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Mexico City

## “Tasting cheese is like another dimension of myself.”

A conversation in three bites with Georgina Yescas A. Trujano, cheesemonger

Diminutive in stature yet voluminous of personality, Georgina Yescas is a mighty force in the world of Mexican artisanal cheese. Like some of the remarkable, aged queso in which she trades, Georgina might be thought of as concentrated. Her wholesale and retail business, [Lactography](#), is a dairy-based nexus of advocacy, education, commerce, activism, taste-making, and brokerage. Over the course of a week in Mexico City, as part of UNISG’s [Eco-Gastronomy Project](#), I got to know this lovely person, gradually and to increasing degrees, through a series of sensorially rich moments.



*Seeing (Dec. 7, 2015)*

My first encounter with Georgina takes place at Fonda Fina, a newish restaurant in the hipster neighborhood of Roma Norte. “They use our cheeses here,” she says to me not long after sitting down. “We’ll be having some of them tonight in a few of the dishes.” Clipped into her cascading curls is a pinkish-red crocheted rosette, a winkingly apt fashion reference in this traditional/innovative Mexico City setting.

With us at table is Nanae Watabe Llamas, herself a hybrid of new and old, serene and febrile, from here and from there. Like me, Nanae is an UNISG master alumna, having graduated in 2011. It is four years since last saw each other, and with a giant hug and big smile, it is like we are back in Colorno again (minus the pig smell). Nanae’s own food business, [Umami Burrito](#), enfolds her Japanese-Mexican heritage, her indefatigable entrepreneurial spirit, and the quest of all great gastronomes: to merge pleasure, politics, and maybe even a little profit.



We order drinks—mezcal for me, an ojo rojo (beer and Clamato juice) for Nanae, and a G&T for Georgina (“I’m very into gin and tonic these days.”) The subject of my Eco-G event in a few days comes up—ethics and entrepreneurship—and both women are full of reactions. Within minutes we are talking about the blurry line of good and bad in food businesses, and from there to Georgina’s motivations and questions about working with small-scale producers in the first place. What is more important: money or fairness? Can the two co-exist? What about the challenges for women in commerce? Should small entrepreneurs support each other, or compete like big businesses? What are the moral issues at stake?

I learn that Lactography is a partnership between Georgina and her brother, [Carlos Yescas](#), and that their retail operation (named ‘Queso Store’) is situated at the trendy [Mercado Roma](#), just a few streets from where we are sitting. (The market—really a sleekly designed, labyrinthine array of mini-eateries—is also the location of Nanae’s food operation.)

“We want to make better lives for cheesemakers,” Georgina says. By selling their products, but also acting as both champions of networking and education, the brother-and-sister team is working to change the profile of cheese culture and the artisan dairy industry in Mexico. It’s not just crema and queso fresco here, but a wide range of products that draw not only from European styles, but from locally developed recipes as well. For Lactography, it is about shifting gastronomic consciousness, while pushing consumers to acknowledge that the so-called ‘hand-work’ of food is as socially valuable as the ‘head-work’ of academics or professionals. With a firey challenge in her eyes, Georgina lucidly articulates their goal: “Why not make cheesemakers as respected as lawyers?”

As the three of us hunker down to the equally serious business of making our way through *agua-chile con camarones*, *tacos ahogados*, *sope con ‘pork belly’*, and *tamal de frijoles*, the conversation shifts from the sharper phrases of advocacy and activism to the more mumbled syllables of *mmmm*, *bueno*, and *ohhhyess*. Later, sliced tongue with a *pasilla chile salsa* comes out, along with short ribs in *adobo sauce* and a sweet cheese *espuma*. (“That’s our cheese! I’m not so sure about the foam, though..”) By the time our *postres* arrive (a cornmeal cake with cream and strawberries and a *nieve de zapote*), Georgina has invited me for a proper cheese degustation two days hence. There we can concentrate on the central matter of trade without all the ‘distractions’ of a laden dinner table.

*Tasting (Dec. 9, 2015)*

In Mexico’s dairy history, a total of 70 distinctive cheesemaking recipes were practiced; today, only about 30 are generally known and in use. Like so many places with a widely ranging topography and set of regional identities, local Mexican foodways were extremely diverse in the past. And, like so many places wending their way through the present of industrialization and ‘modernization’, many of those historical practices have faded, as small-scale foods drift away under the pressure of industrially made, promoted, and distributed products.

Perched on a wooden stool in a bustling avenue of the Mercado Roma, I cling to the Queso Store counter and Georgina's torrent of words. Today a plumeria hair pin stands in place of the other night's crocheted rosette. Sliver after sliver of artisanal cheese is offered up, as Geo narrates their various biographies. Corazón de mantequilla is a queso de boda, or 'wedding cheese': an interface of sweet butter (the eponymic 'heart') is sandwiched between a pink, chile-spiked 'male' layer of cheese and a more fruity, white (female and virginal?) layer. Quesillo ahumado, from the state of Tabasco, is smoked with pepper tree leaves; I find it meaty, dry, and almost fibrous. A stretched-curd cheese, similar in form to an Italian caciocavallo, is called bolla de ocosingo. It is a double-cream creation, with a ball of curd wrapped in a second layer that forms a protective shell as it ages. The cheese survives at room temperature for extended periods, at least until a hole is carved in the hard casing and nuggets of goodness are carved out. (This is the cheese we had with our tamal at Fonda Fina, it turns out.) Panela, a fresh cheese that seems similar to ricotta, is among the most familiar of Mexican cheeses. "It's so boring, but everyone wants it," says a frustrated Geo. I nonetheless love the taste and texture: calming, soft and milky, gentle but distinctly cow-like.

