

2015 | NUMBER 95

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# a tale of two sausages

Longaniza in Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula

By Zora O'Neill



La Sultana del Oriente — the Sultaness of the East — is not, as it sounds, the heroine of a fairy tale. Rather, it refers to Valladolid, a small colonial city in the state of Yucatán in Mexico. It earned its nickname because it is about a hundred miles east of Mérida, the capital. But there is something undeniably exotic about the food in Valladolid, even within the distinct, rich culinary traditions of the Yucatán Peninsula. *Cocina vallisoletana* is known for such baroque dishes as *pavo en relleno negro* — turkey in a voluptuous sauce, black from charred dried chiles — and *pollo en escabeche*, grilled chicken in a vinegar broth that is legitimately “Oriental,” as the method was brought by the Arabs to Spain from medieval Baghdad. Compared with all that, the local sausage, *longaniza de Valladolid*, which usually shows up on restaurant menus near the bottom of the “Regional Specialties,” never really caught my eye. For years, I just never got around to ordering it.

When I finally did, I discovered I'd been missing one of the most richly flavored regional products, one that Yucatecans hold especially dear. *Longaniza*, which is usually grilled, does look a bit austere on the plate: a charred horseshoe-shaped link, finger-slim, shiny, and nearly mahogany from having spent a long time in the smoke of a wood fire. Inside, its burnt-orange color comes from annatto, and its flavor is intense and complex. Along with savory pork, black-pepper heat, a high note of vinegar, and a hint of smoke, there are layers of other warm spices and an earthiness whose source is not immediately identifiable. The garnishes on the plate are the typical

ones of nearly every Yucatecan meal: wedges of bitter orange, bright-pink pickled onions, and a bowl of watery green or yellow habanero salsa, flecked with the charred skin of the peppers, to add a vegetal burn. Ideally, you also get a luminous green wedge of avocado, the firm, almost juicy local variety that reminds you avocado is botanically a fruit. On a single plate, you have all the flavors and colors of the Yucatán.

Throughout Valladolid, at roadside stands near the edge of town, next to yards on quiet back streets, even on the door of the cantina opposite the bus station, handwritten signs proclaim “*Se vende longaniza*” — “Longaniza for sale.” Signs aren't necessary in the city's central market. There butchers simply drape the ten-inch links over the metal rails above their stalls, next to the cuts of raw pork and above the tidy bottles of caramel-colored lard.

Humberto Chávez González is a mustachioed butcher in his seventies who wears a crisp white guayabera and sturdy black glasses. Shoppers greet him as Don Berto, and he has a reputation for some of the best *longaniza* in town. When I asked him about his technique, he immediately introduced me to his son, Abraham Chávez Rodríguez, who now makes the sausage each day.

Abraham is burlier than his father, with curly black hair, and he was happy to drive me across town to his family's home, where, in the backyard, he makes the *longaniza*. Past a sun-bleached American muscle car and a pair of fluffy dogs stand two outbuildings. The smaller one, lined with pale-blue tile, is where the sausage is assembled. The larger, pitch-roofed structure is the shadowy smokehouse, and inside it the corrugated metal roof and wooden beams are coated in a solid, velvety layer of black soot. One corner, where *chicharrón* is fried, is permanently scented with lard.

“The only machine is the meat grinder,” Abraham told me with pride. His assistant, Abelardo Cauich, was using the traditional tools of sausage makers the world over: his thumb and a small metal cone. Cupping the cone in one hand, Abelardo pressed the filling into lengths of pork small intestines, producing link after link in a scant few seconds. In this way, he and Abraham produce about 150 pounds a day, typical for Valladolid butchers.

I had promised Abraham that I wouldn't pry into the particulars of his family recipe, but he did tell me he uses two standard *recados*, or spice mixes. *Recados* — some are powders, some pastes — are building blocks in many Yucatecan dishes. They're made by specialists and sold fresh in markets. It's not consid-

Abraham Chávez Rodríguez grinds pork to order at the stall he shares with his father in Valladolid's central market.

Larrabélla

2015 NUMBER 95

37



ered a shortcut to buy your *recados*; both housewives and restaurant chefs do that. But the Chávez family are purists: Don Berto makes his own paste *recados*. “We buy the ingredients, of course,” Abraham said, “but the rest is made by us. It’s what makes the flavor special — more pure, more concentrated.”

