

Semitas, Semitic Bread, and the Search for Community: A Culinary Detective Story

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Are semitas, a lightly sweetened roll or bun found along the border between Texas and Mexico, a specifically Jewish (Semitic) bread? You can buy them both sides of the border in bakeries and even in convenience stores. They are a quite delicious bread, usually rhomboidal and usually made from white flour. They are sweetened with piloncillo, unrefined cane sugar that turns them brown. They are usually flavoured with anise and/or cinnamon and studded with pecans and raisins. Sometimes lard or oil and eggs are added. Sometimes they are raised, more often not.

The semita question has come to the fore in the last decade or so, thanks to the growing interest in the likelihood that many families in the region have crypto-Jewish roots. Beginning in the 1980s, the popular press, certain families from New Mexico and other parts of the border, and a number of scholars began investigating the possibility that many of the original settlers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been Conversos or New Christians. They had made the long trek to the northernmost parts of New Spain perhaps to escape the threat that they might be brought before the Inquisition for 'backsliding', perhaps because even those who did not have pure 'Old Christian' antecedents could hold land in that part of the world, or perhaps for some combination of these motives.¹

Because most likely the descendants of crypto-Jews lost most, perhaps even all, of their knowledge of the Jewish faith hundreds of years ago, those who seek to recreate this community have identified practices that are said to reveal crypto-Jewish origins. They include Sabbath and holiday observances, ways of naming, use of language, genetics, and culinary customs.

Among the culinary customs, eating semitas looms large. Researchers have made three assertions about semitas. The first is etymological. Anne deSola Cardoza, author of numerous fiction and nonfiction books, following the lead of Richard G. Santos, a scholar based in San Antonio,

Texas, says: 'Seventeenth century secret Jews who settled in what is today southern Texas, particularly around San Antonio took with them their Jewish foods, particularly what they call "Semitic bread" or *pan de semita*.' She continues: '*Pan de semita* was eaten in pre-Inquisition Spain by Jews and Arab Moors ... It translates into English as "Semitic bread".'²

The second is that semitas are matzoh in disguise. '*Pan de semita* is really the recipe for 17th century secret Jewish Matzoh', she continues. As evidence, she points out that Mexican Americans and Mexicans in the northern city of Monterrey tend to eat semitas during Lent or Passover. The third is that the Texas border region has a special kind of semitas. Tacitly acknowledging that breads called semitas are not unique to the border regions, deSola Cardoza contrasts the Texas kind with the semitas of Guadalajara that are flavoured with anise and mixed with milk. The implicit conclusion is that these other semitas have nothing to do with Judaism. (As an aside, if this is so, it creates a problem of course for the theory that semita can be translated as Semitic bread.)

In any case, as a quick Google search reveals, the belief that eating Texas semitas signals crypto-Jewish origins is now firmly established. For example, Alberto Omero Lopez, who movingly describes how he came to believe that his family descended from crypto-Jews, cites as evidence their enjoyment of '*pan de semita* (Semitic bread) ... that the Jewish American Archives identify as having Sephardic origins'.³

My first encounter with the equation between semitas and Semitic bread came a couple of years ago. I was in Austin, Texas, when over a leisurely lunch Mary Margaret Pack, a chef, scholar, and writer who shares my interest in Tex-Mex foods told me how her husband had eaten semitas growing up in Laredo, Texas, showed me her notes on semitas, and told me that they puzzled her.

Having lived nearly a decade in Central Mexico, I had to agree that the definition of semitas as Semitic bread at the very least needed more careful examination. I myself had run across semitas (or *semitas* as they are sometimes written, the two pronunciations being indistinguishable in Spanish) on many occasions and in many parts of Mexico. Although not as popular a traditional bread as the crisp white rolls known as *bolillos*, semitas have a pervasive, if often rather shadowy presence throughout the Republic, a point I will return to later. Furthermore, without having given it much thought, and certainly without having any claims to linguistic expertise, I had always assumed that *semita* came from the same root as *semilla* (seed), *-ita* and *-illa* both being diminutives in Spanish.

