

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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TORTAS HERE ! / Aca Las Tortas (1951)

Juan Bustillo Oro

Genre : Drama

Link to film: <https://youtu.be/ysuQMIBtjsc>

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OVERVIEW

Acá, Las Tortas! is a melodrama of Mexican identity where authenticity is measured in the ways in which elitist or alien practices, products, or values are rejected, even at tremendous personal cost or sacrifice. The restoration of Mexican roots is redemptive and nowhere is this more evident than in the case of the food of everyday people, and also in their work and entertainment. It is an urban authenticity centered in Mexico City, where small family-owned restaurants, shops, clubs, dancing (in the “carpa” or tent-show tradition). In *Acá, Las Tortas*, director Juan Bustillo Oro makes an important artistic statement about the merit of core Mexican values – family, food, language, honest work with one’s hands, stewardship, modesty, and thrift. Rejected are the elitist values of the idle rich (vestiges of colonialism) and also those of the Gringo “north” which threatens to engulf the local culture. In this film, Bustillo Oro depicts for his populist audience of the expanding economy of the 1950s what would be called “The Mexican Dream,” that holds that prosperity will come from honoring your heritage (most importantly, your parents) and that the most potent and effective vectors of communication are from those who are the most authentically Mexican, most true to Mexican values. They forge “truth paths” that allow the revelation of reality, the opening of true communication, and a road to redemption. *Acá, Las Tortas* is the story of the unintended consequences of hard work, sacrifice, and commercial success of two hard-working “salt of the earth” parents whose three children have all come to bad ends: for the eldest, through self-loathing and addiction, and younger two, through being pretentious spendthrifts with a sense of privilege and exaggerated elitism, all driven by a sense of shame about their humble origins.

SYNOPSIS

The film begins as the family restaurant owners, Dolores and Don Chente, learn that the apples of their eyes, their son and daughter, Lupe and Ricardo, are coming home after three years studying in the U.S. Instead of being a happy reunion, the encounter is awkward. Lupe and Ricardo have groomed themselves to pass as elite and in fact, Lupe is engaged to a member of one of the most prestigious families in the city. To make things worse, Lupe and Ricardo do not want anyone to know who their parents are because they are ashamed of the fact that they still bake the buns at home and always smell of onions. In the meantime, Lupe’s fiancé and his famous family are, in reality, stone broke, and they are looking to Lupe to snatch them from the clutches of the creditors. Dolores and Don Chente are dismayed by the way that Lupe and Ricardo are burning through their savings. They are also tormented by the fact that their prodigal alcoholic son, Vicente, is on the brink of death and almost living on the streets. When Vicente learns that Lupe’s fiancé is marrying her just for money, and that his parents are virtually bankrupt even having to sell their beloved restaurant, *Acá Las Tortas!*, he storms into the wedding to stop it from happening and to save his sister and to restore the human dignity of his parents. Vicente dies, his abandoned wife takes solace in her child, and the newly humbled Lupe and Ricardo abandon their shallow, materialistic ways, to join with their parents to launch a new restaurant.

STORY

PARENTS' SHOP: The film opens to a scene of restaurant so crowded and busy that people are waiting outside and clamoring to enter the popular eatery. Tortas are an informal Mexican dish, a kind of sandwich, which consists of a special bread cooked the day before. Inside, the bread contains layers of vegetables and the main ingredient. A typical torta has avocado, onion, tomato, sauce, and then the main ingredient which can be sausage, meatball, veal, beef, chicken, even sardines. The tortas are wrapped in paper. People often drink lemonade, juice, or beer with them. In the restaurant, Don Chente and his wife, Dolores, the founders and owners, are working at breakneck speed to satisfy their customers.



CHILDREN RETURN : Dolores and Don Chente are delighted that Lupe and Ricardo have returned from the U.S. They arrive in stunning fashion, in a rented limousine, dressed in elegant clothing of the latest fashion. Dolores comments on Lupe's elegance – "Oh, it's nothing – just my traveling clothes." In the 3 years or so that Lupe and Ricardo have been in the U.S., they have transformed into both elegant and extremely snobbish elitists.



