
MARGARITA MEMORIES: CHASING THE WORM

BY DK CRAWFORD



“If life gives you limes, make margaritas.”—Jimmy Buffett

We all have locations that hold a significant amount of our memories—church or school are often where formative moments occur. When I think of a place that holds some of my most vivid social memories, LaFonda—known as LaFonda’s, one of the first “Mexican” restaurants in my hometown—comes to mind. There I learned to love margaritas, and to laugh at my own folly. LaFonda’s holds memories of tempestuous youth, much like a mother might.

“To show what good came from my experience I have to tell you of things that were not so good.”—Dante, The Inferno

Growing Up Tex-Mex

I grew up in Lafayette, Louisiana, an area that is distinctly French due to the immigration of the Acadians from Nova Scotia. Street signs and menus are often in French and men at barbershops and country stores can be heard telling stories in one of the several dialects of Cajun French. My grammar school only taught English and French (European) and I never even contemplated learning Spanish until my move to the left coast.

I cut my teeth on Southern dishes, soul food, fresh produce from our garden and wild game, along with Cajun

foods like chicken andouille gumbo, crawfish étouffée and jambalaya. LaFonda’s was Tex-Mex and to my family, who had very little exposure to Mexican food, very exotic. We loved their chile rellenos, homemade paper-thin tortilla chips, fried rabbit appetizer, seafood enchiladas with Monterey Jack sauce and crabmeat-stuffed avocados. For us it was like escaping into an unknown world, though some thought it was inferior compared to authentic Mexican cuisine.

LaFonda’s was best known for its frozen margaritas served in single glasses or by the liter. Local lore espouses that these margaritas contain 190-proof Everclear but that has never been proven nor am I certain it’s legal. Either way, these icy drinks had the power to unwittingly pour the best of strong men onto the floor. Whether due to the salt-rimmed liquid fire spirits or the raucous oil-boom see-and-be-seen atmosphere, LaFonda’s was always crowded and buzzing with excitement.

Why Are the Grown-Ups Acting So Weird? Made Up, Liquored Up, Grown-Ups

“Drinking makes such fools of people, and people are such fools to begin with, that it’s compounding a felony.”—Robert Benchley

My first memories of LaFonda’s were with my family, all dressed up for a dinner out. We’d walk in and fight our way through the crowd to find the owner Lee Bob Cox or the maître d’hôtel Harry Alexander. They’d hand us a seating card with a number on it and any drinks brought prior to our being seated were marked on the card. We’d sit in the lounge area (if we could find a place), looking up at numbers on a light box that resembled those in an elevator. Eventually we’d hear the familiar ding and see our number light up. We’d again fight our way to the front, find Harry or Lee Bob and follow him to our seats.

In my youth my parents were pretty straitlaced and wouldn’t imbibe much—they often seemed very Presbyterian and proper. But there was always a combustible energy in the restaurant and I’d witness other grown-ups yelling over the crowd to tell very colorful, animated stories or, as Cajuns would say, *“Cher, dey (they) passed a good time.”* The wild drunken people whirling around as they ambled from table to table intimidated me. I’d see friends of my parents dressed to the nines, laughing raucously and acting quite unlike themselves. I was fascinated and terrified all at once.

Almost Grown Up and Dressed Up

LaFonda's was where, at the age of 17, I had dinner before my winter formal dance. I was with a boy I really wanted to impress. I had taken weeks trying to find the perfect dress in every store in town before finally discovering in the attic one of my mother's dresses from her youth.

My mother had an emergency appendectomy surgery that morning. I saw her through the procedure and when she woke, she insisted I go on my date. I left Mom with her friend and felt guilty as I rushed home to get ready for the dance. I ran in circles trying to curl my hair, apply mascara and get dressed before my date arrived. When Tim picked me up he complimented my dress. It was a Hepburn-esque black silk number with a tightly fitted bodice and waist and a full, stiff, A-line skirt that danced as I walked. We got in his father's Cadillac and started to drive toward LaFonda's to meet other friends for dinner. Five minutes from the restaurant a car ran a stop sign and plowed into us. We had to call Tim's father to pick us up and left in another car as the Cadillac was towed away.

We made it to LaFonda's a little late but still managed to meet our friends. I finally started to unwind as nachos were brought to our table. As I sat back and relaxed, I felt an odd sensation. My dress felt like it was coming undone in the front in little pops. I rushed to the bathroom and discovered that the car accident had pulled my dress and the old stitching was giving way right up the two front seams.

I held my hands over my chest as I walked back to the table, told Tim I was cold and he lent me his jacket. As I continued to eat or laugh or breathe at dinner, I could feel my dress coming more and more unraveled. I finally let on to my date and was escorted out of the restaurant. We rushed back to my house so I could change into my mother's other dress from her teenage years—my second choice. Luckily there was an alternative and it got me through the dance, though when I look at the pictures from that time I'm amused—I'd changed the dress but not my makeup. I have on dark red nail polish and lipstick with a delicate white lace dress piped in pink satin! I looked a bit like Miss Kitty ready for a night at the Long Branch Saloon.

