

Fideo fans just love their Tex-Mex pasta

HARLINGEN, Texas - Ask a Rio Grande Valley native about mom's noodles or pasta, and he might gently remind you that this is the Mexican border - you know, tortillas, beans, rice.

But mention Fideo and you'll likely get a happy sigh about the "yellow box" - and the mother, grandmother, aunt or uncle who makes this lesser-known staple best.

Yet Fideo is essentially the Spanish word for vermicelli, pasta. So how did it find its way into the Tex-Mex oeuvre?

Fort Worth-based O.B. Macaroni, the company behind the "yellow box," says the answer is simple: A sharp-minded and very Italian ancestor of his decided to market the cut-up noodles to the burgeoning population on the Texas side of the Rio Grande.

"The idea was to supply the Hispanic migrant workers coming across the border a quick, affordable, easy product that they could actually cook out in the fields," he said.

From there, he said, the dishes evolved. There's sopa de Fideo, a brothy chicken soup prepared with some mix of tomato, cilantro, jalapeno and-or cumin. Then there are the recipes that use the Fideo as a flavorful bed for chicken, beef, bacon or anything else.

There are as many recipes as there are families, he said, but all share the basic steps.

Of late, he said, orders from major supermarkets and supply chains indicate the dish is spreading with Mexican-Americans throughout Texas and the United States. Fideo is by far the company's biggest seller, he said and new supermarket orders for it are coming from wherever lots of Mexican-Americans are settling.

"It's a Rio Grande Valley food grown to where it's all over," he said.

America Rangel, who owns a Mexican restaurant in Harlingen, said she ships Fideo noodles by the case to her daughter, who pines for the comfort food in northern California.

Joe Marquez, who is director of Hispanic Foods for KeHe Foods in Chicago, O.B.'s biggest Midwest customer. Marquez, whose parents immigrated directly to Chicago from Mexico, said he's seen variations of Fideo dishes in Spain and all over Mexico. He said that the QandQ Fideo is by far the top brand and some recipes recommend using the yellow box's "since 1910."

"It's a tradition," he said. "Every day for dinner there's either rice or soup... 90 percent of the time it's going to be chicken bouillon or chicken soup, and a lot of times with Fideo."

History does say that pasta came to Europe with Marco Polo from China, and the technique of stir-frying dry noodles could be an Arabic contribution to the Mexican culture via Spain.

Either way, the Texas border definitely put its mark on Fideo as a comfort food affordable to the largest families, said Tony Zavaleta, an anthropologist at the University of Texas-Brownsville.

"It's a classic example of a food of poverty... a bona fide cultural super-food along the same lines as flour tortillas," he said. He explained that flour tortillas were born fairly recently, when sacks of wheat flour provided a ready answer to poor corn harvests.

A generation ago, Fideo might have been 10 cents a box. Now it's three or four boxes a dollar, but usually on sale somewhere.

Zavaleta got nostalgic.

"In our case it wasn't a matter of poverty, but there were a lot of people to feed," he said. "We just couldn't wait for my grandmother to cook up Fideo for us."

Here is a selection of Fideo recipes. Note: In them, the Fideo has been broken up into pieces about 1¼-inch long. Vermicelli can be substituted for the Fideo.

This Fideo Soup with Chicken, made with a recipe from America's Restaurant, Harlingen, can be served as a soup or stew depending on the amount of broth used.

Sopa de Fideo con Pollo

Chicken parts

Bay leaf

Cumin to taste

Garlic powder to taste

Salt to taste

Vegetable oil (just enough to coat the bottom of large skillet)

2 boxes (10 ounces) dry Fideo noodles or dry broken vermicelli (pieces about 1¼ inch long)

1 white onion, cut up

1 large bell pepper, cut up

1 small can tomato sauce (just enough for some color and flavor)

Cilantro and-or jalapeno, for optional seasoning and color

Boil chicken pieces in large pot full of water with spices until done, about 30 minutes, reserve broth.

Sauté the Fideo in oil a few minutes until browned (medium heat). Add onion and bell pepper pieces. Once lightly browned, add chicken pieces. Pour in some broth and tomato sauce, enough to cover everything - just barely for thicker stews, more for thinner soups, then cover and simmer until noodles are cooked through. Finish with more seasonings (cumin, salt, garlic, to taste). Can be garnished with cilantro and-or jalapeno. America serves this with warm corn tortillas and refried beans.

Makes 6 to 8 servings.

(Recipe from America's Restaurant, Harlingen)

Sopa de Fideo

(Recipe from Josefina Guerra, Mesquite Country Cookbook)

3 tablespoons vegetable oil
5 ounces dry Fideo noodles
½ cup chopped onion
2 cloves minced garlic
1/8 teaspoon ground cumin
1½ teaspoons salt
2 large tomatoes
1 bell pepper, finely chopped
3 to 4 cups chicken broth

Heat oil in a large skillet. Add Fideo and sauté, stirring occasionally, until golden brown. Add onion and sauté 2 minutes. Remove from heat. In a blender, liquefy garlic, cumin, salt and tomatoes. Return skillet to heat. Add liquefied mixture and bell pepper. Simmer 5 minutes. Stir in broth. Cover and simmer 20 minutes or until Fideo is cooked. Add water, as needed, if sauce gets too dry.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Fideo Delicioso

(Recipe from Q&Q brand Fideo)

1 pound ground beef or diced chicken or pork
5 ounces dry Fideo or vermicelli
1 tablespoon oil or shortening
1 medium chopped onion
15-ounce can chicken broth
½ cup water
2 or 3 tablespoons chili powder
Salt or garlic salt and pepper, to taste

Sauté selected meat until done, set aside. In the same pan, heat oil or shortening and lightly brown Fideo, stirring constantly. Add chopped onion halfway through browning. Add chicken broth and water. Return meat to pan. Add chili powder, salt and pepper. Cover and simmer 15 minutes. For extra "zip," add sliced jalapenos or ground cayenne pepper.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.