

Foreword

Pickerel has prepared, eaten, and—most importantly—digested every dish in these pages. Many fires have charred his grill. His pots are black, his bean masher worn. *The Poor Gringo Guide to Mexican Cooking* is, between recipes, the story of Pickerel himself—a poor gringo masquerading as a sane one.

Pickerel lives in Mexico for many reasons. The sea is near. The nights are warm. The women are friendly. So are the husbands. He is poor here for others, which have nothing to do with his cooking.

Pickerel is no gourmet, not even by the loosest translation of a drunken Francophile. He is a slam-it-down, toss-it-on-the-fire, meat-an'-tater, elbows-on-the-table, fork-clicking, chew-with-his-mouth-open kind of fellow. His former mother-in-law rarely had him over for dinner. He is a graduate of the Walt Whitman School of Cooking, where liberal substitutions are encouraged and “Song of Myself” is finding a pubic hair in your taco.

Pickerel does not promise that you will get fat on his poor gringo fare. In fact, you may get thin. The only promise Pickerel does make—if his cooking guide is followed—is regular and satisfactory bowel movements. This he guarantees, upon proof, or your money back.

Oh, yes.

Pickerel pretends to know nothing of culinary terms. He also mixes metric and English measures (both liquid and dry) at his convenience. His Spanish translation of food items and cooking directions is colloquial, if not ungrammatical. And he borrows, bargains, or steals most of his ingredients.

Purists read no further.



Your Chef Today

Your chef for this impertinent culinary onslaught is Miles S. Pickerel, at your service. Middle name is service. However, S is for Standish—a momentary resurfacing of the puritanical consciousness on his mother's side.

Autobiographically speaking, Miles Standish Pickerel (It is he speaking here, preserving the neutral voice of the disembodied; Pickerel is allergic to first-person singular and plural. It makes him itch.) appeared on the planet one rainy morning in June 1950 at 221 Longwood Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts. His arrival was inconspicuous enough—one more boomer in Beantown. That afternoon, across Muddy River, the Red Sox played a twilight double-header against the Yankees, losing both games. Pickerel's mother fondly recalls that her son cried all night. To this day, he continues to wail in one implacable voice or another, even in the telling of his favorite recipes.

Pickerel's first distinct recollection is that of trying to throw pabulum at a Goodyear blimp as it passed low over his daybed, obstructing his view of the universe. He was two at the time. Next came the unpleasant memory of his maternal grandmother—a stern, fearsome woman with cold Britannic blood—forcing him to eat a boiled egg from an eggcup. Forty years later, Pickerel still runs from hardboiled eggs.

His first social encounter with fellow small-fry Freudians like himself was on the sidewalk of Ditson Street, downtown Dorchester, where he pushed Grady Goss, age three, off the curb for not giving Pickerel half the sidewalk. Grady ran home to his mother, scraped up and bawling, while Pickerel marched victoriously forward. He remains a sidewalk pusher to this day.

Then his formal education began. For young Pickerel, this was an overwhelming event overshadowed by abundant paper, Crayolas, wet paint, Play-Doh, and glue. There was a big person mixed up in it somewhere, calling herself a teacher, but Pickerel acknowledged her existence only when she began to shriek. The whole experience was so thoroughly enjoyable that life since has never stopped being kindergarten. Pickerel misses the chaos to this day.

Regarding Pickerel's adolescent years, he will say only this: he was a typical teenage boy—he liked to eat, drive fast, watch porn, and play with his peter. As for the debauched collegiate days that followed and his subsequent (albeit perverse) embarkation into the adult world, Pickerel will say nothing. Nothing best describes that chapter of his life.

How Pickerel Turned Culinary

When Pickerel's wife, Miriam, departed their two-room, dirt-floor hacienda one August morning in 1997, taking the children but leaving the dog, Pickerel faced the cruel culinary realities of the world for the first time in his life. He had spent the last thirty years intentionally bent on not stirring a pot or washing a dirty tablespoon. In a pinch, he would butter toast, boil a tea bag, or turn a saltshaker, but nothing more.

