



# Crossing Borders: Designing for the Hispanic Demographic

By Kimberly J. Decker  
Contributing Editor

**P**undits in search of a pithy metaphor for the Latinization of the United States often seize upon the parable of the two competing condiments. As the story goes, the year was 1992 and Packaged Facts, New York, reported a 14% rise in salsa sales over the previous year. But while the spicy sauce raked in a record \$640 million, sales of ketchup, America's best seller for nearly a century, lagged behind at a mere \$600 million. To be fair, the higher price of salsa relative to ketchup softens some of the statistic's punch. But ever since, everyone from demographers to media executives to the very food manufacturers who produced the condiments in the first place accepted salsa's supremacy as a sign of things to come.

For despite its oversimplification, the story encapsulates a larger truth about the changing flavor of North American life: Hispanics are the country's largest, fastest-growing ethnic minority. At nearly 40 million strong already — 44 million, if you count Puerto Rico — the demographic is increasing at a rate of 7%, or 500,000 households, annually, outpacing the U.S. Census Bureau's 1999 forecasts. And with their growth rate expected to exceed the general population's by at least a factor of 10 in coming years, Hispanics will account for one-third of the nation by 2030. Translated into dollar amounts, that works out to a collective annual buying power estimated at \$580 billion, approximately 8% more of which goes to weekly household food purchases in non-Hispanic homes.

## *Salsa: a case study*

So does salsa's success send a message to food manufacturers about the value of courting Hispanic-American food dollars? Yes, but the message isn't as straightforward as manufacturers might think. The northward spread of Hispanic culture may have set the stage for salsa's stellar sales, but Hispanic-American consumers haven't necessarily driven those sales themselves.

"The biggest consumers of canned or jarred salsas are Anglos," says Veronica Kraushaar, consultant to Texa Sweet Citrus Marketing Inc., Mission, TX, and principle of Vanguard Ethnic Marketing, Scottsdale and Nogales, AZ. In the May 1997 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Michael J. Weiss reported that demographic surveys ascribe the greatest U.S. salsa consumption to two groups: "upscale



Anglo families, who can afford to buy a condiment that is more expensive than ketchup and who appreciate salsa's low-fat content," and what he calls "downscale Latino families," for whom salsa is a staple that they'd rather prepare from scratch.

That way, Latinos can calibrate the sauce's flavor to their own tastes, which may differ markedly from store-bought salsas. As Joe Bavone, R&D manager, Kerry Americas, Waukesha, WI, explains, North American consumers adopted salsa early in their exploration of Latin-American cuisines, so the product "was never really developed here with Latinos' tastes in mind. It was essentially homogenized to American tastes to appeal to a broader spectrum of non-Latinos." In fact, he quips, North American salsa may have supplanted ketchup because, "essentially, it's just another variety of ketchup" — a sweetish, mild, tomato-based sauce. "You can get mild, medium, and hot now, but even the hot isn't necessarily as hot as you would find in parts of Mexico."

Further complicating matters, *salsa* — Spanish for sauce — can mean anything from the caramel poured over ice cream to a scorching paste made from dried chiles and vinegar. The chunky concoction of fresh tomatoes, onions, and cilantro familiar to us represents only a sliver of the salsa spectrum — and a predominantly Mexican one, at that. More accurately called a *pico de gallo*, this particular salsa wouldn't strike much of a chord with immigrants from South America or the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, who are more likely to equate "salsa" with a parsley-speckled *chimichurri*, or a citrusy *mojo criollo*. It's no coincidence, Weiss notes, that two U.S. cities with atypically low salsa consumption rates — Miami and New York City — also host sizable Cuban and Puerto Rican communities.

#### **One name, many cultures**

So while demographers might see the saga of salsa as a snapshot of America's future, food manufacturers would be wise to heed it as a cautionary tale about the complexity of

***With the basic elements of dairy, garnishes and salsa, an appetizer can appeal to a wide range of cultural groups. However, a simple accent of flavoring can spin it in any number of original directions.***

developing products to please the Hispanic market. "You have so many question marks hanging over you when you're designing for Hispanic Americans," says Leigh Enderle, market research manager, Givaudan Flavors, Cincinnati. First question: Who are Hispanic Americans?

In the strictest sense, the term "Hispanic" unites as an ethnicity those who trace their ancestry to the countries of the Spanish-speaking world. But given the reach of Spain's colonial empire, such a classification hardly narrows things down, lumping together nearly 20 nationalities spread across the tropics, mountains, desserts, coasts and grasslands of the western hemisphere.

Such a broad definition inevitably masks local distinctions — and in the process, confuses outsiders and creates tension among those so broadly defined. "Some level of resentment of the term exists for some members of the population identified as Hispanic," says Don McCaskill, vice president for research, Riceland Foods, Inc., Stuttgart, AK. "Those individuals make a case that it generalizes when, in reality, several distinctly different populations exist: those of Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban descent; Central American refugees and immigrants; and South American immigrants."

