

# SOMEWHERE SOUTH

with CHEF VIVIAN HOWARD

## THE TACO PROFESSOR, STEVEN ALVAREZ



Photo courtesy of Steven Alvarez

If you're a super foodie, you may have noticed professor Steven Alvarez pop up in a recent [Bon Appetit video](#), where he takes longtime food writer Rick Martinez to one of his favorite taco spots in Queens, New York. But Alvarez's claim to fame is actually rooted in the South as the country's first professor of [taco literacy](#).

In the spring of 2016, Alvarez, a literature professor, launched a course at the University of Kentucky called "Taco Literacy: Public Advocacy and Mexican Food in the U.S. South." He gave lectures on birria and bluegrass, taught the history of the tortilla, and invited chefs and food writers to weigh in during class lectures. The taco-centric syllabus included books like "Planet Taco: A Global History of Mexican Food," "Tacopedia" and "Taco USA." He said he started the class to explore the issues of immigration, inequality, and labor through the lenses of food and literacy, touring taquerias in [Mexington](#), a Lexington neighborhood dubbed for its Mexican influence. [Producer note: We visit Mexington in our pickle episode. Stay tuned!]

Alvarez now teaches at St. John's University in New York. But Alvarez often argues that taquerias in the rural South have staked claim long before the streets of Queens. He also argues that

understanding Mexican cuisine is key to learning about our American history. Alvarez grew up Mexican-American in Safford, Ariz., a tiny town just a couple hours from the U.S.-Mexico border. His parents were born and raised on either side—his mother 30 miles south in Cananea, Sonora, Mexico, and his father 10 miles north in Bisbee, Ariz. Alvarez told the Dallas Morning News in 2019: “When has there ever been a time when being Mexican isn’t politicized? This is the most recent edition of a long history between the U.S. and Mexico. This is why it’s so important to understand the food and culture of our neighbors.”

Serving on Somewhere South’s advisory board, Alvarez played an integral role in informing our work. We caught up with el profe to learn more about tacos—and all the rich history that comes with them.

For more, follow @tacoliteracy on Instagram and Twitter and visit [tacoliteracy.com](http://tacoliteracy.com)

### **You’ve coined the term “taco literacy.” What’s your elevator pitch?**

Taco literacy thinks about foodways in humanizing ways, and views literacy as a humanizing activity the same way foodways can be. The overall goal is to bring to the fore the culinary contributions of Mexicans, but also people’s stories and their faces to try to counter the stigma of “faceless immigrants.”

### **How’d you come up with that name?**

People ask me, how can you read a taco? Really, it’s true history. You can read ingredients, you can read migration patterns, you can read the history of nixtamalization and of course what goes inside. That’s all just in the tortilla!

My research is in literacy, and mostly about Mexican immigrants. In doing this work with people, food always happens. I got into food because I was missing Mexican food and would find it for sustenance, to keep me going.

### **And now you’re known as the taco professor.**

[Journalist] Gustavo Arellano got me involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance. They were the ones who got me to see that food is first about the people’s stories, history and even politics in the changing South. And when I saw that, I realized that it was the same thing I was trying to do with literacy studies. Food had always been there, I just didn’t see it.

Through foodways I have a public audience to introduce the more academic stuff. And with academics I can also bring in foodways, which gives special privileges to chefs, cooks and farmers as a kind of valued knowledge and expertise that academics should look at.

### **What’s cool about the name ‘taco literacy’ is that you kind of give storytelling another name, equating it to a necessary skill.**

For me and a lot of the researchers who study literacy, it is not defined as *a thing*—not even as a noun. It is a practice. Literacy is something that we do. Often it’s seen as something a person has or doesn’t have and typically we’ll talk about the term illiterate, which is a dehumanizing term. People

communicate through stories. We grow up with stories and nursery rhymes and bedtime stories. All of those are literacy practices.

Food is also language. Recipes and teaching someone how to cook something—that's literacy. They're deeply wound together. Some of our most profound learning is through our families and our communities and that literacy around food and the stories that go with it. It's cultural practice bound with human relationships.

**When you introduce this concept to your students, does it immediately resonate?**

It depends on the students. In Kentucky, many students work in or have some tie to farming or the horse industry. They recognize the idea. Or anyone who works in a restaurant has some kind of experience with the back of the house. And actually, this is very similar to my classroom in New York City. With a proximity to immigrant labor, they have a different kind of understanding. And there's other students who have very little to no understanding. Maybe they haven't had the chance to critically examine the ubiquity of food. It's the one thing that connects us, but we don't think critically about how that got there, how many hands it touched. Or how that food has been prepared and then the history beyond that.