SPENDERS Lupe and Ricardo have reinvented themselves in the U.S. Reinvention costs money, though. They ask their generous parents to fund them, and they cheerfully oblige. Lupe and Ricardo seem to have achieved tremendous social mobility and are now in the upper reaches of society. However, to stay there, they can't let anyone know about their humble origins. So, they invent a story: "Our parents are in Switzerland, but suffer from poor health and cannot travel." The fact that Lupe and Ricardo are now ashamed of their parents is painfully apparent to everyone. "Look at this fantastic Cadillac, with 8-cylinder engine and elegant appointments. It was only \$50,000 pesos! Don Chente and Dolores are horrified, but do not want to alienate their children. They love them and do not want to lose them, which may explain why they are enabling them, even to the point of their own self-destruction.

THE HOUSE PARTY: Eduardo and Poli, his catty and snobbish sister, play cards with Ricardo and Lupe at a house party held by a friend of the family. The hostess has decided to have the best and most famous tortas in the entire town catered in. So, of course, that means Acá Las Tortas. Poli and Eduardo, who are privy to Lupe and Ricardo's shameful secret, decide to use the occasion to say rather needling comments. They sadistically look forward to the moment when Lupe and Ricardo come face to face with their disavowed parents. The moment happens, and it is worse than anyone expected. Ricardo treats his own father like a stranger, and a servant, and Lupe pretends not to know her own mother, who is so discomfited by this that she drops a glass of beer, which falls to the ground and splashes onto Poli's dress, ruining it. After the experience, Dolores is devastated. She weeps that they've lost all three of their children. What Jacinta has commented on earlier is true – they lost the elder son, Vicente, through addiction. In Jacinta's opinion, it's from the poor treatment by his father when he was a young boy. Now, all three are lost to them. It is a low moment.



MARIA AND HER SON: Not all of the people in Don Chente's circle of friends and family have been so fortunate. Jacinta visits a young woman, María, who is taking care of her young son, Ricardito, who is around 4 years of age. Ricardito is Ricardo's son, but was born after Ricardo and Lupe left to study in the U.S. Jacinta has been bringing María and Ricardito food and other assistance, as María's life is very challenging. Dolores and Don Chente do not know that they have a grandson. Ricardo happens to run into María and Ricardito while they are walking down the street. Ricardo barely acknowledges María. Later, Jacinta informs him that the little boy is his. Ricardo is coldly dismissive: "How can I be sure of that?"



MARIE DANCES. Jacinta finds Vicente after many years. In her conversations with Vicente, she lets him know that she has a new job dancing at a nightclub. Vicente, who first loved María, but then lost her affection to his own younger brother, longs for contact. He sneaks into the nightclub where María's dance number begins. She dances with two men who dance in a Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly kind of manner, in a cabaret act that reminds one of those from the carpas, or the tent shows. It is designed to be popular with men at nightclubs. Vicente watches from the shadows in a rumpled suit and disheveled hair.

MARIE OVERHEARS: María is a success at her job in the nightclub. Her dancing improves, and she works on more complex routines that require more innovative choreography. But, still, it is a nightclub, and after her dance, she is required to sit with the best patrons and to have a drink with them and chat. Coincidentally, Eduardo Salgado's friends have invited him to the nightclub as a bachelor's party on the eve of his wedding. He complains to them about the fact he can't stand Lupe, but is doing it for the money. María overhears it and is horrified.

PANCO IN LOVE Pancho is a successful entrepreneur an auto repair shop: Don Chente visits Pancho after work. Pancho, a hard-working young auto mechanic, is beneath a car. He is in love with Lupe, but has not heard much from her since she left to study in the U.S. He has been waiting for her, and in the meantime, has started his own shop and also has a number of cars. He has a positive outlook and a promising future. In another chance encounter with loved ones from the past, Lupe encounters Pancho. She cuts him absolutely cold and does not even acknowledge him. Pancho, who has been in love with Lupe, and still is, is devastated.

EDUARDO, THE FIANCEE: The Salgados: “They sicken us, but we’re just doing it for the money.” Eduardo Salgado, Lupe’s fiancé, is discussing his engagement to his parents and their attorney. They are in dire straits financially and are looking forward to having access to Don Chente’s resources. The attorney mentions that he’s checked them out thoroughly and verified that they have a successful business, plus own several buildings in the neighborhood. Money that smells like onions still spends! Eduardo whines about his sacrifice. “At least she’s cute,” mentions the attorney. Eduardo mocks Lupe and Ricardo for being common and thinking that they could fool the Salgados. Eduardo Salgado lights a cigarette as he speaks to his parents who express their gratitude that he will be marrying a woman whose parents have a successful restaurant, real estate, and money. Eduardo comments that money that smells like onions still spends.



