

A Grassroots Group Taps into a Nostalgia Market

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By Patrick Breslin

All photos by Patrick Breslin

Nopales, the tender branches of the prickly pear cactus, are a key ingredient in Mexican cuisine. They can be eaten grilled and tossed with a squeeze of lime and olive oil. More commonly, they're added to scrambled eggs for breakfast. They're also used in soups, stews and salads, and as a filling in tortillas. Around the little town of Ayoquezco de Aldama, in Oaxaca, people claim they produce the best nopales in Mexico. In recent years, many Ayoquezcanos have migrated north, and like most migrants, they long for the foods of home. That kind of craving gives rise to a "nostalgia market", and supplying the products migrant consumers grew up with can mean economic development in the hometowns they left behind.

Catalina Sánchez Jiménez was once a migrant, working in agriculture in California before returning to Ayoquezco where she and her husband had fields of nopales. Unimpressed with the quality of the nopales for sale in California, she wondered about shipping the Ayoquezco variety north. She took the idea to the Mujeres Empacadoras de Nopal de Ayoquezco (MENA), an organization of 68 mostly women nopal producers in which she had long been active. The members decided to move into the nostalgia market by taking advantage of Oaxaca's most important festival. Each July, Oaxacans at home and abroad celebrate the Guelagueta, a whirlwind of music, dance, costumes, food and exhibitions fusing Spanish culture with indigenous traditions. Last year, Oaxacans in southern California planned a lavish weekend of festivities at California State University's San Marcos campus, north of San Diego.

MENA's president, Carmén Estela Cruz Chavez, and secretary, Asela Rosa Barrios Pérez, carried cases of the group's pickled nopalitos, mole sauce and chocolate to the festival. Coordinating at the other end was Felix Cruz, an Ayoquezco native who is president of Migrantes por Ayoquezco (MIGPAO) and also of Chapulin Distributors Inc., the California corporation migrants created to work with MENA. APOYO, profiled on page 23, helped make this linkage in its pioneering efforts to involve migrants in the development of their hometowns. Carmen and Asela started their foray into the nostalgia market on an overnight bus from Oaxaca to Mexico City, then caught a plane to Tijuana where Cruz and several other migrants who are California residents picked them up. By the next morning, the travelers were busy in a cut-flower-packing warehouse owned by yet another Ayoquezco native, helping prepare food and assemble flower arrangements for the Guelagueta.

The festival, with its lively music, swaying dancers, masked figures and a busy corridor of commercial booths, drew thousands, and many of them wound up in the constant crush of people three and four deep in

front of the Ayoquezcans' booth. Brisk sales for the Guelaguetza suggested they may well have a better market than Catalina anticipated for the increased production when a new packing plant comes on line.

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MENA's logo. Ayoquezco means "place of turtles."

Preparing nopales, above, and toasting cacao beans for chocolate for sale in California.

Carmén Cruz Chávez, right, and Asela Barrios Pérez wait for the bus to Mexico City.

MENA recently won a competition sponsored by the Mexican Ministry of Agriculture and is using its \$594,000 award to construct a processing and packing plant.

At the Tijuana airport, Carmén Cruz helps load trucks bound for San Marcos, site of the Guelaguetza.

Preparations in San Diego for the celebration.

Students publicize the festival on the San Marcos campus.

The Guelaguetza festival