All together, it really teaches us to appreciate creativity and human ingenuity. It's been pretty cool meeting a lot of people who do this work in the South, where I've experienced the most diversity. And when students come into the classroom, they are bringing their own foodways and their family stories.

**Walk us through a class visit to a Mexican restaurant. What are the sort of things you ask them to pay attention to?**

It starts off with just researching places to go. I do give a few little pointers. One is to practice mapping locations online. Sometimes use different search terms. Using Spanish terms will give you different places that pop up. And sometimes they're far away from where you might've been looking. Read what people are saying on Yelp. Check out the menu ahead of time and figure out more about the words or items you don't know. When you walk in, don't expect the full story. You have to listen for it.

**How would you tell someone to listen for a story?**

There's the story of the students going to different places, narrating the experience, and then there's another layer of story later when they interview someone and learn to look deeper at stories through the prism of food. Ultimately, when thinking of literacy as doing, they begin to take away that to know a community and its foodways, you have to know the people, their stories, and also how those stories sustain them, just like the food.

It may not happen the first time. Definitely on the way out, say "thank you, I'll be back." And do come back! Also, many people think if they don't speak Spanish then they won't be comfortable in those spaces. But folks are friendly. So you can't just parachute in, get your story and leave. You get to know somebody, you get to know their name. That goes a long way.

**You talk a lot about demographic shifts through studying foodways. What did you learn in Kentucky about these changes?**

Kentucky was interesting. Folks were coming from all over Mexico. But a lot of people were coming from Jalisco and Michoacan. Many of those people had family in Chicago. But they'd find themselves migrating from Chicago to Kentucky, where they heard about the horse industry hiring people. Once people started establishing roots and getting married in Kentucky, then it became a primary destination for people in Mexico who had connections to family and their own hometown. Now we're at the point where [in Kentucky] there's abuelos (grandparents) and bisabuelos (great-grandparents) because the community has been growing.

"Mexington" was a name used pejoratively by the community to describe "over there where the Mexicans lived." Like everywhere in the South, the lines of segregation are firm, where the railroad tracks and overpasses form lines. This part of the city was historically where African Americans lived, but also poor white people in rental houses. So it's probably one of the most diverse parts of the city, poverty being the equalizer.

**You've seen our hand pie episode. Do you have a memory of an empanada you grew up eating?**

Yes! Most of the empanadas in your show are savory. The Mexican empanadas I grew up with are sweet and my favorite ones were made out of pumpkin. They are my absolute favorite, spiced with a little bit of cinnamon.

These were the same I found in Mexington [Lexington, Kentucky] at [Panaderia Aguascalientes](#). But there they also had custard ones, pineapple ones, even guava and cream cheese. They were very different from those you got from Colombian folks or the Argentinian style.



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## ***N.C. IS HOME TO THE FASTEST GROWING LATINO POPULATION IN THE COUNTRY***



In “Somewhere South’s” “American as Hand Pie” a few Latino communities in North Carolina are featured. Demographically, North Carolina is home to the fastest growing Latino population in the country.

According to the most recent U.S. Census data, which classifies the demographic as Hispanic, North Carolina’s Hispanic population is nearing 1 million, with 997,000 residents in 2018. The state’s Hispanic/Latino population grew from just over 75,000 in 1990 to 800,000 in 2010. Between 2010 and 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that North Carolina’s Hispanic population grew by 197,000 new residents, an increase of 24.6%, faster than the growth of this population nationwide (18.6%). For more details on how this plays out across the state, visit [ncdemography.org](http://ncdemography.org).

As communities grow, so do their influence in Southern culture. This becomes clearly evident in food. We see next-level creative influences in restaurants like Durham’s [Boricua Soul](#), serving Puerto Rican-Southern fare, and Raleigh’s [Jose and Sons](#) (where Oscar Diaz is also chef) using Carolina ingredients in recipes rooted in Mexico.

Perhaps the influences are most evident, though, as today's youth find ways to hold onto their family's culture while participating actively in their communities as North Carolinians.

In the episode, Jose Godinez tells Vivian that he advocates for farmworkers in his community. Godinez helps run the nonprofit organization NC Field, which supports farmworkers and their families by educating communities on issues they face. The youth-led organization is made up of some young people who have worked the fields themselves, or whose parents are farmworkers. North Carolina has consistently ranked among the top three states in the country who offer the most agricultural working visas to immigrant laborers, which has provided a rich convergence of culture in our rural communities.