He had lived with his mother until the very last episode of *Gunsmoke* aired in September 1985. Constitutionally speaking, he was old enough to become president of the United States, and, though Pickerel was never elected or nominated, his mother catered to his smallest palatal whim as if he had been. Seafood Newberg served over oven-warmed toast for breakfast. Swedish meatballs skewered on toothpicks during televised Celtics games. Pickerel's mother baked beans and brown bread every Saturday at six sharp (when Pickerel was tuning into *Hee Haw*). On Sundays, she prepared a thick-crust shepherd's pie (supplicated by her one and only begotten son, sometimes preacher, sometimes parishioner of her heart). She made Pickerel corn bread on rainy November mornings, and she boiled corned beef and cabbage every Tuesday in March. When Pickerel turned pale, she fried him a pan of liver and onions, and on his birthday, she prepared his favorite dish: salmon soufflé. She cooked an old-world beef Stroganoff that warmed Pickerel's bilges even when he gobbled it cold, which he did sometimes, straight from the Westinghouse at two in the morning after surviving on gin and pistachios for twelve hours without intermission. What Stroganoff! What a *madre!*

Then Pickerel met Miriam, and the planet heaved slightly from the collision. Young Miriam. Innocent Miriam. Sweet but sugar-free Miriam. She was studying interior design at a local junior college. Pickerel was an ergophobic associate professor of biological sciences at the same institution. They came from opposite ends of the great *Via Lactea*—he, a devious black hole, she, an ingenuous twinkle, twinkle. But Pickerel didn't care if the universe was expanding. He was not looking for fast-snapping neurons, an engaging personality, or even new upholstery. He was looking for high growth in mutual funds. He was looking for stock options, T-bills, and a junior partnership in the family lumber business in Brazil. Pickerel could bring himself to rape the tropical landscape. Yes, he could! Apart from abundant wealth, Pickerel was also looking for one thing more in his future: an abundant woman—not one with hidden beauty or factory

options, but one with well-converted carbohydrates in all the right quarters.

How Miriam managed to usurp Pickerel's good sense, deluding him into seeing abundance where abundance was not, is a long and mournful tale that Pickerel still drowns himself bibaciously to forget. It has no place here, where thorough digestion is sought and a loose bowel is a culinary crime.

Instead, let Pickerel say this: Miriam turned out a very decent meatloaf. Yes. Also a mean dish of scalloped potatoes. And her macaroni and cheese (old Norwegian recipe from her mother) never once made it as far as the dog's dish in the backyard.

Stateside, Miriam cut a persuasive figure pushing her shopping cart down the supermarket aisles, sagaciously eyeing bar codes. Years of convenience shopping had tuned her prehensile grip for the instant, the frozen, the freeze-dried, and the prettily packaged. In the kitchen, she was a dervish between the microwave and the toaster oven. She knew all the settings—the wattage for thawing frozen broccoli, the seconds needed to silence Orville Redenbacher. Her electric can opener was never lonesome, her Crock-Pot never cool. She was well on the way to turning instant herself—Miriam in a minute. Just add water and nuke.

Then she followed the Great Solitaire (aka Miles Pickerel) to Mexico—25° 45' N, 108° 57' W, to be exact—and Quaker Oatmeal never tasted the same. A two-burner gas stove with a deceased pilot light turned out to be a shocking welcome. So was the sink. More precisely, the lack of sink. “Where does the water go?” was the question Miriam posed upon peering into the depths of a plastic dishpan perched on a rickety wooden stand. Obviously, Miriam had never had the pleasure of tossing dirty dishwater out the back door. “And the hot water?” she asked meekly, observing the solitary cold-water tap with its musical drip. Pickerel pointed at the high noon sun and smiled. After all, such was the price of living in the romantic dream fields of a dangerous Latino land.

At the beginning, Miriam bravely trooped it out. She beat their beans without a blender. She hand strangled Pickerel's morning juice. Daily, she made the dusty pilgrimage to the local market where she haggled in bad Spanish over fresh carp and the price of ripe mangos. Briskly, she returned over the cobbles, her woven bag full of corn to husk, peas to shell, and fish to gut.

