

## The Day I Decided to Learn Spanish - and got 3 great recipes

“No hay leche.” There’s no milk. The Mexican dairy farmer shrugged and looked at the four bony cows munching grass beside his adobe barn. This was the second weekend in a row that Harlan and I had made the four hour drive from San Antonio to the small town of about thirty-thousand that is two hours south of the border town of Eagle Pass. With the same result.

Harlan was something like the unofficial mayor of the village. Actually, something more important, but less official. Three years earlier he had lost his wife to cancer. When he was unable to get past the grief, someone suggested he spend time in Mexico. Harlan has an uncanny ability to sniff out good advice, so he drove from San Antonio to the border and kept driving until he got to the village. He stopped to eat at a café on the town’s plaza.

At 6’ 4”, with a haphazardly trimmed, salt-and-pepper beard, teeth gleaming in leathery tanned features under a sweat-stained Stetson, Harlan could have been one of Pancho Villa’s men in the old photos. That and his charismatic personality—complete with Will Rogers sense of humor—immediately attracted several curious locals. Although he spoke no Spanish, he made friends as fast as the horse whisperer breaks mustangs and ended up the afternoon on the Sabinas River with his new friends at a *carne asada*, a cookout featuring char-broiled meat. Having attended numerous such gatherings, I imagine there was more beer than *carne*. Harlan returned to the village every single weekend for the next three years, learned Spanish to a colloquial perfection, and ended up friends with everyone in the village that counted, including several that shouldn’t have.

Harlan collects offbeat people like a politician collects lobbyists, and when I first met him we immediately hit it off. He was probably amused by the guy from California writing a book on the cooking of northern Mexico who didn’t just want to learn how to use the local cheese—but how to make it, as well.

Harlan said he would return to the village next weekend and that I was welcome to come with him. Maybe there would be milk and I could finally learn to make asadero cheese. He suggested we now visit his friend, Marcelo, who had a ranch a few kilometers west of the village.

We drove out of town in Harlan’s old Chevy Blazer. To the left, scrub and cactus-dotted plains disappeared into the Sierra Oriental Mountains. The forbidding range seemed to mark the end of civilization. Ahead, my map told me there was nothing for five-hundred miles but a few tiny outposts in the Chihuahua Desert. To the right, occasional gates below arches of crumbling masonry gave notice of *ranchos*.

We turned right onto a narrow, rutted dirt road. On the other side of the first rise, nestled a low-slung hacienda beside a large garage with double, corrugated-metal doors. Patchy stucco on the house sported a recent coat of white paint. We pulled up in front of the house, interrupting a game of tag between a pig and two chickens. As I put my still-lit cigar in the ashtray, Harlan said, “I just remembered, when Pedro rigged the propane tank in the back, he said not to smoke.” He nodded to the back.

Sure enough, behind the SUV’s back seat, from under a pile of clothes, paper bags, and magazines, I caught the curve of a rusty, white tank. “Thanks for the warning,” I said, snatching the smoking butt and crushing it into the sandy soil.

Harlan banged the bull’s head knocker on the heavy, unfinished mesquite door. When it opened a moment later, there stood Central Casting’s perfect Mexican cowboy: about six feet, slender, and raw-boned tough, black wavy hair, and long sideburns but otherwise clean shaven. He wore Mexico’s version of designer jeans, a white western shirt, and black pointed-toed cowboy boots. He was strikingly handsome in a gypsy sort of way.

Marcelo smiled with what seemed real joy. He immediately showed us to a table in the kitchen, a large room with white plaster walls, Saltillo tile counter tops, and floored with the rust-colored tile often used for sidewalks in Mexico. Without asking, he grabbed three Bohemias from an ice chest in one corner. (Almost everyone in this part of northern Mexico keeps beer in an ice chest and drinks it whenever possible).

At the time, I could ask simple questions in Spanish and usually understand enough of the answers to communicate on a basic level. But when it came to ordinary conversations, only rapt attention gave me an inkling of what was said. In this case, I soon lost interest in the rapid fire exchange between Harlan and Marcelo.

My attention refocused when in English Harlan said, "Jim, we're going to Marcelo's main ranch, want to come?"

"Sure," I said, thinking that sounded interesting.

Marcelo handed out more beer, including one for himself, and led us outside to the garage. When he opened the doors, inside was not the usual pickup with a *tumba burro* (oversize iron bumpers designed to "knock down burros" or most anything else one might encounter on a dark country road). Looking as incongruous as a Ferrari in a tin shed, was an airplane.

Oh shit!

"After a fiery landing in a TWA DC 6 on a Montana wheat field at the age of 12, I was a nervous flyer. That condition was not helped by a one-month college tour of South America. I remember fellow passengers screaming, blood gushing from their noses when the pressurization on an ancient DC 3 failed between sheer, snow-covered Andean peaks. And there was the medium-size plane that barely missed catching a wing tip on a dirt runway in the middle of Brazil. After which, the hostess cheerily informed us that we would now have a new pilot; "The next landing is too difficult for this one."

