierno, sabroso y crujiente)

By GusTavo Adolfo Guerra Vásquez

First of all, I guess I need to make a clarification right off the bat. Pollo Campero is not like Kentucky Fried Chicken, or el pollo del viejito as the cubanos call it. Pollo Campero is fried Chicken but it's not Kentucky Fried Chicken since the taste of Kentucky Fried Chicken comes nowhere near the taste of Pollo Campero. Pollo Campero is a Central American product. Not a "traditional indigenous" Central American product- for you purists out there- but a Central American product nonetheless. And here comes my distress at the migratory threat to the Pollo Campero Express.

When I heard that there was going to be a Pollo Campero in the United States, I received the news that the Guatemalan fried chicken sensation... I guess I need to make a disclaimer here. Sorry Salvies if you feel I'm being nationalistic here. I know that there's Pollo Campero in El Salvador and that it's supposed to taste different (which in many of your mouths comes out as "better") but it did start out in Guatemala and the Guatemalan version does taste better- at least to me. Anyway, I received the news that the delicious fried Chapin Chicken had obtained legal residency in Los Angeles with mixed feelings. I mean, I knew that Pollo Campero was migrating, (after all, it had been in El Salvador and other countries such as Ecuador for years and was making a migration to the "madre patria" in cahoots with a Pizza chain) but to be permanently settled in the U.S. carried a totally different significance for me along with many other Central Americans- mostly Guatemalans and Salvadorans, I must admit.

What would happen to the "Pollo Campero Express?" You know what I'm talking about. Those airplanes coming from Central America- especially the Central American airlines like TACA and Aviateca- that would be filled with that unmistakably (whether you like it or not) strong aroma of fried chicken skin that overpowered the cabin whenever one person brought even one piece on board? (Sorry vegetarians, like for many of those U.S. "hippies" backpacking through Central America, there's no escaping the aroma which some have sacrilegiously referred to as stench for which, if they're Catholic, they should be excommunicated.) What would happen to the Pollo Camperos at the Salvadoran and Guatemalan national airports that would cater to the people traveling north on daily flights from the Central American isthmus? Would the workers at the Pollo Camperos in the airport be displaced by their U.S. counterparts because of a lowering of demand? The maquila industry in reverse... Someone should do a sociological study on this. "The impact and social ramifications of the Transnational migration of Pollo Campero to the United States: experience appraised." You could have focus groups in every country Pollo Campero is in and you know that you wouldn't have to search long and hard for "informants." The line outside the Pollo Campero in the Curacao Building on Olympic still looks like the newest attraction at Disneyland. But let's get back to my concerns. What would happen to those polleros: those aprovechados and aprovechadas that would buy the biggest box of Pollo Campero in Guatemala or El Salvador with as many pieces as could fit into the box with the plastic bag barely tied around it- just to come and sell individual pieces at an exorbitantly high price- in dollars and at the worse exchange rate

possible- to their Pollo starved family members jonesing for the Pollo Campero fix like CIA-sponsored South Central crack fiends or white suburban prescription drug-addicted housewives? How would U.S. Customs agents know when a flight was coming in from Guate or El Salvador without the smell of Pollo Campero in the airport? I mean, queso duro smells like feet but it doesn't fill up the airport or the hermetically sealed airplanes in the same way. And tamales taste delicious, especially the pork ones smuggled illegally through customs pretending to be chicken, but they don't have that distinctive odor that must be a mix of Central American smog with who-knows-what-kinds and how many herbs and spices deep fried in a maybe-its-better-that-I-don't-know-where-this-came-from kind of oil. But I digress.