VINCENTE: After seven years, thanks to knowledge shared by Jacinta, Don Chente and Dolores see their oldest child, Vicente, who is fighting a losing battle with addiction and living in despair and squalor with his only true friend, his dog. Dolores displays a mother's undying love, while Don Chente expresses his pain and disappointment. Vicente, the lost black sheep, has never lost the love of his mother, Dolores. Although his father, Don Chente, is deeply ashamed that his oldest child has fallen into the depths of addiction and vagrancy, and has essentially disappeared for seven years. They do not know if he is alive or dead. However, after María and Jacinta find Vicente, they face their fears and feelings. Dolores pours out her love, and in doing so, she softens Don Chente's heart and he comes to accept Vicente. Vicente has told Jacinta that he does not expect to live long – he has a high fever every afternoon and feels very weak. The doctor called in by Don Chente gives them a grim prognosis. "He's young and could potentially come back, but he must have absolute rest for a period of time."



THE SCANDAL AT THE WEDDING: Dolores and Don Chente have not been invited to the wedding. Nevertheless, they both dream of seeing their daughter marry, so they stand along the wall with the other observers. Lupe and Eduardo are at the altar, their family in the audience exchanging knowing looks. At that moment, Vicente breaks in and announces that he knows a reason why they should not be married, and that reason has to do with the fact that Lupe has been misrepresenting herself and that her parents are not in Switzerland, and are not rich, but are now dirt poor thanks to the fact that they've been subsidizing their children's spendthrift ways. The Salgados turn on their heels and stride out. There is no love for Lupe and her brother, and in fact, they look at her in a despective manner. At his medically inadvisable exertion, Vicente collapses to the floor.



VINCENTE DIES: Vicente's exertions to intercede in the marriage of Lupe and Eduardo essentially killed him. He is now on his deathbed and his family are saying their good-byes. As they do so, he exhorts them to do something in the future that will help them as a family. For example, he asks Ricardo to do the right thing and acknowledge that he is the father of Ricardito and to support him and the mother, María. He also asks Lupe to consider Pancho. He asks both to help their parents start over and open a new torta restaurant since they sold Acá las Tortas and all their material wealth to support Lupe and Ricardo's luxurious lifestyle. In a heartwrenching scene, Vicente dies, his mother embracing him.

STARTING OVER: Across the street from the now-sold Acá Las Tortas, Don Chente and his entire family open up a new torta shop, and it is an immediate hit. Lupe works at the cash register and Ricardo works the front of the house, calling people in from the streets, greeting, and also cleaning tables. Jacinta, Don Chente, and Dolores are in their customary roles. The film ends as Don Chente embraces Ricardo, who is proud and happy to be a part of the family enterprise.



Lupe works in Acá Las Tortas where she now appreciates her hard-working, loyal friend, Pancho, who visits her after eating lunch at the restaurant.



In the final scene of the film, Don Chente expresses his gratitude and love to his son, Ricardo, who now wholeheartedly embraces his Mexican identity and heritage, his family, and tortas.

THEMES

Maternal love: Perhaps the most persistent theme in the film is that of a mother's undying and unconditional love for her children. Despite the fact that Vicente is a disappointment (and a humiliation in the eyes of his father), Dolores loves him. As Lupe and Ricardo seem to spurn her and to be ashamed, Dolores feels the agony of rejection and loss. Another mother in the film, María, loves little Ricardito unconditionally, even though he is a reminder of her loss of the love of her life, Ricardo. Jacinta loves María as a daughter, and takes care of her and watches out for her as a mother would.

Family: Families eventually overcome the external pressures that drive them apart. Don Chente and Dolores work hard and their business is a success. One would think that such success would unite the family, but instead it drives them apart because it finances Lupe and Ricardo's sojourn in America where their education has the unintended consequence of teaching them to be snobs. However, thanks to the behind-the-scenes communications of Jacinta, the family is able to come back together and protect Lupe from certain humiliation, grant emotional absolution to the black sheep, Vicente, and to look to the future generation as Ricardo shows pride in the family business, and an eagerness to respect and work hard with this father.