Even the Spanish heritage that unites them survives only to varying degrees and in a mixture of dialects. Moreover, Latin Americans have often distinguished themselves from each other by reacting against their shared inheritance. Local responses to the Roman Catholic Church, race, politics, capitalism and the sheer weight of pre-

**Mexicans have made cheese a staple in traditional dishes, like enchiladas. However, Americanized products often supplant queso fresco with blends of yellow American and Cheddar cheeses.**

and post-Columbian history have all carved out unique identities for Latin Americans that defeat the notion of a monolithic Hispanic culture.

“Bolivians and Peruvians are strongly influenced by a mixture of Incan and Spanish culture, whereas Colombians, Venezuelans and Panamanians show an African influence,” explains Lionel Vil, R&D director for seasonings, Kerry Ingredients. Spain’s former Caribbean colonies also cling to African traditions, while visitors to Chile and Argentina comment on how European their city squares and temperate climate feel. And in Mexico and Central America, the legacy of the Aztec and Mayan empires continues to permeate spirituality, literature, architecture and the timbre of everyday life.

### La cocina mestiza

Latin America’s cuisines tend to bend to the same winds as culture. And when Columbus made landfall on what is now the Dominican Republic, a gust blew through that would change the way the region — and the world — would eat forever (this phenomenon is known in some circles as the “Columbian Exchange,” as described in a book written in 1972 by social historian Alfred W. Crosby). At the potluck where the Old World met the New, Europeans brought wheat, rice, olives, citrus, bananas, sugarcane and livestock — including cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens — while the indigenous populations contributed what had sustained them for millennia: corn, potatoes, cassava, chocolate, vanilla, pineapples, turkey, tomatoes and the



Photo: Sargento Foods, Inc.

full scope of the genus *Capsicum*. This culinary coming together laid the foundations for a *cocina mestiza*, or “mixed cuisine,” that defines the Latin-American table to this day. Such standard fare as wheat-flour tortillas, rice-and-bean dishes, crispy corn snacks fried in pork fat, and the whole panoply of Mexican cheeses persist as edible artifacts of the Columbian Exchange.

But they don’t persist everywhere, or with the same popularity. For example, although Mexican cooks use cheese in everything from soups to salads to stuffed chiles, the same isn’t true in other Hispanic countries. “If you look to Cuba or Puerto Rico, when they use cheese, it’s often just as a snack,” says Barbara Gannon, vice president of corporate and marketing communications, Sargento Foods Inc., Plymouth, WI. “It’s not usually incorporated as a vital ingredient in a main dish.”

Similarly, contrary to popular U.S. opinion, not all Latin-American foods leave a lingering capsaicin burn. “Only in Mexico, and to a smaller extent in

Guatemala and Peru, is the food really spicy,” notes Denyse Selesnick, president, International Trade Information Inc., Woodland Hills, CA. Even within Mexico, a region like Veracruz relies more on capers and olives than searing chiles to season its foods. “You’ve got fiery chiles, and you’ve got chiles that give flavor without being hot,” Selesnick continues. “So spicy food in Mexico is very different from what you’d find in Costa Rica or Caracas.”

As it happens, though, Mexicans account for nearly two-thirds of the U.S. Hispanic population, with Puerto Ricans and Cubans coming in at only 10% and 4%, respectively. And according to Givaudan resources, more than 90% of our Latin-American restaurants bill themselves as “Mexican.” Thus, much of what we know about Latin-American cuisine we’ve learned from our neighbors to the immediate south.

But geography, climate, immigration patterns and the unstoppable march of time have bred endless variations

on a collective culinary theme, rendering a blanket statement about the cuisines of the Hispanic world virtually impossible to make. “Subtle differences in ingredients, preparation and even presentation are key to the personality of each,” says Kraushaar.

So while Mexicans might mash yesterday’s pinto beans and fry them in lard, Cubans would probably steer more toward boiled black beans mixed with rice and fried plantains. And corn may be king in Mexico, but rice, potatoes, yucca and other starches reign elsewhere. Of course, that doesn’t mean that you won’t find corn elsewhere, too, but you’ll have to look for it in different guises. In Puerto Rico, for instance, *pasteles* are tamales wrapped in aromatic banana leaves, and in South America, fresh-corn tamales dating back to indigenous times still go by their Quechua name, *humitas*. Salvadorans make a local version of the corn tortilla, called a *pupusa*, which they stuff with meat, beans or cheese. And in parts of Venezuela and Colombia, *arepas*, flat cornmeal buns, take the place of the daily bread.