There had been a Pollo Campero chain in Los Angeles already. But even though the sign looked the same and the little chicken was exactly like the one in the Guatemalan stores, one thing gave it away. It said "Restaurante y Pupuseria." That made me suspicious. I figured it wasn't the Pollo Campero I knew in Guatemala because in Guate, Pollo Campero did not sell Pupusas. Sure enough, I found out later through some personal "sociological" research that this Salvi entrepreneur- and everyone knows Salvies are known to be extremely entrepreneurial- had decided to open his own Pollo Campero in the United States. And he knew that the name alone would help him bring people in. And he must have known that the Pollo Campero fiends that I mentioned to you earlier, yeah the ones who will eat the chicken even if it's cold and old, would probably buy the chicken with the hopes of satiating their Pollo Campero fix and come into his chain even if it was only a cheap imitation of the "original." My friend, Tom, short for Tomas*, a chapin who identifies as Dominican because he loves merengue and dances salsa New York style, actually dated the daughter of this Salvi entrepreneur dabbling in culinary nostalgia. Her name was Ana. (I'm not too worried about her suing me because it's not like that's a unique name among Salvadorans.) But anyway, he dubbed her the Polla Campera. How's that for gender consciousness? He told me that she told him that her father had told her that one night, in his Salvi ambition and American Dream, he had stayed up all night and mixed up many herbs and spices and he came up with just the right combination of ingredients to make the chicken taste the same as the original Pollo Campero back in his home country. Of course, he did this through trial and error as many Latinos tend to do when they're cooking if they're not the know-all-measurements-by-heart señoras who just throw a pinch of that and a dash of this into the dish and it comes out perfect but if I try to do that, it sucks. Anyway, this Pollo Campero impostor apparently came up with the recipe just as the sun was coming up on a new day and he launched his Pollo Campero chain. According to my friend Carlos, who studied law and knows about such extremely crucial legal issues, Guatemala's Gutiérrez family who originally started Pollo Campero in Guate didn't place an international patent on the name or famous image or at least they didn't register in the U. S. and this man was able to have his Pollos Camperos impersonate the real deal. This kind of reminds me of those Foster Farms Chicken commercials where the chickens from outside of the state are trying to pass themselves off as Foster Farms chickens. Except, there's a reversal here: The "native" chickens this man was using were trying to be passed off as immigrant chickens. That's a trip! I guess anything goes when it comes to food and immigrant nostalgia.

My analysis of this and constant digressions are getting too long, I know. That's something academics tend to do. It's like we get paid by the word.

Needless to say, the impostor Pollo Campero failed. I wouldn't have been caught dead there. What if the identity police saw me there and revoked my Guatemalan identity license? I'd be just an Angelino. But some of my confidential informants, like my mother who was an expert having been a waitress in several Guatemalan Pollo Camperos, told me that the chicken didn't taste the same. I was relieved when the Pollo Campero in Hollywood, on Sunset and Normandie... don't look at me like you don't know which one I'm talking about and haven't been there, the one by El Hospital Kaiser where the 2 and the 206 Metro bus lines meet. Well, let's just say that I'm relieved that it's now a Zankou Chicken catering to its own nostalgic immigrant communities.

So for a while, I was relieved. But when I heard that Pollo Campero was coming to the Los Angeles area and would be housed inside La Curacao, that post-modern Maya temple facade which housed B of A, Wells Fargo, and Homies Unidos, I once again became worried about the transnational implications of such a move.

But my fears- and your listening to this story- may have been in vain because according to one of my best friend's mother, my Salvadoran Pollo specialist and informant, "a mí no me importa lo que me digan, no sabe igual." But then again, she's married to a Salvadoran. So does she mean that it doesn't taste like Pollo Campero in El Salvador or that it doesn't taste like Pollo Campero from Guate. The worse thing about it is that they didn't bring over the tartaletas de higo, those fig tarts that I love so much. I guess I'm going to have to send the big guns in. I'll ask my mother and grandmother to give me their opinion. So here I am left with a personal and academic quandary. Do I forget about it, or should I continue in my quest to analyze this Transnational pollo phenomenon?

At least for my friend's mom, who is also my mom's friend, whether it's a Salvi entrepreneur or the Guatemalan originators themselves that fry the chicken in the U.S., Pollo Campero does not taste the same in L.A. as it does in El Salvador. It's because of these die-hard pollo purists (I said purists, not tourists) that the airplanes coming from our tiny countries, in which many people can't even afford to eat chicken, much less Pollo Campero chicken, will continue to carry the aroma, the scent of our beloved transnational chicken patrimony. It is because of them that Taca, Aviateca, Continental, yunaited, even American will continue to be: The Pollo Campero Express.

*Name changed to protect Rick, my confidential informant.