

The Journey of the Arepa

Venezuela's daily bread as a metaphor for the global migrant crisis

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Introduction

Arepas are an essential part of Venezuelan cuisine. Whether it is for breakfast, dinner or lunch, the Arepa is considered the country's daily bread due to its simple preparation and nutritional value. As the country is facing a major crisis, in the last few years, over 5 million Venezuelans have been forced to leave their home and start a new life somewhere else, oftentimes struggling to make a living in the countries that they move into. Not only has the diaspora exposed Venezuelans to a myriad of new cultures and traditions, but it also has allowed Venezuelans to bring their own identity everywhere they go.

History of the Arepa



Maize/Corn

Evidence shows that corn (originally called Maize) can be traced back to Mesoamerica sometime between 6000 and 10000 B.C,

specifically in the Northern part of Mexico. Long before the colonizers arrived in "The New World," between 1000 B.C and the XV century, the indigenous people of the North of South America (Colombia and Venezuela) were already cultivating and experimenting with corn and yuca. The word "Arepa" comes from "Erepa" which means Corn in the Carib (indigenous people of South America) native language.



Grinding Corn: Metate

The preparation of the Arepa required a lot of effort from the indigenous: First, they had to thresh the corn to obtain the grains. Then, they would boil and grind it using a *metate* (a tool made out of stone). Once they had a dough they could work with, the next step was making it into a round-flat shape and cooking it with fire on a *Budare* (a flat pan).



Arepas being cooked in a Budare

The oldest reference to the word Arepa comes from the book by European traveler Galeotto Cei "*Journey and description of the Indies (1539-1553)*"

"They make another kind of bread with corn as tortillas, a finger thick, round and large as a plate to the French, or a little more or less, and put them to cook in a pan over the fire, smearing it with fat so that they do not stick, turning them until they are cooked on both sides and this class is called areppas and some fecteguas"



Grinding Corn: Pilon

The *Pilon* came after the *Metate*. This large wooden tool was used in the field to grind or pound corn, a large wooden vase in which the grains were placed to be crushed by a hammer-like tool.

Pounding was usually a task that the women were expected to do while men were working out in the field. For a long period of time, between the colonization up until the industrialization, women were making arepas from scratch, following the method that their indigenous ancestors once developed.



After the colonization, the worlds of the Spaniards, the African slaves and the Indigenous peoples collided. It was a cultural exchange that influenced one another. The conquerors were reluctant to eat bread that was not made out of wheat, while the Indigenous remained faithful to some of their traditions, including the consumption of Arepas. Africans, similarly to the Spaniard adopted new and also brought their own. This collision influenced the preparation of Arepas. Eventually, Arepas were consumed not only as a side dish but as a meal on its own, now filled with a variety of meats and cheeses. Arepas are a central part to Venezuelan gastronomy and identity, which is nothing but a great mixture of these three cultures: European, African and Indigenous.

1954: A turning point

In 1954, a Venezuelan engineer named Luis Caballero Mejías developed a method to expedite the process of making Arepas. He introduced to the market a product that saved the consumer the trouble of threshing or pounding the corn. He invented a type of



cornmeal that significantly reduced the time Venezuelans spent in the kitchen.

The package reads “*La Arepera*,” with the slogans “*No necesita cocimiento*,” which translates to “does not need to be cooked” and “*se prepara al instante*,” instantly prepared. With the image of a corn cob and a woman, the image implies that the housewife would be the one doing all the cooking.

Caballero Mejías' vision opened up the door to the massive expansion of the Venezuelan bread, so much so that the leading company in the food industry, *Empresas Polar*, bought the patent and started their own brand “*Harina P.A.N*” in 1960. There is a controversy surrounding the invention of white cornmeal or “*masa de arepa*” (arepa dough) as *Empresas Polar* states that Carlos Roubicek, an associate of the company, was the one responsible for inventing the machine that substituted the manual work of corn pounding. However, the evidence shows that Luis Caballero Mejías launched his cornmeal “*La Arepera*” in 1954. Regardless of which one of these two men was responsible for this revolutionary idea, it

is unquestionably true that *Empresas Polar* had the leading role in expanding the commercialization of the product.





