Wheels of

Nearly 4,000 taco trucks roam the streets of L.A. Tacos

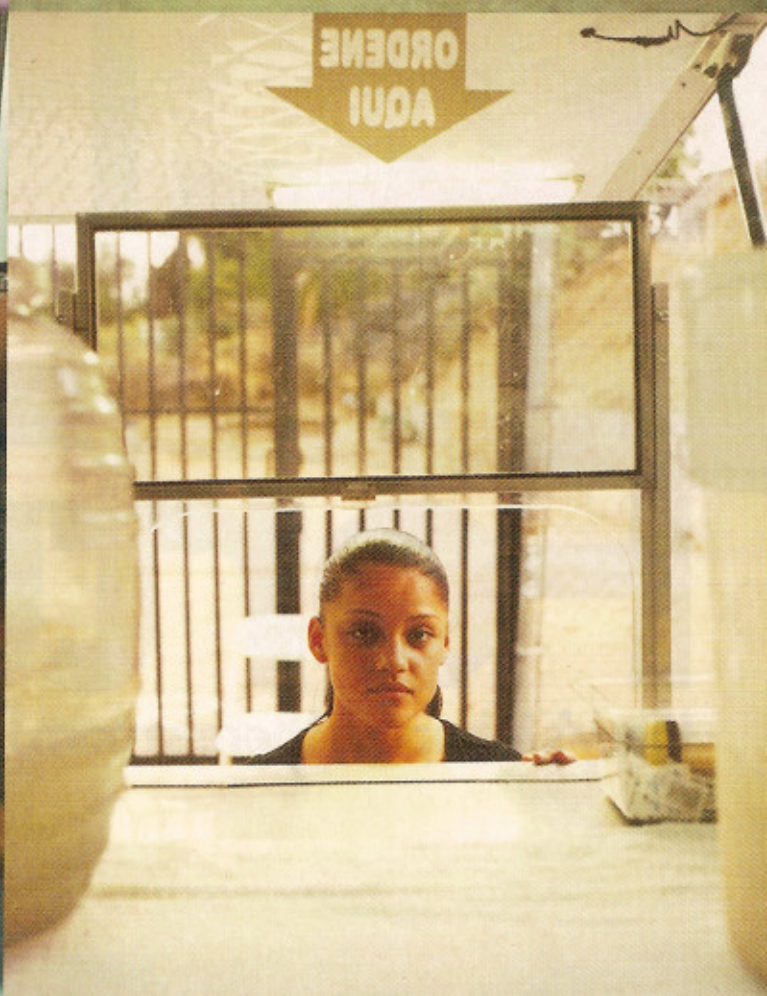
Fortune »

Jeesy's is hoping there's room for one more

by Jesse Katz

Photographs by Trujillo+Paumier


TACOS


ORDENE
AQUI

TACOS BY JESUS:
Every dollar that Jesús Meneses (top left) has to his name is tied up in Tacos Jeesy's, which began trolling East L.A. last year

» Heading north

out of Huntington Park, across the sooty flatlands of Vernon, past the spray-painted basin of the Los Angeles River, over the Santa Fe Railroad, over the Santa Ana Freeway, over the caverns of the future Eastside metro, Tacos Jeesy's rattles and groans. The stereo thumps to Mexican narco ballads, tales of gunslinging farmers and duplicitous cops. Neon tubes swirl around the exterior, outlining the powder blue van in the emeralds and indigos of a carnival ride. Swaying in the back, on a shelf above the take-out window, is a shrine to *el Niño Doctor*—a faith-healing version of the baby Jesus—with votive candles, rosary beads, and a lucky $2 bill.

"Today's a day for drinking beer, not working," says Erasto Sandoval, punching the motor past Evergreen Cemetery and swinging east on Cesar Chavez, into the heart of the old unincorporated barrio. It is that kind of a day, a sweltering Friday afternoon at the peak of a suffocating July: too hot to eat meat, let alone grill it in the steel belly of an industrial RV. The back of Erasto's shirt, embroidered with a plate of steaming tacos, is already soaked. His mother, Andrea, needing something for balance, has wedged herself against the ice tub. "*Pa'delante*," she says. Forward, not backward.

"Yes, I know," sighs Erasto, who is 25, with a Dodger cap turned around and a gold hoop in each ear. "Little by little."