Pickerel did his part too. He found a cottonwood stump upon which Miriam could strike cutlery. He purchased a clattering electric fan to blow hot wind upon the flies. And he grew demanding with the landlord. Said

Pickerel in his most exigent voice, “*Señor*, the holes in the kitchen roof must be plugged. *Pero ya!*” When Miriam was not laboring under summer showers, she was speckled with tropical sunlight. Poor Miriam. She tried. She really did.

Then came the Pickerel progeny, unexpected and plural—Rose and Roselyn—the twins, a double whammy of vanilla frizzes and Colgate smiles—and heirs to the Pickerel misfortune. Their arrival sent Miriam’s adventurous spirit into a nosedive while launching her nest-building instincts into the stratosphere. Pretending to be poor had been fun. As for the real thing, Miriam saw no future in it. “To hell with doing without,” were her exact words. Suddenly, indoor plumbing became essential, hot water a necessity, and the lack of window screens a serious health hazard. Soon Pickerel found himself on Miriam’s list of things to fix. No longer was she willing to accept his God-given right to prevaricate. Nor was she disposed to tolerate his walking phallus or his intemperate squandering of the family peso. Pickerel’s tiny business of biological supply was still in the early stages of liftoff. His monthly check from the VA did not always make a timely landing in the hands of Miriam. Usually it landed not at all, due to urgent debt in other sectors. Remnant cash was often rerouted to El Toro Manchado (The Spotted Bull), Pickerel’s favorite retail outlet for distilled beverages.

Miriam’s brisk step to the market turned to a trudge. Dusty streets took their toll. The untimely concurrence of a trash collectors’ strike and an outbreak of dengue fever fouled her mood. Frequent visits by the landlord trying to ambush Pickerel for back rent became a constant Miriam mortification. And simply living with Pickerel was enough to make her believe she had died and gone to hell in a *chiquihuite*.*

In due course, Miriam’s shadow grew willowy while the substance of the woman grew frazzled and wild—a dandelion gone to seed.

One morning, with eggs frying on the stove for breakfast, the bottled butane ran out. No gas, no eggs. When Miriam called for help, Pickerel jumped to his feet, quickly suggesting that she fire up the charcoal grill. Miriam refused. Instead, she laughed a strange laugh, one from the abyss. Then she shrieked, “Miles, get me some gas this instant!” Pickerel farted, rather loudly, and then he smiled. He may have grinned.

That was it. Miriam retreated, hands over ears, paint peelings on the ceiling stirring in her wake. Within the hour she was gone, twins in tow, and Pickerel suddenly found himself alone with one dog, no breakfast, and

* Tortilla basket made from woven grass.

cold eggs congealing on a gasless stove.

What to do? he asked himself as he stared at the lace of eggs clinging to the edge of the frying pan. He looked to Ladrón for an answer—the dog that two months later would mysteriously disappear on the same day Chacha Machado (Pickerel's first housekeeper) served a very decent pozole* for a dinner party of six—and then the answer came to him.

Pickerel would cook. Yes. He would fire that charcoal grill, refry those eggs, and he would eat them inside a warm tortilla—Miriam be damned. Then Pickerel did it, a new king in his kitchen, and even Ladrón got a lick.

The next day he dared to boil his first pot of beans. A week later, he was eating refried topped with grated ranch cheese. Within the month, squash blossom quesadillas filled Pickerel's plate, *frijoles* on the side.

Every dish in this poor gringo's guide came after that—recipes borrowed from neighbors, offered by friends, stolen from taco stands, or taught to Pickerel by female culinary consorts passing through his kitchen in the tsunamic wake of Miriam.

To this day, Pickerel continues his gastronomic march to madness. And he still gets gas.

* A stew made with meat and hominy in a red chili sauce.

Pickerel's Kitchen

Welcome to Tabachines 212 Ote., Pickerel's address in an unnamed city. Observe the front yard—an oblong plat of weeds enclosed by a rusted wrought-iron fence topped with rust-cankered pikes (tetanus is Pickerel's first defense against creditor climbers). And behold Pickerel's blue-painted front door, dented with kick marks—these left from the days when Miriam believed door locks could keep Pickerel from entering his castle in a drunken rage at early antemeridian hours.