The daily bread in Chile and Argentina, however, is just that: bread, made from wheat flour and in the French manner favored by the countries’ European expatriates. Cubans also adopted French-style bread, most famously in the “sandwich *Cubano*” — a baguette layered with ham, *mojo*-marinated pork, Swiss cheese, pickles, mustard and mayo, flattened and toasted in a *plancha*, or sandwich press. Even in Mexico, the ultimate culture of corn, wheat-flour tortillas are the norm in the north, and *panaderías*, or bakeries, sell wheat rolls called *teleras* and *bolillos* that, split in half and filled with roasted meats, *chorizo*, vegetables and cheese, make massive sandwiches called *tortas*.

### ***Old habits die hard***

*Tortas* and *Cubanos* fit right in on the menu board at any stateside sandwich shop. (The *Cubano*, in fact, was purportedly “invented” in Miami’s Little Havana.) But the Latin-American immigrants who introduced us to these sandwiches sometimes have a harder time making themselves feel at home. A whopping 63% of U.S. Hispanics are immigrants, and depending on age, education, income levels, where they came from, and where they settle, their adjustment to life north of the border

Americans who can speak Spanish at home and English with their friends. They can go out for pizza, a hamburger or Chinese food and still enjoy moles and salsas with their families. They don’t want to forget their roots or their language. They’re acculturated.” And therein lies the difference: Acculturation blends what assimilation once dissolved; it preserves, where assimilation erased. To an immigrant whose only roots tap into memories, this cultural connection gives profound comfort.

---

## ***Panaderías sell wheat rolls called teleras and bolillos that, split in half and filled with roasted meats, chorizo, vegetables and cheese, make massive sandwiches called tortas.***

---

— and the ability of their foodways to survive it — can vary widely.

We used to call this adjustment “assimilation,” and as Selesnick points out, earlier waves of immigrants resolved to make theirs as seamless as possible. “It used to be that everybody wanted to be assimilated,” she says. But now, with the United States on its way to minority-majority status, the classic immigrant drive to melt completely into America’s bubbling pot has waned. Now, even second- and third-generation Hispanic Americans — the real engines of the demographic’s growth — take pride in sustaining their parents’ and grandparents’ traditions.

“It’s not that Hispanics don’t want to become American,” Selesnick continues. “They already are. But they’re a different kind of American. They’re

“The last thing you lose in your culture is what you eat,” says Rafael Toro, director of public relations, Goya Foods, Inc., Secaucus, NJ. “You may find people who don’t speak the language of their parents or practice any of their customs. But they still eat the food.”

Kraushaar concurs. “It is human nature to try to preserve your traditions,” she says. “Food provides that opportunity.” In fact, food serves as a “nonpolitical way of holding onto your own cultural identity when you are being assaulted by the lifestyle of the country you immigrated to.” For Latin Americans exposed to the globe-spanning din of U.S. pop culture, that assault begins before they even cross the border.

“There are emotional attachments to the food your mother prepared for you,” says Felipe Korzenny, Ph.D.,

cofounder and consultant, Cheskin, Redwood Shores, CA, “and those last for quite some time.”

### *Food and family*

So strong are these attachments that Sylvia Meléndez-Klinger, M.S., R.D., L.D., a Chicago-based consultant to Hispanic community groups and the food industry, predicts that the continued growth of the Hispanic population, coupled with its noted family solidarity, will only reinforce cultural and culinary traditions. In Latin America — and, by extension, Latin American communities abroad — family and food are two sides of the same coin.

This is, after all, a demographic that treats grocery shopping as a bona fide family outing and considers the making of tamales reason to convene a multigenerational party (Mexicans even have a name for the events: *tamaladas*.) Kraushaar can't emphasize enough that “family is everything to the Latino. And food is the premier expression of love for that family.”

Furthermore, 30% of Hispanic families have five or more members, according to Via Texas Marketing, Mission, TX. “And if you have more relatives around you,” Meléndez-Klinger claims, “they can keep you with traditional practices longer. You can follow the advice of friends and family who arrived earlier about where to go for the best prices and to find your favorite Hispanic products.”

### *As easy as uno, dos, tres*

Traditionally, dinnertime is family time in Hispanic households. “We've had many Hispanic mothers tell us: ‘My kids might grab a quick breakfast and be on their way, and they may get their lunch at school. But we always sit down to dinner together,’” says Enderle. Such determination is rare in an age when frenzied daily rhythms disconnect families members and leave them fending for themselves at feeding time.

But even determined Hispanic-American moms find it hard to keep up with the demands of fast-paced

North-American life. So “while it used to be, and still is in some situations, that the first-generation mother stayed home and did all the cooking from scratch,” Selesnick says, “now with two parents working, they're looking much more for convenience.” Case in point: Research from Swift & Company, Greeley, CO, shows that 79% of Hispanic-American families surveyed named speed and ease of preparation as key factors in food purchasing decisions, compared with only 52% of non-Hispanic whites.