Since last November, when Erasto's brother-in-law set Tacos Jeesy's in motion, the whole family has been on a seven-day-a-week road trip, from their home near the Estrada Courts housing project to a commissary on Maywood Avenue to the streets of East Los Angeles, then back again, night after night. Spouses, parents, siblings, children—everyone has been forced to pitch in, to keep Tacos Jeesy's chugging along, to justify this madbrain investment. The patriarch of the venture, Jesús Meneses, is 31, a father of four and husband to Erasto's sister. Like most immigrant entrepreneurs, he walks a tightrope: no health insurance, no 401(k), no stock options, no savings. He still works a day job, repairing machinery at a tortilla factory. With his in-laws he rents two units on the same lot; they are 15 altogether.

"Everyone thinks I'm crazy," Jesús says in Spanish that is formal yet earnest. "Instead of buying a house, I bought a taco truck." It was the biggest purchase of his life, the most fantastic gamble he has ever taken. He has $65,000 tied up—some of it his own money, some his sister's, some a loan—in a movable kitchen. He faces a mess of other bills, for inspections, licenses, insurance, and storage. Then there are the risks of just taking Tacos Jeesy's out, of running a cash-only curbside business after dark. "Sometimes," he says, "I wonder what I've got myself into."

The son of itinerant produce vendors from Tepeaca, a 16th-century township in central Mexico, Jesús is both a dreamer and a worrywart. He has sad, heavy eyes and a habit of pulling the corners of his mouth taut, teeth clenched, to convey his premonitions of calamity. He trusts in the Child Doctor, Tepeaca's patron saint. He believes in the promise of *el norte*, in the resolve of his own hands. Yet L.A. is a place Jesús only half understands. It has pressures and regulations, financial and legal complications, that never existed back home, opportunities for ruin every bit as plentiful as those for advancement. Before Tacos Jeesy's, he operated a pair of sidewalk taco stands, one in East L.A. and one in Compton, the kind with pirated electricity and open flames that violate just about every article of the state's health and safety code. Twice the authorities swooped in, seizing his carts and condemning the meat. Graduating to a truck—a gleaming, chrome-encrusted monument to the intersection of Mexican cuisine and L.A. car culture—is a coming out of sorts, a rite of assimilation. Jesús, the underground *taquero*, is going legit. There is one obstacle he never anticipated, though, a hitch that is threatening to derail his great American journey. After nearly a year on the road, Tacos Jeesy's has not been able to stake out a spot worth keeping. The good ones are too few. The competition is too fierce. Business was better in the shadows, it pains Jesús to admit, than it is now in the glare of the truck. "I've got to stick it out," he says. "I've gone too far to turn back." So as the weeks roll by, as summer fades into fall, Jesús keeps going, hoping, waiting, searching for a corner of the city to call his own.

To operate a taco truck legally in L.A., a vendor must gain approval from the Vehicle Inspection Program of the Food Inspection Bureau of the Environmental Health division of the county Department of Public Health. There are currently 7,165 vehicles, from ice cream trucks to hot dog carts to fruit-and-vegetable wagons, with valid health permits. The largest number, 2,422, are what

officials call MFPUs, or mobile food-preparation units. In Spanish, they are *loncheras*. These are vehicles like Tacos Jeesy's, self-contained vans or trailers with refrigeration and running water. An additional 1,465 loncheras have allowed their health permits to lapse but could still be operating on the sly. Put another way, there is nearly one taco truck for every square mile of land in Los Angeles County.

Just as L.A. is renowned as the cradle of the drive-thru restaurant, so has it been a pioneer of the inverse—a restaurant on wheels. Hot trucks, unlike those that merely serve prepackaged snacks, emerged as a fixture in the 1970s, bolstered by a mild climate, a sturdy economy, and a growing Latino population raised on the fare of open-air markets. While the rest of the country was still being peddled ham and cheese, roving chefs here were frying and stewing and broiling, beef, pork, goat, tripe, brain, tongue, re-creating the dishes of home on the streets. By 1982, the *Los Angeles Times* had made the trend official, declaring the mobile kitchen a "Southern California phenomenon." Colorful, absurd, ingenious, taco trucks are the ultimate icon of urban L.A., a proletarian response to the city's social geography. They have become an obsession of painters and screenwriters, academics and chowhounds, who see in them something indigenous and improvised, the gastronomic equivalent of folk art. "Taco trucks are the unconscious connectors of the city," the online journal *Polar Inertia* recently mused, adding that L.A.'s vast lonchera fleet both "discovers and reconfigures" its environment.