So what are *semitas*? No way of getting to the bottom of a culinary mystery can beat the methods followed by Alan Davidson. First, refuse to be limited to cookbooks. Instead, turn to whatever standard works of scholarship might have a bearing on the puzzle, be they zoological, botanical, economic or etymological. Second, never be seduced by a single line of evidence. As Alan tracked down mysterious fish in the world's markets, he availed himself of the knowledge of local fishermen and merchants, and spent a good bit of time in the kitchen as well as poring over ichthyological classics. In that spirit, I have drawn on the work of lexicographers, historians, anthropologists, and culinary specialists as well as on my own experience – and, of course, the web, something only just becoming of real use toward the end of Alan's life.

My first step was to turn to the classic Spanish etymological dictionary authored by Joan Corominas.⁴ He had no entry for *semita*. But he did have one for *semita* and that in turn led to another entry, this time for *acemite*, a coarse mixture of flour and bran from which pan de *acemite* (also known as *cemitas* or *semitas*) was made. According to Corominas, these words derived from the Arab *samīd*, a term originally used for white flour. These in turn originated in Greece, and, he claimed, did indeed belong to the family of seed words including *semen*, *seminary*, and *seminar*, presumably because seeds or grains were ground into flour. At some point, *samīd* shifted its meaning to a coarser mixture of flour and bran.

Corominas's etymology suggested that *semitas* had been known in Islamic North Africa. Perhaps they had even originated there, though this seems unlikely because breads of coarsely ground wheat flour must have been common from the Mediterranean to India long before Islam came on the scene. In any case, it may have been given the name *semita* there. And since it was an area with significant Jewish communities, it is not surprising that Corominas offered one Jewish connection. In the 'judío-español' of Morocco, *assemita* retained its original sense of white flour.

The term *acemite* for a mixture of bran and coarsely ground flour ('middlings' in English) has survived to the present in the baking trade of the Spanish-speaking world, according to the FAO.⁵ Kosher suppliers offers *acemite* to their customers. So do major milling companies such as the Mexican Harinera Espiga. Thus it is a technical term in the industry at large.

The next step was to try to find out something about *samid* in North Africa and *semita* in Spain, the obvious geographic links to Mexico.

Although histories of North African breads are in short supply, at least in English, I did make some progress here thanks to a fine food forum, Book of Rai, established by Chef Farid Zadi and his wife Ji Young.⁶ Farid, who grew up in Algeria, confirmed that *samid* referred to *semolina* (coarse particles of wheat) or to a whole-wheat flour similar to Indian *atta* (flour that includes bran). He reported that breads called *sמידa*, *sמידa*, *sמידa* were still being made in North Africa. Often slightly sweetened or seasoned with anise, nigella seeds or sesame seeds, they could vary from unleavened to quite yeasty. All of this made sense. Anise, nigella, and sesame seeds are readily available and inexpensive flavourings in that part of the world. Indeed anise-flavoured seeds of various species are common in many parts of the world and are usually thought of as aids to digestion. The photographs we uploaded of North African and Mexican examples revealed a clear similarity.

Given the tight connections between North Africa and Spain in the Islamic world, it would be no surprise to find *semitas* in Spain too. Indeed I strongly suspect that deSola Cardoza is quite right to say that Jews and Moors both ate *semitas*. I would simply add that I am sure Christians did too. Even so, having no access to the scholarly work on Spanish culinary history, I largely drew a blank in this part of the story. Thomas Glick, the leading historian of the technology of al-Andalus, offered *acemite* as an example of a word that had passed into Romance from Arabic.⁷ The town of Alcaucin in the province of Málaga lists as one of its culinary specialties a porridge or mush called *acemite*.⁸ If this did not add much at least it fitted the pattern. It would have been natural in the past to turn coarse flour into one of the peasant mushroom type dishes that were universal in the pre-modern world but that are now largely gone. I will however be very surprised if research in a good Spanish-language library does not turn up a history of *semitas* in Spain.

So on to the Americas. Corominas reported that pan de *acemite* (*cemitas*) are found in Argentina, Bolivia, Ecuador. El Salvadorians make them in the form of a flattish square packet of cakey dough with a sweet filling and a lattice decoration on top, a recipe that they have brought with them to the United States.⁹ They celebrate *semitas* as the signature sweet bread of the country. So it seems that *cemitas* were introduced to the entire Spanish empire in the Americas (it would be fascinating to know if they also turn up in the Philippines).

