



Say It With Feeling

How San Antonio gave one native Texan a most unusual gift

Essay by Edmund Tijerina • Illustration by Andy Ward

I know it sounds strange, but for years, I didn't pronounce my last name correctly. I mean, I could, but my pronunciation felt either too ethnic or not ethnic enough. Growing up on the outskirts of Houston in the 1970s and '80s, I was taught by my parents and teachers to anglicize it as much as possible. So I didn't pronounce the "J" like an "H" or roll the "R." And the "T" always came out too hard: "Tee-er-eeen-ah."

I don't blame my parents. Children of immigrants from northern Mexico who had fled during the Mexican Revolution, my mother and father were punished for speaking Spanish

in school in their native San Antonio in the 1930s and '40s. In those days, many people believed that speaking a different language would hinder learning English. And so, as I was growing up, it was English-only in our house. My parents reserved Spanish for their own private conversation, especially when I got into trouble and they debated how to punish me.

Later, when I went away to college in Boston, I continued to mispronounce my name in a way that made people think I was Italian. When I went to graduate school in New York and later moved to Chicago, I tried saying my name correctly, but then

people suddenly expected me to speak fluent Spanish—and I couldn't.

Then, in 1999, I moved to San Antonio. The city was very different from the place I remembered visiting as a kid. It had become much more vibrant and open to newcomers. I got a job as a newspaper reporter. One of my first assignments was to interview a tall, gracious, Anglo judge. He didn't speak Spanish, but as he stood to greet me in his chambers, he pronounced my name perfectly: "Tee-heh-ree-na," with just a slight roll of the "R."

I'll never forget it. The way he said my name seemed so natural and understated, as though everyone in the world said it this way. He wasn't alone. Bankers, attorneys, editors, reporters; Latinos, Anglos, African Americans, Asians. It didn't matter what they did for a living or where they were from—or whether they even spoke Spanish. In San Antonio, they all pronounced my name correctly.

Old San Antone, it seemed, had grown into a city that openly embraced its Mexican roots and accepted Mexican Americans at every level. San Antonians took it as a given that Spanish surnames should be pronounced correctly. Even more amazing, I realized, was the way this shift made me feel about myself, my background, and my new home. Simply living in a city that said my name correctly deepened my pride in my family and my heritage.

To be sure, San Antonio continues a delicate dance with its own identity, alternately celebrating and downplaying its Mexican heritage. Still, I love San Antonio. Not only has it given my wife and me a great place to raise our son, but the city has given me a beautiful gift: pride in saying my name.

Edmund Tijerina writes about food and culture from his home in San Antonio.