Polar's cornmeal first package with the slogan "Sin Pilar, Moler, ni Cocer" in English "no more pounding, grinding or cooking"

How did Luis Caballero Mejías' invention change the world?

The industrialization of cornmeal by *Polar* was so important that nowadays people all over the world refer to it by the name of the brand instead of the name of the product: *Harina P.A.N.*



Empresas Polar is still one of the leading Corporations in the Food Industry in Venezuela today. Their huge comercial success has allowed them to expand worldwide. With their signature product, *Harina P.A.N*, *Empresas Polar* has made it possible for Venezuelans to bring Arepas to their table for an affordable price wherever they are.

Ever since the invention of Harina P.A.N, making Arepas has never been easier. The preparation only takes three ingredients: corn meal, water and salt, and approximately 20 minutes of cooking time.

Arepas Post-Pilón: The era of Harina P.A.N



Step One:

Add Corn meal to a bowl and incorporate the water and salt.



Step Two:

Knead the dough until smooth, adding water or corn meal as necessary.



Step Three:

Form uniform balls and flatten them



Step Four:

Cook on medium heat until they look slightly brown (about 10 minutes each side)

The invention of Corn meal in many ways revolutionized Venezuelan Gastronomy and even culture. Making it so accessible

opened the door to the exponential commercialization of not only the product but the dish itself.

Commercialization: *Areperas*

Before the invention of Corn Meal in 1954, women in every region of the country were making arepas the old fashioned way at home and selling them to the men in their communities for lunch or dinner. With *Harina P.A.N.*, it was easier for everybody to make arepas; the original sellers switched to the new method with corn meal and more and more small family restaurants emerged. An *Arepera* is simply a restaurant that sells Arepas exclusively, usually with a pretty standard menu that includes all kinds of fillings, each with their own distinctive name.



Arepera Hermanos Alvarez

Los Hermanos Alvarez: The Alvarez Brothers

According to Venezuelan gastronomy expert Armando Scannone, and journalist Oscar Yanes, the first Arepera in Venezuela was that

of the Alvarez Brothers. A family of 8 brothers who moved to Caracas, the capital of Venezuela and began to sell Arepas downtown. They started off by making them using the *Pilón*, but eventually switched to arepas made with *Harina P.A.N.* They are particularly relevant because they were the first ones to name every single filling you could possibly fill an Arepa with. From shredded cheese and beef to chicken and avocado, these fillings acquired their own distinctive name, and every Arepera started to use them.



Arepa fillings chart

Migration Crisis in Venezuela



In the last decade, Venezuela has been facing a humanitarian crisis that have forced millions to leave the country.



Poverty

The 2020-2021 National Survey of Living Conditions (*ENCOVI*), conducted by researchers at Andres Bello Catholic University (*UCAB*), found that of the country's 28 million residents, 76.6% live in extreme poverty.



Lack of services

Water:

Venezuela struggles with a major water crisis. According to a study held by *Centro de Justicia y Paz (CEPAZ)*, nearly 8 to 10 Venezuelans do not have continuous access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation. Venezuela's water crisis also impacts wastewater

collection, sanitation, control over sewage, and farmer's access to water for irrigation. As a result, national production in agriculture, including for main crops has fallen to approximately 60% in the last 2 decades.



