
MELTING POT

BY SARAH DIGREGORIO

TAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAACO!

Who needs the world cup? Summer soccer showdowns in Red Hook boast the best eats north of the border

RED HOOK—Maria has her back to the long line of customers, each clamoring for one of the enormous quesadillas she piles with spicy pork, chorizo or cesina. With utter calm, she reaches one gloved hand into a bucket and scoops out a handful of her pale batter of white corn meal and water. She works it into an egg shape, flattens it in a tortilla press, then lays the translucent sheet on the grill. The tortilla bubbles softly, turns golden and billows up into a puff.

Maria's stand is one of many at the makeshift yet vibrant Central and

and vats of oil to tempt the crowd with homemade chile verde tamales, chicharrón, elote, tangy ceviches and horchata with great chunks of ice. The sound of sizzling grills mixes with the cheering from the field and dueling ranchero and salsa music. The muted hum of the BQE overhead rises above everything. The waterfront is only a few blocks away, and although you can't see it over the concrete blocks of the housing projects, you can feel the river's breeze.

The cooks are mothers and grandmothers, backyard grill masters and



South American food fair that accompanies the weekend soccer games in Red Hook all summer long. By noon on Saturdays and Sundays, a throng gathers under the improvised cooking tents. While teams battle for superiority and families play pick-up games on the sidelines, food vendors fill the surrounding street. They set up grills, butane burners

catering chefs. Ask where they learned to make such delicious pupusas or such flaky empanada crusts, and the answer is always the same—back in Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador—en la casa, with mama. But when asked if cooking this food makes them homesick, again the answer is the same—Brooklyn is home now, and cooking this food

Photographs: Akiko Nishimura, brooklynphoto.com

makes them happy. The crowd is overwhelmingly Latino and Spanish is the language of choice—close your eyes and the smells and sounds suggest Guadalajara rather than Red Hook. There's also a sprinkling of young Brooklynites of all colors who may have heard about this event on Chowhound.com (where posters obsess over everything from Al Di La to where to get the best bagel in the borough).

Esparanza Ochoa, of Sunset Park, immigrated here from Guatemala in the 80s and has been cooking at these summer soccer weekends in Red Hook for over 20 years. She is short and plump, with tortoiseshell glasses, a voluminous orange-checked apron, and a granddaughter clinging to her arm. She makes tamales filled with a mixture of chiles, sesame and pumpkin seeds and taquitos filled with spiced pork. Her son hangs out in front of her stall, slapping hands with his friends and encouraging passers by to come over and eat. Esparanza's specialty is manjar: she pats a handful of sticky, yellow mashed plantains into a little pancake, spoons some dulce de leche into the center, seals the top to



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way to the sweet, soft dulce de leche. “Eat it,” she chuckles, “and you’ll be fat like me!”

Wander down the line of stalls and you’ll hear the percussive slap of hand against masa dough—pat-pat-pat-pat-pat. Susie, a Honduran woman with a curly ponytail and tired eyes, is making pupusas the way her mother taught her. She fills dough with a mixture of cheese and spiced pork skin, deftly shapes it into a ball with a few rapid smacks of her palm, splashes the ball with oil and throws it on the hot grill, flattening it with her spatula. The pupusas sputter and smoke, leaking cheese as the masa slightly chars. Susie serves the pupusas hot with crunchy cabbage slaw and vinegary hot sauce. Her motions are fluid: it’s easy, she shrugs. She works at a factory on Long Island during the week, but says this work is different, not just for the money—it makes her happy. There’s a long line at her stall, but her rhythm neither speeds nor slows.

make a ball, fries it deftly and tops it with sugar and sour cream. The trick, she explains, is to stop the cooking at the precise moment of perfect plantain texture. Freshly fried, the manjar is crisp outside and creamy inside, the tangy plantain giving

At a picnic table, five young men shovel down Susie’s pupusas with gusto. They all play on the Salvadorian soccer league and have been coming here for years for the traditional foods they remember from El Salvador. “Eat and then play and then eat!”

At the far end of the line an Ecuadorian flag flaps in the breeze at Carmen and Victor’s stand. Victor is from Chile, but moved to Ecuador where he met Carmen, now his wife of 30 years. They share a love of seafood and a cooler filled with pescado, camaron and mixto ceviche. “The salsa is very hot,” Carmen warns with a grin, pointing to a bowl of chopped chiles, tomatoes and cilantro, and it is, but it’s a wonderful, fiery addition to their simple shrimp ceviche. Victor uncovers a pot of tuna soup simmering on a burner and releases fragrant steam. He’s simmered the tuna and vegetables for hours with lime and spicy aji, yielding a rich, brick-red broth. Victor also makes Chilean empanadas, his homemade dough filled with meat, onions, olives, hardboiled egg and raisins. “Anyone who has our food always comes back,” he says. “Especially the Americans.”

Ana Sosa bustles in her flowered smock behind a row of jewel-colored agua frescas in giant jars bobbing with ice. She’s dipping out to-go cups of horchata and running them to waiting double-parked cars. She’s soaked rice in water for five hours, then strained it and added cinnamon, sugar, vanilla, chopped almonds and evaporated milk. She also grills a pile of yellow corn for elote. After each ear is charred on the grill, she smothers it with lime juice, mayonnaise, grated cheese and cayenne.

Of course, there’s also a soccer game going on—but most people are fixated on the food. Two police officers meander by, heads bent over containers of shrimp ceviche. “We always try to get this detail,” one of them admits with a slurp. □