



Clockwise from upper left: *Frutas Rivalca* fruit cart; handmade tortillas at *La Gran Chiquita*; María Martínez, the Tamale Queen, works her magic; Luis Abundis churning a new batch at *Nieves Cinco de Mayo*



A FLAVORFUL TOUR OF FRUITVALE

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CHERYL KOEHLER

Watch out, Berkeley's Gourmet Ghetto, Oakland's Fruitvale district is vying for your title of top East Bay food touring destination.

No, there's nothing remotely like Chez Panisse in Fruitvale; a diner can show up at most any of the district's local eateries unannounced, and probably leave with enough money in his or her wallet to finance a splurge at the ice-cream place around the corner. Many of the Fruitvale's chefs and vendors appreciate the value of organic, sustainable produce, and while it might not be their first priority, they may well be getting some of it from their local farmers market. But "organic" is not necessarily the word to look for here—expect instead to enjoy the flavors of a long and colorful culinary tradition carried on by small, locally owned businesses offering many delicious handcrafted items.

The first time I suspected there was something afoot in Fruitvale was on a drive down Fruitvale Avenue. A handsomely renovated Colonial Revival-style storefront caught my eye, and the neon sign for the World Cup Café suggested the likelihood of a good espresso within. But something even more beguiling spanned a lintel across the building's façade—hand-painted lettering announcing the presence of the Tamale Queen. A Classical-style painting over the door indicated that there would be a beautiful patio on the premises—a good place for a queen to hold court.

That indeed was where I found the queen last August as she gave audience to an enthusiastic group of foodies who had joined the Commonwealth Club and local historian Pamela Magnuson-Peddle on a tour entitled "Sabores de Fruitvale" (flavors of Fruitvale). The first thing we learned was that the queen herself, María Martínez, had designed the lovely décor. She gave us a demonstration of tamale-making peppered with colorful description of her cooking apprenticeship as one of 12 children working under their mother in Durango, Mexico.

"We had to kill the pigs to make the tamales," she said, explaining that lard is the traditional fat used in the cornmeal tamale

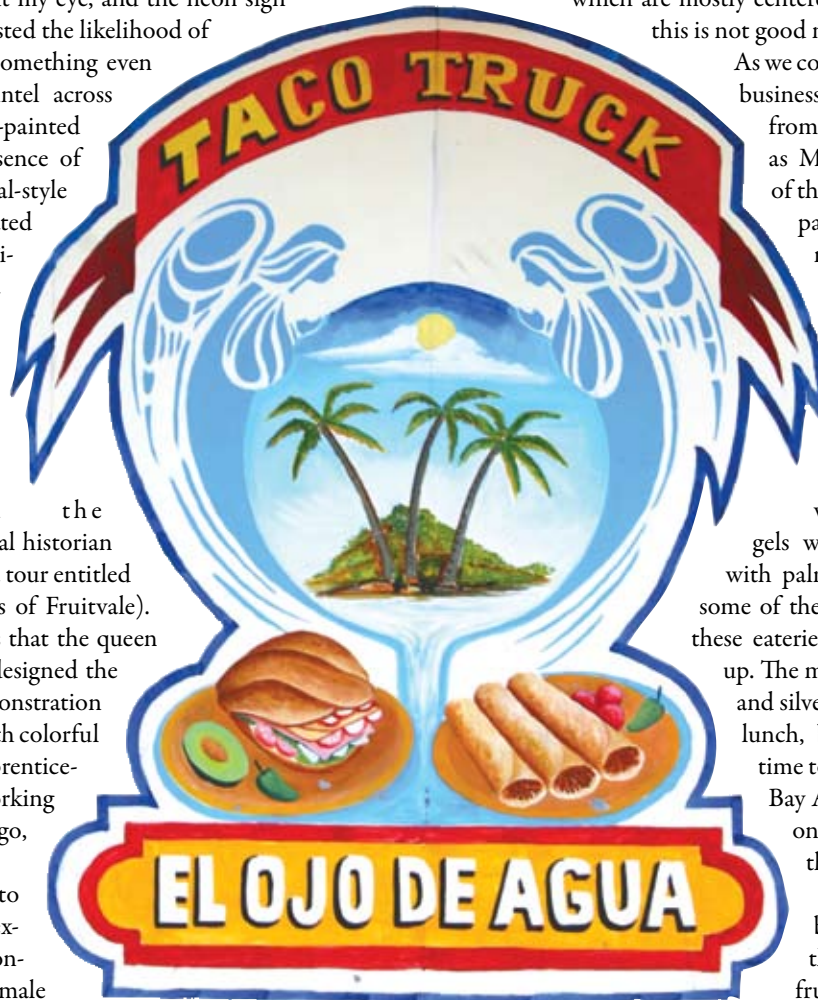
dough. (She now uses olive oil to suit many of her customers.) Other parts of the pig are cooked up to make the traditional pork tamale filling, one of the 10 choices of filling (some suitable for vegetarians) Tamale Queen offers.

Martínez no longer has to kill the pig, and she no longer has to grind the corn in a little molino (mill), as she said her family used to do. She now buys freshly ground corn (or more accurately, *nixtamal*, which is lime-treated corn) from La Finca Tortillería, a local mill that makes and packages tortillas and provides masa for cooks who want to make their own tortillas and tamales.

Martínez has watched business at Tamale Queen grow, with more and more people ordering tamales for big occasions. But she also is watching her profits drop as corn prices rise with the increasing use of corn-based ethanol for fuel and with widening global food shortages. For people whose diet follows the culinary traditions of Mesoamerica, which are mostly centered on corn as a staple ingredient, this is not good news.

