A magical afternoon at a neighborhood bakery: Memories, flavors, and encounters

Neighborhood bakeries in the 60s and 70s

In the sixties and seventies, Mexico City smelled of bread. Neighborhood bakeries were temples of flavor and gossip. Just stepping through the door was enough to feel the warmth of the oven, the aroma of freshly baked bread, and hear the murmur of the neighbors.

As evening fell, the shadows lengthened toward the counter. The open doors revealed the floor covered in wood shavings—no one knew what they were for, but everyone knew that this was the entrance to the sacred vault of biscuits.

There you could hear the bustle of the flour mill workers, with their laughter celebrating the practical jokes between coworkers. It was the academy of double entendres .

– If you like, ma'am, I'll take off your pants and rub my mustache against you.

– Better give me a kiss and put your underwear away, they're already too golden.

The shelves were a parade of delicacies: bobbins, teleras, conchas, volcanes, trenzas, ojos de Pancha, orejas, nueves... and an etcetera longer than the neurons that allow me to remember their names.

Among them all, there was one pastry that occupied the center of the altar: an exquisite blend of vanilla and cream, made to drown the sorrows of any fallen archangel. A delicacy

sent by the monarch of heaven for a feast of pure indulgence. The name of this treat was " *The Queen* ," empress of all cakes, ruler of the pastry shop.

My mother used to say that that little cake had the power to cure any sadness: from a scraped knee to the crying of a broken doll.

Marble, sister of the Moon and the Queen: The sweet bread of a daughter and mother

In the days of the Chilean national team wearing a hat, back in Tacuba, there lived a tiny little dog named **Canica** . Her world was perfect: she slept on her master's belly, barked at the calla lilies believing they were butterflies, and chewed on a Mazahua doll with long braids. She knew neither cold, nor hunger, nor sadness.

He became aware of the impending doom just as his paws stopped feeling the breath of the sole provider of his existence. At that moment, he suddenly raised his head and looked him straight in the face. He did nothing more: he remained in the same position, his nose touching his master's chin.

Then came a cascade of infamy. Those who had once greeted their owner in the streets entered the home's two rooms. Nothing escaped the plunder: the rocking chair, the battery-powered radio, the Puebla china—all vanished. Fifty books were used for a bonfire next to a portrait of a woman holding a child in her lap. They stole the rug where she rested after playing and even her Mazahua doll.

She was stripped of her home by two hands that tied a rope around her neck, dragging her through the streets as she moaned and wept—

yes, with bitter, liquid tears. She was confined to a narrow courtyard of dirt and mud, with no roof to shelter her from the rain nor any hollow to protect her from the cold, her only food scraps of tortillas and a few meatless bones, thrown to her with contempt. No one was moved by her howls and her pain.

Her sleep was filled with nightmares, and on the rarer occasions, she remembered Benito, her beloved father, his lap, and the caresses on her back. She lived through a long period of loneliness and fear, so intense that she nearly succumbed to madness. There were times when she thought she could smell the coat her human wore when he went shopping. At the memory, she would run frantically in circles, barking incessantly.

One day, while she was in this trance, the door to her tiny patio opened, and the figure of her

captor appeared, whose presence could only be less ugly than her soul. Her obese and deformed body was as detestable as her cheeks glistening with fat. There she was, holding a menacing board that she intended to strike down Canica's fragile body.

The terrified female tucked her tail between her legs, gripped by a terror she had never known. But the Divine is generous, and a kind soul descended from heaven at that moment. In reality, it was Simona, a gray rat who sometimes shared her meager rations with our heroine. She landed right on the wicked creature's split-ended hair, who, startled, slipped on the mud, fell backward, and broke her neck on a brick—one of those that could last 200 years without losing its hardness.

Cautiously and timidly, she and Simona brought their noses close to sniff the fetid

body. Then they looked at each other, until the rodent noticed that the door to the street was open. With a knowing glance, they fled together toward a better life.

Some time later, someone saw Canica taking food to a drain. There lived **El Guantes** , a huge puppy abandoned by his mother, a vicious dog known as 'La Charanda'. She brought him chicken feet, pork rinds, bread rolls, and other food donated by community members touched by the little dog's maternal kindness.

Canica spent all his time going back and forth with food that he carried in his mouth, of which he only enjoyed a small part.

