



The Weapon of Satire

“¡Ask a Mexican!” author Gustavo Arellano on how he combats hatred and stereotypes ■ BY SUZI STEFFEN

So who is the real man behind the sombrero-wearing hombre cartoon that’s causing uproar in the *EW*’s letters section?

Gustavo Arellano is a 28-year-old investigative reporter and food critic for *The OC Weekly* in Orange County, Calif. He has a bachelor’s in film studies from Chapman College in L.A. and a master’s in Latin American Studies from UCLA. He specialized in anthropology, sociology and history in the multidisciplinary grad program. “I’m a total nerd,” Arellano says.

And for his most famous job, writer of the “¡Ask A Mexican!” column, he calls on all of that knowledge plus his life experience from living as a fourth-generation Mexican-American in Orange County, the place that he says “created this anti-immigrant hysteria.”

The syndicated column appears every week in 32 papers with a combined circulation of more than 2 million, and it runs everywhere from Seattle to El Paso, from Kansas City, Mo., to Jackson, Wyo. *Eugene Weekly* began running the column in the Nov. 8 issue at the request of an *EW* board member, and “because Arellano is a voice addressing Latino-Anglo topics in a fresh and well-written way,” says *EW* Editor Ted Taylor.

Though Oregon has been and remains a largely white state, vital statistics in Oregon show that 20 percent of babies born in the state in 2005 were born to Latina mothers, and demographic stats from the 2005 census show that nearly 10 percent of Oregon residents

identify as Hispanic or Latino. Orange County’s stats claim a 35 percent Hispanic/Latino population.

And Orange County, Arellano says, has so much stereotyping and so much ignorance that even though he began his column as a joke, he quickly learned how necessary it was. As an investigative reporter (a job he still has), he had been tracking hate groups and also covering the education beat. In May of 2004, he remembers, the *OC Weekly* ran a special issue for Cinco de Mayo called “Why Do We Hate Mexicans?” The issue “was devoted to the history of Mexican-bashing in Orange County,” and that was when the now-infamous caricature of a Latino man made its debut at the paper. The caricature is required by the syndication contract and runs alongside the column.

Arellano has won many awards, including the National Hispanic Media Coalition’s Impact Award for Excellence in Print Journalism in 2007. But in many places, including Eugene, some community members believe that “¡Ask A Mexican!” perpetuates stereotypes, that Arellano is a racist and that his column hurts the very people he’s trying to help.

What’s going on? We asked him.

For our readers who haven’t read a lot about you, could you describe your parents’ background and where you grew up?

My parents were immigrants from Mexico. My dad crossed the border illegally

in the trunk of a Chevy. I grew up in Anaheim, but when I entered kindergarten, I only spoke Spanish.

So technically, I’m fourth generation. My great-grandfather came in the early 1900s to pick oranges, went to Mexico to get married and have kids, and brought up my grandfather when he was 3. My grandfather grew up in Anaheim during the 1910s and 1920s, at a time when Mexicans could only live in citrus camps. Then he went back to Mexico and had his family. My mom came to the U.S. when she was 12, but her family connection to Orange County had gone back 60 years. We’ve now had a century of living in Orange County.

My mom doesn’t think much of my Spanish now — Mexican mothers are like Jewish moms; they are never content. They love you, but they are always going to be pricking at you. I came on [the air] a couple of weeks ago with Jorge Ramos on Univision, and my mom said, “Your Spanish was great; you only had one or two words that you missed.”

In my experience, my column is my best tool in confronting know-nothings. I’m not going to just allow hate to run in circles around me.

What’s the point of your column?

The point is to debunk the stereotypes that people do have about Mexicans, to aggressively go after racists, but at the same time, do it in a way that people will want to read it every week and get entertained — whether it’s Mexicans laughing at ourselves or people laughing at stupid racists or at stupid questions.

It’s satire. I try to follow the great satirists: Mark Twain, Jonathan Swift, Dave Chappelle and Stephen Colbert. They make people laugh, but we don’t consider them comedians, we consider them making a commentary on their time.

I have found that this column has been incredibly effective in combating hatred and stereotypes. And sometimes people really do have earnest questions about Mexicans.

What is the audience you envision for the column?

The audience to me is everyone who’s concerned about Mexicans. Latinos are the largest minority in this country, and Mexicans make up 60 percent of that and are moving into places they never were before. We can’t be surprised that some people are having a freak-out about us. Assimilation in this country has never been pretty. There is going to be curiosity; there is going to be skepticism. As a member of the “invading army,” I can tell people: Look, it’s going to be OK.

For an audience breakdown, I’d say it’s 40 percent Latino, everyone from third or fourth generation Mexicans who don’t know how to speak Spanish to Mexicans in Mexico who read the column online and respond. Then 40 percent are gabachos, 10 percent Asian American, 10 percent African American.

Let’s talk about the caricature. Doesn’t it reinforce stereotypes?

The caricature is not a Mexican; it’s a dumb drawing of somebody’s warped image of Mexicans. Also, it’s the image that has been in American minds for about 150 years. If it were something people used to ridicule or to harm, I would totally understand [the objection]. However, it’s satire; I published that logo to rob it of its power. I’m trying to reappropriate that image to castrate it of its power, publish it again and again and again until people no longer see that as a Mexican.

Actually, we’ve already reappropriated that image. Go to most Mexican restaurants in the U.S., and entrepreneurs are using that trope to promote Mexican businesses. Mexican entrepreneurs know it’s a dumb drawing that’s gotten a cachet amongst people. I don’t see Latino activists protesting those entrepreneurs who use it.

But I completely understand why the freak-out. Because it is an ugly caricature. But why are we allowing a dumb drawing to upset us so much? We should laugh at anybody who thinks this is an actual Mexican. We should