Pásale, pásale. Yes, come in. *Mi casa es tu casa.*

No tour today, however. Instead, let us head straight to Pickerel's kitchen (*cocina*) at the rear of his humble abode. Pickerel calls it his scullery turned culinary, his galley-in-the-alley—a three-sided lean-to that opens onto a low-walled patio where rare red bougainvillea once grew until Pickerel repeatedly peed upon them for obstructing his view of the neighborhood. Now when Pickerel cooks, he is able to gaze unhindered upon nearby wash lines and genuflecting washerwomen.

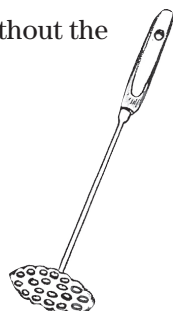
But enough of Pickerel's voyeuristic pastimes. To the kitchen and what you will need there to prepare your poor gringo cuisine.

Essentials and Utensils

Pickerel's poor gringo kitchen would not be complete without the following instruments of culinary mayhem.

Bean masher—*Moledor de frijol*. A plastic or wooden instrument of bean demise.

Bean spoon—*Cuchara para guisar*. For cooking beans. Must be long-handled; wooden or plastic. Never use a metal spoon. Beans will behave badly.



Blender—*Licuada*. The presence of an electric appliance in Pickerel's kitchen is a tacit acknowledgment that science is grand and the manual eggbeater is dead. He considers his four-speed, turbo Facimix of Brazilian fabrication to be the most important advancement in thorough digestion since Tums. Even plain water tastes better with froth. And in the preparation of his unheralded, maguey milkshake, Pickerel would be helpless without it.

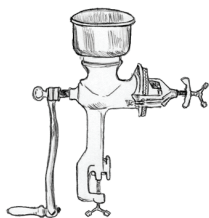
Cheese grater—*Raspador de queso*. If cheese is milk's leap toward immortality, then a cheese grater is what? A tritulating time machine? For poor gringos, a hand grater will do. Ask Santa for an upgrade to a box grater.

Colander—*Escurreidor*. Pickerel made his own by going crazy with an ice pick on a #10 coffee can.

Cookware—*Batería de cocina*. The centerpiece of Pickerel's cookware is his bean pot: a 10-liter, enameled ironware receptacle blackened with many bean incarnations. His biggest pot is an aluminum stockpot (*olla*), 16-liter capacity that Pickerel sometimes turns upside down for a stool. His kitchen also boasts two porcelain saucepots (*cazuelas*) and a menagerie of banged-up, formerly nonstick saucepans (*cazos*) that Pickerel borrowed from (and did not return to) neighbors, housekeepers, and grieving widows. As for his skillet (*sartenes*), they are cast-iron, and Pickerel has three of them—eight, ten, and twelve-inchers (the last, a reflection of his rich fantasy life). Finally, there is Pickerel's *comal*—his griddle—an indispensable piece of flatware for cooking tortillas. Pickerel



owns two—a thin, tin one (square 12" x 12" piece of sheet metal cut from nearby AC ductwork) for tortilla warming, and a heavy-duty, heat-holding, cast-iron job that Pickerel needs both hands to lift. On cold nights, he has slipped it between his bedcovers as a warmer.



Corn grinder—*Molino de maíz (granos)*. Pickerel uses his grinder to make green corn tamales. If you count among your culinary appliances a meat grinder or a food processor (Pickerel has neither), you may use one of these to grind corn for tamales. Purists use a *metate*. Alternatively, you may borrow a neighbor's *molino* if you promise to pay the owner back with warm, freshly made tamales. If your grinder is new, first grind 1/2 cup of uncooked rice and then grind 3 corn tortillas.

This will eliminate any metal flavor. Also, be sure your grinder is fixed to a heavy/immovable object (bar counter, billiard table, or nearby fencepost). Hand grinding is a shaky, screw-loosening enterprise.