The cult of the taco truck has had few converts in city hall. Decade after decade, politicians have demonized the trade, denouncing it as a source of congestion and crime, blaming street vendors for drawing boozy crowds and for competing unfairly with sit-down establishments. In many communities, "roach coach" has become code for unwelcome immigration, the attacks often a thinly veiled strategy for keeping a foreign culture at bay. Some municipalities have banned taco trucks. Others have adopted impossible restrictions. In East L.A., where Tacos Jeesy's operates, catering vehicles are limited to 30 minutes in a single location and required to travel at least half a mile before stopping again. Such ordinances are, of course, only selectively enforced; nobody heeds them, police and vendors alike, unless there is a complaint. But that is just the sort of uncertainty that baffles and torments Jesús. He has jumped through every hoop required to get his truck sanctioned—passed every inspection, obtained every certificate, affixed every sticker—and yet somehow he still finds himself at the fringes of the law.

Every taco truck is supposed to begin and end its day at a commissary, which is like a trailer park for mobile kitchens, with hookups for water and electricity. The county has 31 authorized sites, mostly in the south and the east—Bell, Cudahy, Paramount, Lynwood—L.A.'s invisible outskirts, brown and working class. Tacos Jeesy's parks in berth no. 123 of the Royal Catering yard in Huntington Park. It is a teeming labyrinth, home to about 240 trucks, part swap meet, part recycling center, part migrant camp. The entrance has a swinging wrought-iron gate. The walls are topped by razor wire. The ground is forever wet, covered by a sludge of grease and dishwater, plastic wrappers and decaying produce. Old men in rubber boots wade through the muck, scavenging bottles and cans, dragging soggy cardboard to a trash compactor. Seagulls dive for leftovers. Because the health code prohibits street vendors from cooking or even keeping food at home—another law only sporadically enforced—there is a company store on the grounds, selling essentials on credit. Ice tumbles from a huge refrigerated silo. A van drops by to hawk rags and towels. Everyone is either loading something up or flushing something out, singing or cursing, each invariably blocking the other's way along the narrow corridors. Jesús pays $640 a month.

Early in the morning, the traffic at Royal Catering leans toward the *marisco* trucks, their coolers full of shrimp and oysters. They advertise seafood Sinaloa style and Nayarit style and Colima style and Baja style. WELCOME TO YOUR VITAMINS! reads the sign on the Korita Jr. truck. In the late afternoon, as the fish wagons lumber back, the meat trucks file out, transforming the intersection of Slauson and Maywood into a ballet of the animal kingdom. Now come the *birria* and the *al pastor*, the hog maw and the cow cheeks, the *tortas ahogadas* and the *cemitas poblanas*, Michoacán style, Jalisco style, Distrito Federal style, Oaxaca style. TASTY CHICKEN NECKS, TIJUANA STYLE, beckons the Super Taco truck—and really, who knew such a specialty even existed? It is as if the true flavor of Mexico, its regional traditions and raucous imagination, its Indian roots and European legacy, is bursting from this motorized cook-off. There is a truck named the King and one named the Dandy, followed by the Cherub, the Sexy White Man, Mr. Freckles, the Curve, the Jalopy, and the Lonely Tacomobile. On the side of El Rojo is a caricature of the devil, grinning over a flaming grill. Mariscos Sinaloa flaunts a portrait of the bandit hero Malverde, patron saint of smugglers. The mural on Tacos Jeesy's is the grandest of them all—an Aztec warrior, shirtless, head bowed, mourning his fallen princess.

