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# Latinos In The US: Griselda García Castillo, From Lawyer To 'Bodeguera,' Explains How Her NYC Store 'El Tepeyac' Highlights Mexican Culture

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By **Maria G. Valdez** Aug 22 2013, 04:03PM EDT

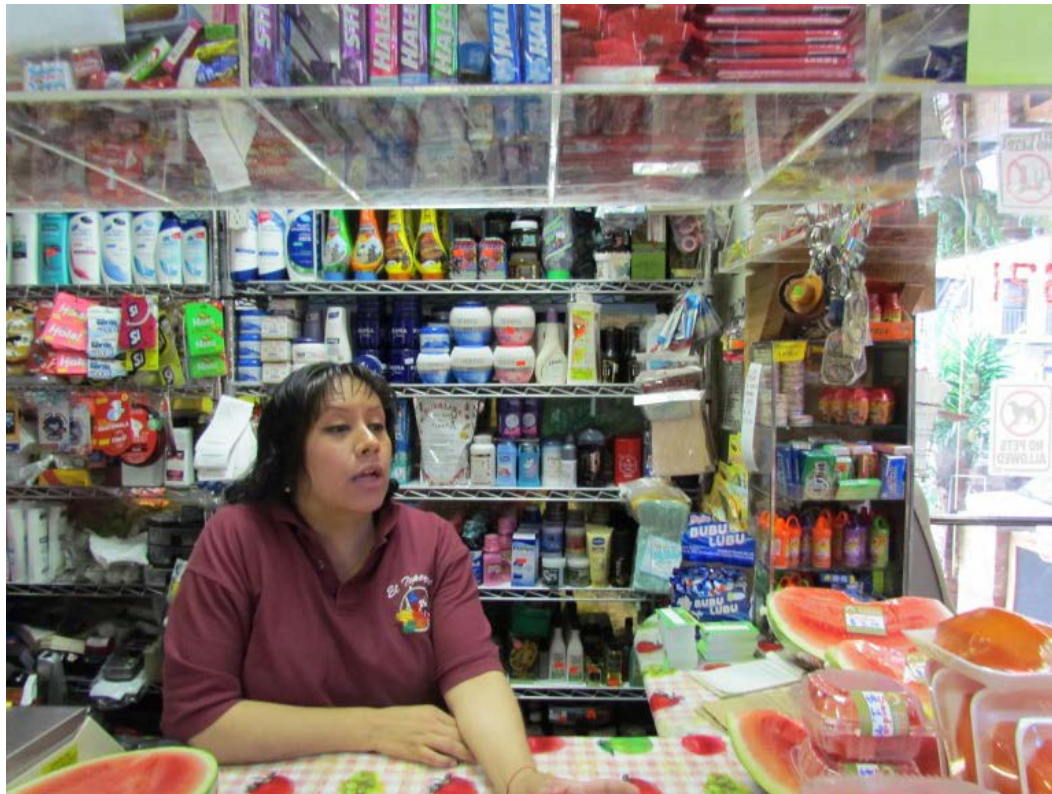


Image Latin Times

It is very interesting to live in the United States and see the impact Mexican culture has in the different communities. Yes, the two countries are next to each other and you can actually drive from one to another without having to pay the ever-rising plane ticket fares. However, coming from the Dominican Republic and having Haiti as neighbors and never seeing any traces of their culture in my country (considering we are a tiny island and there are about three million Haitians in the DR, and I'm pretty sure most Dominicans don't know our neighbor's traditional cuisine for example), it shocks me how such a big country like the United States can be so "Mexicanized" in so many ways.

The incidence of Mexican culture is more palpable in the border states, but that doesn't mean that other states don't get a taste of their flavor. For example, in New York there's a fascinating authentic

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Mexican store called "El Tepeyac," located in Harlem, in Lexington Avenue and 102nd street, which sells all the traditional ingredients you need to create a tasty meal with a more Latino twist. Not only do they have groceries, but you can actually get candy, beer, and even saints statues, as religious symbolism is very important in the neighboring country.

Feeling attracted to such an explosion of color (there's even an altar for the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Mexican version of Virgin Mary), smells, tastes, and the tiny yet so expressive space that enclosed so many wonders of a very rich culture, I decided to have a talk with the owner, **Griselda García Castillo**, a lawyer from Mexico turned "bodeguera" in the New York City's Upper East Side. This 37-year-old woman left her country to live and work in a "less corrupt" environment, and ever since she moved to the States, she's been trying to professionalize being a "bodega" owner.

Griselda lives with her parents and doesn't have kids, although "El Tepeyac" is as demanding and time consuming as having kids, with a daily schedule of 7:30 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. and only 5 employees that make sure the business is up and running every day to offer the best experience to their clients.