Electricity:

Electricity is a huge concern for the people in Venezuela. In March of 2019, the country experienced a catastrophic blackout that left all 23 states in darkness for approximately a week. This was not an

isolated incident, but the consequences of underfunding, poor management and negligence of the state, and blackouts have been part of the daily lives of Venezuelans all over the country ever since



Repression and abuse of power

The lack of basic services, along with food and medicine shortages all over the country has had a toll on the people of Venezuela. In 2014, 2017 and then again in 2019, concerned citizens took the streets to protest against a deeply corrupt government. Massive

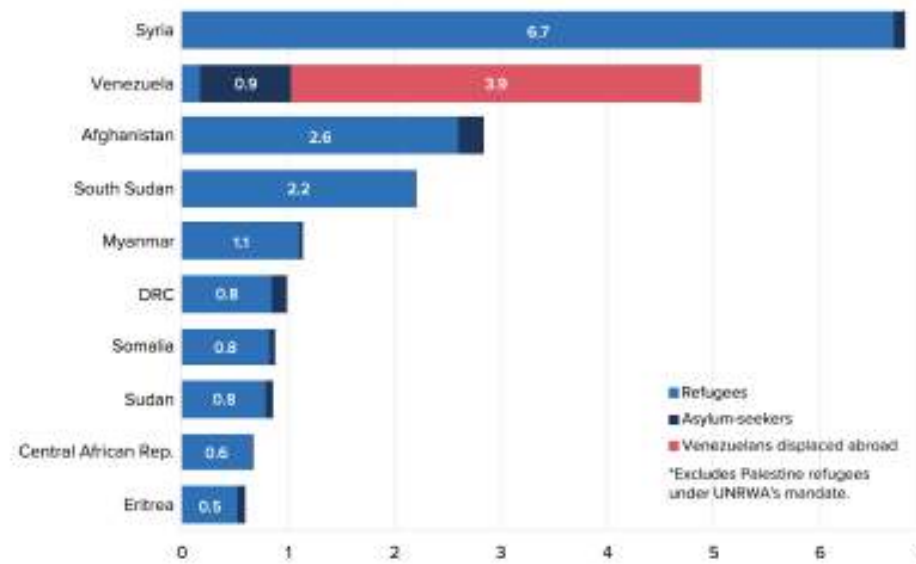
protests took place all over the country, and hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans were met with severe punishment from government officials, the military and the police.

Discouraged and wounded, those who could afford it, were left with no other option but to leave the country as a result of the political turmoil, socio-economic instability and the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Venezuelan Refugees

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 5.9 million migrants and refugees from Venezuela worldwide. Over 18% of the population has left since 2014. Some leaving by plane, some on foot crossing borders to neighboring countries, many of them not knowing what their final destination will be, oftentimes risking their lives.

Figure 3 | International displacement situations by country of origin | end-2020*



Refugees report 2020

Arepas internationally

The great amount of Venezuelans around the world have had to find new ways to make a living in the countries that they arrive in. Finding a job in their field of expertise as an immigrant, especially if undocumented, is very difficult or even impossible, which is why many Venezuelans have had to appeal to their cuisine to stay afloat.

Nowadays, Arepas can be found everywhere. In over 45 countries, there are about 400 *Areperas* Worldwide according to *locos por las arepas.com*, a Venezuelan online platform that keeps track of Venezuelan products around the world.

Arepas are incredibly famous internationally, the low cost of making them, their nutritional value and versatility are some of their most appealing qualities. People of all places have at least heard of them, and they provide a taste of home for all the Venezuelans scattered around the world, they will always find an Arepa spot no matter where they are.



Some Venezuelans raise enough money to rent a space and make it into a restaurant, some rent a food-truck, while others make them at home and wander around the streets selling them. In one way or another, Venezuelan migrants are contributing to the globalization of the Arepa.



Areperas/Venezuelan Restaurants in Argentina, South Africa, China and the U.S.





Arepa street vendors

Conclusion

The arepa serves as a compelling symbol of how food can launch people into new opportunities and methods of survival– not only through sustenance but also through cultural and economic preservation. The migration of Venezuelans into different parts of the world due to government repression has had an immense impact on the global usage of the Arepa. Not only has the arepa remained a cultural staple in Venezuelan nutrition, it has provided a method of Venezuelans escaping poverty to make a living off of the dish and its variations. Similar to how Empresas Polar and the Alvarez brothers were able to revolutionize the production of arepas, the way that Venezuelans have transported the arepa all over the world has allowed them to preserve part of their culture while also flourishing in new environments outside of their home country.

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