Granted, “the first generation still holds beliefs about freshness that prevent them from consuming certain frozen and prepared foods,” Korzenny says. For example, Latinos cite the quality of fresh produce as the No. 1 criteria for choosing a supermarket. “Careful selection of each piece of produce is part of the pride of providing the best for the family,” Kraushaar says. “Shoppers will squeeze, fondle and generally manhandle everything.” And, Gannon notes, even pre-shredded cheeses rob some first-generation consumers of what they believe to be their sacred preparation oversight.

To some extent, this resistance to value-added products owes itself to simple frugality. “Consumers will buy huge sacks of dried beans, and part of the reason is because it's so much cheaper,” says Korzenny. “When they make beans for the whole family, for them to buy enough cans would cost upward of \$10. With dried beans, they might spend around \$1. It makes a huge difference.”

But as the Hispanic-American middle class grows, it promises to shunt

---

***Variations on Hispanic sandwiches, such as the Cubano or torta, might feature spiced beef, roasted peppers and cheeses. Such products can prove popular with both traditional and assimilated immigrants.***



Photo: Cattlemen's Beef Board and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association

## Sensory Trend-Trekking

more of its dollars toward convenience foods. While visiting groceries in Miami's Little Havana, Enderle noticed "a lot more frozen complete Cuban meals" in its freezer cases than there were equivalent products in Mexican and Puerto Rican markets she surveyed. Perhaps, she theorizes, that's because Cubans are generally more affluent, allying them with mainstream consumers willing to pay a premium for a quick-cook meal. And with nearly half a century in the U.S., a significant number of Hispanics are U.S.-born, and thus almost four times as likely to pull a frozen meal from the freezer as are recent arrivals, according to Mintel International Group, Chicago.

Korzenny believes that manufacturers could broaden their markets beyond the affluent and acculturated by making small investments in education. "Many convenience products aren't consumed by Hispanics not because they don't like them, but because they don't know what they are or how to use them," he says. Bilingual packaging helps, although the lesson of the Chevy Nova — *no va* means "doesn't go" in Spanish — reminds us that semantics can be a dangerously sticky wicket in the translation of one language to another.

Perhaps a safer tactic is simple outreach. Selesnick recalls that when Pillsbury, Minneapolis, had trouble generating interest in its refrigerated dough products among Hispanic consumers, it "rolled out a truck with an oven and took it into Hispanic neighborhoods. They invited women to come in, have coffee and see how to open the canisters of dough and make these fresh breads that smell wonderful — that's the first thing they noticed, that sensory appeal. And so the women learned that they didn't have to make their bread from scratch, and they didn't necessarily have to go to the *panadería*

A woman in form-fitting, flowered pants, gauzy fuchsia blouse and high-heeled sandals pushes the shopping cart at a supermarket in Pilsen, a Mexican neighborhood on Chicago's south side. She calls excitedly to the two children who run ahead of her as she reaches for a box of pancake mix. She selects a gallon of whole milk and lets the children choose a package of pink coconut snowball cakes. Piñatas form a colorful swaying ceiling, and brassy music with a vibrating bass pulses through the aisles.

Leigh Enderle, market research manager for Cincinnati-based Givaudan Flavors, observes this scene. She jots sensory notes on index cards: "Loud," "bright," "sensual," "mother and kids." She smells deeply: Sweet floral? herbal? citrus? cinnamon? chiles? Enderle is one of 17 participants from the company's marketing, R&D, sensory and culinary divisions on a Hispanic Trend Trek™. Givaudan began these treks several years ago to go beyond learning from books and the Internet, to uncover what traditional market research does not measure about emerging trends, and to inspire new directions in tastes and flavors.

Givaudan contracted with Food Marketing Support Services, Inc., Oak Park, IL, to design a sensory-based program that would expose the "cultural heart and soul" of major Hispanic groups in the United States. In Puerto-Rican and Mexican neighborhoods in Chicago and the Cuban community in Miami, the group discovered themes: family values, the role of community and ceremonies, love of music, respect for history, nostalgia for the homeland, the importance of homemade/traditional foods, brand loyalty, energy and action, passion, emotion and pride. The sensory words on index cards, along with photos, flags, foods, and music become part of an on-site ideation at the end of the venture.

Sylvia Meléndez-Klinger, a Chicago-based Hispanic food consultant, was a guide and interpreter on the trek. She explained, for instance, that the mother Enderle observed would probably add both milk and eggs to the pancake mix, even though it didn't require it. "A mother always wants to add something more — to the pizza or canned soup — as a sign of her love," she says, while also explaining that "Hispanic mothers believe that whole milk is more nutritious." She also tells the group that it is common for families to be together — on a trip to the store or in the kitchen, around the table. Ads targeted to Hispanics feature families — and the women are glamorous, like popular Hispanic soap opera stars. "In real life, even those who are not so shapely are proud of their femininity and like to show off their bodies."

