

Sofia Dominguez

Mr. Greco

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Home Food

It's an old apartment building, and she lives on the first floor. You can already smell it: the prickles of safety, of something good. She opens the door, and past the wire windows and the typical immigrant household lace curtain, you can hear the warm sizzle of her stove. Right there, in the border between her small kitchen and her smaller living room, Elsy lines up the many handmade cheese, zucchini or chicharrón pupusas ready to be cooked. For a moment, you feel like you've returned to a homeliness you didn't know you ached for.

Elsy's is only one of many small home businesses hidden around Mountain View, California, that has popped up from the economic hardship of the COVID pandemic, catering to the taste buds of people willing to explore different flavors or to those who are nostalgic for them. Even though there has always been a demand for food from Latino countries—so much so that it seems to have become just as American as the stereotypical hamburger—people like Elsy still live hidden in the cracks of the city. Salvadoran immigrants, specifically, tend to experience more erasure because of the Mexican-dominant view of the word “immigrant” (Ochoa). Home food businesses like Elsy's are a solution to this problem because they give voice and strength to the Salvadoran community through sharing their culture and allowing access to socioeconomic security.

One of the most important aspects of this issue has to do with the history of Salvadoran food, and therefore Salvadoran migration, to the United States. From its roots, Salvadoran food history begins with the Pipil tribe, which are descendents of the Aztecs (Chan), who created the pupusa, a flat disk of maize with filling, topped with a cabbage and onion vinegar salad called *curtido* and a non-spicy tomato sauce (Kavanaugh and Kiniry). This dish and its culture survived for centuries more, through Spanish conquerors and through the birth of the United States and its later involvement in Latin American countries.

But the emergence of Salvadoran identity in the United States would not begin until many decades later, when the Salvadoran Civil War began. According to Milton R. Machuca, this tumultuous time was “an expression of the inequitable socioeconomic structure in El Salvador” under a right-wing government of those who profited from exploited impoverished populations, “complicated by the larger international context of the Cold War and the strong influence and involvement of the U.S.”. Then-President Ronald Reagan became concerned about a communist government in El Salvador being established, so his government helped fund train armed forces that would go against the leftist guerillas, exacerbating tensions. (“United States calls situation in El Salvador a communist plot”) As the violence exploded and the situation deteriorated, the Salvadoran Civil War succeeded in “catapulting the country from its proverbial obscurity into daily headline news”. This would be the first time that Salvadorans’ lives became visible to a wide, unknowing US population, and this event would last as the strongest connection to Salvadoran identity in the US. The effects of the violence and instability would continue to rupture people’s lives, and many had to gather the courage to escape to the United States. But here they were not granted freedom, either. The US began to put in place restrictions and legal barriers towards

Salvadoran immigrants, rejecting their pleas of asylum with the justification that they were not refugees, but economic immigrants (Stanley). Many had no other choice but to stay without documentation, as their situation was of life and death.

And even already living in the US, Salvadoran-Americans would engage in a generational struggle with the hopes of improving their economic status, picking up the pieces of their buried identity in a country that did not respect it. Some survived by pushing away their Salvadoran heritage and assimilating into a simpler American culture that is more palatable for the Anglo majority. Others rejected the American hegemony and instead built homes-away-from-home, encoding their heritage into restaurants and neighborhoods, converting their culture and food into a secret yet defiant stance. This history of pressure, struggles, and perseverance has grown everywhere from Los Angeles, to San Francisco, to Washington DC. And in Mountain View, Elsy, with her small home business story, has become a true reflection of the Salvadoran-American experience, of the ability to provide for herself and her family while acting as a powerful voice for her culture.

The story of Elsy and her business begins with her childhood in El Salvador. By watching and learning from her mother, Elsy inherited many of her country's recipes, including the pupusa. When she arrived in Mountain View, the impact of Latino food in local supermarkets allowed her to keep her recipe's authenticity. She began working in restaurants of different cuisines and served as a prep cook for many years.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, Elsy watched with dread as "work started to go down: less hours, less and less hours." Like so many people, she eventually had to stop working and was left with a household to feed and no income to support it. But one day,

while talking to her friends about this problem, one of them said, “Elsy, your food is really good, why don’t you go and try to sell your food?”

