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LA NOCHEBUENA: THE BEST OF NIGHTS*
by Jose Yglesias

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Nochebuena. I have never been able to find out how Christmas Eve came to be named this by Spaniards, but in Ybor City, the Latin section of Tampa, it was truly a good night. Indeed, it was the best of nights. Why this was so is difficult to explain. After all, there were other occasions that should have been more exciting for me and my cousins and the other kids on the block—children’s day at the State Fair, outings to the beach in summer, the times the Ringling Bros. Circus came to town, the training games of the Cincinnati Reds. Our happiness was not due either to the expectation of gifts left by our bedside while we slept that night; there was no Christmas tree and hardly any toys in the 20s and 30s, not for the children of workers. The gifts we did receive were mostly clothes, and we had a pretty good idea of what those would be. Why then was Nochebuena so special that it has left me with the finest of gifts - the belief that like most Latinos I was given a touchstone for true gaiety and good feeling?

Let me describe it. For us it was a secular holiday. True, some Latinos went to the Catholic Church for midnight mass, la misa del gallo, but these were mostly the few who attended the parochial school and it was another way of not letting go of the day, for Nochebuena was the one night when we were allowed to stay up as long as we could. The younger kids were carried off to bed when they turned into little heaps of sleep, and the older ones were guided there in their stumbling daze. I don't remember ever wanting to cross the backyard that joined my aunt's house, where we all gathered, to our own, but I never walked the few yards home, while my Cuban grandfather firmly grasped my elbow, with any energy left to spare or any room in my bloated belly for another mouthful of turron. I once said to him, "I stole a third glass of wine when no one was looking," and he replied, "Aha!" in a tone I heard myself use years later with my son when I pretended to have been taken in by some maneuver of his.

When I think back about Nochebuena in Ybor City, I can see that although it was not a religious occasion it was certainly a reverent one. Our altar was the dinner table. All the preparations and expectations and excitement of the day led to that marvelous feast. We sat down to it at least four or five hours later than our usual 6:30 dinner, reverting in this way, by a kind of racial memory, to the right time for a proper Castilian cena. The very timing creates suspense: in any Spanish city, even today, you can observe the happy buzz of anticipation that invades the people out for the paseo. Whether they are dashing out on last-minute errands or meeting friends at cafes or simply strolling down the main street, they are all really preparing for the cena.

The cantina of Ybor City's Centro Español with members playing dominos in 1941. Photograph courtesy of USF Special Collections.

But whereas the Spaniards in the cities are somewhat blasé about their paseos and cenas, we in Ybor City never could be about Nochebuena. Ours was a cigarmaking community that kept U.S. working hours, and although on ordinary days the men went after dinner to the canteens at the Cuban, Spanish, Asturian, and Italian clubs to play dominos and chat and have a second cup of café solo with perhaps a trago of cognac, everyone was back home and ready for bed at eleven o'clock. On Nochebuena this was reversed: about six o'clock, when they were assured that there
were no more errands to do - the pork well on its way to being perfectly done, the house stocked with wine and liquor, the long Cuban loaves brought home from the last freshly baked batch at the bakery - the men of the family went off in little groups to make the rounds of the cafes and the homes of friends. We boys would see our fathers and uncles leave and we longed for the day when we too could go off to be treated (making the women a little anxious that we might return too drunk to appreciate the dinner) and come back four hours later flushed and happy, sneaking dimes and quarters to the kids.

Not that the men were uninterested in the preparation of the dinner. In Ybor City families, they took no part in shopping for food or in preparing meals on ordinary days, except, of course, to make the café solo when dinner was done: handling the colador was a man’s job. But Nochebuena was another matter. A week earlier began the discussions of where to buy the big fresh hams that, crisp on the outside, juicy inside, are the great baked wonder of the meal. Sometimes it was the men who cooked it too. I was startled out of bed one Christmas Eve morning by agonized squeals coming from the backyard and ran to help whoever was in trouble. Mother yelled from the kitchen, "Don't go there!" Too late. The men of the family were struggling with a pig, and I was just in time to see Cousin Viola’s husband, who had been reared in the Cuban countryside, plunge the knife. I was rooted to the back steps by curiosity, and I did not turn away despite the blood and my mother’s calls, because it would have been unmanly.

