



CHAPTER FIVE: GOATISH ON AMERICA

From: IMAGINARY LINES by Linton Robinson and Ana Maria Corona

After living in Tijuana for a little over a year I took my family back to visit Guadalajara during *Semana Santa*. My children were questioned constantly by my cousins and nephews, not about Tijuana, but about the United States. I heard my son, barely in school, tell his cousin, "You know, in the United States you never see any goats." This seemed strange to my family but after I had thought about it, I told them that it is true. In Mexico you see goats everywhere and everyone eats them. In the United States you never see goats and nobody eats them. This signifies something important about the two countries, although I am not sure what it is. In fact I am not completely sure what goats signify to me personally, but I recognize it as something on a mythical level. Goats are like cats, cocks, serpents and eagles; they serve some deep component in the subconscious, have more reality as symbols than as mere animals. So I assume there are deep meanings behind a country having or not having a population of goats.

The Bible speaks of judgment separating the sheep from the goats, as crops are separated from weeds. This seems to imply a judgment of values, and we have seen that Christianity, even Western Civilization, is often depicted as a victory over the goat. The poets refer to the Lamb of God's victory over Pan, pagan goat-foot god and lord of the goat-legged satyrs. Throughout the background myths of the Christianization of Europe there is an image of the Good Shepherd triumphing over the cloven-hoofed enemy, the ways of pastoral fields overcoming the old wild ways of the woods. The very word "*pastor*" means "shepherd" in both Latin and Spanish. Even though I lived in the center of a large city as a girl, goats had a strong impact on my education; usually as a matter of diet, although in Mexico eating is seldom separated from other questions of grave importance.

Some of my strongest dining impressions were of goats, especially since my favorite place to eat was near our house in *Socina Reforma*, a small *birriaria* called La Enramada.

Birria is a classic of the people's *cocina Mexicana*, a barbecue of goat meat on the bone in a red *chile* sauce. It is a specialty, like *pozole* or *carnitas*, and many *birriarias* offer nothing else, just three sizes of plates for three different prices. There are several different styles of *birria*, but it is known as a distinctively Jalisco dish so as I am, as we say, a "red boned" *tapatia*, I prefer the Jalisco "original recipe". *Birria* can be made of beef or other meats (sometimes very questionably when sold in tacos on the street), just as a hamburger could be made of pork or turkey or horse. But unless stated otherwise it is assumed to consist of *cabrito* or *chivito*, both words meaning "kid".

Served in a plate, with radishes and tortillas on the side, *birria* looks something like a stew, but it is cooked bones and all, often in a large, deep tray which is later tipped up to display the contents to customers. Whether out of tradition or convenience, this display of the red, dripping goat bones is common in *birriarias* and can give tourists, especially the young, a touch of the horrors. Especially since the skulls, stripped of meat but still horned and dyed a bloody red by the spices of the recipe, are usually placed on top of the heap as proof not only that the meat is actually goat, but also that the goat in question was still of a tender age.

Even to little Guadalajara girls used to the spectacle, the red tangle of massacred bones and flesh tossed in a tumble like some infernal slaughterhouse was not always a welcome sight. But we came to welcome the sight associated with good eating and good times at the back table by the whitewashed kitchen of La Enramada where we would listen to the owner and my father singing along with the three old guitarists who worked there on weekends. Our younger sisters still kept their doubts about the gruesome pile of bloody-looking body parts. One of our famous family anecdotes that always comes out on holidays or visits to restaurants with goat meat, was the time my brother "made eyes" at Cladita.

Clara was the youngest of the eight girls and was always very tender and impressionable. Even now we call her Cladita, as she called herself before she could pronounce Clarita. By the time she was four or five, she was always crying for dead animals in the streets, and having her tender sensibilities victimized by my three brothers. She never learned to watch horror movies, even to this day, and now her children tease her the way we used to. One Sunday at La Enramada, Cladita got a seat that forced her to look right at the pans of red-dripping bones and the staring, diabolic skulls on top. She got very upset and couldn't order anything to eat. Finally my brother Juan Jose volunteered to get her something else from the little *fonda* next door. I saw Juanjo stuff some radishes in his pocket as he left, but my only thoughts were on eating without getting my Sunday dress messy and maybe wondering why Juanjo would be nice to Cladita for a change. He was a typical ten year old brother, maybe a little worse.

He came back to the table carrying a plate covered with a copper pan. With a gentlemanly gesture he slid the plate in front of Cladita and whisked away the cover. When she jumped up screaming we all looked to see what Juanjo had done. He'd cut the ends off the radishes, leaving slick red balls with big white spots, then stuck the radishes in the eye sockets of the most evil-looking of the wet, red goat skulls and put in on her plate. When he lifted the copper cover, she was served with the delight of a lurid, pop-eyed vision from hell staring right back at her.