Cultural mining is an essential part of product development at Givaudan. "We can talk about flavor, or texture, but that's not the whole product," Enderle says. "We want to see a product outside the lab — in its cultural context." The authentic influence in mainline products appeals broadly to consumers — Hispanic and non-Hispanic, authentic and mainstream.

Asked for an example, Enderle points to her husband, Joe, a senior flavorist. Joe returned from the Hispanic Trend Trek with a vision for marketing *horchata*, a popular rice-based Mexican drink. He added bits of rice to *horchata*-flavored ice cream, pointing to its ethnic origins and giving it a texture like he'd experienced. He also made it pink strawberry.

Meléndez-Klinger would approve. "We don't like plain!" she says. Remember the pink coconut snowball cake in the supermarket? ■



—Nancy C. Rodriguez  
President, Food Marketing Support Services, Inc.  
([nancy.rodriguez@fmssinc.com](mailto:nancy.rodriguez@fmssinc.com))

every day to get it fresh.” Within a matter of months, she says, sales of the products doubled.

No one would argue that refrigerated, ready-to-bake rolls and biscuits aren’t convenience foods. However, they’re in a special class of products that, while considerably easier to prepare and serve, incorporate the elements of freshness and hands-on participation that compel Hispanic cooks toward scratch preparation. Remember, Kraushaar says, “there is a high pride for a Latina to cook from scratch.

and constraints in most prepared products.” With the exception of Puerto Rico, he continues, “long-grain rice tends to be most commonly used. Medium- or short-grain is popular in Puerto Rico, although long-grain is substituted in some recipes purportedly offered as authentic.”

On the bean ingredient front, Brian Yager, corporate research chef, ADM, Decatur, IL, says, “dehydrated whole beans work very well” in boxed-mix applications. Black beans, pintos, kidneys, dark reds and even light reds,

temperature and pressure, “we can give you a five-minute cooked bean.”

Yager mentions his company’s line of instant refried pinto and black beans, which come in a “ribbons” form. “They look almost like broken pieces of spaghetti,” he says. “They’re long, slender and porous, so they absorb a lot of water quickly.” How quickly? “You bring the water to a boil, you add the bean product to it, you stir it, you take it off the heat, let it sit for five minutes, and it’s done.” Added to a soup mix or taco meal kit, it offers consumers a middle ground between scooping refried beans from a can and boiling, mashing, and refrying them for themselves.

---

## ***Spanish-dominant consumers will buy baking mixes and prepared dough because the products give the illusion of scratch prep.***

---

### ***Ever faithful***

Even in their home countries, however, Latin Americans have long had their pick of ready-to-eat meals and convenient ingredients. Gone are the days when Mexicans nixtamalized their own corn, soaking ripe grains in quicklime to ease grinding and release nutrients. Now corn processors take care of the alkali treatment and grinding, producing instant *masa harina* mixes, if not the finished tortillas. “You’re going to find the same canned foods in Latin America that you find here,” says Bavone, “and you’re also going to find a lot more UHT product,” particularly where unreliable refrigeration and inadequate infrastructure preclude the distribution of fresh.

What’s more, the food industry’s multinational scope has given Latin-American consumers as many name-brand packaged sweets, breakfast cereals, baked goods and beverages as appear in U.S. supermarkets. And make no mistake: When Latin Americans head north, that’s what they’ll look for. Much has been made of Hispanic Americans’ legendary brand loyalty, which, Kraushaar says, is second only

We’ve found that you don’t want to take away from the cook’s glory. The cook must be able to add her special touch to the dish, whether it’s a regional or family influence, using her own ingredients.”

Mintel found that even Spanish-dominant consumers — presumably a more traditional bunch than English speakers — will buy baking mixes and prepared dough because the products give the illusion of scratch prep. So baking mixes and quick-cooking rice-and-bean dishes present product development opportunities that reach out to the Hispanic home cook. For the latter, McCaskill suggests going with a long-grain parboiled rice as an ingredient because it “probably comes closest to meeting both the necessary finished-product attributes and processing and handling requirements

he says, are culturally consistent with what you’d find across Latin-American cuisines. “There are other heirloom beans out there, but they’re not really that much of a draw for the average home cook in Hispanic communities, because they’re more expensive and they’re just not within the tradition.” Product developers should find this encouraging, because usual suspects, like black beans and pintos, are plentiful, easy to source, and economical. “And when you use these beans,” he adds, “the mainstream American public would be able to recognize them, and they’d be more apt to try the product, too.” Manufacturers can customize ingredients to fit the product’s processing and preparation requirements. For example, “if the rice in the dried mix cooks in five minutes,” using a combination of time,