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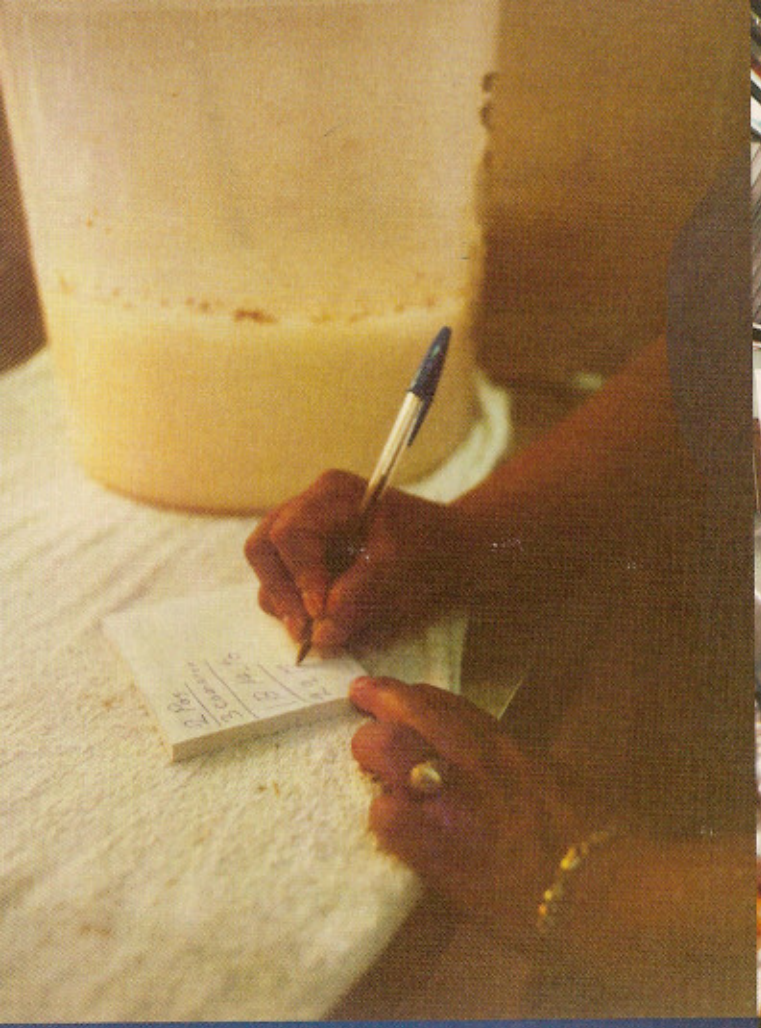
Like many who share his name, at least in this country, Jesús prefers to go by a diminutive, something a bit less sacrosanct. After buying the truck, he christened it Jessy. He hired a sign painter, an artist from South Gate, to hand-letter the name on four panels—above the windshield, over the mural, and on each side of the cab—in a careful, two-tone, drop-shadow font. Somewhere along the way, the letters got scrambled; the painter doubled the *e* instead of the *s*. Doing it over was never discussed. If his biggest problem was being known as Tacos Jeesy's, Jessy could live with that.

MOVABLE FEAST: **Erasto Sandoval (top right) carves the *al pastor* seven nights a week while his mother, Andrea, waits on customers**




TACOS
BURRITOS
TACOS

AZTEC MYTH:
The mural on Tacos Jeesy's depicts the legend of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, the great volcanoes of central Mexico

Tacos Jeesy's began life as a 1991 GMC step van. It is rectangular and chunky, 24 feet, 2 inches long and covered in rivets. The seat feels like a bus driver's, high and close to the hood. The windshield looks like two mammoth bug eyes. The tires in back are duallys, the rims as shiny as mirrors. It had originally belonged to a laundry service, used for hauling uniforms and linens.

A mom-and-pop metal shop, El Monte Catering Trucks, obtained the van for Jessy and went about gutting it. Where once there were clothes racks there would now be a kitchen, every nut and bolt of it subject to the county's review. The container would need to become a stainless steel cocoon, the bottom sealed in diamond-plate flooring, with the surface extending up the wall by at least four inches. The pass-through windows would need to be smaller than 216 square inches, and the screens that covered them would need at least 16 strands of mesh per square inch. There would need to be a potable-water tank of at least 30 gallons and a wastewater tank of at least 45. The hot water would need to get up to 120 degrees. The fridge would need to get down to 41. "Everything," says the manager, Jorge Gómez, "was built just for him."