The base of a paste *recado* is garlic, loose cloves toasted in their skin on a dry *comal* (a thin cast-iron griddle) until charred and soft, then peeled and mashed. *Recado rojo*, the dominant flavoring in *longaniza*, contains a bit of allspice and a lot of *achiote* — annatto seeds. They are a natural coloring, but annatto is added to this *recado* in such quantity that it contributes not just a deep red hue but also that earthy flavor I had noticed, along with a faint bitterness. You could see Abraham had been using *recado rojo* just that morning — his knuckles were stained orange.

The other paste essential to *longaniza* is *recado blanco*. It is not actually white but a dull slate gray from a large quantity of black pepper, plus it has oregano, a bit of *canela* (Mexican cinnamon, milder than Asian varieties), and often cumin and clove as well. Because *recado blanco* is used so frequently in Valladolid, it is sometimes called *recado oriental*. Like the city’s nickname, it has a double meaning; in old Mexican and Spanish cookbooks the combination of clove, cinnamon, and black pepper was long identified as *morisco* — Moorish, from the period of Arab rule in the Iberian peninsula.

These two spice pastes distinguish *longaniza* from chorizo, the more commonly known Mexican sausage. Chorizo gets its color and heat from red chiles and is further flavored only with cumin, oregano, and, sometimes, *canela*. Another important distinction is that chorizo is fresh, while *longaniza* is semi-cured. Thanks to the salt, vinegar, and smoke, it can last a couple of weeks.

Don Berto learned to make *longaniza* from his father, who built the smokehouse about 50 years ago. Abraham has worked there his whole life. I asked Abraham if he would teach his own son the *longaniza* trade. “Maybe,” Abraham said, with a half-smile. “But he’s 15. Right now, he wants to do anything but what his father does.”

Back at the market, I had asked Don Berto about *longaniza*’s history, and he answered vaguely, “Oh, it’s very old.” When pressed, he added, “From the time of the Spanish. Probably a hundred years old.”

Don Berto’s answer is true enough in the context of Valladolid. After the Spanish officially left Mexico in 1821, the European elite lived on for a long time in this small city, rarely mixing with the rest of the

population. Into the decadent years before the 1910 Revolution, this rarefied, wealthy group preserved some of the more strictly traditional Spanish dishes, such as *pollo en escabeche*, and encouraged newer, more fanciful creations that melded Mayan and European ingredients. During this period, the chefs of the hacienda families refined many of the most distinguished and complex regional preparations, and a certain Felipe Pérez Vázquez is said to have popularized the local sausage. He became known as El Rey de la Longaniza — the King of Longaniza.

But *longaniza* goes further back. Probably the oldest written reference is in a regional cookbook from 1832, according to David Sterling, author of *Yucatán: Recipes from a Culinary Expedition*. Sterling takes its inclusion in this relatively short work, containing only the most common dishes, as a sign the sausage was already well known, and probably handed down through several generations before that. For *longaniza*’s inception, “we’re looking at the early to mid-1700s at least.”

The roots of the sausage are clearly Iberian, and well before that, Greek and Roman. *Lucaniae*, a spiced and smoked sausage made in the Lucania region of southern Italy, is described in the fourth-century cookbook *De Re coquinaria*. What became *luganega* in Italy became *longaniza* in Spain (and *linguiça* in Portugal) and spread all over the Spanish-speaking world, where it can be found in wildly different incarnations. The Yucatecan version could be connected to one from Aragón that is spiced with anise, nutmeg, and black pepper. According to another





theory, put forth by Narces Alcocer-Ayuso, who is the great-great-grandson of Valladolid's 19th-century Longaniza King, *longaniza* is Asturian. He points to the first commercial *longaniza* operation in the Yucatán, which was established by the Noreña family, whose name is the same as that of a town in Asturias.

Abraham lifted the lids on the smokers, two large, deep concrete boxes, to show me Abelardo's links, hanging in tidy rows on wooden dowels, the pale-orange raw meat visible through the milky casing. After the sausage spends an hour or so in the warm smoke, the casings start to go translucent and the meat darkens to a dull orange-red. It remains there for seven to eight hours altogether, losing about 30 percent of its weight, concentrating its flavor. "When it's thin," Abelardo said, "that's when you know it's good *longaniza*. It has smoked long enough."

