

# **The Politeness of Questa la Platta**

Mary Austin



# Table of Contents

<b><u>The Politeness of Questa la Platta</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<u>Mary Austin</u> .....	2
<u>1</u> .....	3
<u>2</u> .....	4
<u>3</u> .....	5
<u>4</u> .....	6

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- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

## The Politeness of Questa la Platta

### 1

THIS is a telling of the politeness of Questa la Platta, which is the most polite of the Spanish-speaking towns of New Mexico. It is also distinguished for goat's milk cheese, made and ripened after receipts already ancient when they came into New Spain with St. John of the Gentlemen. This politeness and the pride of their sole product Questa la Platta laid on the altar of Americanism in the year nineteen seventeen. I ask you, what more could a town do?

Questa la Platta is a day's journey from anywhere, and its geography is mostly on end, which accounts for the prevalence of goatherding as an industry. All the ore having long since been taken out of the Silver Search Mine, which gave the place its name, the young men of Questa la Platta have taken to following it, spreading the town's reputation for politeness and little white, leathery cheeses wherever they go.

Letter-writing, however, being at best a perilous adventure, and reading a matter better left with those who can see some use in it, the town did not certainly know that it was implicated in the great war until the draft reached out for the whole two of their able-bodied young men. But how was anybody even then to feel certain that those animales of Germans would not make peace for themselves before the men of Questa la Platta could get at them? What else was there for the town to do but register the high mark of that cortissima for which for two hundred years it had been distinguished?

2

An adequate opportunity for doing so did not arrive, however, until near the close of the first year of the war, when the mail-carrier from Arroyada brought word that the Government at Washington was sending a food expert to teach them how to conserve food for the armies by eating meat once a day. Once a day, mind you! Dios y santos! but that was a thing Questa la Platta would be glad to learn!

Up to this time Questa la Platta had not thought of itself as wasteful in the matter of food. There were brown beans raised in the pockets of the hills, also a little wheat, which is harvested by hand and ground as required in the water mill of Pablo Romero, which is at least as old as the American Constitution. In sickness there was always a chicken that could be spared, and from afar the walls of Questa la Platta could be picked out against the mountain-side by the strings of scarlet peppers drying. Meat hunger, when it grew imperative, was satisfied by the killing of a goat or a calf, of which everybody in the village ate as long as it lasted. The famous cheeses were seldom eaten

in Questa la Platta. What else had they for trade and the support of the town's reputation? And should this be sacrificed because one felt a little more empty than usual? When it was learned that the food expert meant to pay them a visit, Questa la Platta felt that the keeping up of the reputation of the cheeses had not cost too much; they were ravished with a sense of the delicate condescension of the Government at Washington. Pablo Romero, who as postmaster was felt to be somewhat in the confidence of the Government, considered that there might be a possibility of sending a consignment of the cheeses to the front, where they would undoubtedly be appreciated.

The food expert was a young and charming woman who had had two periods of domestic science at her state university and was engaged to a lieutenant in the Aviation Corps. She came up, a whole day's journey, with the mail-carrier from Arroyada, with a brief-case full of food-administration leaflets, a colored chart of food values, and full directions for putting down eggs in water-glass and making goat's milk cheese. The mail-carrier, who was a Questa la Platta man, did his best to present the country to her in the most engaging light. He also, being himself of a politeness, learned something of what she hoped to accomplish for Questa la Platta. She would teach them to make goat's milk cheese.

But goat's milk cheese! The matrons of Questa la Platta to whom this was privately communicated put their hands over their mouths with astonishment; by which sign you may know that the particular community was founded on and had absorbed a Tewa Pueblo. Senora Peladero, at whose house the expert was to be entertained, recalled them to the tradition. This might be a trick of those animales, the enemy, to rob the town of its true glory; but, on the other hand, there was always its politeness. On the strength of the reputation of her own cheeses as far afield as Albuquerque, Senora Peladero decreed that for as long as the Senorita Hooverino remained in Questa la Platta, its inhabitants should know nothing of goat's milk cheese except what it pleased the Government to teach them.