And so she did. With the help of her friends, family, and community, Elsy slowly began to spread the word of her business, and demand for her pupusas increased. Since the very beginning, every order which could vary from 10 to 100 pupusas has always been made solely by Elsy in her small kitchen, because she doesn’t earn enough to hire someone. Her business was part of a larger trend all around the Bay Area, especially “concentrated in communities like East Palo Alto where residents [were] hardest hit by the economic impacts of the pandemic, ...[reflecting] the inequities of the shutdown” (Kadvany). These communities are generally made up of service or food workers who were laid off as soon as people began working from home and companies closed. And like so many others, pure necessity and talent isn’t all that Elsy began with: she also had a passion for cooking. Whenever she is asked about this passion, her eyes open wide, her arms excitedly gesturing: “Oh, I love cooking, I love exploring, I love trying to do this and that...seeing how it turns out, and every time I make it better... I really love making the pupusas and I like doing this business.” With this passion, these small entrepreneurs took the quarantine’s isolation, and the loss of financial support from companies, and instead turned it into an opportunity for long-time dreams to flourish.

Yet in joining this wave, Elsy and many others encountered new challenges when trying to navigate the legal side of these businesses. The legal path most of these businesses can follow is through obtaining Cottage Food permits, according to Kadvany, and would allow them to sell “low risk” foods in home kitchens under the California Homemade Foods Act. But the fact that one permit costs \$219 and the other \$635 (plus additional fees when

inspecting the business or paperwork), and the annual revenue caps that come along with these permits, are a strong deterrent for “legalizing” a business (Kadvany). As Elsy says, when having a home business in Mountain View, “you don’t earn much... only enough to cover basic necessities like rent, and that's where all the money goes, in rent and bills.” And there are still so many more barriers to getting a permit. Tania Alexandria O’Connor, a long-time community leader in Mountain View, has been involved in several organizations like Listos, building safety nets for low-income families and undocumented people. She breaks down this issue further: “What I understand is... it's really easy to get a business permit, except when it comes to food. Because of health regulations, you need to have an industrial kitchen, and that industrial kitchen needs to be like, I don't know, all stainless steel, it has to have like fire-controlling things...and none of that can be built in a house or in an apartment.” Additionally, the extremely high rent prices pose an additional barrier towards the idea of expanding home businesses into actual restaurants to be able to meet these requirements for a permit. And without a permit, O’Connor adds, one cannot apply for a loan from a bank. What results from this is that it is much more difficult to become a brick and mortar restaurant that is validated, stable, and established in a community. Instead, people like Elsy must rely on word of mouth and personal connections to reach a small clientele that lives around their community, which can be more of a struggle when one doesn’t speak English very well, as Elsy does. It creates an environment where one is always careful to not run into any trouble, always fearful of being put in the spotlight. In this way, the suppression of immigrants is leaked into economic matters, not only social ones.

But the truth is that these issues don’t only affect aspiring business owners. These small businesses deeply affect all community members, as well, such that any obstacle to

them is an obstacle to their community. It starts inside the home business's family, because, as O'Connor describes, these small businesses allow the families that run them to become closer, which allows children or teenagers to experience and get involved in cultural rituals.

