

**Horchata, the Sweet Latin Drink That Gets Around**

By Joel Denker  
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Ask a Salvadoran or Mexican which country is home to the best version of the refreshing milky-white beverage called horchata, and you can guess the answer. Salvadorans are fiercely loyal to their horchata, made from the seeds of morro, a green, hard-shelled fruit that looks like a coconut. Mexicans are just as steadfast about their rice-based drink, which Salvadorans won't touch.

Spaniards, who consider their nation the parent of the real horchata, dismiss the claims by people from their former colonies. They insist that their creation, prepared from roots they call "earth almonds," is the only drink worthy of the name.

This pale drink, a perfect cooler at the beginning of a hot Washington summer, is ubiquitous at the area's Central American eateries. But it comes in many guises, and to most non-Hispanic diners it remains a bit of a mystery, so I set out to understand the story behind it. Or, rather, them.

At Moroni & Brothers, a combination pizzeria and Salvadoran restaurant in the Petworth neighborhood, José Denis Velasquez, who owns the business with his wife, Reyna, sheds light on his country's drink. Growing up in the campo (countryside), Velasquez very early absorbed the lore of horchata. "I made it as a little boy," the 38-year-old Salvadoran remembers.

The morro grows on a wide-branched tree, part of the calabash family. The small, gourd-like fruit stands out because it is attached directly to the tree's trunk and branches. For farming families, morro trees were a prominent part of the landscape.

The black, lentil-shaped seeds are the tree's coveted treasure. Pried from the fruit's pulp, "they are put in the sun to dry and then they're ready to be ground," Velasquez says. The resulting powder is blended with water to make horchata. The seeds have a hypnotic smell, Velasquez says, something like that of the Ligurian olives he worked with at Dupont Circle's Pizzeria Paradiso.

Velasquez scorns citified horchata and says extra ingredients, such as the peanuts and pumpkin seeds in the packaged mixes sold in American and Salvadoran cities, corrupt the basic drink. "In the country, they will make it more plain," he says. "It will smell more natural."

He also doesn't like the growing tendency toward using milk instead of water. "In my country, you never, never use milk," he insists.

Because morro seeds are not available in the United States, Moroni & Brothers makes do with packaged horchata mix. Companies have sprung up to sell the product to Salvadoran retailers and consumers. Laurel-based Rio Grande Foods, the largest seller of horchata mix on the East Coast, processes morro seeds at plants in El Salvador. Charlie Rizzo, the firm's vice president, says his mix has one simple drawing card: "a lot of morro." Customers "pick up a little bag and smell it" to detect the seed's fragrance, he says.

The Salvadorans' bond with horchata is strengthened by their attachment to the morro tree. Its canopy offers shade on hot days. Its fruit nourishes their animals. And the hollow morro shells were valuable household containers. The tree inspires devotion in a religious people: Its distinctive leaves, says Melvin Nunez, a baker at the Cosi coffee shop north of Dupont Circle, are shaped like crosses and transfixed early Spanish explorers of the Americas.

Mexicans, also avid horchata drinkers, are wedded to their own national recipe, Rizzo says.

Luis Marroquin, the owner of Taqueria Distrito Federal in Columbia Heights, straddles the two cultures. A native Salvadoran, this 50-year-old entrepreneur lived in Mexico for many years. He is evenhanded about the rival horchatas: "Every country has a different taste." But because he is trying to re-create the atmosphere of a Mexican taqueria, Marroquin serves that country's *aguas* *frescas* (fresh waters): tart tamarind; Jamaica (pronounced ha-MIKE-uh), a sweet and sour hibiscus drink; and, of course, creamy horchata. The drinks are a cooling complement to pungent tacos bursting with goat, chorizo, pork rib meat and other fillings. "It's not going to be a taqueria without horchata," he says.

In making Mexican horchata, rice is soaked, strained, and ground into a powder. The powder is then dissolved in condensed milk and water is added. Cinnamon and vanilla enhance the flavor.

Why rice and not morro? Maybe, Marroquin says matter-of-factly, it is because the morro tree doesn't grow in Mexico. It also may be because the country's Spanish colonists, who introduced rice there, concocted the drink to go with it. In 12th-century Spain, a popular treat was rice boiled in almond milk scented with cinnamon.

Spanish horchata, made with neither morro nor rice, is all but invisible in the Washington area. A search for the drink turned up only one outlet: ironically, a Mexican taqueria. Its owner, veteran local restaurateur Ann Cashion, has traveled widely in Spain, and manager Wayne Combs has lived there. At their Taqueria Nacionale near Union Station, the nutty horchata is neither as thick nor as creamy as its Mexican and Salvadoran counterparts. Cashion and Combs prefer it that way. Spanish horchata is "lighter," Combs says.

The Iberian drink is made from *chufas*, or earth almonds, a sack of which, imported from Spain, is displayed near the taqueria's entrance. The restaurant soaks them for 24 hours, grinds them and blends them with water. The resulting whitish liquid is sweetened with sugar and spiced with cinnamon sticks.

*Chufas* technically are not nuts but underground tubers from a grassy plant of ancient lineage. One of the earliest domesticated plants, this cousin of the papyrus was grown in the Nile Valley. Roasted, ground and mixed with honey, *chufas* were a popular Egyptian sweet. The Moors, Muslim warriors who invaded Spain and occupied it from the 8th to the 13th centuries, carried *chufa* plants with them. They introduced them to the area around Valencia, on Spain's eastern Mediterranean coast. Its warm climate and sandy soil were ideal for the crop.

Fond of barley- and almond-infused drinks, the Moors found *chufa* a tasty substitute. Their milky refreshment, sweet and nutty and rich in minerals, is the ancestor of the Spanish horchata.

Although popular throughout Spain, horchata de chufa has its most ardent fans in Valencia. Sold in small cafes and shops, which reminded taqueria manager Combs of old-fashioned soda bars, it is often taken with long buns called *fartons*.

A council in Valencia polices the market; to be called horchata, the drink must be made from chufa.

One mystery remained: the name.

According to writers Anne Chotzinoff Grossman and Lisa Grossman Thomas in "Lobscouse & Spotted Dog," the name is associated with a long line of medieval European grain and nut drinks. A barley water infused with ground almonds was known in France as *orgeat* and in Italy as *orzata*, names that derive from the Latin word "*hordeata*," meaning "made with barley."

Gradually, Grossman and Thomas explain, those names were transferred to almond milk, a cloudy blend of ground almonds and water introduced to Europeans by the Arabs, and in Spain, it was a short step from *orgeat* and *orzata* to horchata, another milky, nutty delight.

As the drink was reinvented across Spanish-speaking countries, the name remained unchanged. There are no impostors among horchatas, just close relations on a tall family tree.

*Joel Denker is the author of "The World on a Plate: A Tour Through the History of America's Ethnic Cuisine."*