One afternoon, a worker came out of the bakery and offered her an unexpected gift: a Reina pastry with vanilla, cream, and a cherry. From the first whiff, she began to salivate uncontrollably, urging her to devour that

imperial morsel. Despite the demons that commanded her to fulfill her craving, Canica took the paper bag containing it between her teeth and went to deposit it behind the drain grate.

Canica has a long, heroic, and moving story. But here we'll only cover this part. Stay tuned to these chronicles: soon you'll learn all about her and also about 'El Guantes'.

The Chinese Cafe: Bread, beans and elephant ear cutlets

The bakery shared its kingdom with another establishment, always attended by a small individual with slanted eyes, a descendant of those "little Chinese" men that Don Porfirio brought to build the railroads... and who, on a whim, were expelled, only to return later with more ingenuity than ever.

These men, with no excuses for not working hard, mastered the essence of the biscuit and a whole range of other high-quality pastries. This work was overseen by a fat, long-eared Buddha and a golden cat that waved with one paw. The bakers said that if the cat stopped waving that paw, the bread would burn.

The first Chinese migrants arrived in Mexico at the end of the 19th century. They intended to cross into the United States, but found opportunities in the industrializing fervor of the Porfiriato. The railroad was intended to be the backbone of progress. Imbued with a culture of maximum effort, they were the muscle that laid the tracks for the powerful locomotives.

Many settled in cities like Mexicali, where the neighborhood known as *La Chinesca was born*. In the 1920s and 30s, a wave of hatred

arose in Sonora and Sinaloa, forcing the government to expel several families from this community. Many had fathered children in Mexico—and were therefore legitimate Mexican citizens. In the following years, a repatriation process began and continued until the 1980s. Some settled in the capital, forming what we know today as *Barrio Chino (Chinatown*), near the Alameda Central park.

After the railroad was completed and after reconnecting with their origins in the Asian motherland - but with very Mexican tastes - in a display of commercial talent, they created those cafes that are part of the soul and culture of the City of Palaces.

The Chinese café was the other house of bread, but it was also the laboratory of other delicacies: Coffee with milk in a glass, Chinese

beans and elephant ear milanesas - so called because of their enormous size.

More than a bread business, a festival.

The area around the bakery was filled with aromas: eggnog-infused gelatin, tamales wrapped in corn husks, and tacos piled high with fried snacks. A few steps away, the dairy shop offered bottles with cardboard caps sealed with thin wire. The quality of the product was judged by its baptism with water and the amount of cream floating at the bottle's opening. This was a rare and precious treat, perfect for licking straight from the cap or spreading on a roll with sugar.

Cream was a separate matter. Obtaining it required patience to boil the milk and wait for it to cool, provided one had the tenacity to watch the boiling liquid without it spilling onto

the stovetop, which usually happened due to a momentary lapse in attention.

You'll agree with me that the best nest for cream is a good concha. It's unparalleled in Europe. Although some say it comes from the French brioche, ours is unique: sweet dough, cracked topping, shaped like a seashell. In recent times, some have filled it with abominations like beans, chilaquiles, or Nutella. But there have also been successes: blackberry, pastry cream... inventions that respect its essence without betraying it.

A nest for pubescent loves: The Chaperone, the Flan and the Kiss Under the Lightbulb

The bakery was a romantic meeting place for teenage girls and young men seeking the shadows, which were plentiful due to the lack of streetlights. The light from the grimy bulb at

the birria or taco stand only served to make faces even more indistinct in the gloom.

The fifteen-year-old girls would ask permission to go get bread. Their mother, a veteran of countless battles in matters of love, would look at them suspiciously, but in the end she would give in, almost always with two conditions: "You'll be back in twenty minutes and you'll bring the chaperone." That chaperone was almost always a younger brother, with the face of a private and a hunger for flan.

The young woman was mending her blouse and skirt as best she could: she took off her sweater, pinched her cheeks, and bit her lips. Her unruly hair did as it pleased. The chaperone carried the coat, the pennies, and the patience.

The young waiter waited at an agreed-upon spot, occupying his time by repeatedly combing his hair, which was caked with Vaseline, and by rehearsing the most manly tone of his pubescent voice, as well as the correct words so as not to be seen as a fool.

The encounter between them was brief, as brief as the rush to avoid a scolding on the way home or the greedy speed of the impertinent chaperone who was bribed with a flan or some other treat. A kiss was the reward to seal the magic of the moment, along with the promise: "to see each other again tomorrow, God willing," who, fortunately, always was.