This involvement in cultural heritage expands to other families which Elsy serves, which, more specifically, is the Latino community around the Gabriela Mistral and Mariano Castro Elementary schools in Mountain View. Elsy's pupusas and their non-spicy tomato sauce are tailored specially for the young children of the mothers that buy her pupusas. She is one of several latino-owned businesses around this neighborhood, as O'Connor describes: a tax service that caters mostly to Spanish speaking immigrants, helping them integrate into US institutions; the Mexican-Salvadoran Jennifer's Taqueria and its adjacent and strangely similarly named Jennifer's Joyeria; and the Mexican bakery La Imperial, which displays posters for local organizations or donation jars for struggling members of the community. This small ecosystem of Latino businesses is only accessible if one speaks Spanish, so people like Elsy can find support and a sense of belonging, and can become part of a strong network of understanding, Spanish-speaking, clients and connections. And for the wider community, the accessibility of diverse cultures and the ability to buy locally gives people cultural knowledge through connection with people of different backgrounds.

However, as long as small businesses are limited to the small social circles and neighborhoods they come from, these benefits become vulnerable.

And yet, Elsy continues to hold a special gratitude for the situation. When asked about the difficulties of owning a small business as an immigrant, she often downplays it, nonchalantly saying it "isn't easy but it's not that difficult." She shakes her head and says, "*Gracias a Dios*"-thanks to God-"I feel like it hasn't gone badly for me here at all in this

country. That has gone well, I feel like I'm a good person, I have all I need here where I live, being where I am." She doesn't hold any insecurities or anxieties about her business, because she believes that "if I tell myself or want to do it, I feel like I can".

This small neighborhood, situated in the heart of Silicon Valley, echoes the history of Salvadoran neighborhoods that also lives in places like Washington DC. In Ana Patricia Rodriguez's article, "Becoming "Wachintonians", she exhibits her own photography of the community, displays Salvadoran-American works of art and literature, and analyzes these works. She ultimately exposes the history of creative survival and strong identity of Salvadoran-Americans that is often hidden or devalued. She weaves this story into the context of the long-standing threat of gentrification in ethnic neighborhoods of DC, which, much like the rent prices and the issue of business permits in Silicon Valley, would break up these communities. Of the Salvadoran-Americans that have fought against this, Rodriguez gives the example of Quique Avilés, a poet, performer, and cultural activist. He often writes in "English, Spanish, and Spanglish, about his own experiences and observations as a Salvadoran immigrant". Rodriguez depicts Avilés's public performances in a lively photograph, where he is accompanied by his friends in protesting through satire. The photograph has a casual, make-shift mood, and it shows a small crowd around him as it listens transfixed. This is quite similar to Elsy's art of home-made pupusas. Although she differs by not taking a direct stand against racism or gentrification, by creating and owning her own business, and indeed simply by sharing her authentic way of life, she confronts the silence and false popular ideas about what a Salvadoran immigrant is. In fact, Elsy argues that because pupusas have become, in her view, a symbol of Salvadoran nationality for the rest of the world, she has the means to expand her culture. She describes the positive

comments she receives from those who are discovering Salvadoran food for the first time. Through these conversations, she says, other people have a chance to understand her and they can form connections. And through this ability to retell her culture, she contributes to the changing of the popular immigrant narrative, and she opens the hearts of those who were afraid to approach the latino community.

Her self-assured and confident tone is a special trait seeming to be shared by all immigrants with small businesses, but her particular sincerity is what sets her apart. It is woven in her pupusas: this special comfort, this strong voice of authenticity.

“What is something authentic to me...” she repeats the question, mulling it over for a few seconds, before her eyes widen and that sparkle begins again. She begins to wiggle her hands and snap them, as if trying to pull the words from the deepest parts of her mind. “Something authentic is something good... something that is authentic because it is unique, because it's not a comparison, or-or a copy of something or of someone. That isn't good. Something authentic is just me.” She giggles, embarrassed for complimenting herself so candidly, and then continues with a surer tone: “Like the pupusas that I make, I know that I prepared them, they come from myself. I know that I make them with all my heart, with all my power, with everything I like.” Her business is not simply a money making endeavor. It is much like an artwork or a piece of music: it comes purely from herself, like a purpose, like a mission. And when you see her with her big stove, with her bright plastic tablecloth, her flowery spatula, flipping and patting and filling the pupusas as if it were an old dance tune, one gets the feeling that it is more like destiny.

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