***Tacos camarones (shrimp) and pescados (fish), regional Mexican favorites, have gained favor as Hispanic cuisine has hit the United States. Manufacturers can mine authentic cuisines for undeveloped gems.***

to African Americans. So if they had a weakness for Nesquik in Colombia, they'll bring that craving with them here. In addition to homegrown baked goods and snack manufacturers in Mexico, such as Bimbo, Gamesa and Sabritas, many U.S. brands are perennial favorites, including Carnation, Sunny Delight, Jell-O and Quaker Oats. Products from The Coca-Cola Company, Atlanta; H. J. Heinz Company, Pittsburgh, PA; The Kellogg Company, Battle Creek, MI; and Kraft Foods, Northfield, IL, are also continually popular.

Brand appeal isn't just about taste or convenience, either. As Korzeny says, a sense of status accrues to Hispanic shoppers who purchase North-American products. "So when the upper and middle classes in Latin America buy a Sara Lee cake mix, they may choose it more for the prestige of making an American cake." The flipside of such aspirational buying, Kraushaar points out, is that while "recent immigrants reach for American brands in

their desire to belong, highly assimilated — i.e., secure — Hispanics go back to brands that they had as children in their homeland. I'm one who now searches for labels that I remember seeing as a child in Brazil but would not touch when I arrived in this country 30-plus years ago."

### **Viva la diferencia**

Even so, Kraushaar cautions: "You can't assume that Latinos will buy a brand just because it is Latino. It has to be seen as authentic, and it has to communicate a specific image." But a product developer weaned on Americanized versions of Tex-Mex favorites has little cultural basis for determining what that image is, let alone how to make it authentic.

For example, Korzeny says, even an ingredient as basic as corn is "very complicated." Most U.S. tortilla manufacturers, he explains, use a hybrid variety that yields a brittle tortilla. "That's why they crack when you try to roll them. And that texture is precisely what

Hispanics don't like." Thus, he says, many Hispanics "object to the tortillas they can buy on the shelves here."

A typical tortilla chip might also seem off-key to a Latin-American consumer, who looks for something "a little coarser, harder, not really salty, with a lot of color variability from light to some dark spots, heavy corn notes, and strong in a flavor called *cal* that is distinctive to authentic tortillas and comes from the lime used to treat the corn," explains Karen K. Trumbull, vice president of creative services, Food Marketing Support Services, Inc., Oak Park, IL.

And as for nacho cheese-flavored corn chips, according to Federico Noltenius, international sales region manager for Latin America, Kraft Food Ingredients, Memphis, TN, their main audience lies north of the border. If a snack chip is going to sport a jazzed-up flavor in Latin America, he wagers it'll be chile-*limón*, not Cheddar.

The differences don't stop there. Mashed plantains stuffed with sweet bean purée, avocado ice cream, desirable sediment in beverages, watermelon candies laced with chile powder, tangy drinkable yogurts, a liberal use of lard ... These are just some of the ingredients, sensory profiles and product applications that "speak" to Latin-American palates.

Taking such elements into account in product development, Toro says, has been key to Goya's success. Indeed, he believes "it's key to marketing to Hispanics, period. The distinctions are substantial." The company's 1,200 SKUs acknowledge those distinctions, addressing not only general Latin-

American preferences, but regional ones, as well, offering Guatemalans their beloved *volteado*-style refried beans, Dominicans their beef-tripe *mondongo* stew, and Central Mexicans their *huitlacoche* corn fungus — all canned and ready to go. And although Goya products occupy a niche, it's cushioned with intense customer loyalty. "We don't market to Hispanics," Toro likes to say. "We market as Hispanics."

### *Going local*

Not every manufacturer can be Goya, though. "There are big companies out there who are not going to spend their marketing and research dollars on making a niche product," says Enderle, even if that niche comprises millions of consumers. Most food companies, if they want to market to Hispanics at all, have to achieve a broad appeal across the subgroups — as well as within the mainstream market — in order to make the effort financially feasible.

But that doesn't excuse product

developers from doing their homework. "The more mainstream the product, the more important it is to understand the subtleties of the various Hispanic cultures," says Trumbull. In other words, if we can't dedicate an entire product line to second-generation Puerto Ricans and another one to upwardly mobile, middle-aged Mexicans, we had better approach what we do design with enough appreciation for their regional differences to recognize the universals.

And that means going local. "Companies that are really serious about developing new products for this market are going to travel," says Selesnick. "They're going to go into some of these areas to visit their markets, eat at local restaurants, see what the tastes are."

And sometimes, they're just going to play sensory tourist, soaking up a community's sights, smells and sounds before they even start thinking about what anyone's eating. Trumbull calls this holistic approach to tapping sensory trends "cultural mining," and she

practices it when she and her colleagues at Food Marketing Support Services lead industry professionals through ethnic neighborhoods in pursuit of the local color.

