

Taco Tuesday's Days Might Be Numbered. Because Cultural Appropriation

A burrito cart in Portland recently closed after citizens of one of America's most progressive cities charged its owners with cultural appropriation. Accused of exploiting a marginalized culture by serving its food, two white women and their breakfast burritos were forced into early retirement.

Does this signify the collapse of ethnic cuisine? Are all Mexican food chains doomed? Must Taco Tuesdays in households across America cease?

According to the outraged and offended, households and consumers are in the clear. It's businesses that need to watch out. Because it's not about the burritos, really. It's about power.

What happened to Kali Wilgus and Liz Connelly, the two women who had the misfortune to run a popular food cart in Portland, was this: In mid-May a local publication ran a [short profile](#) on the women and their business, Kooks Burritos. Wilgus and Connelly explained that they had visited Mexico and gushed over the tortillas in Puerto Nuevo. So they did what many entrepreneurial people do: they asked the chefs their methods and brought those insights back to their hometown and launched their own food cart.

Portlanders were outraged that the women would snag delicious tortilla recipes from Mexico and popularize them in the U.S. without compensating the Hispanic women who shared their secrets. Within a week, Kooks Burritos [had shut down](#).

This sort of thing doesn't happen only to restaurants (although there is now a [full list](#) of culturally appropriative

restaurants in Portland, complete with politically correct alternatives). Those concerned about cultural appropriation want to dictate what you can wear (hint: not [hoop earrings](#), if you're a white woman), how you can work out (forget about doing [yoga](#)), and [who you can cast as a marginalized character in a movie](#). Anything has the potential to become a misstep if minorities have the right to dictate how their cultures are spread.

The argument goes like this: White-run businesses that profit from some aspect of non-Western culture are using their power and privilege to take even more power and privilege away from minorities. But this is ridiculous. Food doesn't have an "identity." It's food. It may be one of the most salient aspects of a particular culture (we know the French for their wines and the Indians for their spices), but food, like an idea, occupies the public domain.

Businesses thrive on this sort of competition. It's one of the driving ideas behind the free market; competition spurs entrepreneurs to make their products better. If someone makes a product and succeeds, similar products must step up their game or lower their prices. As consumers, we end up with better, cheaper products. Stumbling through the identity politics of burritos not only dismantles this cycle but also spoils the beneficial, fundamentally human activity of sharing a good meal.

Maybe Portlanders should have talked to Glen Bell, the founder of Taco Bell. A California native and a WWII veteran, Bell turned his taco stands into the first Taco Bell restaurant in 1962. What gave his early taco stands more promise than the hot dog stands he had originally tried? Maybe because taco seasoning is more flavorful than ketchup. Whatever the case, we don't spend \$2.89 for chalupas at Hotdog Bell today. We eat at Taco Bell, a billion-dollar corporation created by a white guy, because it offers savory, cheap food (granted, with nutritional ramifications only a week of salad eating could

make up for). From a business perspective, Bell's is a simple story of entrepreneurship and success.

But from a social justice standpoint, the story gets muddier. Why should a white man capitalize on the successful sale of another culture's food? This agenda entails correcting a power imbalance in modern America, spreading the power evenly among the people. It's food communism.

If ideas like this can cause such an uproar that a couple of small business owners decide they need to close up shop, when will the outrage machine be satiated? When all ethnic restaurants are owned by proprietors of the same ethnicity? What if a Chinese man doesn't want to own a Chinese restaurant? What if he wants to be a painter?

This was the case with Philip Chiang, co-founder of the restaurant chain P.F. Chang's China Bistro. After the company got off the ground, he sold it to an investment firm founded by white guys and pursued the artistic career he'd always wanted.

It's probably true that white people don't always do justice to another culture's cuisine. Often these businesses are too quick to tailor non-American food to American sensibilities by adding too much salt and fat. But in the end, what's important is whether or not people like the food. So let the quality of the food—and not the ethnic background of its producers or identity politics—determine a restaurant's success or failure. And leave Taco Tuesday alone.

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