Cutting board—*Tabla para cortar*. Pickerel uses Miriam's cottonwood stump for fish gutting, poultry beheadings, and other animal dismemberments. For smaller jobs, he uses a pine board. Once a year he replaces his bloodstained and knife-marked plank for a new one, selected from a carpentry shop conveniently located across the street.

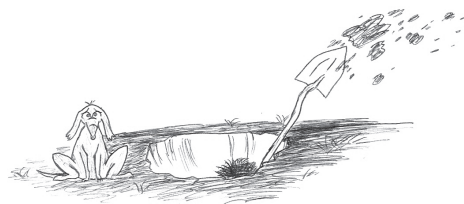
Dishpan—*Bandeja*. Pickerel uses a plastic dishpan for sorting beans, mixing tortilla dough, making green corn tamales, soaking dishes, and washing the racing stripes from his yellowed undershorts.

Fire—*Fuego*. Pickerel's kitchen has multiple options. *Número uno* is his gas stove (*estufa*), a Mabe three-burner (burner number four inoperable since Doña Cuca, Pickerel's purveyor of cold-blooded vertebrates, plugged it with blackened reptile glue while cauterizing broken iguana tails). (See *Stewed Iguana*, page 191.)

Never one to depend on a timely supply of gas, Pickerel has backup—his charcoal grill (*parrilla*). He buys his charcoal (*carbón*) from friend and local burner Pablo Quemado, a sooty-faced man who charges Pickerel the ridiculously low price of thirty pesos (about three dollars) for one bulging onion sack of charred *déndron* (enough to last Pickerel two weeks). In return, Pickerel prescribes his soon-to-be-patented tequila vaporizer as treatment for Pablo's stage-one black lung disease. (Pickerel—known as *El Doctor* in

the neighborhood—dispenses his ample medical knowledge to the natives at no charge, though donations are gratefully accepted.) So Pablo and Pickerel are back-scratching buddies until organ failure (Pablo's *pulmones* and Pickerel's liver) do they part.

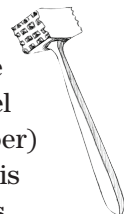
Finally, option three in Pickerel's incendiary arsenal is the pit—his backyard barbeque pit (*hoyo*). Pickerel dug it one midnight while Miriam slept. It began as a shallow grave—last resting place for a quarrelsome spouse—then grew less rectangular and more cylindrical as Pickerel's hands blistered, his back wearied, and sobriety set in. Later, Pickerel tossed in a layer of large, round stones (highly recommended for thermal retention), and then he acquired an appropriately sized cover (the hood off a 1979 Oldsmobile Delta 88, mint condition) from an unconvicted felon working at a local garage.



(To hear more of this hero, read Pickerel's forthcoming *The Poor Gringo Guide to Mexican Mechanics*.) Pickerel inaugurated his pit the afternoon he not so accidentally ran over a goat grazing too close to the shoulder of a country road. Pickerel outran the goat keeper (an old man with a herding cane) to the carcass, and in moments, he was motoring back to town with the dead goat in the trunk of his car. Pit side, Pickerel invited neighbors to gather wood and supply him with aluminum foil and free labor. Within the hour, one chopped up, chili-basted, and foil-wrapped goat was slow cooking under a dirt-covered Oldsmobile hood. (See *Fired Tequila Goat*, page 189.)

Lime squeezer—*Exprimidor de limón*. The cast-iron variety lasts longer than the aluminum kind. Pickerel's squeezer has turned green with a thousand lime confessions.

Meat pounder—*Machacador* or *marrito para carne*. Hammer-like device with a dentated head used to pound tough meat. Pickerel lost his the day Manuela Picas (green card aspirant with a temper) threw it at him. She missed but hit a window instead, sending his meat pounder into the street. As Pickerel ran to fetch it (he was going to *machacar* Manuela for breaking his window), a passing urchin found it and was already setting a new world record for the 100-meter dash in bare feet. Pickerel now uses a smooth, flat-



bottomed stone (fist-size) for his meat pounder.

