

Historic Bakersfield and Kern County  
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## Estrada's Tamale Parlor, 1914

Ver 4

By Gilbert Gia  
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For 75 years Estrada's Spanish Kitchen was a popular Visalia restaurant, but few patrons knew it was founded on a widow's determination to preserve her family.

In the early 1870s Manuel Estrada left Hermacillo and became a vaquero on Miller and Lux ranches in California. In 1876, when Manuel was 22, he married 14

year-old Florencia Enriques of Firebaugh. They had six children. In 1886 Manuel abandoned the family.<sup>1</sup>



In 1889, in Visalia, Manuel Estrada married Louisa Forquera.<sup>2</sup> By this time Manuel was in the carpenter business, and Louisa worked at a cannery and sold tamales, fruit, and vegetables around town. In between, she had children.

In 1900 there were several tamale shops around Visalia. Salazar's was one, Mrs. Romero's another, and then there was a parlor run by 50 year-old Pablo Vielmas and his wife Josephine--who was also known as Mrs. Pablos. Their business, operated out of their adobe home, was strong competition to the other tamale makers. Another popular item from Mrs. Pablos' kitchen was a puffy, chili relleno as big as a goose egg. No one knew who invented it because Mrs. Vielmas was friends with Louisa Estrada and Louisa's mother, Estefina Matley,

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<sup>1</sup> Author's 2001 correspondence Sheila Munian (Modesto, CA), great-grandchild of Manuel Estrada and Florencia Enriques.

<sup>2</sup> Before Justice of the Peace James S. Clark. Louisa was 17.



who also knew how to make the round relleno. No one could agree which had learned from the other.<sup>3</sup>

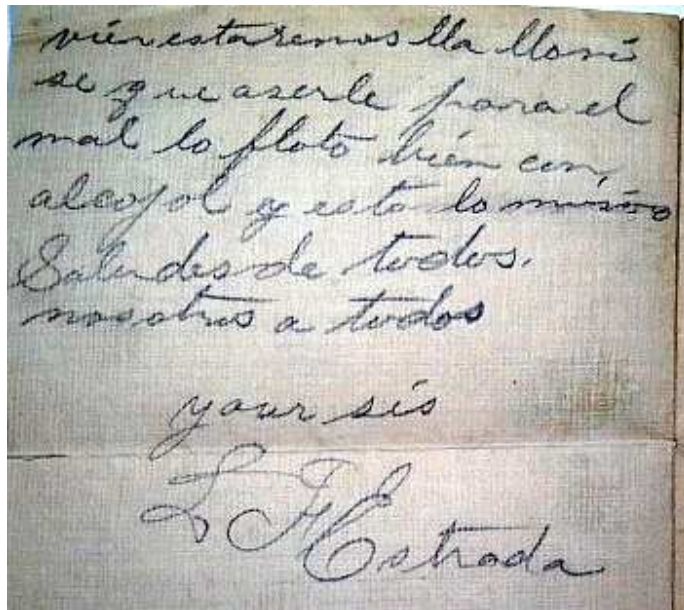
After Pablo Vielmas' death, Louisa and Manuel helped with the tamale business, and eventually the Estradas were running it. But in 1912 life changed abruptly. Manuel Estrada, 58, had a stroke, and the next day Louisa wrote to her brother Antonio and his wife Martina in Delano,

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<sup>3</sup> *Fruit of the Valley*. C. Lee Aydelott, Ed. California Writers of the San Joaquin Valley. Ward Richie Press, 1942. (1941 interview with A.J. Forquera)



Visalia Cal July 22  
1912  
Hearos & Mart an Jorey  
esta es con el fin de deserte  
que todos estamos buenos  
y espero que todos esten igual  
muerte y que Jorey haya  
pasado un flep Chumpkins  
estodo lo que nosotros  
le daríamos, Manuel esta  
bastante enfermo ha asi  
un mes que no trabaja y  
ayer le vino un ataque  
de parastises todo un lado  
no puede andar y ni puede  
casi ablar ha estar que



que esta remos lla lla  
se que aserle para el  
mal lo floto bien con  
alcojol y esto lo mismo  
Saludes de todos  
nosotros a todos  
  
your sis  
L. Estrada

"Dearest Martina an Tony, ...Manuel esta bastante enfermo lla ase un mes que no trabaja y ayer le vino un atace de paradeseo todo un lado ni puede andar y ni puede casi [h]ablar .... lo floto bien con alcojol y esto lo mismo..."<sup>4</sup>

The alcohol she rubbed on his paralyzed side might have helped; he recovered some, but six months later he had another stoke and died. Manuel Estrada left his wife and their 10 children. Two daughters were married and out of the house, but eight children were still at home, and adding to the challenge the 38 year-old widow was pregnant.