**All that seems** clear enough, but eight miles north of Valladolid in the village of Temozón, the subject of *longaniza* becomes more complicated. In much the same way that Yucatecans know the village of Oxcutzcab for its oranges and Ticul for its shoes, they know Temozón as the place to get *carnes ahumadas* — smoked meats of all kinds, including *longaniza*.

In Temozón, the signs read "*Se vende longaniza especial*." In a sort of self-regulating denomination of origin, there is no mention of nearby Valladolid. During my years of *longaniza* ignorance, I had never noticed the distinction and assumed the sausage was all the same. It certainly looks the same: long red links displayed in neat rows. Yet they are different enough to inspire firm opinions, expressed tactfully, with typical Yucatecan courtesy. Temozón's *longaniza* is "commercial," some say. Others counter that Valladolid's is "a bit dry."

And "a bit dry" is an understandable comment. *Longaniza de Valladolid* is not succulent; the rather coarsely ground meat crumbles under a fork. Abraham's is pure *pierna* (pork hind leg), and he adds fat only if the meat looks particularly lean. The mix is never more than 15 percent fat, in contrast with, say, a typical chorizo recipe, which calls for about 30 percent. Abraham sees fat as filler — "and people won't buy filler."

Yet when I ate lunch at El Hosco, a small smoked-meat shop on the north edge of Temozón, I found its *longaniza* was as crumbly and lean as anything I'd tasted in Valladolid. I tried to chat up the counterwoman, but she was tight-lipped. And, no, I could

not see the smoker, she said, as it was being cleaned. Her guardedness was not surprising, considering the intense competition in Temozón, which has close to 20 smoked-meat sellers. And what could I expect from a shop whose name, El Hosco, means "the surly one" and whose logo is a glowering pig? She did, however, tell me that the recipe had changed over the decades. Originally, the meat was heavily salted and smoked to preserve it. Now, with refrigeration widespread, salt and smoke are applied with a lighter touch, and the result is milder and juicier.

On another pass through town, I stopped at Carnes Concepción, which, like El Hosco, claims to have started Temozón's smoked-meat industry in the 1960s. Carnes Concepción is probably single-handedly responsible for Temozón's reputation as "commercial." To American eyes, its shop is hardly a megamart, but the storefront, open to the street like most others in town, is relatively large and stocked to appeal to through-travelers and tourists looking for peculiarly eastern Yucatecan staples, which run from candied papaya and habanero salsa all the way to sarsaparilla syrup and Dutch cheese.

Carnes Concepción seems to be going after a wide market. The *longaniza* I tasted there was fattier than its rivals and not quite as intensely spiced or smoked — overall, a somewhat more conventional sausage. That wasn't entirely a bad thing. By contrast, Abraham's concentrated sausage, used in standard proportions, would dominate common preparations calling for *longaniza*, such as crumbled in scrambled eggs and added in slices to *potaje*, a lentil stew. Carnes Concepción has also taken the step of registering a national trademark, Carnes Temozón, and it has a number of branches, selling its meats vacuum-packed and ready to ship around Mexico. The company processes more than a ton of pork every week, purchased from Kekén, the largest pork producer in the Yucatán, and its smokers are fired around the clock.

I asked one of the employees about how the village of Temozón developed its unique economy. Besides smoked meat, the town has an older, much larger activity, the production of hand-carved furniture, and the family that runs Carnes Concepción also deals in furniture. Half its building is given over to Muebles Concepción, so that hungry visitors can also pick up a sturdy dining-room set, carved with flowers.

I had heard that the two industries had a symbiotic relationship: the sausage smokers were fueled by the furniture makers' scraps of *cedro*, so-called Spanish cedar, a tropical hardwood. I had assumed that the kind of wood must be one of the key differ-

Abelardo Cauch demonstrates his technique for filling sausage casings by hand.

ences between Temozón's *longaniza* and Valladolid's. But when I asked the man at the counter, he looked aghast. "Oh, no, no, not at all!" he protested. Not only were the smokers strictly prohibited from using the wood from furniture making in food, but, and this was perhaps a more convincing argument, the *cedro* would make the meat taste terrible.

