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The first symptom of trouble in the ranch holiday kitchen looked innocuous enough. The label on the new meat thermometer was that of a well respected kitchen equipment company, but in smaller print it said, "assembled in Juarez, Mexico."

What a fine ring that vigorous border town once sounded before the drug problems and population explosions tempered the charm. In those days, several fine restaurants across the Big River served grilled quail and deep-fried peppers stuffed with goat cheeses. Guitar players, the troubadours of the plazas and streets, played long into revelous nights. Señoritas promenaded around the squares and all the real and imagined allure of Mexico spelled the gringo's mind.

Streets, like the city itself, were named after heroic historical figures of the founding days of independence from Spain and the revolutionary times of the early part of this century. However, despite those noble titles, not one row of houses were numbered in order. "Casillas numero 30#" stood between "numero 123#" and "numero 67#," as logical to the Mexican mind as it is to take a four-day holiday in the middle of the busiest season of his *patron's* schedule.

At no time, or at any time, in this bustling border outpost of unmetered cab rides and uncalibrated cash registers did anyone suppose these citizens were going to bother to make an object as accurate as a thermometer.

As I thrust mine into the 19-pound turkey's breast, flashbacks of the Juans and Juanitas plying the trades of the border hit hard. The turkey had been marinated in brine for eight hours; three fretful days had been spent thawing the bird in the refrigerator. I had a difficult time letting go of the thermometer.

"Jesus Roman Quiros blended tequila anejo, orange brandies, limes and salt to make him the toast of all the margarita drinkers of North America," I recalled. "Yet Jesus Ramon Quiros' skills were limited to glass jiggers and long-handled silver bar spoons, and did not include mercury-calibrated instruments."

Appreciate that this agony is not the pain of a tunafish salad maker, who combines canned fish with Miracle Whip and chopped celery to slam in front of a starved school kid. Selecting the parsley to garnish the holiday fowl takes my level of cook 15 minutes. Please do not confuse mixing wild rice, golden raisins and shredded carrots to be moistened by Granny Smith apples and orange zest with a creekside frankfurter roast. Elevate your sights to a near chef preparing rosemary chicken stuffed in braised sweetbreads, or a beef stroganoff perfected by sour cream and fresh lemon juice, and then you understand how dense the day becomes using a meat thermometer assembled in a town yet to be mapped, much less located on the ground.

Turkeys are alien, too. Odds are slim of buying one today raised in Texas. North Carolina leads the nation in

turkey production. Texas ranks fifth. I asked around San Angelo where their stock came from. All the better hamburger grinders in the meat departments of the chains thought turkey came from warehouses in Dallas or Amarillo. Employees of the big stores, (and San Angelo has one independent grocery store left of any size) are so removed from food production, the closest they come to animals are the cartoons on TV.

Herders trying to trap butchers into admitting they sell imported meat keeps them on edge. Store-bought beef today marbles like kangaroo cutlets from a nursing female. Labels classify the steaks as "select quality". "National disgrace" sounds better in a country awash in good cattle.

By breakfast, the flavor from roasting turkey, enriched in sage and whiffs of baking cornmeal, heralded the feast. My daughter-in-law fixed oatmeal rolls and pecan pie by the same recipes Mother used every holiday. Six hours and 20 minutes after going in the oven, the Old Mexico thermometer read between the temperature for rare duck and well done cod fish. The thingamajig of a plastic indicator supplied by the packer, stuck deep in the white meat, lay dormant and non-committal.

I rifled through three cookbooks, confirming cooking time for a 19-pound bird. I seared my forefinger and thumb pulling out a rack with a wet hot pad. The rubber bulb of a two-bit phony baster melted airtight at the tip. Just before the smoke detector beeped in the back bedroom, the door

letting the smoke from the kitchen blew shut and knocked the timer off the window into the sink.

But two hours later, I slid the broad-breasted, full winged, long stride fowl out on a rose point, milk white platter, browned to the gold of Montezuma and as evenly done as Mr. Greenspan's workday.

"Jesus Ramon Quiros may have made the best margaritas on the border," I thought, "but he'd of never made the tryouts cooking on this ranch."

I was all but prepared to bow or to accept a salutary toast when a grandson came by and asked, "Granddad, why are you wearing two aprons?"