To learn more about NC Field, visit the website at [ncfield.org](http://ncfield.org). You can also read more about Godinez's photography and his work leading NC Field in this [Crop Stories essay](#) by journalist Victoria Bouloubasis. (Note: Bouloubasis is also a "Somewhere South" producer.) Another great resource for learning more about farmworkers are the stories collected and produced by Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF), an organization born out of Duke University's Center for Documentary Studies. A collection of SAF's work can be found [here](#).



The youth of Ballet Folklórico De Colores in Goldsboro, N.C. | Credit: Lauren Vied Allen

At the Fiesta Latina in Snow Hill, Vivian runs into photojournalist Lauren Vied Allen, and her mother, Saralynn Flores Vied, who directs the dance troupe [Ballet Folklórico De Colores](#).

Vied Allen spent years documenting her mother's troupe in her hometown of Goldsboro, N.C., which culminated into a short documentary, community

celebration (complete with dance and food) and photography exhibit. She writes about it on her blog, saying "as a Mexican-American in the South, I'm learning there's no better asset to my own people than showing what's hidden, respecting the beauty of our culture and celebrating it." You can read more [here](#).



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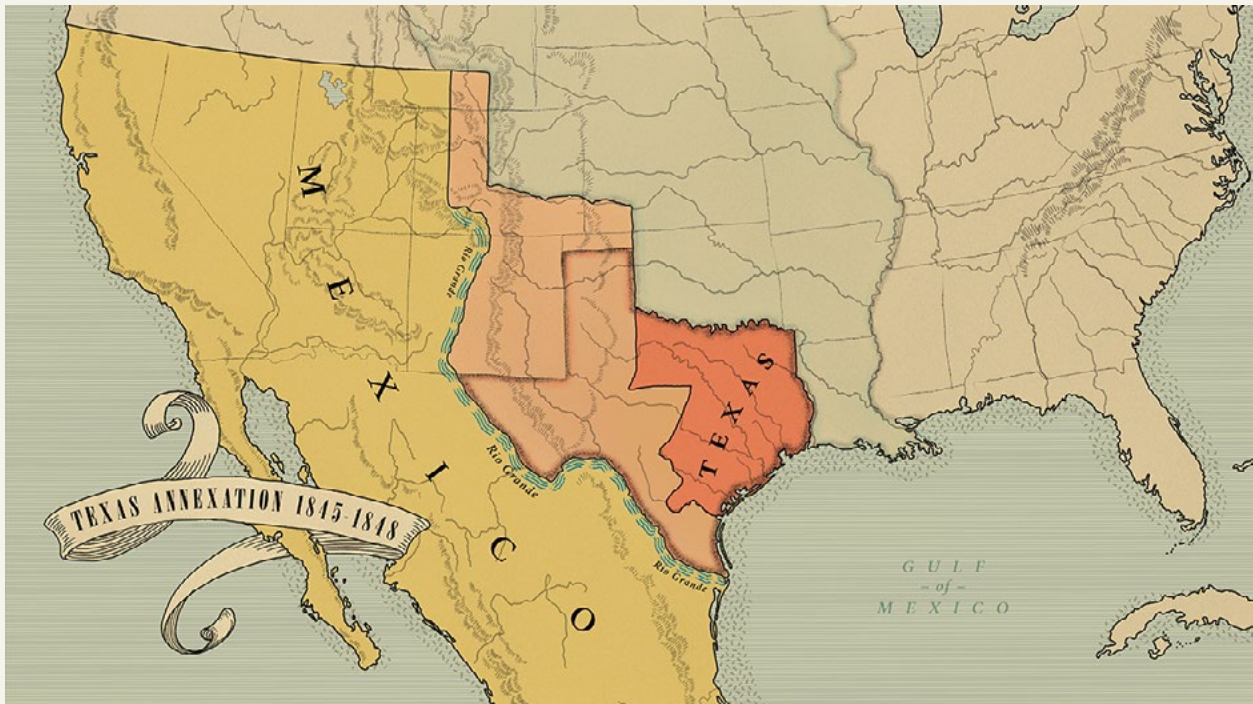


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## HOW TEXAS AND PARTS OF MEXICO BECAME THE SOUTH



Map illustration by Margaret McNealy

Lauren Vied Allen’s family has been cooking and celebrating their original recipes for generations. As Vied Allen wrote for her food project, [The World in a Pocket](#), “my grandma can proudly list our ancestors dating all the way back to 1608.”