Trumbull specifically encourages nonfood observations during cultural mining expeditions. For the first few days, in fact, "you don't offer any explanation yet for what you're experiencing, or any food-related characteristics or how you might apply these observations down the road," she says. "It's strictly an observation and an identification of traditions. You're looking at the communities, taking in all of the sensory stimuli: the music, the colors, the sounds, the smells. It's about going on location and just being there with the people." So, in Miami's Little Havana, "if we go to a cigar factory, we look at the colors, look at who's making the cigars: Is it men and women, or just men? What does it smell like? And we capture those impressions on cards or sticky notes that we carry with us throughout the trek."

### *Turning a feeling into food*

After spending a few days immersed in the culture, Trumbull says, "we look for what flows from that experience that we can merge into common themes." These themes, she says, are "the meaningful threads that weave the communities together rather than separate them: vibrant color, the beat, the music, the family influence." By this time in the process, participants have so internalized such signals that "they're on-track to translate them to food. And that's the next step."

Meléndez-Klinger, who has par-

---

***Product designers can create myriad variations on the popular wrapped-tortilla dish. Authentic spice blends and ingredient choices, as well as the presentation, can draw interest from Hispanic subgroups.***



Photo: Kraft Food Ingredients



## Keeping a Finger on the Pulse of the Latin-Flavor Beat

Having immersed themselves in the sights, sounds and all-around savor of Hispanic neighborhoods on their Latino Trend Treks™, the creative minds at Givaudan Flavors, Cincinnati, got to work translating some of the sensations they carried home into flavor trends. Here are a few of their impressions and ideas.

### Hispanic Savory Flavor Trends

- Chocolate with cinnamon
- Citrus
- Coconut
- Dark, sweet coffee
- *Guanábana*
- Guava and cheese
- Honey and tobacco
- *Horchata*
- Lime
- Mango
- *Mojito*
- Papaya
- Pineapple
- *Mamey*
- Sangria
- Sour-orange
- Strawberry
- Sugar cane juice (*guarapo*)
- Sweet plantain

### Hispanic Ice Cream Flavor Trends

- Chocolate silk with sour-orange
- Cinnamon and chocolate sugar cane
- Cinnamon papaya cobbler
- Coconut Champagne cola
- Cream cheese and guava
- Honey café horchata (tobacco)
- Key lime mojito
- Strawberry horchata
- Strawberry sangria
- Tropical sugar cane
- Vanilla Jamaica (hibiscus flower)

Source: Givaudan Flavors, Cincinnati

ticipated in cultural mining expeditions with Food Marketing Support Services, puts it this way: “Think of the colors of a piñata, the simplicity of it — it’s paper and cardboard. It doesn’t need to be very fancy. But it’s vibrant, it’s in a shape the community recognizes, and it’s got the candy inside that they know. This is something that brings back memories. So you’ve got the colors and you’ve got the fun. You’ve got to transfer that fun to the food. It’s got to be colorful. It’s got to be something that makes them think of home and the flavors of home. I think of those *cajetas*, the goat’s milk caramels that I remember were always in a piñata in Mexico. How can you put that *cajeta* into a pancake, an ice cream flavor, or a beverage?” This is how *dulce de leche* worked its way into everything from coffee beverages to lollipops, and it’s how tropical fruits, like tamarind and *guanábana*, piggy-backed onto more familiar carriers like strawberry and vanilla, snuck into Popsicles and yogurt.

But while a product developer might swoon over the *helados* she tried at a Chicago ice cream vendor’s cart, the ice cream parlor on the corner of Main Street, U.S.A., might not be ready for something like avocado à la mode. In that case, Trumbull says: “You look at the color, the texture, the ingredients, and you morph that into your mainstream world. That way, you’re going to hit some of the high notes, the drivers, the familiar feel, and you’re still going to have broad appeal.”

So what are some of the gems that participants dig up on a cultural mining trek? For one, they learn that Hispanic consumers don’t shy away from combining sweet, spice and salt in one stimulating package. “Just think,” Korzenny says, “Mexicans eat pineapple with lime, salt, and hot peppers.” Noltenius agrees. He’s seen flavor pref-

erence curves that show a prominent spike around the *chile-limón* profile, particularly among Mexican consumers. “It’s a really big flavor there. You see it in snacks, in potato chips, in corn chips,” he says — products whose neutral flavor base balances the sharper spicy-citrus top notes. The citrus portion of the equation, in fact, is a near-universal driver for Latin Americans, bridging the gap from savory — Kraft has introduced lime notes to a line of *mayonesas* for the Hispanic market — to sweet, where colas, fruit sodas, and other beverages often carry a lemon or lime tang.