Lessons in Limits: Foreshadow of the Future

As I grew older I spent more time at the restaurant with my oldest brother than with my parents. I remember driving him home from over-imbibing more than once as only a responsible little sister can or letting him into the house when he was locked out for coming home late. I also recall his sitting and drinking and holding court on his barstool one night. When he stood to go to the bathroom his legs turned to jelly and he fell on the ground. There was something about the margaritas that wouldn't hit until you stood. After this experience with my brother I saw others follow suit.



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My First Margarita

When I turned 18 finally I could have margaritas at LaFonda's. My favorite combo was the equivalent of how people now order at their local coffee joint. "half and half, light salt, peppermint." Meaning I would get half margarita, half sangria, a salt-rimmed glass and a peppermint stick stirrer. It would appear as a celestial confection, swirled white and raspberry stirred with a barbershop-pole peppermint stick. You've never lived until you taste the slowly melting peppermint infused into a winey, limey, salty, slushy drink.

We All Have Moments We'd Like To Forget

I learned more about my family each time we'd go out together as adults. One Christmas visit we had a few liters and I talked my siblings into sharing their most embarrassing moments with each other. We were in the main dining room, surrounded by other tables whooping and hollering with the reverie of tequila. I started first with the memory of my dress strategically splitting up the seams the night of winter formal. My siblings laughed loudly, then my brother Nathan went.

He told a story that involved being locked out of a gas station bathroom in a desperate moment, holding a huge ten-pound roll of toilet paper with traffic going by and honking. My brother John was next and raised the stakes again with a story about spring break in Florida. Each time we went around the table we'd come up with worse and worse memories to tell. A sort of one-upsmanship evolved.

I excused myself to go to the restroom and noticed the neighboring tables had now moved on to hanging spoons off the tips of their noses, ears and chins. I was still giggling at my brothers' stories as I weaved my way back from the restroom through the packed dining room.

As I approached the table I saw my brothers were now having a contest with the spoon table. I sat down still

laughing and noticed everyone around me was laughing hysterically too—indeed it seemed as if the whole dining room was laughing.

We Are All Laughing Together, Aren't We?

"You don't have to hold on to the pain, to hold on to the memory."—Janet Jackson

As I sat the chair felt very cold. I stood a bit to re-tuck my dress under me properly and felt no dress. I saw everyone laughing more and more as I pulled at my belt and my dress started coming out of the back of my pantyhose. As I pulled it out, still a bit puzzled, the laughter around me increased until my brain went into what seemed like slow motion and I realized what had happened. I had just sauntered through the entirety of LaFonda's in my high heels with my dress tucked into the back of my hose. Quickly the newest embarrassing moment was born as I accidentally won the contest that night.

Silliness Shared and Pranks Revisited

Each holiday my siblings came home we'd gather at LaFonda's. New friends would be initiated into the wildness and we'd catch up with the old. Once or twice we talked our mother into joining us and even pulled a prank on her by having the entire restaurant sing Happy Birthday to her, bring her a cake and one of LaFonda's terrible signature ceramic clowns. My mother, always the polite Southern woman smiled and tried to pretend it was her birthday but when she got a chance she'd turn to one of us amid the singing and exasperatedly cross her eyes. All night friends came up to wish her happy birthday. Somewhere we still have that awful clown.

Older and Wiser Though Memories Live On

"You do surely bar the door upon your liberty if you deny your griefs to your friends."—William Shakespeare. Hamlet

Now when I go to LaFonda's I thoughtfully and slowly sip my margarita and many of my friends don't drink at all. We order the same food and run into old friends but we've all calmed down. We are all living less volatile lives and instead of embarrassing moments our discussions tend more toward our jobs or children.

When I taste the familiar flavors, I quietly relive all the memories and voices of my colorful history. I am thankful to have shared these moments with my family—some of whom are no longer here. There is a bittersweet note I experience along with the humor as I miss those I've lost and now realize that certain moments there, like my brother falling off the stool, were early signs of a much bigger problem. He along

with others got lost in the revelry of Louisiana and died from alcoholism at the age of 44. It seems unfair that some of us look back on memories and have something to laugh or blush about while others faltered and never recovered. Just as every true comedy must contain some tragedy, so does my story contain the edge of loss.

I remain grateful to my lessons learned at LaFonda's. I no longer take myself so seriously; I laugh at my mistakes and embarrassing moments and even occasionally have the nerve to share them with others.

There is power in owning our stories—both good and bad.

DK Crawford is a restaurant critic, freelance writer and photographer originally from the bayou country of Southwestern Louisiana. She is deeply passionate about all things food-related, her dog Noop, Southern fiction and her wildly wonderful family. She believes she could solve many of the world's problems if only she could feed everyone a bowl of her homemade chicken soup.

DK recently won a writing contest sponsored by The Ojai Post and Arcadia Publishing and has since joined The Ojai Post as their newest author and food blogger. See her most recent articles and reviews in the VC Reporter, Ventana Monthly, www.ojaipost.com, and online at her food blog The Food Savant at www.thefoodsavant.blogspot.com. She is a longtime member of Slow Food and the Southern Foodways Alliance. She has moved to Ventura, CA after living in Ojai for the past 6 years and continues to work in both locations.



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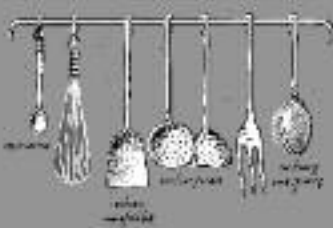
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