In the hand pie episode Vivian makes turcos with three generations of women in this Flores family tree—Vied Allen, her mother Saralynn and her Grandma Sara. (Want to make your own turcos? Click [here](#) for the recipe!) These tiny hand pies tell a rich and complicated history, one that many Texans share.

But it begins across the Atlantic Ocean, centuries ago. As the ladies mention in the scene, their ancestors were Jewish Spaniards at a time when that community was considered a threat to the Catholic monarchy. Vied Allen writes: “The Spanish Inquisition (1478-1834) was started as a way to detect and “control” the Jewish population. Many converted to Catholicism, known as conversos, but practiced Judaism in secret. The triple-cooked preparation of the pork loin for the turcos, which

was a mystery to my grandma until she learned about our heritage, finally made sense. Cooking the impurities out of the pork was a way to blend into the Catholic community for fear of being persecuted, and to purify the pork, which was far from kosher.” Note: this method does not actually constitute as kosher. But it was all Spanish Jews could do in a place where pork dominated the meat supply.

So what does this have to do with Texas? Many Spaniards, conversos included, took the monarchy up on an invitation to sail to what later became the Americas and to live on land the Spanish had conquered, starting life anew. The North American region that the Spanish colonized is now part of modern-day Mexico *and* Texas.

While family originated in Spain, the move across the Atlantic Ocean eventually led them to become Mexican—until the border crossed them. Grandma Flores was born on the U.S. side of the border. Yet her ancestors had landed in Mexico. And the family had always remained in the same region. Because of a progression of border shifts over time, Flores still has family members on either side. This is the origin story of the Mexican-American South, a place that begins in the borderlands and grows into culturally-fluid identities that people choose for themselves (Chicano, Tejano, Mexican, American) in Texas and beyond.

In “Somewhere South” the family explains how this border shift happened via the Texas Annexation of 1846. While this is one of the first historic indicators of drawing a territorial line in the Rio Grande Valley, it actually took a total of nine years (see below). The event is preceded by the Texas Revolution (beginning in 1835) and the formation of the Republic of Texas (1836). The 1846 border shift they refer to launched the U.S.-Mexico War that same year, followed by a series of battles, treaties, allegiances and enforcement carried out over time.

This history is tricky for a novice to absorb (or anyone who didn’t grow up learning about Texas). Thankfully, the Bullock Museum of Texas State History in Austin offers an incredible, easy-to-follow timeline on its website. You can use your mouse or finger to trace the entirety of the Texas History Timeline, [found here](#). You can also visit [thestoryoftexas.com](http://thestoryoftexas.com) to read in-depth, poetic Texas narratives from the past and present (with peeks into the future!).

For a deeper dive, the Texas State Library and Archives is a great place to start. The museum published a comprehensive history of the Texas annexation that shows how the slow process almost never happened. Found [online here](#), the events are set out by chapters, starting with a prologue on Spanish Texas through what the library calls a “reckoning” period that would last more than a decade. Visit [tsl.texas.gov](http://tsl.texas.gov) for the general library page.



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## HAND PIE EPISODE READING LIST



With the help of our amazing board of advisors and scholars, we dug into scholarship related to each of our episode themes. Below is a list of some of the most helpful books and essays we found that helped shape our understanding of the evolution of Southern foodways.

**[“Of Pepperoni Rolls and Soup Beans: On What It Might Mean to Eat Like a West Virginian” by Courtney Balestier in \*Gastronomica\*](#)**

This lovely essay by Courtney Balestier gives more personal context to West Virginia foodways.

**[“Uneven Americanization: Italian Immigration to Marion County”](#)**

Chapter by William Klaus in the book *Transnational West Virginia: Ethnic Communities and Economic Change, 1840-1940*

We recommend this chapter for a deeper look into West Virginia labor history and the migration patterns from Europe to the coal mines.

**"Here Come the Boomer 'Tals: Italian Immigrants and Industrial Conflict in the Upper Kanawha Valley, 1903-1917."**

By Fred Barkley in the book *Transnational West Virginia: Ethnic Communities and Economic Change, 1840-1940*

This chapter in the same book above illustrates the Italian history more specifically.