It took four weeks. Jessy visited almost every day. For the down payment, he had needed to borrow $16,000 from his sister Cirila. His brother Constantino agreed to handle the registration and insurance. Everyone would have to give to the truck—cooking, cleaning, driving, shopping—and from the truck, if Jessy succeeded, they would all receive. On the final day, when he was invited to drive it away, Jessy found himself overwhelmed. It was the strangest thing. He could not remember the last time he had cried, but there he was, eyes puffy and wet, wiping away the tears. The manager asked if he was all right. "I couldn't answer," Jessy says. "Not even I understood what I was feeling."

As Avenida Cesar E. Chavez wends east, past the mosaic facade of Self-Help Graphics & Art, host of the city's most fabled Day of the Dead celebration, it dips into a basin, a stretch of three or four desultory blocks. At the bottom of the slope is a sorry little strip mall, with a Thrifty-Wash and a pay phone and a defunct bridal store. Sun-scorched men drink from paper sacks. Prickly pears sprout from the dust. The sky crackles with fireworks and helicopters. It has been gang turf since L.A. gangs were invented, a neighborhood the homies call El Hoyo Maravilla. The Hole of Marvels.

This is where Erasto slows and pulls to the curb, parking Tacos Jeesy's across the driveway of an abandoned lot. He hops out to check his position, then kills the engine and fires up the generator. He swings open the shutters, which glide on hydraulic struts and in their new position serve as illuminated awnings. He unhinges a polished sheet of metal that has been bolted to the chassis, just under the customer windows, lifting it into an instant countertop. He hops back in the truck and emerges with five folding chairs. He lugs out a garbage can for the sidewalk. It would not be an exaggeration to call Tacos Jeesy's the slickest thing in sight, a clean, well-lighted symbol of enterprise on a corner as bleak and weary as any Erasto could hope to find. "It's pretty lonely here," he concedes, folding a napkin and wiping the sweat from his wispy goatee.

How a town of 4,000 taco trucks manages to accommodate them all is something of a choreographed mystery, a daily convergence of law and tradition and fear and etiquette that still eludes Tacos Jeesy's. Some spots can only be inherited, bequeathed from one generation of street vendor to the next. Some spots have to be bought, rented from property owners or neighborhood gangsters. Some spots are won with charisma, some are seized by intimidation, some are a product of intuition and luck. The government sets parameters—in the city of L.A., catering vehicles must be at least 100 feet from the nearest intersection, in the county at least 1,000 feet from the nearest school. But it is the unwritten code, a delicate balance of audacity and discretion, that dictates where most taco trucks go. Jessy would like to be near a hub of commerce, surrounded by shoppers and workers. With exposure, though, comes unwanted attention—say, from an irritated restaurateur—which could lead to inspections or fines. Because it is so forlorn, Jessy's sliver of Cesar Chavez serves as a safe harbor, the kind of peripheral space that can be inhabited without explanation or permission. Nobody recommended it. Nobody invited him. "I didn't check it out first or really take note of anything," says Jessy, whose truck has been parked there from 6 to 12 every night, with the exception of Christmas, New Year's, and Erasto's birthday. "I just started showing up."

It is as if the true flavor of Mexico, its regional traditions and raucous imagination, its Indian roots and European legacy, is bursting from this motorized cook-off.

Tacos Jeesy's may have insinuated itself into the neighborhood, but that is not the same as the neighborhood welcoming Tacos Jeesy's. Winos gather outside the truck, cadging food. A tumble of skaters and *cholos* and Goths blow down the sidewalk, sometimes pausing long enough to become customers, sometimes scaring customers off. Not long after the debut of Tacos Jeesy's, someone hurled an egg from a passing car, staining the mural with yolk. Taggers have sneaked around the blind spots, scrawling their insignias while Erasto cooked. Several times an old bald-headed *vato*, more lapsed pachuco than practicing gangbanger, has thrust his hand inside the take-out window. In halting Spanish he asks for money, ten dollars, five dollars, two. Erasto always shakes his head.

"Just a couple dollars," the dude says one night.

"We don't have anything," says Erasto.

"I'll pay you with interest—*con interés*," the dude says.

"With Teresa?" asks Erasto, playing » CONTINUED ON PAGE 283

Wheels of Fortune

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 161 » dumb.

"C'mon, homes," the dude says. "I know you have it."