The pig had to be degutted, scrubbed with boiling water, and its hair plucked, while others dug a pit for the charcoal fire. It took much work and discussion to do all this and set the dressed pig on a spit. Also, many swigs from the gallon of wine. Cousin Pancho had prepared a huge pot of the *mojo*, made with sour orange juice, garlic, and paprika, and during the long hours ahead there were always two men there to turn the pig and baste it with *mojo*. After the novelty of this had worn off for them, I was allowed to dip the new paint brush into the delicious-smelling pot and coat the now unscarifying pig. My mother and aunts no longer live in those three houses on Ybor Street with a common backyard. Some have died and all have scattered to better homes, but to this day Cousin Pancho, now in his mid-seventies, prepares the *mojo* on the 23rd and takes it round in half-gallon jars to three or four of our family’s homes. He insists on personally puncturing the legs of pork to show the women, who are certainly no novices, just how to soak *mojo* into these interstices.

That Nochebuena they cooked an entire pig because we were sharing it with neighbors. Otherwise, two hams (eighteen pounds each) cooked at two stoves will do. We were never less than two dozen at dinner. Some families took their pork to the bakery to be done. On our block there were always variations of this sort from family to family, but what made Nochebuena a true rite was that the menu never changed. There were (and are) no surprises in that - only confirmed delights. The menu was black beans, white rice (each grain firm and separate), sweet potatoes, yuca, salads, chicken baked in lemon and garlic sauce (in families with closer ties to Spain than Cuba, this might be substituted by whole red snappers in *escabeche*) and the pork. The hams were not brought to the table whole. They were sliced in the kitchen, the brown crisp skin put to one side, and the slices and drippings placed in long pans and given a last turn in the oven just before being served with the crackling skin as garnish. On the table was red wine and *sangría*. 

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This menu rolls off the tongue so easily that I forget how complicated is the preparation of the least dish. Take the black beans; they must be soaked overnight, fortified with garlic, onions, green peppers sauteed in fine olive oil, along with oregano, wine, and hot pepper, and simmered for hours. These ingredients are added at careful intervals so that the sauce will coagulate while the beans remain whole and firm. No mean trick. No less than getting the white rice perfect and hot to the table. One Nochebuena the rice was ruined because at the last moment, when the men were already late from their rounds of the clubs, two empty homes behind our alley burst into flames. So suddenly, so thoroughly, that we all knew without being told that the fires had been set. It was 1932, the Depression was well under way, and the insurance would come in handy. What a memorable Nochebuena that was for us kids - what a disaster for the cooks!

Of course, no one owned a dining table that could seat 24, and kitchen tables were brought from the other houses, placed in a row, and made to seem one by overlapping tablecloths. Our excitement was already at a high pitch by the time we sat down at it, but the very novelty of so long a table made for further happiness. Also, the tolerance and good humor that prevailed. We children did not cease to be children, and our mothers and aunts yelled at us when we threatened to get out of hand, especially when the table was cleared and the turrones and guava paste and cream cheese and flans and brazos gitanos, brought out for dessert; but the admonishments carried no threats: everything the adults said, and especially the laughter of the men, contained a license for our youthful mischief, so long as it was harmless. After all, it was Nochebuena.

There was enough of everything for everyone. On this one night we were the privileged of the earth. Or so that groaning board made us feel. Only the adults knew what sacrifices it may have taken to provide this plenitude, but I believe that even they when they sat at the table felt they had achieved the good life. Not just for themselves, nor for what in the non-Latino world is called the immediate family, but for the whole of the family - the least cousin or in-law - and the neighbors on the block and that island of Latinos called Ybor City. If an americano had wandered down our street, we should have gathered him unto us with a whole heart.

There is not much left of my home town. It is scattered and broken up, and its old ambiente seems to me almost entirely gone. I am bitterly sad about it, but three years ago my wife and I were down there for Christmas and our two grown sons, who are New Yorkers, joined us there. Mother got up at six on the morning of Christmas Eve to start the pork cooking, and we three fellows got out of the way by driving to the beaches 40 minutes away and spending the day with the tourists from up north. It was after six when we started back, so interested in our talk that we had no sense of what day it was. As our car approached Nebraska Avenue, the outer rim of old Ybor City, the car was invaded by a new odor. "What's that?" one of them asked, and I immediately recognized it - pork baking in that pungent mojo. Heavenly pollution, may no wind ever waft it away.