**The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina: New Roots in the Old North State By Hannah Gill**

Hannah Gill serves on the "Somewhere South" advisory board. Her book is a wide snapshot of North Carolina Latino migration and uses oral history methods to focus each section. For more on Gill's project, visit its interactive website full of complete interviews with Latino immigrants throughout the state: [newroots.lib.unc.edu/](http://newroots.lib.unc.edu/)

**Corazón de Dixie: Mexicanos in the U.S. South since 1910 By Julie Weise**

As a comprehensive history of Mexicans in the South, the book is accompanied by a robust website that includes lesson plans for teachers, a "Nuevo South" podcast and more: [corazonededixie.org](http://corazonededixie.org).



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## TURCOS



This recipe comes from Sara Dueñas Flores of Corpus Christi, Texas and Goldsboro, N.C. The recipe is from her family's cookbook, "Lo Mejor de Los González II." Her granddaughter, Lauren Vied Allen, wrote this about turcos on her website, [The World in a Pocket](#): Turcos, turnovers filled with thrice-cooked pork loin, fruit, and nuts, are a South Texas specialty that my grandma, Sara, has been making in her family for over 70 years. Their history is extensive to just be such tiny, tasty pockets. The insides of Turcos are so well cooked and preserved, so they last for months after they are prepared. There have been many years when we arrive for Christmas and find a turco or two from months before (you have to look in Grandma's hiding place for the pretty ones). They still taste as if they were made that morning.

*Note: This recipe makes twice the amount of the filling than the dough, but it can be frozen for later use. Because the meat is cooked three times, boiled, cooked in a pan and then oven-baked, turcos keep for a long time unrefrigerated.*

## ***INGREDIENTS***

### **For the tea:**

3 cups water

1 tablespoon anise seeds

4 to 6 small Mexican or Ceylon cinnamon sticks, broken up

3/4 cup granulated sugar

### **For the filling:**

2 to 3 pounds pork loin

1 to 2 sticks cinnamon

4 tablespoons butter or margarine

2 cups dark brown sugar or 2 crumbled 4-inch piloncillos

2 teaspoons fresh ground Mexican or Ceylon cinnamon, or more to taste

2 teaspoons fresh ground allspice, or more to taste

2 teaspoons fresh ground anise, or more to taste

2 teaspoons fresh ground cloves, or more to taste

2 teaspoons fresh ground nutmeg, or more to taste

2 cups raisins

2 cups chopped pecans

1 (27-ounce) jar mincemeat

2 red apples, cored and diced, or 1 cup applesauce

### **For the dough:**

4 cups all-purpose flour, plus more if needed

3 teaspoons baking powder

1 teaspoon ground Mexican or Ceylon cinnamon

Pinch of salt

1 ½ cups vegetable shortening

1 cup cinnamon-anise tea

1 cup milk, for wash

## ***DIRECTIONS***

**Step 1:** Boil 3 cups of water with anise seeds and 4 to 6 small cinnamon sticks, broken up, until the tea turns dark reddish brown. It may take more than 30 minutes. Add water as needed to make sure you end up with about one cup of dark reddish brown tea. Drain seeds and sticks and add sugar to hot tea to dissolve. Let it cool.

**Step 2:** Cover pork loin with water in a large pot or Dutch oven. Add 1 to 2 cinnamon sticks. Bring to a boil over high heat and cook until the meat is falling apart, about 2 hours. Drain and chop into small, minced pieces or grind in a meat grinder.

**Step 3:** In a large pot or Dutch oven, melt butter or margarine and add chopped meat over medium-high heat. Stir frequently. Add brown sugar or crumbled piloncillos. Add ground cinnamon, allspice, ground anise, ground cloves and nutmeg. Keep adding until you get the taste you like; it may take another 1 teaspoon each of the spices to make it just right.

**Step 4:** Add raisins, chopped pecans, mincemeat, and chopped apples or applesauce, if desired. Reduce heat to low and stir constantly. Cook until the mixture dries out and tastes good, about an hour. The mixture will turn dark brown. Set aside to cool.

**Step 5:** Mix flour, baking powder, cinnamon and salt in a large bowl; cut in shortening and add tea until it is the consistency of bread dough. You may not use all your tea. Knead. Add extra flour if needed so dough is not sticky. Make into small balls, about 1 ½ inches in diameter, to roll out or press out in a tortilla press between two plastic sheets or wax paper, will be about 4 inches diameter. Place a teaspoon of filling in the center of each dough circle, fold over and crimp or press edges with a fork. Brush each turco with milk. Place on an ungreased cookie sheet and bake at 400 degrees until golden brown, about 25 to 30 minutes.

*Yield: about 6 dozen*



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