Upon returning home, the chaperone's statement would be the same: "All quiet on the Western Front." Dear reader, if you are 30 years old or a little older, there is a high probability that your arrival into the world was planned

amidst the aromas of cakes and eggnog-flavored gelatin.

The conceited one discards what the humble one gathers. Pericocha was a pretty girl... except for her nose. Big and pointy, like a parrot's beak. Hence her nickname, of course. She didn't like going to the bakery, but her mother insisted, with a glimmer of hope and several prayers to Saint Anthony:

—Take your time, daughter. All the time you need.

One afternoon, dragging her feet and her spirits, La Pericocha entered the bakery. Right at the door, a raging, hulking figure with a wig-like hairstyle called "Mi Alegría" ran her over without apology or assistance. She lay on the ground, stunned.

After this misfortune, still dazed, she was lifted up by arms. Her gaze met that of a young man with corn-colored hair. He was the same one who had been chasing the girl, Mi Alegría... but now he was looking at her. With tenderness. With surprise. With something more.

We won't say what happened next. Suffice it to say that he cleaned her knees, stroked her cheeks, and gave her a smile worth more than a whole bag of biscuits.

That night, La Pericocha's mother looked at the clock, smiled, and, jumping for joy, ate a bread roll that tasted like hope.

The art of bread making and the Pastry War: Masters, recipes and a French tantrum.

Corn is the stuff from which we, the men and women of this land, are made. We will always repeat this with pride, but bread made with wheat also became an art that Mexico mastered with great skill.

Being a master baker is no small feat: it requires time, discipline, experience, good taste, and intuition. Each master baker owns their recipes, a scientist with a mastery of chemistry and physics, whose rise is the result of starting, in their early childhood, cleaning trays .

He is a specialist in obtaining all types of dough, in controlling fermentation, baking time and temperature; in placing the exact amount and location of the ingredients; in obtaining

the perfect consistency and shape of the product.

Ingenuity is the mother of success, though sometimes also of tragedy. In Iztapalapa, an apprentice—in an attempt to surpass his master—tried to improve one of his recipes by adding piloncillo (unrefined cane sugar), cinnamon, and crushed chili peppers to a delicate dough. The result was a crispy, spicy bread with a horrendous taste. Thus, 'El Marranito Bravo' (The Brave Little Pig) was born.

Form, as politicians would say, is of great importance. No painter would be content simply to mix paints without regard for the result. Their work must be appreciated, recognized as a testament to their ingenuity and mastery of the tools.

The quality of a good baker is evident in the appearance of the bread. This was something that greatly concerned the bakers of that era. Each loaf has its own character. The bolillo, for example, must have a perfect score line, a golden crust, and two well-formed bulbs. The telera is softer, but the bolillo was always a favorite for the working class's breakfast. This lovely bread, with its sheen and subtle hint of butter, enhanced the flavor of the food.

Put simply, good bread is a source of pride. It is for the master baker and his apprentices, whose steely muscles would be the envy of any 21st-century fitness enthusiast. In those days, bread was also a source of pride for the working-class father, who, after a long and exhausting day, would empty his enormous bag of biscuits onto the table where afternoon tea was served.

And yes, bread made us fat. But even more absurd was the war that broke out because of a cake looted by gendarmes in 1832. A French pastry chef, Monsieur Remontiel, demanded $60,000 from the Mexican government for the damages. Thus, over a sugary tantrum, we ended up facing France at San Juan de Ulúa.

But it wasn't the war that made us fat. It was the butter, the whipped cream, the chocolate, the piloncillo, the sesame seeds, the vanilla, the cheese, the powdered sugar... and all the ingredients of this culinary witches' sabbath.

We owe a debt of gratitude to Monsieur Remontiel for the recipes and secrets he left behind. We also owe a debt of gratitude to the Chinese, the Spaniards, and the Arabs with their owl-like eyes, for their generous contributions. But let's not forget that in Mexico, everything is transformed. Here,

spaghetti is au gratin with Oaxaca cheese, hamburgers are garnished with jalapeño slices, and cod is served with güero chiles. And if you insist, bread with crushed chiles is an undeniable delicacy.

In those decades, a child's plump belly was a symbol of health, love, and prosperity. Adult women would confirm this with compliments: "That little boy is so chubby, he's beautiful!" It was living proof that our parents' hard work had triumphed over hunger.

And so, amid absurd wars and glorious recipes, all I can say is something that any expert baker will understand very well.

In Mexico... *all bread is art bread*.