At just seven years old, Lactography is already a key player in the world of cheese, both in Mexico and more broadly. Brother Carlos started working with cheesemakers in Chiapas thirteen years ago, is now a respected member of the *Guilde Internationale des Fromagers*, as well as the author of [Quesos Mexicanos](#), an important collection of recipes and techniques. "He is my favorite person in the world," says Georgina. "We are passion partners." She, too, is a member of the Guild, and the only latina judge among the 150-person panel who judge the [World Cheese Awards](#) (a project sponsored by the Guild). Both together and as individuals, they have collected multiple accolades. But for Geo, the more important successes are the stories of the cheesemakers—particularly the women—with whom they work.



Several years ago, in the town of Huitzilac, Morelos, Regina Olvera started making cheese with a smallish herd of 60 goats. The former academic from the department of veterinary science at [UNAM](#) sold her products at the local scale—mostly just around town. But the political and economic situation in the region was difficult at that time, and Regina had to reduce the visibility of her operation. Through Lactography, however, Geo and Carlos continued to distribute her cheeses, until the time that Regina was able to re-activate her [cheesemaking business](#). Geo encouraged her to experiment with various recipes, and she went on to develop an innovative fresh chèvre wrapped in avocado leaves—those that grow on the aguacate criollo trees near where the goats graze. Seven months later, Regina's Sierra Encantada al Aguacate beat out 2,735 other entries to win Best New Cheese of 2014 in the World Cheese Awards. It was the first Mexican product to do so.

Queso Store sells about 60 different cheeses, and if one of them isn't as popular as another, Geo just keeps pushing until it gains a following. "Someone will like it eventually," she notes, "so we can't just let it die." I start to understand why she refers to herself as the 'bad cop' and Carlos as the 'good cop' of the team. Geo is the enforcer, the fighter, the strong arm of the team; she gets the bills paid, she battles for the rights of those who are less empowered, and she practically demands that local consumers learn about—and eventually appreciate—the lesser-known quesos that her country has to offer. Geo calls herself a "cheese nerd," but I see her less as a shy kid in the dairy playground, and more as the intimidating bully. Except, of course, she's the one who forces you to take her cheese-sandwich lunch, rather than stealing yours.

*Smelling (Dec. 11, 2015)*

Great. ✓✓

See you at 3:00. ✓✓

We'll have lunch. ✓✓

My WhatsApp bleeps several times on Friday morning as my new friend confirms a third meeting, back at the Mercado Roma. Geo and I had discussed having a churro and coffee (or even a churro ice-cream sandwich...!), but after a latish night at [Camelia](#)—site of the Eco-Gastronomy round-table for which I have come to #CDMX in the first place—my tum is feeling a touch delicate. No churro for me. (Actually, I thought 3:00 pm would be late enough to avoid a full meal, but I have forgotten about the timing of comida here. Sigh. I have a dinner scheduled for 7:45 that evening. I commit to eating lightly when we meet up.)

I find Georgina again at the Queso Store counter; today a tiny knitted blue flower perches in her dark tresses, which I realize for the first time also contain a few strands that are tinted sapphire. Geo is gently (!) encouraging a client to try some of their less-familiar offerings. Some Viña Milagro, perhaps, drenched in Tempranillo de Queretero for five days and heady with undulating, evolving aromas? Or a manchego-like sheep cheese? It's closer to the taste and texture that customers more generally like, but still distinctly Mexican: buttery, gentle, not as bitey as the pecorinos I have known.

Geo and I go to collect two of Nanae's 'burritos,' which turn out to be more like giant, uncut futomaki, light on the rice and gloriously heavy on the mouthfeel. We opt to split two: one tonkatso (pork filet) and one camarón (shrimp) tempura, with extra sauce. So much for a light bite. As we wait, she tells me, "My favorite part of being a cheesemonger is being the caves—brushing, turning, touching the cheeses. But also tasting and smelling them—I love smell."

We take our umami bombs to the upper level of the Mercado Roma, where our conversation drifts back towards women's empowerment. "I feel a sense of doing something greater when I work with women; I believe in the creativity of women, and I want to use that energy to change things." Recently, for the [Festival del Queso Artesanal](#) in the state of Tabasco, Geo and Carlos leveraged their passion-partner power, convincing the organizers that, in return for Lactography's presence, they should make a space for Regina Olvera to tell her story. The cheese innovator did, and sharing that success with her peers engendered a new sense of pride for Regina—in both her cheese and her capabilities as a businesswoman.

I ask whether Geo thinks that women cheesemakers are more curious or creative than their male counterparts. Perhaps, she says, but it's more about the mutually productive relationships that she and Carlos, through Lactography, are building. "I feel like a psychologist sometimes, helping these women merge their societal roles with their love of cheesemaking." The producers believe in the Lactography project, and that produces value on both sides. Although Geo doesn't sense that Mexican artisans currently have a collective idea of what cheese can represent for the country, the momentum gathering in the parallel worlds of Mexican wine and beer is encouraging. "We can help each other to develop a community, to preserve the traditional recipes, to build something."

In cheese, Georgina Yescas has certainly found and occupied a space that continues to grow and evolve. She loves it, and it seems to love her back. Over five quick days and several slow meals, I have come to sense that this is why cheese fits her so well. I suggest that being loved is about being seen, recognized, understood. Geo nods and smiles, and the two of us continue eating our burritos.

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