The counterman named the same mix of woods that Abraham burns at his smokehouse in Valladolid. The fire is largely fueled by *jabín*, which doesn't have much scent but is good for smoking because it is especially hard and burns especially slow and long; the Maya use it for heat during the winter. (It's also known for its medicinal effects; West Indies natives used it to sedate fish, to capture them by hand, hence its English name of fishfuddle.) For flavor, *bohom*, Spanish elm, another common local firewood, is also added, along with *kitanché*, peccary wood, a tropical tree in the legume family, related to mesquite.

To set the two *longanizas* apart, this left only differences in the quantities of fat, spice, and smoke. Even the modern industries were about the same age. Abraham's smokehouse had been built by his grandfather, and most of Temozón's businesses were also two generations old.

So whose sausage was better? Asking such a bald question was slightly rude, but it was the end of the day, and I was feeling just a little exasperated by the apparent fiction of two different *longanizas*.

"Well, it's clear," said the counterman at Concepción, who may have grown a bit impatient with me as well. "Temozón is known as the *pueblo de carnes ahumadas* and Valladolid is just a *pueblo mágico*."

"Magic town" is a designation the Mexican government bestows on particularly charming and historic places; it has nothing to do with food. With this official sobriquet then, everything was settled.

**Longaniza occupies** a special place in the hearts of Yucatecans precisely because it is the province of specialists. It's hard to make it in your own kitchen, so if you're Yucatecan and you drive too far from Yucatán, you can't get this essential taste of home. That's why the cantina across from the Valladolid bus station offers travelers a chance to stock up, why Temozón can support so many roadside smoked-meat shops, and why, as Abraham told me before I left town, he is building a new smokehouse. There he'll have more capacity, as well as a machine for vacuum-sealing the sausage. It's a big step for his family business — some-

thing that *longaniza* connoisseurs might consider too commercial. But it could build a higher profile for the sausage and, just as important, Abraham said, give people "a taste of the Yucatán when they're away."

A rare opportunity to taste *longaniza* outside Mexico is a little over 2,000 miles away in Los Angeles at Chichén Itzá restaurant. Gilberto Cetina Jr. grew up in Mérida until the age of nine, when his father, with whom he runs the restaurant, moved the family to the United States and opened Chichén Itzá in 2001. Since 2005, the Cetinas have had *longaniza* on the menu.

They started with help from a onetime Valladolid sausage maker who was living in Los Angeles. Almost immediately, Gilberto and his father adjusted the salt and the spices to match what they remembered from home. Gilberto recalls a very specific sausage, the one his family always bought in Mérida, from a Valladolid man who pedaled door to door on a *triciclo*, a three-wheeled cargo cart still commonly used in the villages of the Yucatán. His grandmother had bought *longaniza* from the same man, so by the time Gilberto met him, "he was a pretty advanced age," he recalled with a laugh, when we talked on the phone.

I asked Gilberto where he stood on the issue of Temozón versus Valladolid sausage, and he gave a typically polite Yucatecan answer. "Maybe it's just because it's what I'm used to," he said, "but I'm more biased toward the one from Valladolid." But Gilberto doesn't say his *longaniza* is *de Valladolid*. On the menu, it's simply *longaniza asada* — grilled *longaniza*. He is sensitive to the naming issue. "*Longaniza* is immensely popular in Mérida," he says, "and not all of it is from Valladolid. So there's some pirating going on there, you know?"

His recipe combines pork shoulder with beef rib meat and about 25 percent pork fatback. Beef is not usual in the Yucatán now, although the Longaniza King's 19th-century recipe was half beef, half pork. Gilberto speculates that the change is due to cost, since pork is cheaper. But it could also be logistical, because most butchers in Valladolid sell either pork or beef, not both. In any case, the beef is a good addition — its satisfying meatiness stands up well to the spice.

Gilberto also lets the seasoned meat rest for an hour, during which time it gives up a bit of liquid. Between this and an overnight smoking over mesquite, the sausages lose 40 percent of their weight. The result is a flavor nearly as concentrated as Abraham's sausage, and even on a winter day in a New York City kitchen, a single bite can transport you to sunny Valladolid. ■