As the wheedling grows more desperate, Erasto eyes a cleaver.

"All this, from up there to down here, this is ours, *ese*," the dude says with a flourish. "We own it." Then he storms off.

Tacos Jeesy's has only one window to the curb, the "order here" opening, which is at the far end of the countertop. The "receive here" window stays shut, blocked by a fitful TV, which blares the same *novelas* week after week. Whenever traffic rumbles by, the whole van shudders, as if stricken by a quake. As soon as he parks, Erasto starts cooking—nine different cuts of meat on four different fires. He digs into a refrigerated bucket and pulls out an al pastor spit, already speared with dozens of pork cutlets, and mounts it on a rotisserie. He spreads *tripas* across the grill, dusting them with seasoned salt. He lifts open the steam table, poking at the *lengua* and *cabeza* that his sister Adriana—Jessy's wife—began stewing earlier that day. Finally, on a gas burner, Erasto sets down a giant disk, raised in the middle and sunken along the edges, like an upside-down hubcap. He fills it with cooking oil, a good three inches deep, then submerges the *carnitas*, the *buche*, the chorizo, the *suadero*, and the *carne asada*. Soon the entire kitchen is enveloped by a pungent barnyard fog, everything smacking and popping and hissing so loud that it is almost impossible to talk. At these moments, the customers might as well be mimes on the other side of the glass; one weathered drunk orders everything this way, in a flurry of cryptic hand signals to indicate that he is almost ready for a taco but not yet, because he has a beer to down, but soon enough, unless, of course, he decides to crack one more.

Tacos Jeesy's boasts no signature dish, no regional specialty. There is not even a menu to speak of, just a list of the nine meats onboard. Tacos are $1. Burritos, tortas, and quesadillas are $3. But nowhere do those prices appear. It is simply understood, the taco truck's unspoken pledge, that a full belly is within anyone's budget. As the most veteran chef in the family—he learned on Pasadena's Mexican restaurant circuit, at La Estrella and Doña Rosa—Erasto is anxious to stretch his limits. He talks of adding nachos or wet burritos, maybe Cuban sandwiches, to the Tacos Jeesy's repertoire. "I'd like to go to school and get a diploma, to learn how to make more foods, but I don't have the time," says Erasto, who comes from Veracruz, where his father grows chayote, the pear-shaped squash. With his mother, he often watches the Food Network, the closest Erasto can get to formal instruction. They marvel at all the elaborate recipes, the flavors and techniques from around the world. "I tell him he can make these things, too," says Erasto's mom, who sits on an overturned milk crate, chopping limes and trimming radishes. She pulls out a Snickers that she has stashed in the drink cooler, breaks off a piece, and slips the rest of the bar back in the ice. "He's still young," she says. "He still has able hands."

Erasto is so filled with restless energy, with longing and ambition, that he can sound almost contemptuous of Jessy, a killjoy by nature, sober and cautious. Erasto is on the front lines, stuck at a hot stove, putting his skills to the test every night. Jessy is essentially upper management, dropping in only at the end of the shift, to drive Tacos Jeesy's back to the commissary. On good weeks, Erasto gets a salary; on bad weeks, not much more than room and board. "I'm looking for my own flavor, a mix, a little from all the places I've worked," says Erasto, who wears wraparound Chopper shades and sports a yin-yang tattoo on his right biceps. "My brother-in-law doesn't really even like to be in the truck."

The youngest of nine children, Jessy came north at 17, reuniting with siblings who had made the trek years before. They had urged him to stay in Mexico. "They said there was too much suffering here," says Jessy. "But I had already bought into the illusion. I wanted to make money. I wanted something bigger than my parents had." His eldest brother, who drives a produce truck, was the first to put him to work. Then another, who runs a garment factory, taught him to sew. Jessy met his wife there, at the single-needle lockstitch machine; they went on to have four children, now nine, five, four, and one. Following his sister's lead, Jessy found work at a *tortillería*, servicing the presses and belts. When a friend with a lonchera offered him a part-time job, Jessy hesitated. "I had no idea," he says. "I was afraid I'd burn my hands." Once he learned the trade, he bought his first cart. He merged it with a scheme he had for party rentals, printing up business cards that offered tables, chairs, canopies, DJ services, and "tacos for any occasion." About four years ago Jessy began rolling his cart into Compton after work. A couple of years later he took another to East L.A. The sidewalk stands brought in enough money to help finance the truck—and truth be told, still do. Although he is sheepish about acknowledging their existence, Jessy is counting on his unlicensed carts as an insurance policy, at least until Tacos Jeesy's is paid for. His day starts at 10 a.m. and ends at 2 a.m., from the factory to the carts to the truck, with stops at the meat market and the propane dealer, often with a kid or two in tow. He is just six years older than Erasto but already with a lifetime of burdens.