Metate—*Metate*. Also known as the Aztec blender. A flat, rectangular stone mortar used for grinding corn, chilies, and cacao. Pickerel owned one until it was carried off by his landlord in lieu of back rent. Now he grinds his corn in a *molino*. (See *Corn Grinder*, page 18)

Mortar and pestle—*Molcajete y tejolote*. If purchased new, both of these must be cured prior to use (to avoid mineral shedding). Pickerel has no idea how to do this. He acquired his mortar and pestle used from Reyna de Los Reyes, a post-Miriam tenant who dreamed of permanent residency. When she precipitously exited



Pickerel's life never to return (after discovering Pickerel's stash of embalmed cats—her calico kitty among them—curing behind the latrine ... Did Pickerel mention that he dabbles in the biological supply business?), she took her Virgin of Guadalupe votive candles but left the *molcajete*—mostly because it was too heavy to run with.

(Reyna's black basalt mortar is a relic the size of a pre-Columbian chamber pot.) Now that Pickerel calls it his own, he pulverizes spices, garlic, and coriander with the thoroughness of a possessed alchemist transmuting lust to love.

Rolling bottle—*Rodillo*. Instead of a rolling pin, Pickerel uses a rolling bottle to flatten his flour tortilla dough. He recommends a long-necked beer bottle, preferably 1/2-liter size, preferably Pacifico brand, preferably full (and cold). When not making flour tortillas, Pickerel remains entirely unbiased in his preference for bottled beer.

Steamer—*Olla vaporera*. Pickerel's steamer consists of a dozen stones (golf ball-size) laid in the bottom of a tall pot. He adds just enough water to cover the stones, and he positions two circles of mosquito screen (cut to fit the diameter of his pot) over the stones. On the screen, he places the ingredient(s) to be steamed, covers the pot, and places it over high heat.

Strainer—*Colador*. Pickerel uses a short length of mosquito screen removed from the window after the landlord made repairs.

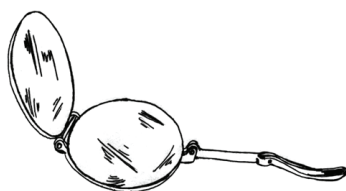
Tongs—*Pinzas*. Essential for toasting chilies and roasting onions over charcoal. Pickerel uses a short culm of *carrizo* (poor cousin of sugarcane) cut lengthwise with the end attached as a hinge. This

device Pickerel borrowed from local urchins who bring live scorpions and tarantulas to Pickerel's small business of biological supply. A burning chili is not unlike an enraged arachnid.

Tortilla basket—*Chiquihuite*. A woven basket to keep tortillas warm.



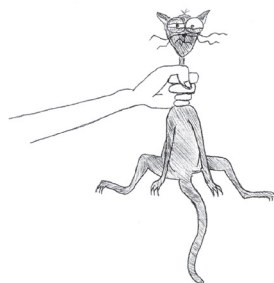
Tortilla press—*Prensa de tortilla*. A simple engine of tortilla torture used to squeeze the skinny out of tortilla dough. Two flat and perfectly round cast-iron plates hinged together with a lever. Absolutely medieval.



Ingredients

Carne machaca. Salted, pounded, dried, and shredded meat made from beef or other mammalian quadrupeds.

Pickerel used to make his own *machaca* (recipe to follow) until rumors of missing pets and an uncommon scarcity of domestic rodents alarmed his neighborhood. Pickerel added his angst-ridden voice to the *barrio* hubbub—visibly concerned for the safety of his longtime canine companion, Ladrón (though not for the welfare of annoying rodents, of which, coincidentally, he had none)—but the purported pet and pest bogeyman was never sighted, much less apprehended.



Pickerel now buys his *machaca* from the lowest-priced *machaca* vendor within bicycling distance of his humble abode. He does not inquire about the meat's origin or its species. He understands that low price means low quality, low pedigree, and low to the ground. Pickerel figures that all meat—after salting, pounding, drying, and shredding—acquires its own distinctly flavorful anonymity in *machaca*.