Pride: Pride leads Lupe and Ricardo down a destructive path as their desire to reinvent themselves after returning from the U.S. as high-status members of the wealthy elite. The broke but prideful Salgado family also suffers from pride as they do not deign to actually work for a living or do something productive. In this case, pride is not self-respect but arrogance, and is a sickness that this film wholeheartedly con-

Class: At the heart of the pride and family issues is a critique of the class-conscious, rigidly hierarchical Mexican society. The film is a celebration of the ingenuity, hard work, and integrity of the Mexican working class, and an indictment of the idle rich, illustrated in the Salgado's scathing attitudes toward Lupe, Ricardo, and the family, and the way that Vicente and other internalize the class system and turn it into shame.

Redemption: Redemption occurs in many ways in *Acá Las Tortas*. First, there is redemption from the consequences of one's vices or errors by returning to the family. Second, there is redemption through the Mexican identity itself, and by embracing the core, working class ideas and values of the people. Mexican food of the people, namely tortas, with the home-baked bread, the fresh ingredients, which include the redolent onions along with the colorful vegetables that align with the Mexican flag – the red tomatoes, the green avocado, the white slices of onion – restore Mexicans to their roots, and offer redemption from their forays into the “extranjero.” The food redeems Mexicans from their dabbling in “gringo” culture.

Shame of Origin. Dolores and Don Chente own a successful restaurant that specializes in the popular layered sandwiches called “tortas” in Mexico. They are so popular and typically Mexican that they are almost an institution, like barbecue or chili in the American Southwest. That said, there is nothing elegant about a “torta” restaurant. You stand in a long line, crowd yourself toward the counter to order and to pay, and then pull yourself up to a table to eat a kind of club or submarine sandwich with homemade buns, fresh vegetables (with onion being a mainstay), and an array of options for the main ingredient, ranging from beef to sausage to sardine. Dolores and her husband, Don Chente, have worked hard and sacrificed to make their little shop a success. Unfortunately, their joy is not unalloyed, as they have lost touch with their oldest son, Vicente, who lost himself down a dark path of addiction. They are hopeful about their younger son and daughter, Lupe and Ricardo, whom they have sent to the United States to study. However, their stay in the U.S. has turned Lupe and Ricardo into the worst kind of snobs and spendthrifts, and they are ashamed of their mother and father's business and the fact they “smell of onions.” The movie explores class differences as it celebrates Mexican popular culture and traditions. It also aligns itself with other films of the day as the 1940s and 50s were characterized by many “shame of origin” stories that explored societal attitudes toward the poor, minorities (Black, indigenous),

immigrants, and the disabled. The goal of the stories / films was to restore human dignity by rehumanizing the protagonists and exposing the cruelty of the oppressors. *Acá, Las Tortas* does that, as well as celebrating Mexican identity and pride.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dolores: The matriarch of the family, Dolores has been married to Don Chente for many years and together, they have launched and run a successful family restaurant, and have raised three children, Vicente, Lupe (short for the Mexican name, Guadalupe), and Ricardo. She is an emotional, caring, and generous woman who dresses in traditional Mexican working class attire: a modest dress, an apron with ruffles, and a rebozo (long, woven shawl) around her shoulders when she goes out.

Loving: First and foremost, Dolores is a loving and generous mother, who sacrifices for her children. She is in agony over the seven-year absence of her oldest child, Vicente, whom she does not condemn for his descent into addiction. She just wants to know if he is alive or dead. When he reappears, she is the first to urge Don Chente to forgive him and to reconcile. Dolores is cut to the quick when the newly returned Lupe and Ricardo, poisoned by their years in America, do not even acknowledge her in a chance encounter at an elegant party catered by *Acá Las Tortas*. She forgives them, however, with a very sincere heart. Maternal love is an important theme and part of the positive message of the film, which suggests that a Mexican mother's love is pure, healing, and a bedrock upon which the nation can build itself.