For Mexico, I was relieved to turn to my own extensive library. In the colonial period, according to the Mexican culinary historian, José Luis Curiel, *semitas* were coarse breads unlike fine bread made of white

flour, then (and now) called *flor de harina* (the flower of wheat).¹⁰ Bread historians, Sonia Iglesias and Cabrera Samuel Salinas Álvarez, point out that in New Spain, as in most other parts of the bread-eating world, at least in the major cities the government strictly regulated the making and distribution of bread.¹¹

The wealthier you were, the more refined the bread that you ate. The rich enjoyed delicate *pan especial* made only in upmarket bakeries or in the mansions of those wealthy enough to hire their own bakers, often from France or Italy. It was made from wheat ground in a horse-driven mill and sifted several times to produce pure white flour. The next grade down, *pan floreado* was almost as white. It was made from wheat ground in a watermill and then sifted or bolted (*floreado*) until it was completely free of bran. The third grade, probably brownish, was *pan común* (common bread), a term that speaks for itself. Then came *pan bajo* or *panbazo* (low or lower class bread) made with the screenings left over from the higher classes of bread and sold in the squares and the market places.

Finally at the bottom of the scale came *pan cemita* or *de acemite*. It was made of bran and with a little sieved flour to hold the dough together, and was sold in the lowly neighbourhood stores known as *pulperías*. It would have been eaten mainly by the lower classes of European extraction, the indigenous tending to stay with their traditional maize tamales and tortillas. These groups would have included Christians, crypto-Jews, and probably crypto-Muslims. Some of the large number of Africans from south of the Sahara might also have eaten *semitas*. Common to all these groups, *pan de acemite* does not crop up in Inquisition records as typical of Conversos.¹²

Today, *semitas*, and breads that I believe to be closely related, take a staggering variety of forms in Mexico. It is worth describing some of them because the variety bears on my general argument about *semitas*. In the centre, in Mexico City, *cemas* are soft, sweet and anise-flavoured, eaten filled with *nata* (thick cream) and a little sugar.¹³ Those who follow the popular television cook Chepín Peralta might even make a homemade version that she calls *pan de piloncillo*, a flat anise-flavoured tea bread (as it would be called in the United States).¹⁴

To the east of Mexico City lies Puebla. One of the great wheat-growing areas in colonial Mexico, its bakeries turned out the biscuits for the ships that plied between Acapulco and Seville. Puebla has remained true to the savoury *cemita* tradition. Its *semitas* are chewy rolls, now made of white flour and not *acemite*, either about nine centimetres

across and three and a half thick, or more commonly twelve centimetres across and seven thick. To make a quick meal, vendors stuff them with all kinds of meats, cheeses, and the local signature herb, *papaloquelite*, probably reflecting traditions that go back a long way. The fillings are also probably more lavish than in the past. These *semitas compuestas* are aggressively marketed as a regional street food.

In the next-door state of Tlaxcala, *cocolos* are rhomboidal sweet breads flavoured with anise and studded with bits of *piloncillo* and pecans.¹⁵ They are actually a good candidate for the *semitas* of the Texas border. In the colonial period, many settlers (possibly including crypto-Jews) moved on from Tlaxcala to the north of Mexico, taking with them their bread-making traditions. Among these *pan de pulque*, bread leavened with *pulque*, an alcoholic drink made from the maguey plant grown on plantations in Tlaxcala was famous. It is now a typical bread of the Saltillo-Monterrey region of northern Mexico. They probably also took along the variant of *semitas* called *cocolos*.¹⁶

To the west in the state of Colima, *semitas de huevo* are made with eggs, lard, *piloncillo*, yeast, and salt. *Cemitas de tuba* are raised with *tuba*, the local name for palm wine, and do not include eggs. In Guerrero, *semitas* are stuffed with sweet potato. To the south of Mexico City, *semitas* are proudly proclaimed a speciality of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Oaxaca, the narrowest section between the Pacific and the Gulf Coasts.¹⁷

To the north, in the state of Guanajuato, *pan de piloncillo* is little bigger than an egg and is sold by small street vendors. In Ajjic, a small town just south of Guadalajara in Jalisco, bakers make another variant, *pan de tlachigual*. It is made with a starter dough and comes in two variants. The white flour variant has white sugar, raisins, and toasted nuts; the whole wheat variant is sweetened with *piloncillo*.¹⁸ In Zacatecas, *semitas* are made milk and sugar, studded with pecans, raisins and *biznaga* (candied barrel cactus) and dusted with sugar.