As we continued our tour of Fruitvale food businesses, we visited many that operate from trucks or mobile carts, although, as Magnuson-Peddle explained, most of these wheeled vendors will be found parked in the same spot daily, and most have brick-and-mortar locations where some of the food is prepared in advance of each day's commerce. The truck for El Ojo de Agua parks right beside its immobile kitchen, which decorates the corner of Fruitvale and East 12th Street with colorful murals showing angels watching over an island studded with palm trees. As we stood in line for some of the popular bite-size tacos found at these eateries, a van full of mariachis pulled up. The musicians, in their handsome black and silver costumes, were there for a quick lunch, but Enrique Álvarez took some time to tell me about mariachi life in the Bay Area and to set the record straight on the taco trucks. "It's a myth that they are dirty," he said.

This statement was reinforced by Magnuson-Peddle throughout the tour. As we enjoyed freshly cut fruit sprinkled with limejuice and



chile powder at Frutas Ruvalca (corner of International Boulevard and 35th Avenue), she pointed out the health inspection certificates glued to the cart and the required hand-washing sink that's built into the contraption. "It was a pilot program started in 2000," she said.

Throughout the three-hour tour, Magnuson-Peddle described Fruitvale's long history as a neighborhood where food production has been a central feature. Her story begins with the Ohlone people reaping and managing the abundance of this lush ecosystem, and proceeds through the Peralta ranching era into the time when improved transportation (by rail, road, and water) made it profitable for food production to expand. Soon orchards and huge kitchen gardens studded the landscape, while bakers and brewers set up shop on the avenues. At that time, some of the nation's largest canneries were established here, and some, such as the large Del Monte operation, remained a strong economic force in the Fruitvale district into the mid-1970s.

When BART began operation in 1972, it became a key player in shaping Fruitvale into the place we know today. The decade just previous had seen the creation of the Spanish Speaking Unity Council, which Magnuson-Peddle writes was "born of the 'Brown Power' movement of the 1960s [and] developed into one of the strongest community development organizations in Oakland." One especially visible outcome of the Unity Council's efforts is the Fruitvale Transit Village, which opened in 2004. That village includes shops, apartments, and a beautiful plaza, which on Sundays is transformed into a bustling farmers market offering local produce.

Continuing our tour of the daily street fare, we stopped at Piperina Barbacoa (34th Avenue at Farnum), where Magnuson-Peddle explained that, in Mexico, *barbacoa* implies lamb. Her favorite item on this menu is the vegetable consommé; a belly-warming concoction of garbanzos, onion, hot pepper, cilantro, and meat broth.

We also stopped at Tamales Acapulco (1680 Fruitvale Avenue, between 16th and 17th streets), one of many carts offering champurrado (also known as atole), a hot beverage made from milk, chocolate, and cornmeal. (Filipinos make it with rice.) "You have to stir it all the time," said María Sánchez, the Unity Council Commercial Corridor manager who was providing very helpful commentary and translation along the tour. "They make it for women having babies," she said, adding that it's popular with everyone on a cold winter's morning, and lines at the stands offering champurrado can be quite long.

Food markets and restaurants also bring cooking out onto the streets, and so one finds chicken roasting on large grills in parking lots (Fruitvale Market/El Paisano Carnicería at 1502 Fruitvale Avenue) and restaurants like La Gran Chiquita (3503 International Boulevard), where the front window opens to dispense barbecued lamb dished up hot from a large griddle.

Our tour could have gone on for several more hours, but having eaten our way through our scheduled tour time, we ended at the new Fruitvale Public Market (34th Avenue and East 12th Street). Here we visited with two indoor food vendors who hold a daily celebration of fresh produce. One is Rosalva Contreras Chirino, who makes fresh-squeezed juices and also beautiful salads and sandwiches at La Verbena Juice Bar and Café. Winner of Oakland Indie's 2008 Neighborhood Dynamo Award, Chirino created her business to provide healthy food options in a neighborhood fraught with concerns over childhood obesity and diabetes. She also provides employment and training opportunities to women who might be trapped in domestic violence.

Across the hall from Verbena is Nieves Cinco de Mayo, where Luis

Abundis, a jovial and energetic man, cranks out (literally by hand) several delicious flavors of ice cream and sorbet every day with the help of the strapping teenagers he gladly mentors. Abundis works with unusual (for ice cream) ingredients such as rose petals, corn, cheese, avocado, guava, and *arrayán* a sweet/sour fruit similar to guava. (He also offers more-typical choices, such as coconut, chocolate, and vanilla.)

Perhaps the greatest distinction of the Fruitvale food scene (dubbed Comida Corridor by the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 2006) is the way it serves pedestrians, who are largely residents of the neighborhood or visitors arriving on BART. Whole families move around together on foot and there is a sense of excitement every day of the week during the hours when stores and street vendors are open for business.

"We're trying to convince the restaurants to stay open later," said Unity Council Commercial Corridor manager Tom Limon, who manages the farmers market and is developing a local dining guide. You can check in on his progress at the Unity Council website (see below). Limon says that recent reports of an upturn in crime in the Fruitvale district have kept people away from the Comida Corridor, but he reminds us that "it's very important to support these small businesses."

By far, the best source of information on the Fruitvale district is the Unity Council's website: unitycouncil.org

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Fruitvale Market/El Paisano Carnicería



In December, Fruitvale will be full of festivities, many offering traditional foods of the season. Look for the celebration of the Virgen de Guadalupe on or around December 12, which will be held at Saint Elizabeth Church (464 34th Avenue; 510.536.1266). Las Posadas (Spanish for 'the inns') is a nine-day celebration that begins on December 16, with activities scheduled along International Boulevard, at César Chávez Park (Foothill Boulevard at Harrington), and at Saint Elizabeth Church. For more information, check the Unity Council website, unitycouncil.org/commu-nity3 or call 510.535.7175