Naturally she became completely discomposed by the sight of the goat head, and started dancing up and down, shrieking. And I'm afraid the rest of us made it worse because the skull looked so comical with its cross-eyed stare. We all laughed until we were crying, especially when one of the "eyes" fell out and rolled off the table toward Clara and her collapse became complete. When Omar picked the "eye" up, toasted Cladita with it and took a big bite we were laughing so hard the red sauce was running out of our mouths and down our chins. Clara must have thought her family had suddenly turned into Satanist vampires because she ran out into the street crying for help. Even though we were all punished for torturing her so, she still reacts very ungraciously if anyone waves a pair of radishes at her, generally calling us all a pile of *cabrones*.

Mexican insults frequently involve animals; we call a stupid person *bucy* or *burro*. Calling a person an ox or donkey might seem tame to Americans, who learn insults about homosexuality and perversions from urban walls, but they are strong to Mexicans because such words don't rely on the things they describe, they take on the colors of the emotions with which they are spoken. Much of Mexico is still very simple and people are still familiar with barnyard animals. It might be hard to imagine a man violating his own mother, but the behavior of goats can be observed at close hand anytime and many Spanish words formed from *chivo* or *cabra* are about insults, vice and debauchery. *Cabrón* is the standard Mexican *grosseria* or "fighting word". It means "goatish" but can't really be translated because it branches out into so many shade meanings involving cuckolding, incontinence, and all kinds of rutting and slutting around.

Whatever it is about goats that gives them that sexual reputation is probably responsible for their identification as an archetype of evil and corruption. The common image of Satan, drawn from Europe where goats were as common as they are in rural Mexico today: has the split hooves, the twisted horns, the stained beard, the pointed ears indicating a pentagonal star, the rank hair, the insinuating tail, the insatiable appetite. But the mythical goat is too capricious to remain simple: there has always been the paradoxical element of sacrifice. The image of the scapegoat is as common as the sacrificial lamb's. Which might have confused my theology, if not for my own appetite.

La Enramada will always have a traumatic nostalgia for Clara, but my own deepest impressions were of the Restaurant Nuevo Leon on Calle Independencia, a few blocks from the Merced Market and the Mariachi Plaza. As soon as I walked out of the church of San Juan del Dios, dressed in my frilly white dresses and elaborate hair ribbons, I would start sniffing the air. My father would laugh and call me a little glutton whose nose connected directly to my tummy. I'll admit I'm too fond of good food, but even at that age food meant more to me than just something to eat.

As we walked up Independencia I would start to smell the roasting goat meat and as soon as I was allowed I would run ahead to stare in the front window at a pit of coals where several young goats would be cooking in the primitive outdoor style of Nuevo Leon. Decapitated and dressed, the little bodies were leaned over the fire on wooden frames, their exposed ribcages, spread arms and bound legs making them look very much like tiny crucified humans. Staring up from the foot of the window, I saw a scene of suffering and drawn-out death that melted into my Bible study so fluidly that I still picture Golgotha as including a fire; the Savior gutted and roasting with two side orders of thief. The fusion of suffering, sacrifice, hellfire, and sacramental communion was never a mystery to me at all. It was right there on the menu.

Since there were eleven of us, my father couldn't often take us in to eat, but there were special Sundays when we could file in and sit at the high, rough tables and I could watch the cooks carve slices and joints off the little crucified scapegoats. I would eat them with my eyes closed, a private mass in which I completely felt and smelled the fruits of that long suffering; the bodies given for me, becoming part of me, and giving me life. But whenever I opened my eyes and looked up, I would be staring straight into the face of a tremendous mounted goat's head with horns spread as wide as my reach, a long white beard like a Biblical patriarch, and a gaze so obviously evil, sexual, and unclean it would have given me shivers if I hadn't seen the secrets of purification by fire, the way cooking transforms and transcends the flesh.

This discussion of bloody bones and roasting cadavers in family restaurant might seem odd to Americans, whose restaurants and markets prepare and arrange meat so that it hardly appears to have once been a living creature, but Mexican eating places frequently display the animals in their original format, dead or alive. In small restaurants in rural Jalisco, I have seen animals caged or tied in sight of the tables to be killed to order. I think this is a good thing. There is less confusion of what is happening: the Spanish word *carne* is less equivalent to the English word "meat" than to "flesh". All flesh; human as well. Flesh in the larger sense. . . the sense of carnal, of carnage, of carnival. Maybe life would be less confusing for us if we all killed our own meals.