Forgiving: Although wounded and heart-sick due to the shameful way in which her very own children treated their own mother as a total stranger, Dolores understands the situation and is quick to forgive them as they beg her to forgive their coldness and their fundamental error. Likewise, after Vicente sacrifices himself to bring the family back together, he dies in his mother's arms, and the seven years he spent away from her, when she did not know if he was alive or dead, are forgiven.

Hard-working: Dolores works each and every day at the restaurant, *Acá Las Tortas*. She also works in the home where she cooks the bread for the next day's tortas, and keeps their modest home neat and clean. They are happy in their little nest, mainly because Dolores has made the house home through her tireless cleaning, cooking, sewing, and nurturing.

Jacinta: The quintessential a working class, down-to-earth, straight-talking, direct, and hardworking Mexican from Mexico City, Jacinta plays an invaluable role in the lives of the Don Chente, Dolores, and their family, along with the ones she loves, which include her god-daughter, María.

Gossipy: Jacinta talks. It's something that Don Chente complains about, but if Jacinta did not talk, there would be no possibility of having María supporting her own child, of Vicente having the courage to face his parents, of Vicente interceding to stop the reckless and inadvisable wedding between Lupe and Eduardo Salgado. Her talk also sets up a chain of events that open conduits of truth, which lead to conduits of truth.

Down-to-Earth: Jacinta wears her hair pulled back into a serviceable bun, and she wears long skirts, ruffled aprons, and long-sleeved cotton blouses. When she goes out, she drapes a rebozo, a long shawl woven of light wool in traditional Mexican patterns, around her shoulders. She is kind-hearted to the extreme, and even though she talks, according to some, too much, her words serve as bridges and catalysts for positive action.

Scrappy: Jacinta is spunky, energetic, and outspoken. Even though she is old enough to be a grandmother, she has enormous reserves of energy and she uses them to clean, gather baskets of food, clothing, and medicine to bring to María, Vicente, and other loved ones.

Other Characters

Don Chente Mendoza	Founder of Acá Las Tortas, husband of Dolores, Father
Vicente	Dolore and Don Chente's older son
Lupe	Dolores and Don Chente's daughter
Ricardo	Dolores and Don Chente's younger son
Ponciano	Aspiring restaranteur, wants to buy Acá Las Tortas
Eduardo Salgado	Son from a high-society family with secret financial problems
Poli	Eduardo's sister, extremely snobbish

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. One could argue that *Acá, Las Tortas* contains examples of the best and worst types of sons and daughters. For example, when Lupe and Roberto return from their time studying in the U.S., they profligately spend their parents' money and even pretend not to know them when they are with there elegant friends. Their older brother, Vicente, disappears for seven years, in which time he was nothing but a drunken vagrant. However, each achieves a kind of redemption. How does each redeem herself or himself. What is the film suggesting constitutes a good daughter or a good son?
2. Don Chente and Dolores are, alternatingly, hypercritical parents (Don Chente to Vicente) and overly generous. Are they responsible or irresponsible? Please support your assessment with at least two scenes. What are the characteristics of a responsible parent? Is being over-indulgent irresponsible? How might the behavior of Don Chente and Dolores motivated by shame about their humble social rank and the desire to advance in the rigid Mexican social hierarchy?
3. One can consider Jacinta a catalyst by means of the "truth paths" she creates through her not always very welcome gossip. Describe two scenes that illustrate how the "truth paths" are opened up by her talk, and how they demonstrate her deeply held sense of how things should be, a kind of "rage for order."
4. The uselessness of self-hatred: Vicente leaves home because he can't overcome his addiction. He lives as a bum rather than returning home, excusing / explaining his absence for seven years as a shameful time when he was afraid to come home. What do you think of that behavior? His mother was sick with worry and grief, and his father felt deep shame and frustration. At the core of Vicente's behavior is self-condemnation and self-hatred. How does the film demonstrate that such attitudes of self-loathing are ultimately counter-productive and destructive, not only to oneself, but to one's family and community?
5. *Acá Las Tortas* is an example of successful and failed attempts at reinvention, and the ultimate the "stickiness" of identity. Please describe how each of the following characters tries to reinvent himself or herself, and how the "stickiness" of identity seems to first trap them, but then to affirm their roles as valuable members of society. Lupe and Ricardo "reinvention" as U.S.-educated members of the elites; María as a nightclub entertainer; Don Chente as the owner of a brand new restaurant.