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HOW THE TACO CONQUERED AMERICA



**The story of a Mexican food
that became an all-American favorite**

BY LAUREN TARSHIS

It was 1951 in San Bernardino, California, and 28-year-old Glen Bell was grilling up burgers and hot dogs at his roadside stand, Bell's Drive-In.

For weeks, Bell had been watching the restaurant across the street, the Mitla Café. Bell's place was always bustling, but Mitla's was packed. At lunchtime, people lined up around the corner waiting for a table.

What was happening in there?

Bell had to see what the fuss was about. He went to Mitla's and stood in line, the only white person in a crowd of mostly Mexican immigrants. He was warmly welcomed and served the house specialty: a taco. Few non-Hispanic Americans had ever tasted this Mexican treat, a fried corn tortilla shell stuffed with meat and cheese and topped with a spicy tomato sauce.

Bell picked up the taco, breathing in the delicious scent. He took a bite. *Crunch.*

Bell nearly fell off his chair in ecstasy. Not only had

he just found his new favorite food, he had also tasted his future.

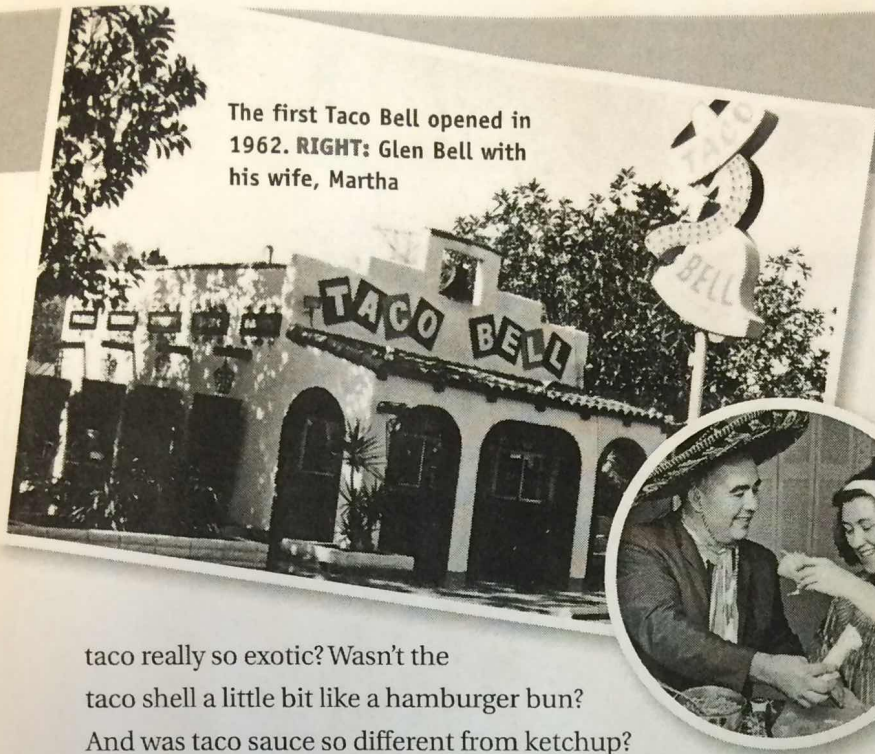
A Taste of Home

For decades, Mexican immigrants had been pouring into Southern California, bringing with them recipes for their favorite dishes. In many Mexican-American neighborhoods, the air was thick with the aroma of meats spiced with dried chili peppers, woody cumin, and chocolate-tinged mole [MOH-lay] sauces. By the 1950s, there were dozens of small restaurants like Mitla's, modest establishments serving up tacos and other dishes for Mexicans longing for a taste of home.

Non-Hispanic Americans rarely ventured into these restaurants. Most were not adventurous eaters; many worried that Mexican food would be too spicy or would make them sick. But Bell sensed that Americans might be ready for something new. And was the



The first Taco Bell opened in 1962. RIGHT: Glen Bell with his wife, Martha



taco really so exotic? Wasn't the taco shell a little bit like a hamburger bun? And was taco sauce so different from ketchup?

Bell was determined to introduce his new favorite food to a wide American audience and started making plans to open his own taco stand. His first challenge was to speed up the preparation process, to satisfy the American craze for "fast food." It was no problem to prepare the beef fillings in advance. But each taco shell had to be fried moments before being served, or it became soggy.

Bell spent his evenings experimenting in his kitchen, finally devising a method of crisping taco shells in advance. He concocted a taco sauce that was milder than a typical piquant Mexican sauce. He designed his taco place to be modern, more like a fast-food joint than a homey Mexican taco stand.

Bell's first taco restaurant, Taco Tia, opened in 1954. It was an immediate success. Most customers were new to tacos and thrilled with Bell's version. Within the year, he opened two more restaurants. By 1962, he had sold Taco Tia and founded fast-food chain Taco Bell.

American Makeover

Some have criticized Bell for "Americanizing" Mexican food. But what is "American" food, anyway? Most of the foods we eat have roots in other lands. Recipes for apple pie and meat stews came from England with early colonial settlers. Italians brought pizza to the U.S. in the late 1800s.

And then there is the most American food of all: the hamburger. It was born in Germany, a land long famous for its sausages (made from ground meat) and brought to the U.S. by German immigrants in the 1800s. Ground beef was cheap, and German factory workers enjoyed lunching on beef patties tucked inside sliced rolls. At the time, most Americans avoided ground beef, which tended to be a mash-up of spoiled meat, fat, and parts of the animal that nobody would knowingly eat.

Like the taco, the hamburger got a makeover that turned a traditional immigrant food into an American classic. In 1921, a diner cook named Walter Anderson teamed up with a businessman named Billy Ingram to open a restaurant specializing in burgers. To help customers overcome their fear of ground beef, diners were allowed to peer into the kitchen and watch hunks of fresh beef being ground into patties. Advertisements emphasized the cleanliness of the restaurant and the wholesomeness of the ingredients. The eatery was given a name that suggested a sparkling-clean restaurant fit for a king: White Castle.

What's Next?

Like Taco Tia, White Castle was a hit. By the 1950s, the hamburger was the most popular food in America. Thanks to Glen Bell, the taco isn't far behind. Today, there are 5,500 Taco Bell restaurants in the U.S. Even Bell's critics agree that he succeeded in introducing Mexican food to picky Americans and establishing the taco as an all-American favorite.

So what's next? Will it be the *samosa*, a crusty Indian meat or vegetable pie? How about Lebanese *kibbe*, spicy lamb covered with fried bulgur wheat? Or Filipino *kwek kwek*, fried quail eggs?

Right now, there are hundreds of delicious ethnic favorites simmering in American kitchens. Soon enough, one of them will win your heart—and your stomach. ●