3

This patriotic resolution was arrived at in the first twenty minutes, while the expert was removing the dust of travel in Senora Peladero's parlatorio and making the disconcerting discovery that the receipt for goat's milk cheese had been left at the station before the last, where she had last had occasion to use it. Senora Peladero, observing at supper that the Senorita Hooverino, whose proper name had been completely swallowed by her function, was troubled, had it out of her in a twinkling. Could it not, then, be recovered, the so eagerly anticipated government secret of goat's milk cheeses? By telegraph, the senorita told her, from that railway junction from which she had been all day climbing up in the buckboard of the mail-carrier to Questa la Platta. How fortunately everything is arranged when one but thinks of it! Only half as much time is required for going down the mountain as for coming up, which would allow Juan Ruiz time for necessary sleep between his arrival at the telegraph station and his return with the so thoughtful receipts of the Government. Accordingly Juan Ruiz was despatched.

Thus Questa la Platta had a whole day for anticipating what the Government had to say on the subject of eating meat once a day, and the expert filled in part of the time by writing to her aviator that the consciousness of bringing this simple people into touch with the great world more than compensated for the hardships of her undertaking. In the spiritual rebirth which was to follow on the cessation of the war, she felt that Questa la Platta would, through the medium of goat's milk cheese, be able to take its place in the brotherhood of peoples.

There was also, as the day advanced, a little matter in the way of an egg lacking for the demonstration of water-glass, which must be seen to. Senora Peladero was desolated because she had used up the whole of two eggs retrieved from her own barn-yard for a cake for the food expert, and Senora Bacca, her nearest neighbor, had sent hers to Senora Montoya, who was abed of her seventh! But let the Senorita Hooverino rest assured; if the Government at Washington desired an egg, an egg would be found.

By the time the shadow of the mountain had swallowed up several lesser ranges, and the last of the goat-herds had come home, Juan Ruiz returned with the telegraphic directions for the making of goat's milk cheese in his hat. Considering the interest at stake, the cost of his journey, which the expert added to her expense account, was not exorbitant.

4

The meeting, which took place at the school-house that night, was a tremendous success, being attended by the whole twoscore population of Questa la Platta. The lecture was not too long; the interpreter made the most of his opportunities. The colored charts of strange and unheard of foods were enchanting. The demonstration of the egg conserved in water-glass was in no way dimmed by the circumstance that the egg that was finally produced would have been better for being conserved earlier.

True, the directions for eating meat once a day lacked applicability, — there was nothing whatever said about how you were to come by the meat, — but the receipt for making cheese of goat's milk created a sensation. Had it not come direct from Washington itself, from the President's lady, no doubt? Had not Juan Ruiz traveled a day and a night for it, and been well paid into the bargain? To crown all, was it not, item for item, the same by which goat's cheese had been made in Questa la Platta for two centuries?

The food expert was greatly touched by its reception. She explained that henceforth Questa la Platta would be keeping step with the great world of affairs: it would now have something to give! To all of which the politest town in New Mexico gravely agreed. The program concluded with a little exhortation on standing by the Government, to which the interpreter added something on his own account. Then, oh, crowning touch! the expert sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" in a very pretty voice, to which now and then from the audience was added a wordless vocal accompaniment. By this time Questa la Platta was so carried out of itself that it had in the fiddle and the flute, unscrewed the school-benches, and turned the food demonstration into a baile, at which the pretty expert, who was of a politeness after Questa la Platta's own heart, danced with everybody.

The next morning, as she was tucking herself into the mail-cart with two thirds of the population seeing her off, she turned back to them with that pleasant air of taking an interest in these simple people which had made her work a success, to remind them that if ever she heard of Questa la Platta again, she expected to hear of it in connection with goat's milk cheeses.

"Si, Senorita," Senora Peladero answered for everybody, tucking a package of hard, round objects consigned to the general store at Albuquerque under the expert's feet. "Sin duda, sin duda!" To which, even after the expert, who was also a representative of the Government, had turned her back on them for the long descent, there was no under-current of laughter in the murmur of general assent. It is not for nothing that Questa la Platta is known as the politest town in New Mexico.