"My father came here a few years ago, but he didn't like it," Jessy says. "He didn't feel free. He went back to Mexico and told my mother not to come either. He told her life in the United States was ugly." His dad still lives in Tepeaca. His mom now is buried there.

THE MURAL on the side of Tacos Jeesy's is epic, an oil painting the size of a garage door. It is modeled on *The Legend of the Volcanoes*, a 1940 product of commercial artist Jesús de la Helguera, whose idealized images of preconquest Mexico have been duplicated on countless holiday calendars and black-velvet canvases. It was applied to the hull of Tacos Jeesy's by Eloy Soto, the 32-year-old graphic designer who also did the truck's lettering. The most prolific lonchera painter in Los Angeles, he has decorated hundreds of taco trucks over the last decade, sometimes drawing from his own imagination, sometimes reproducing the emblems of Latino culture. "If you take a drive anywhere in the city, you'll see my work," says Soto, who used a poster he bought on Olvera Street as his reference for Jessy's mural. "I can't paint them quite as beautiful as I'd like—I need to make a living—but I try to do my best."

Jessy paid close to $900 for everything, including the botched spelling of his name. That he was spending money on art, even as he was sinking into debt, is a testament to just how much of himself is invested in Tacos Jeesy's. His truck is not merely a business but a wonderfully public expression of his aspirations and identity, a way to enter the economy and if nothing else still maintain his pride.

The Legend of the Volcanoes was just what Jessy was looking for. It depicts the creation myth of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, both

of which rise more than 17,000 feet and tower over the Valley of Mexico, not far from his childhood home. As the story goes, the warrior Popocatepetl has been promised the emperor's daughter, but only if he returns from battle. Believing her love has died—as her father wished—the heartbroken Ixtaccihuatl takes her own life. A triumphant Popocatepetl comes back to claim her, only to be himself consumed by grief. Hoping to revive her, he carries his princess to the mountaintop. There he stays at her side—resolute, faithful, still burning with passion—as their bodies turn to stone.

MIRAGES DANCE across the pavement. The wind feels like exhaust. A family of cockroaches has crawled from the gutter and begun scouring the sidewalk. Gnats swarm the windshield, inching up the glass, mesmerized by the neon. Erasto changes the channel, to a dubbed version of *Rocky IV*.

For every $1 taco he sells, Jessy figures he spends about 60 cents on meat and condiments. Just to keep up with the payments on his truck, he would need to sell 1,000 tacos a week. If that equation is expanded to include his fees at the commissary and gas and the token salary he pays his in-laws, Jessy would need to at least double that—and if he wanted to make some money for himself, well, that is on a horizon too distant to even contemplate. Some nights Tacos Jeesy's is lucky to do $100. Some nights it does more. But when Jessy opens the latches on his battered metal cash box in the morning, there is rarely enough inside to cover the cost of doing business. If he did not have Erasto, Jessy could not afford to hire a chef. He would probably have to do it himself, which would mean leaving the tortilla factory, his only reliable source of income. "If this truck were all I had to live on," Jessy says, "I would have had to shut it down by now."

Moving the truck is a debate Jessy has with himself every day, but where to? Within a two-mile stretch of Cesar Chavez, there are at least a dozen other taco vendors—some licensed, some scofflaw—not to mention landmark restaurants such as La Parrilla and King Taco. The shaved-ice guy walks by with his shopping basket. Then the peanut guy. Then the corn-on-the-cob guy. Just two blocks away is a dance hall, El Paso del Norte, which should be supplying late-night customers. On weekends, though, a no-name stand sets up in front of the cantina doors, drawing electricity through an open window. "If we wanted, we could call and get them shut down," Erasto says. "I mean, we have the permit. They don't. I'm not saying we should. You hope there's enough work for everybody. But we could." Even Jessy's illicit carts are making more money than Tacos Jeesy's, an irony he struggles to comprehend. Maybe they are in better spots. Maybe they have just been there longer. Maybe they are more intimate or immediate. If he gives up on his desolate block, he may regret having to start over again. If he stays, he may regret it more. "I'm on my way—that's what everybody tells me," Jessy says. "Sometimes I believe it. Sometimes I don't."