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<sup>4</sup> Letter from the collection of Martina Forquera



Vincent Estrada recalled his family's home about the time his father died: "The house was by the feed yard where two tracks crossed next to the cannery. I used to catch catfish and bass on Mill Creek near the icehouse. About 1910 we had to swap lots because they were going to burn down the Chinatown, so we moved to Bridge and Race Streets. They hitched up a team to our house and pulled it to the other lot."<sup>5</sup>

"We had been living on Race Street when my father died-- just before we started the business. Old man Sweet had the store, and he came over and told my mom to take anything she wanted. Old man Morgan the butcher did the same thing.

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<sup>5</sup> Visalia historian Terry Ommen's taped interview with Vincent Estrada

I remember one day saying to my mom, 'What's that out there in front of the house?' I went out to look, and it was a bag of sugar someone had left for us."<sup>6</sup>

Manuel Estrada, Jr., said, "I heard that after my father died, my mother cooked for the girls who worked at the peach cannery and also for some of the girls who had less respectable jobs." <sup>7</sup> Vincent: "She had to feed eight of us and didn't have much. She told us, 'I have to do something to make money to feed you kids. If I go into business will you help me?' All us kids said, 'Sure.' Lawyer Bill Bier, Red Banks, Judge Bradley, and Susmann Mitchell the cashier at Producer's Bank all helped her." Gerda Perkins who had the flower shop made a loan to my mother when respectable women didn't work outside the home. She got furniture from James, a good friend, and because my older sisters were married, they and the brothers-in-law put in some money to help."<sup>8</sup>

Vincent: "My mom started her business in 1914. I know that because I judge it by my age. I was born in 1900, and I left home to go to plumbing trade school in San Francisco in 1917 or 1918."

The first Estrada restaurant was at Church and Acequia, which might have been Mrs. Pablos' old place. The Estradas were there until 1925, and then they moved to the old Togni adobe at 202 South Court Street at Acequia. A year later the business moved to the remodeled Vucovich home at 414 West Main, and it was their until 1958.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Author's 1997 interview with Manuel Estrada.

<sup>8</sup> Visalia historian Terry Ommen's taped interview with Vincent Estrada



Vincent: "We had a lot of business, and everybody came to eat. But mostly it wasn't the Mexicans because they cooked their own. My mother even sold tamales to the firemen when they had their feeds. We made everything by hand. We ground the peppers for the chili sauce, boiled the corn, and used lime to remove the shell from the kernels."

In the early years Visalia supplied restaurants and markets of San Francisco with diverse foods: Grain, corn, and fruits; beef and lamb; game from the Sierras; fowl from the north-south flyway; and fish and turtles from Tulare Lake. This variety made Estrada's cuisine more Californian than Mexican. Vincent thought that his mother learned from her Basque and Italian neighbors some of the family recipes: The tostados con puesto; the cheese-and-tomato casserole with rigatoni or bow-tie pasta; and those big tamales made with Estrada's secret chili sauce and tied at both ends.



Louisa and her family worked at the restaurant, but little Manuel was underfoot. Who could watch him? Louisa's mother had died in 1899; Louisa's sister Josephine Estrada Stockinger lived in Oakland, and brother Antonio J. Forquera and his wife Martina were in Delano. Then there was Louisa's stepfather, Ricardo Matley.<sup>9</sup> At the time, the 60 year-old saddle-maker was also helping at the restaurant, but he was of more use there than in taking care of little Manuel.

Manuel Estrada recalled, "Mom couldn't take care of me because she was so busy with the restaurant. When I was about three years-old my mother sent me to live in Delano with my sister Cleo and her husband Joe Nunez." The family relationship was more complicated than it sounded because Joe Nunez was both Louisa's son-in-law and her brother's stepson.

Prosperity followed hard work. Said Manuel, "My mother had a big Pierce Arrow touring car, and she liked good things. But she never forgot about what it was like to be needy. We didn't want to throw food out, so we gave away what was left over. I remember that my mom used to invite the Indians down to eat, and we delivered food to those who needed it."<sup>10</sup>

Louisa Estrada remained a widow. By the time Manuel was 16 he'd taken on considerable responsibility in running the business. He was also directing family matters. Manuel noted, "My mother always had men friends, but we didn't let it get too serious. She started seeing a man from Mexico who was coming around. We kids let him know we didn't like it, and we didn't see him again."<sup>11</sup>

The family opened other Estradas Spanish Kitchens: Cruz and George Dillard in Fresno in 1917; Cleo and Joe Nunez in Modesto and Colma; Louise ["Chiki"] and Joe Aguillar in Santa Barbara; and Josephine and Lester Hook in Wilshire. Louisa's sister, Josephine Forquera Stockinger, and her husband Richard opened Estradas Spanish Kitchens in Oakland and Santa Barbara. For a brief time in the

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<sup>9</sup> originally, MATLÉ

<sup>10</sup> Author's 1997 interview with Manuel Estrada

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

early 1940s there was one in Bakersfield. Louise traveled to take care of business and visit her children.



Visalia historian Anne Mitchell admired Louisa Estrada for what the matriarch had accomplished as a widow with so many children, "I remember the big picture of her at the restaurant in Visalia. She is opening gifts and is seated outside. She looks like a queen." <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Author's 1996 correspondence with Visalia historian Anne Mitchell