

## Albóndigas

The Wheatsville Food Co-Op is in Austin, Texas. We are members and do some of our shopping there. Every time I walk through the door I feel as though I've taken a step back in time. There's something about the look and feel of the place, and of course the employees and other customers, that evokes a time gone by. It reminds me of the Austin I found when I first came here, in 1980, when the population was just over three hundred thousand. Now it's three times that so it's obviously not the same city.

Austin still felt like a big country town when I arrived. You could angle park anywhere on Congress Avenue, the heart of downtown, and you could always find a spot. Traffic was sparse and the high-rise buildings hadn't started going up yet so there was plenty of sky. It was the home stretch of the town's hippie period, on the brink of the tech boom. The local health food store epitomized the lifestyle; the staff were friendly and had time for their customers. Artists and dropouts worked there and shopped there and contributed their unique vibration to the mood. Employees and most customers alike took a casual approach to clothing and accessories. Dungarees and tie-dye, long hair and beards, sandals and patchouli oil conveyed a pleasant echo of the 1960s. People in business suits stood out as being from a different world, the world that Austin would soon become though, at the time, very few people understood that. The counter-culture feeling is not that pronounced at Wheatsville today, but traces of it remain, for which I'm grateful.

Time leaves layers on a town just as it creates rings on a tree. Austin is the capital of Texas, home of the state legislature. The fine architectural lines of the Capitol building are the backdrop to the view up Congress Avenue from the river that separates downtown from South Austin. A few miles north is the sprawling campus of The University of Texas, where fifty thousand kids from all over the state and beyond come to get an education. Back in the day, cattle money and oil money drove the local economy. The state government needed places to meet and unwind after hours and students needed places to let off steam, so a lively bar and restaurant scene evolved. Musicians started flocking here to provide entertainment. Soon there were blues bars and rock & roll dives and country western dance halls, and

Austin began calling itself The Live Music Capital of the World. A seductive sense of community and identity tied it all together. People graduated from UT and didn't want to leave town. It was said that there were more PhDs waiting tables here than anywhere else. Austin became a hot spot. People came from far and wide to enjoy its laidback vibe, great music, and unspoiled sense of authenticity. Hi-tech companies saw the potential and Austin is now a tech hub, attracting a sophisticated population that brings its own culture and is spreading yet another layer over the town.

Not too long before the pandemic rolled into town, we learned that Wheatsville offered a take-out dinner for \$5 on Thursdays. That's a great price, especially since the dinners are pretty good, so we've included the Co-Op in the roster of restaurants we've been turning to for take-out since the early days of the lockdown. Yesterday the menu was turkey meatballs, garlic smashed potatoes, and broccoli. At \$5, who could resist? As we drove over there, I asked Lillian if she knew the Spanish for turkey meatball. For years, people have asked her why she isn't fluent in Spanish since her husband is bilingual. She explains that having your own personal interpreter lessens the incentive to learn the language. What she has done, though, is build a mental data base of ordinary, colloquial phrases—such as: “Would you like anything from the kitchen?”—so that, at the appropriate moment, she can say: “¿Quieres algo de la cocina?” and deal competently with the responses she might get in return. This has helped her to develop a feeling for the language and be able to hold her own in Madrid and Montevideo.

She came quite close to the word for meatball—*albóndiga*, borrowed from the Arabic—but then the sound of the word, taken out of context and held up for inspection, made us laugh. It is a dramatic, musical word, stressed on the second syllable—*al-BON-diga*. It can sound like an insult (“You worthless *albóndiga*”), a term of endearment (“My little *albóndiga*”) or something Archimedes might have shouted when he jumped out of his bath. Lillian knew how to say ‘turkey’ which, here in Texas, is known by its Aztec name, *guajolote*. And what I started out to say was that last night we dined on *Albóndigas de guajolote con papas y brócoli*.