Further north yet in the state of Coahuila, *semitas de pulque* are raised with *pulque*. They are a popular item at the fiestas held to celebrate the patron saints of each church. In the northwestern state of Chihuahua, *semitas* are raised with *tesguino* (a drink of fermented maize) and flavoured with sugar, anise, cinnamon, cloves and lard.

From this distribution, I believe it is possible to reconstruct a plausible history of *semitas* in Mexico. At first they were bakery breads eaten in the large cities and very probably coarse and rather plain. They would have been unlikely then to have expensive flavourings.

Probably rather quickly they were livened up with a flavouring of piloncillo. Thanks to the sugar plantations that were founded immediately following the Conquest, sugar was relatively inexpensive in New Spain. Semita-type breads became known as pan de piloncillo in some places. Indeed except in Puebla semitas are now firmly established as a sweet bread. The recent *Diccionario del Español Usual en México* defines them as a 'Sweet bread made of bran (*salvado*) or dark flour, light brown tending to grey in color, round in shape, sweetened with piloncillo and sprinkled with malt which gives it a powdery appearance.'¹⁹

Another change occurred as the result of the migration of groups to remoter parts of New Spain. Those of European descent always tried to grow wheat for their precious bread. But how were they to make flour in areas too arid to build water mills or in tiny communities where even horse-driven mills were out of the question?

A year or so ago I was in the small town of Comonfort, Guanajuato, to pursue my research on the making and use of metates (grindstones). As I chatted to Rafael Hernández, the metate maker, his wife found me a chair on their patio where their caged birds were singing away. Since I was investigating metates, would I like to try one of the gorditas de trigo (wheat bun) that the lady up the street made every Thursday from wheat she had ground on the metate? I most certainly would. She dispatched one of her daughters who returned with a plastic bag bulging with dark muffin-shaped gorditas. They were lightly sweetened with piloncillo, warmly wheaty, and full of fibre: in short, semitas by another name, though the plain-jane kind without the addition of expensive nuts and raisins. They had a taste and texture that (apart from the sweetness) were reminiscent of Indian chappatis made from the whole ground atta mentioned by Farid Zadi. Here was the answer. People prepared acemite, the flour for semitas, on the simple grindstone. They used the entire product without bolting it. They did so at home thus slipping out of sight of government regulators. At least that is what I supposed.

Moreover, far from government regulation (or working on a household scale), people were free to invent variants. Where coconuts and palms grew, they raised their semitas with palm wine and flavoured it with coconut. Where they made fermented maize drinks, they used those to raise the semitas. Where maguay was one of the few food plants that flourished on the dry hillside, they used pulque to raise the bread. No wonder that, by the end of the nineteenth century, semitas were found across Mexico and in dozens of different variations.

Then, around the beginning of the twentieth century, modern mechanized flour mills were set up in Mexico, as they were everywhere in the world where bread was eaten. The price of white flour plummeted. Semitas moved upmarket as bakeries and even individual households began substituting white flour from the millers for locally-ground acemite. Now white flour semitas are commoner than whole wheat ones. In his fine reference work on Mexican food, *Diccionario de Gastronomía Mexicana*, Ricardo Muñoz describes semitas as a form of pan blanco (white bread).²⁰ They still look like the old whole wheat ones, of course, because of the brown tinge given by the piloncillo.

Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, this ancient bread is changing once again. According to CANAINPA (the National Organization of the Baking Industry of Mexico), traditional semitas are becoming less popular, at least as a bakery item.²¹ The savoury *cemitas* of Puebla, on the other hand, with their stuffing of meats, cheeses, and the herb papalote, are taking on cult status. They are regarded as a particularly fine example of the whole genre of savoury stuffed tortas (rolls) that make a popular quick meal in Mexico. And in the border states, the identification of semitas as a crypto-Jewish bread is making them newly fashionable.