City people think of small domestic animals as pets rather than protein factories and are unhappy with the idea of eating them. It is all a matter of what a person's palate is bred to: cooked dog would revolt most Americans, though very civilized Asians enjoy it. Farm children learn that the little animals they love and nurse to life get butchered and eaten. It is, ultimately, less a matter of good and evil than of approaching life realistically and remembering, as we try to when blessing our meals, that we live only by the grace of the moment and by absorbing the lives of other living beings. To bless food before eating it, to feel respect and responsibility for that transaction, is more naturally understood in the countryside. I think that Christianity, especially Catholicism as understood in Latin America, is more easily accepted in that context than in our modern urban lives.

But even animals with as many mystical and carnal properties as goats are also, finally, mere beasts. And as beasts, goats are so pleasant to have around that I'm surprised they aren't more popular north of the frontier. Goats are of a proper size for being around people. A mature male goat, when he stands up on hind legs to reach something else to eat, is about the same height as a young man and there is something very manlike about him; the curve of his rib cage, the way he moves. I have seen goats stand like that and had a sudden impulse to take their hooves on my shoulders and dance with them. I shared that image with my sisters and they all giggled at the picture of a herd of goats waltzing with us in our stiff dresses at cotillion lessons. You can make of my little fantasy what you wish but the reality behind it is definitely male; female goats do not resemble women at all.

Down on four legs goats are the size of dogs, comfortable and safe around the house. The kids are cute and cuddly, very sweet for pets. Goats give better milk than cows, inferior only to mother's milk as food for human babies. They clean things up, keep the grass cut, give warning of strangers approaching. And, of course, they can be eaten. The animals so famous for eating anything and everything are themselves devoured by an even more omnivorous, sexual and probably devilish species.

The odd thing is, although *birria* and other goat dishes are very characteristically Mexican, most "Mexican" restaurants in the United States don't serve goat dishes. I'm told that in American cities far from the border, serving goat is unheard of. I would invite anyone who likes Mexican food to go out of their way to try the local goat dishes. In Tijuana, of course, it is relatively easy to find good *birria*. One good place is Birriaria Guanajuato, up in Francisco Villa. I learned of it through a listing in the restaurant guide in this newspaper and it is excellent. I prefer a place called "Guadalajara, Pues!", an extremely traditional *tapatio* type place with tile pictures of famous Guadalajara buildings and pictures of the owner's career with the Guadalajara *futbol* team, the Chivas. This is one place you can see the piles of bones and huge stuffed goat heads but unfortunately its location at 158 Constitución (at the bottom of the hill, between First and Cuahuila) is in a very seedy part of town. Family groups might be offended by the drunkenness and prostitution that surrounds the restaurant in the evenings, although the goats grinning on the wall seem to approve.

There are also some *birriarias* on the American side of the border, especially in Chula Vista. Birriaria Sinaloa, in the shopping center at Broadway and Main comes richly recommended, even by such a delicate *tapatia* as my sister Clara. (They keep the skulls in the kitchen.)

Other styles of goat meat can be found in Tijuana, but the most convenient and one of the best is Las Brasas restaurant at Ninth and Madero, one block east and south of the Jai Alai fronton. The specialty is cowboy cooking in the style of the Sinaloa and Monterrey ranges. They serve *birria estilo de Jalisco* and barbecue of lamb as well as several traditional dishes of goat meat, including the Nuevo Leon a *las brasas* style with a whole kid skewered over open coals and *cabrito al pastor*, cooked "shepherd style" by rotating over open flames.

And we arrive again at sheep and goats. A friend once mentioned to me an American book called "A Nation of Sheep." I never read the book, but I remembered that image as I started to investigate the United States. Is this the famous "American dream"; a woolly, sheepish life of herds that are protected to be sheared? It is the dream of English landscape paintings and I think I can see it from the hills above Chula Vista, or from the cross on top of Mount Soledad; regular squares of peace, fields of grass cut very short and neat, dogs to protect against the wolves. The order and peace and cleanliness in this country is a very pretty vision, especially to people from Tijuana where things are rough, disordered, unsafe and ugly. If you travel into the *barrancas*, the communities piled up the canyons, you will start up steep, narrow dirt paths through trash piles and rocky confusion. You will walk into a rough male world of violence, drinking, salvaging and harsh treatment. And you will start to see goats running in the paths, eating the trash, playing in the rubble. You can just drive across the border, park your car and walk up into Goatland. But to go the other direction to the organized, clean, trusting fields of Sheepland, is a much more difficult trip which can take forever and cost everything you have. As a guide in either direction I can only advise an awareness of diet and what eating really means to both the eater and the eaten,