Hispanic consumers also seem to gravitate toward sweetness, and in a big way. “They definitely love sugar,” says Enderle. And she does mean sugar: With cane sugar a traditional commodity in places like Puerto Rico and Cuba, the taste for corn syrup — to say nothing of artificial sweeteners — didn’t develop with the strength it has in the United States.

Another popular sweetener, at least in Mexico and Central America, is *piloncillo*, unrefined cane sugar solidified into hard, brown cones. Like most unrefined sweeteners, it has a deeper, muskier, slightly spicy sweetness that complements rich, caramel-inflected applications, giving them a complexity that Bavone says is a trademark of Latin-American sweets. “You’ll have the caramel candies and the *dulce de leche*, but you’ll notice notes of the goat milk they’re made with. You’ll have candies that are made with chile pepper — sweet and hot. It’s more complexity on many levels.”

The whole category of beverages is also wide-open for exploration. Breakfast for many Mexicans, Meléndez-Klinger says, is *atole*, a thick *masa*-based drink, drunk warm and sometimes flavored with chocolate (in which case it’s called *champurrado*),

fruits and nuts, cinnamon, vanilla or piloncillo. Latin-American stores already sell *atole* mixes, and Hispanic-American consumers might appreciate finding such products on shelves here. Mexicans also love their *horchata*, a cool, cinnamon-spiced beverage made from soaked, pulverized rice grains and almonds. Supermarket shelves carry refrigerated versions in flavors ranging from vanilla and banana to strawberry and chocolate, and McCaskill says that “with regard to ingredients and processing methods in commercial products, rice flour or broken grains could be used. A final wet-milling step might then be applied to further reduce particle size for added smoothness.”

Fruit smoothies and shakes attract both mainstream and Hispanic shoppers. *Licuos*, fruit and dairy shakes, sometimes fortified with raw egg, are more popular with Mexicans, while straight fruit concoctions — called *batidos* in Cuba — seem to get more traction elsewhere. Eva Rodriguez, director, regulatory affairs and quality, iTi tropicals, inc., Lawrenceville, NJ, says that Latin Americans prepare the beverages at home by puréeing the raw, fresh fruit with sugar, water or milk, but manufacturers can use frozen and aseptic purées to get a similar effect. “They’re more convenient than the raw fruit because a purée is basically a raw fruit without the skin or the pits,” she says. “It’s ready to go. It’s just easier than taking the mangos and peeling them, dealing with

the seed.” Processing also extends the shelf life — aseptic products, when stored properly, last about a year, and frozen products approximately three, she says — while preserving the flavor and texture of the fruit. And texture, Rodriguez adds, is crucial to a fruit beverage’s Hispanic appeal. “Pulp is a desirable sensory characteristic that the Hispanics are used to, unlike in the American markets where you see the juices made with clarified ingredients that are free of pulp.”

Another theme that Enderle noticed was an overall acceptance — indeed, a preference — for artificial flavors that would be very difficult to mistake for the real thing. Strawberry notes, she says, graced everything from beverages to yogurts, and nobody seemed to mind that they tasted very little like strawberries fresh from the field. Chalk it up to economics and nostalgia. “Natural flavors are very expensive,” she says, “and to make a product with a natural flavor is probably going to be cost-prohibitive” for some Latin-American manufacturers, not only because the flavors themselves are expensive, but because they may require overages, encapsulation or other processing precautions to maintain their integrity in the finished product. And if you grew up drinking an artificial strawberry soda, you may prefer it to natural. No wonder Tang orange-flavored drink mix is such a hit in Latin America.

Product developers might look at these examples — sweet and fruity beverages in fantasy colors, snacks

and chips with sweet-savory flavor combinations, rich and gooey candies — and think: “We can do these.” And they’d be absolutely right. If a manufacturer wants to grab the attention of a Hispanic-American shopper, it doesn’t have to offer a full line of “authentic” frozen dinners bearing all the flavors of home, especially considering that the average Hispanic-American consumer might deem the home kitchen a better source of those authentic flavors in the first place. But few consumers, Hispanic or otherwise, can make their own sodas, candies, ice cream and packaged snacks. So a manufacturer’s better bet for capturing Hispanic market share might be to stick with the products in which they already have a core competency, and angle these products more in the direction of the Latin-American palate.

When Meléndez-Klinger thinks of Puerto Rico, she thinks of grape-, strawberry- and orange-flavored sodas in wildly vivid colors that don’t occur in nature. “They love the colors, they love the sweetness, they love the flavor. You’ve got to think in those terms. Latin Foods are fun, sexy and full of flavor and color. Who wouldn’t be attracted to that?” ■

**Kimberly J. Decker, a California-based technical writer, has a B.S. in Consumer Food Science with a minor in English from the University of California–Davis. She lives in the San Francisco Bay area, and enjoys cooking and eating food in addition to writing about it.**