I don't remember what combination of *machismo*, fear of being thought a chicken, and plain stupidity prevented me from politely revealing my condition and remaining in the hacienda that was fully stocked with beer. I did, however, have the presence of mind to grab a nearly full bottle of rum from Harlan's Blazer.

We pushed the plane out of the oversized garage/hangar onto the poorly surfaced dirt road that led to the highway and climbed in. Harlan sat beside Marcelo in the copilot's seat. I buckled into a seat just behind them. A moment later, the single engine roared. Marcelo checked the instruments, redlined the thing, and released whatever passed for a clutch, sending us bouncing down the dirt track. I felt like a novice skier going head on into moguls. Just as it seemed that the plane would come apart, we leapt into the air.

Thankfully, the sky was clear and blue, and an hour later, comforted by the steady beat of the engine and a few slugs of rum, I was actually enjoying the vast desert diorama below. Then Harlan said, "Here we come," and I felt the plane increase altitude. Peering ahead over Marcelo's shoulder, I saw we were approaching a towering range of mountains at what seemed an alarming speed.

Moments later we passed between the peaks, and just on the other side the plane dropped like an elevator with a broken cable. When my vision returned to normal, Marcelo, who spoke excellent English, said with what I perceived as a bit of smugness, "That always happens, I should have warned you."

Right!

In front of us was a valley nestled like a shallow bowl in the middle of the surrounding mountains. Halfway up the nearest one were the remains of a wrecked airplane. "What's that?" I asked.

"That's where my father was killed," said Marcelo, without further explanation.

We skimmed over row upon row of apple trees to land on a dirt track—fortunately much smoother than the one from which we’d taken off—and taxied toward a spacious ranch house with a red tile roof.

Inside, astounded at the beauty and craftsmanship of the hacienda I complimented Marcelo. He explained that his grandfather and father had built it almost entirely from materials found on the ranch, except the Saltillo and roof tile—and I suppose the nails and window panes. They had even built a sawmill to cut lumber.

We were greeted by a smiling housekeeper, the wife of one of the ranch hands. I understood enough of the conversation to gather that Marcelo was ordering lunch. Immediately she brought a large bucket of iced down beer and we sat on sturdy leather chairs and a couch in the spacious, tile-floored living room. A window so large that I wondered how they’d gotten the glass there intact, provided a lovely view of the mountains. A hundred miles from civilization, the place was simply spectacular!

Before long we were summoned to the dining room where we found platters of [grilled quail](#), [Tex-Mex or Monterrey-style tamales](#), and [arroz Mexicana](#). Perhaps the altitude and morning of fear affected my taste, or it might have been the local custom of heating tamales in a skillet or *comal* that gives them a delicious golden crust, but I remember it as one of the best meals I have ever had.

After lunch and more beer, we left the house to find two cowboys loading something large into the back of the plane. “A transmission that needs repair,” explained Marcelo. After a glance at the sinking sun, he added, it’s getting late; we better leave.”

As I climbed into my seat, I looked back and noticed the transmission in the storage compartment just behind me. Moments later, Marcelo started the engine, and it was obvious that something was wrong. It was missing badly, like an eight cylinder car running on only six of them.

Marcelo grabbed a tool kit, got out and spent about five minutes fooling with the engine. When he got back in and tried it, it sounded as bad or worse. Taking another look at the still sinking sun he grabbed a large screwdriver, got out and banged the handle hard on the carburetor, the way someone might kick a vending machine that stole their last quarter. Instantly, the engine settled into its normal rhythm.

As Marcelo got back into the plane, a satisfied smile on his face, I said, “Won’t that be a little hard to do at 10,000 feet? He just shrugged, turned the plane, and began to accelerate. As we leaped into the air, something caught my eye, and caused me to look back. The transmission was moving inexorably toward the plane’s tail and I felt the aircraft’s attitude shift with it. When I reported this, Marcelo responded with another shrug followed by a quick adjustment of the controls.

By the time we got safely back to his other ranch the rum bottle was nearly empty, and I vowed I would learn Spanish, at least well enough so that, in future, I would understand what I was getting myself into.

## EPILOGUE

A couple of years later, a drug lord bought the ranch next to Marcelo’s. One day while he and an American friend were checking the boundaries on horseback, they came upon a group of the neighbor’s men herding some of Marcelo’s cattle onto their land. When Marcelo objected, one of the men shot him dead. The killers allowed the American to return to the ranch and inform Marcelo’s wife and daughters what had happened. After asking the ranch hands to collect the body, the family and friend left immediately. They decided it would be useless to contact the police, who were known to be in the pay of the *narcotraficante*. They never returned to one of the most beautiful ranches in the world, one that

had been built with the love and ingenuity of three generations of an exceptional family.

Author's note: Only the names were changed in this otherwise true story.