Always trying to be up to date with the latest news in politics, economics, and finance, Griselda is an entrepreneur who loves to read and learn about keeping a business and making it grow, always pursuing success, and especially, permanence, to make her craft a long-term way of living. She agreed to sit down with Latin Times, and told us why she left Mexico, how being a lawyer helped her start the business the right way, and the way she expresses her Mexican culture in her everyday journey.

### 1) When did you first move to the United States?

I came to New York when I was 15, in 1990, and went back to Mexico in 1996. However, an opportunity presented to come back in 2000, so my family and I made the big move. My dad was offered to run a business in the city, so he didn't hesitate and we moved. At first it was a small store, and it stayed like that for three years approximately. Then we took over and the store became "El Tepeyac."

### 2) Was it difficult to become independent and run your own store instead of working for someone else in a city that you were still getting used to?

The US offers a different system, a different legal structure, less corrupt, more specific, and that made us feel safe because we trusted the system. Also, the concept for "El Tepeyac" was partially defined. We knew what we wanted, we knew the community and their needs, and all the ingredients people need to cook an authentic Mexican meal. Another thing that helped was that my dad had another business that imported traditional Mexican products to the States, and at the beginning that helped us separate from other stores with similar products that were manufactured in this country. We've always had products that come straight from Mexico. Eventually, my dad left me the business and he focused on his imports.

### 3) Is your father still your supplier?

He was the sole supplier at the beginning, but now I have a list with at least 25 names from New Jersey to California, and anything they can't provide, I ask my dad for. He and my mother travel to Mexico almost weekly.

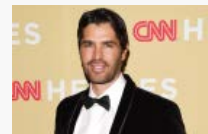
### 4) Which products are your best-sellers and how do you introduce Mexican products to other nationalities?

It's changed lately after so many different people have moved to Harlem. We keep adapting as the people around us change. We have incorporated American products, but Mexican things are still number one. We're lucky that Mexican food is preferred over many other cuisines, and many people go to different Mexican restaurants in the area and feel intrigued about a certain food, and want to know how to make it. Thankfully, our relationship with the restaurateurs have been great, and they refer

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their diners to us when they ask about recipe or ingredients.

### 5) How do you integrate your Mexican culture in the way of doing business?

It's a matter of highlighting the positive, and educating the clients in what they're buying, but also taking into consideration that every person represents their culture and you can't be all up in their face either. I always try to give specific answers with the most accurate information, because that's why people mostly come to this store. New York is such a multiracial, multiethnic city, that allows us to learn about other cultures, so I take that advantage and educate myself on the many different backgrounds that you can find here and might come to the store, to have a better, more positive approach and making them feel welcome and part of the Mexican culture as well. Also, living with my parents help. We sit down every day and share breakfast and lunch and just being with them reminds me that we came here to work, to thrive, to make this a decent living.

### 6) Do you feel that being a lawyer although from another country, helped you set up your business in the States?

Yes. As soon as we started this project, I began studying all the laws here in America. I learned about the licenses needed to run your business, the local, state and federal regulations, and that helped me have a wider vision, and start getting the idea of how I should do things. What helped me too, was that I knew that I needed a team, and immediately got a licensed US lawyer, an accountant and insurance broker because I wanted to be safe in every way possible and also be able to protect my employers if something were to happen to them. The team of professionals that I hired to help me start the business, also guided me in terms of contracts, rent, investment, filing taxes, and now everything has gotten easier with time.

### 7) How do you see "El Tepeyac" in the future?

I would love to open more stores across the city, to perfect and redefine the concept. Maybe have a mini-market or supermarket, only with Mexican products. I would love to offer a new service, which I've already started doing here, and give out different popular and authentic Mexican recipes that I already have printed out in Spanish and English, so people can taste a little piece of Mexico in their homes.

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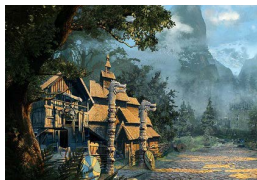
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### Maria G. Valdez

Born and raised Dominican living in New York (do not confuse with Dominican-York), who claims to be Sofia Vergara's long lost daughter and who has an unhealthy obsession with JLo. Associate Editor of Latin Times, overseeing the editorial operation and content strategy of the website. Trained journalist and musical theater performer with solid entertainment instincts. Experience covering human interest stories and social and large scale events with focus on Latino entertainment. Maria began her career in journalism in her native Dominican Republic where she worked for Ritmo Social, one of the country's most prestigious magazines, and as on-air co-host of a radio variety show.

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