But, as happens with culinary mysteries, I have let myself be drawn into the byways of the history of food. It has been an unexpected but delightful outcome of this investigation that we can begin to piece together the history of one of the world's most basic breads. And in the future there are all kinds of avenues to explore. What happened east of the Mediterranean? What happened in Spain? What happened in the rest of the Americas?

For now, we must return to the three theses about crypto-Judaism and semitas. Let us take them in reverse order. That what is now the Texas border had its own variant of semitas is true. That there were many crypto-Jews in the region is also beyond doubt. But whether they put a particularly Jewish stamp on this widely-distributed bread is yet to be established. Second, crypto-Jews may well have used semitas, a bread common in Mexico and often unleavened, to play the role in Passover celebrations that matzoh bread plays in many other places. It would seem unlikely, though, that they used the rich nut and raisin variant now called semitas in that region.

Third, can we translate semitas as Semitic bread? I think not. In the enthusiasm of the search for community, it is all too easy to fall into the trap of assuming that two words that sound alike are related. But there

is another etymology for semitas that has nothing to do with Semites. It is supported by a very plausible history that traces the origins of these breads to the mixed Islamic-Jewish-Christian community of the western Mediterranean. And the very ubiquity of semitas in Latin America makes it unlikely that they were a specifically Jewish bread.

That semitas were eaten by peoples in many places and of many faiths will come as no surprise to those who have investigated Jewish food. Claudia Roden, for example, reports that 'In a gastronomic conference I attended in Jerusalem, in September 1992 ... the first subject for discussion was "Is there such a thing as Jewish food?"¹¹² The participants agreed that if Jews have some distinctive culinary practices, it is also true that they have always shared many culinary traditions with other groups in the many societies in which they have lived. And if that is as true on the Texas border as in other parts of the world, then the eating of semitas is neither the best marker of crypto-Jewish identity nor the strongest foundation for the fascinating attempt to recreate a Jewish community.

NOTES

1. For a good summary, see Seth Ward, 'Converso Descendants in the American Southwest: A Report on Research, Resources, and the Changing Search for Identity', *Proceedings of the 1998 Conference of the European Association for Jewish Studies* ed., Angel Saenz-Badillos (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), pp. 677-86.
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5. <http://www.espiga.com.mx/nuestros_productos.html>.
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7. <<http://libro.uca.edu/ics/table2.htm>>.
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9. <<http://www.laprensagrafica.com/especiales/2005/mipatria/comida/recetas/semitas.asp>>.
10. José Luis Curiel Montegudo, *Vireyes y Virreinos Colosos de la Nueva España* (Mexico: Porrúa, 2004), p. 35.
11. Sonia Iglesias y Cabrera y Samuel Salinas Álvarez, *El Pan Nuestro de Cada Día: Sus Orígenes, Historia y Desarrollo en México* (Mexico: Canaimpa, 1997), pp. 170-71.
12. David Githitz and Linda Davidson, *A Drizzle of Honey: The Lives and Recipes of Spain's Secret Jews* (London: St Martin's Press, 1998).
13. José N. Iurriaga, *La Cultura del Autójito* (Mexico: Diana, 1993), p. 139.
14. Chepin Peralta, *Mis 25 Años en Televisión* (Mexico: Noriega, 1998), p. 337.
15. Yolanda Ramos Galicia, *Así se come en Tlaxcala* (Mexico: INAH y Gobierno de

Tlaxcala, 1993), p. 189.
Cristina Barros and Marco Buenrostro, *Panadería de Tlaxcala Ayer y Hoy* (Tlaxcala: Gobierno del Estado, 2004), p. 31.

17. Raúl Guerrero Guerrero, *Teneucáyotl: El pan nuestro de cada día* (Mexico: INAH, 1987), p. 60.

18. Personal communication, Cristina Potters, 6 March 2005.

19. *Diccionario del Español Usual en México*, 2nd ed. ([1996]; México: Colegio de México, 2002).

20. Ricardo Muñoz, *Diccionario Enciclopédico de Gastronomía Mexicana* (Mexico: Clio, 2000), pp. 130-31.

21. Buena Mesa, Sección G, *Reforma*, 14 de octubre 2005, p. 9.

22. Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food* (New York: Knopf, 1996), pp. 8-9.

