

US Chef Serves Up Taco Diplomacy In Moscow

In Moscow, Independence Day celebration, US chef cooks iconic Texas Mexican tacos for Russian guests, dignitaries at the residence of the US Ambassador.

HOUSTON, TEXAS, US, April 2, 2020 /EINPresswire.com/ -- In Moscow, I cooked [Texas Mexican](#) tacos from a bright red food truck parked smack in the middle of the gardens of Spazo House, the residence of the US Ambassador to Russia, Jon Huntsman.

I was invited by the US Embassy to travel to Moscow as the featured chef at the US Independence Day celebration. It is the social event of the season, the sought-after invitations extended to Russian business influentials, cultural leaders and diplomats. The day is one of official ceremony, the Marines marching and posting the colors, followed by the national anthems of the Russian Federation and of the United States. Hosted by Ambassador Huntsman and his wife, Mary Kaye Huntsman, the formal observance is an event of celebration and diplomacy. Food was to be the sign and occasion of goodwill.

“

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Adán Medrano

I submitted a menu of tacos, the kind my mom cooked as I was growing up in the Westside of San Antonio. Food trucks serve these tacos not just in San Antonio, but also in Houston, McAllen, Austin and all across Texas, in communities of every stripe, color and creed. So, in a sense, we were offering a taste of inclusion and welcome.



Chef and Food Writer, Adán Medrano, from Houston, Texas, talks tacos with Russian guests in Moscow at the US Ambassador's residence

The official printed program explained that this is the cuisine of Mexican American families of Texas, and that this “singular cuisine is showing the way towards a better understanding of [what it means to be 'American.'](#)” My food had to be delicious and be the real thing, American, Texas Mexican food.

Ambassador Huntsman and his wife hosted 1,700 guests on that sunny Moscow day, and during the formal greeting, from the podium he described the tacos as, “street style.” We served hand-held tacos of, [Carne Guisada Con Papas](#) (stewed beef with potatoes) and Puerco En Chile Colorado (pork in red chiles), accompanied by red and green salsas and a garnish of chile toreado, a green jalapeño chile, pan-fried, tossed until the skin blisters and develops black, burnt

spots.

Texas Mexican tacos are made with wheat flour tortillas that originated and are iconic in the border region of Texas and Northern Mexico. "We can buy the flour tortillas here in Moscow because grocery stores have them," offered one of the embassy staff during our second planning meeting.

Flour tortillas in Moscow, now that was a surprise. I described the tortilla we needed, that it is soft and pliable and it puffs up, balloon-like, when heated on a comal, griddle. We had to have a Texas Mexican tortilla. This was going to be, after all, a diplomatic taco.

The Moscow version of a tortilla is delicious, it's thinner and gets a bit brittle when heated. It's wonderful for making quesadillas, but not for our tacos. The Texas flour tortillas, all 2,400 of them, would have to travel from Houston to Moscow.

We couldn't ship them because of International customs requirements and the possibility of shipping delays. The embassy decided to use the reliable diplomatic pouch. I shipped the tortillas to Washington, D.C. where a military transport airlifted them directly to the US embassy in Moscow.

The green salsa was the second big challenge. The salsa needs that special tang that comes from Mexican tomatillos, and those are simply not available in Moscow. Knowing this, in preparation for the trip I tested possible substitutions and found that green bell pepper, when boiled to remove the bitterness, gives a delicious tangy flavor. I'd been assured that green bell peppers are plentiful in Moscow markets.

Turned out that on July 2, our Moscow market shopping day, there were no green bell peppers to be found, an unexpected setback. There's always a silver lining, and as I looked for a substitute, was really geeked to see the wide variety of Eastern European and Russian chiles, quite a few, each with wonderful flavor and with interesting history. I cut into a yellow one, took a bite, loved it. It was a Romanian chile.



Outside the red food truck serving tacos and salsas, Chef and Food Writer Adán Medrano mingles with Russian guests.



The iconic "Carne Guisada" taco served to Russian guests in Moscow at the US Ambassador's residence

After boiling for an hour to remove the bitterness, the chiles blended nicely with onions, Jalapeños and just a touch of garlic. The garlic in the Moscow market I found to be about five times stronger than its US counterpart. I had never tasted something so intensely sharp. With totally unexpected but delicious flavors, we ended up with a Romanian chile salsa whose taste would be very much at home in Texas, in Mexican American homes.

I travelled to Russia with my longtime culinary friend, Texan Chef Kevin Babbit. He was my partner for the entire diplomatic tour, from planning to shopping to cooking to serving. He is from Boerne, Texas and grew up with this food.

Because of his many years in restaurants, Chef Kevin is not only a great chef, but is also a natural when instructing staff about the importance of service. He explained to the staff that conversation and genuine friendliness are companions to the tacos and salsas. Working with our Russian team, he made sure our taco truck delivered the complete package: mouthwatering food and personable service. Food without hospitality has no legs.

I mingled with the guests, watched them eat the food that I've loved ever since childhood. Lots of picture taking as they asked me to pose with groups or single guests, a way to save the memory.

"Pour on the hot salsa," that was the zesty, enthusiastic attitude of the young Russians, students and young professionals. Their interest in things American was earnest, and that surprised me. They started using the hashtag, #MyFirstTaco, to share their taco experience on social media. Beaming with smiles, they did love the tacos.

I shared with new Russian friends the food that is part of my indigenous Texas identity. It's also part of what it means to be "American." Taco diplomacy was an occasion of goodwill, and food was not just a sign of it, it was the effective agent that made it all happen

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