When an order trickles in, Erasto's mom writes it on the back of a La Barca label, scrap paper from Jessy's day job. Erasto is already in motion, fanning through a bag of corn tortillas and carrying a stack over to the gurgling hubcap pan. By now, the oil has been distilled into a ruddy, cloven-hoofed bisque, charred nubs of sausage and fajita swirling in the brew. If not exactly a comforting sight, it is the secret to everything delicious at Tacos Jeesy's, the essence of Erasto's cooking. He dips the tortillas in the fryer, then dangles them over the grill. The drizzle of fat snaps and splatters. Erasto slaps down the tortillas, two at a time, pressing with a metal spatula, forcing heat and grease into the dough. With tongs, he lifts a skirt steak from the pan and lays it on a cutting board. He chops with a cleaver, reducing the fillet to a hundred little bites, then moves it to the grill, searing the meat with another sprinkle of oil. Erasto's hands are like oven mitts, steady and thick. He grabs a pair of tortillas off the stove with just his fingers and thumb. He cradles them in his bare palm, then scoops up the carne asada with one instinctive flick of the wrist. He tops it with a pinch of onion and cilantro, along with a spoon of smoky red salsa. His mom adds lime, radishes, and pickled carrots. When she passes an order of tacos through the window, the paper plate underneath feels as if it is about to vaporize.

To eat this way, to eat right here, in the grit and roar and dog-day heat, is to reestablish an elemental connection with food. All the qualities of restaurant dining—comfort, service, hygiene, status—are, whether by choice or necessity, renounced on the curb. Tacos are not just fast and cheap. They are urgent and primal, the perfect trinity of flesh, starch, and spice. In one form or another, people have been eating like this forever. The taco truck is L.A.'s campfire.

One night, about ten, a wizened little man rolls up on a bicycle and orders a burrito. He is dark and haggard, maybe 40, maybe 60, a life drained by the streets. After a few hungry bites, his eyes close and his head dips, as if in prayer or pain. A minute goes by and his chin bobs lower. His grip on the burrito starts to relax. It is hard to imagine what depths of exhaustion, of debility or drink, could lead someone to fall asleep while eating on a busy L.A. boulevard. His shoulders begin to slump. The burrito shifts again. A few seconds more and, surely, it will drop. All of a sudden, the man jerks awake. He opens his eyes. He takes another bite. Then he sinks back into his stupor, limp and silent again. The burrito never leaves his hand.

WHEN HE SHOWS up at the truck, shortly after midnight, Jessy is with two of his sons—his eldest, Christian, and five-year-old Jessy Jr., who is dressed in Spider-Man pajamas. Little Jessy runs inside and grabs a soda, playing peekaboo through the Plexiglas window of the drink cooler. Christian folds the chairs and drags the trash can up the steps of the van. "They always say that they'll help me," their father says. "I tell them, 'I don't want you to help.' They say, 'No, we want to.' I tell them, 'I want you to do better. You need to study. I want you to do what I couldn't.'" Jessy grabs a broom and sweeps the sidewalk, using a paper plate as a dustpan. He washes down the concrete, splashing it with a jug of water, like a wistful gardener tending a barren plot.

Erasto and his mother leave with the younger child, heading home in the car Jessy drove. Jessy and Christian take the truck. They will drive to the commissary, returning in the car Erasto left in the afternoon. Without traffic to slow them, Jessy opts for the freeway, turning off Cesar Chavez and gunning down the 710. Traveling this fast, Tacos Jeesy's is a colossal rattletrap, a riot of cabinets and hatches and pots and pans. It makes Christian smile. There is no passenger seat, and so he perches himself on the dashboard. He is a nine-year-old boy, next to his dad, barreling through the empty L.A. night on the bow of a taco truck. He looks out the windshield, face pressed against the glass. LA