In 1892 Piedad Yorba hardly looked like a future restaurant star: Los Angeles’s first female celebrity chef and proprietress of the nation’s first upscale Mexican restaurant, a place so wildly popular that a town grew up around it and took the restaurant’s name. That was the last thing anyone expected. In 1892 Piedad was merely a twenty-eight-year-old widow with a famous surname, though she had scarcely anything to show for it.

Her great-grandfather, Jose Antonio Yorba, had been one of the first Spanish settlers in California; he ended up one of its largest landowners. In 1810 the Spanish Crown had granted him the sixty-three-thousand-acre Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana, which comprised much of present-day Los Angeles and Orange counties. After California became a state in 1848, many heirs to California land grants lost their property, either because of Yankee sharpers or unfriendly courts. But not Jose Antonio’s successors. Although many of the land grants had never been thoroughly surveyed, the Yorbas held clear title to their land and were able to keep it all.

However, by the time Piedad came of age there were many Yorba heirs—too many. When Jose Antonio died in 1821, his property had to be divided into seventy parcels for inheritance purposes. His son Bernardo Antonio Yorba, Piedad’s grandfather, had nineteen children. As a result, Piedad was in line for only \( \frac{1}{46} \) share of a 42.88 acre plot just outside the Los Angeles city limits, a property described at the time as suitable for farming or “houses of the humbler sort.” And she would have to split that 0.93-acre portion with her brother. On top of that, the title to this insignificant scrap of land ended up languishing in probate for the next twelve years, and by 1904 the property was pinpointed as the only Southern California real estate to have lost value since 1892.

In an earlier period, the extended Yorba family might have taken Piedad in after the death of her first husband, Charles Argüello, but they didn’t. Perhaps they were in no position to, or perhaps Piedad was too independent to impose on her relatives, even though she had a daughter to raise. A spirited woman, she was described in contemporary reports as having some education, which probably means she was literate in both Spanish and English. For whatever reason, Piedad chose to rely on her skill at cooking the food of her heritage.

Los Angeles had been a dusty pueblo in 1864, the year of Piedad’s birth. It was literally a cow town, with a population of around five thousand and an economy based on cattle ranching and wine. The spoken language was still Spanish. As a cook, Piedad specialized in what Angelenos called “Spanish food” well into the 1940s, though to us today her dishes would seem utterly Mexican. The food was known as “Spanish” because it came from the kitchens of California’s old Spanish families, who thought of themselves as Mexican about as much as present-day Californians think of themselves as Texan. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries California had been effectively self-governing and remote from Mexico and its concerns. When speaking Spanish, the old California families called themselves Californios, not Mexicanos; and when speaking English,
that also housed the headquarters of the Silver Republicans. In the 1890s the United States had been convulsed by the issue of whether the Treasury should issue currency in silver as well as gold; Republicans who favored it, most numerous in the West, were known as Silver Republicans. It may have been through this accidental political connection that Piedad cooked a Spanish dinner for E.H. Harriman, the powerful chairman of both the Union Pacific and Southern Pacific railroads in the days when the railroads ran California.

By 1905 Los Angeles was a city of about two hundred thousand people, crisscrossed by the trolley tracks of the Pacific Electric Railroad much as it would later be crisscrossed by freeways. On October 12 of that year, the PE Railroad announced plans to extend a trolley line from downtown Los Angeles into the foothills north of Glendale. The PE always liked to put tourist attractions at the end of its lines, and it just so happened that company president Henry Huntington and his business associate L.C. Brand owned hundreds of acres in the unincorporated foothill area, as well as a couple of nineteenth-century Spanish adobes near the planned terminus. Huntington had the bright idea to install a Spanish restaurant in one of his adobes. At Brand’s suggestion, he chose the proprietress of El Famoso to run it.
The idea of this restaurant electrified the city. Los Angeles was besotted with the romance of Old California, the days of the dons and the mission padres. Although this craze has left no trace on contemporary American culture (apart from the occasional Zorro movie), a century ago every southern California library stocked four or five copies of Helen Hunt Jackson’s sentimental novel of the mission days, *Ramona*. Spanish food had been available in Los Angeles from tamale carts around the old plaza and in hole-in-the-wall restaurants such as El Famoso, but here was a chance to eat the very food Ramona might have eaten (if she had been real), and in a building she might actually have visited (had she been real).

Huntington planned to name the restaurant La Ramada. However, the first newspaper stories mentioned its location on the property of “the old Verdugo ranch”—Rancho San Rafael, which had been granted to Jose Maria Verdugo in 1798. In point of fact, the adobe chosen to serve as the restaurant had been built by a man named Teodoro Sepulveda, but after an eager newspaper reporter dubbed the place Casa Verdugo, that’s what the public started calling it. The railroad had no choice. Casa Verdugo was born.

Diners were not disappointed. For starters, Casa Verdugo offered a beautiful getaway in the hills, just twenty minutes from downtown by trolley or car. A 1911 article in *The Clutch* (a magazine for “autoists”) later described the nine-mile drive from downtown as offering “wide views of the smiling valleys and of the piled-up mountain ranges, through fragrant orchards and blossoming berry fields.” At least in the early days of Casa Verdugo, big coaches called “tally-hos” could also be hired for a rollicking ride in the hills. The romantic old adobe was rather small, but it had a broad, shady veranda under a shingled roof (Angelenos later assumed that old California buildings always had tile roofs, but this was mainly true of the missions, not of residences). Its foothill location allowed visitors to look across the spacious San Fernando Valley, at the time mostly wheat fields and citrus orchards where not scrubland haunted by coyotes. The picturesque ruins of Mission San Fernando could be spied fifteen miles to the northwest.

Indoors, there were two genuine adobe dining rooms. Photographs reveal that they were not whitewashed in traditional fashion but painted pastel blue and green, more suitable for an elegant residence. The walls were adorned with paintings, Indian rugs, and knickknacks in the Victorian style to keep them from seeming too plain; the windows were shaded with heavy drapes. Wrought-iron lamps hung from the ceilings, but from the photographs it appears that they held electric light bulbs. The waiters wore tuxedos.

Surrounding the adobe were extensive gardens with lawns and benches for drinking the atmosphere in. If patrons chose not to dine indoors, there was plenty of room under the palm-thatched *ramada*, which adjoined a courtyard shaded by an ancient pepper tree. There guitarists and singers performed old rancho music, and Piedad’s daughter, Viola, and nephew Ernesto Martinez danced “La Cachuca” and “El Sombrero Blanco.” The restaurant was considered as famous for its charming young dancers as for its food.

(The first public mention of the Yorba name in connection with Casa Verdugo, about two months after the restaurant opened, was a report of the “Spanish children” entertaining a group of East Coast journalists.) A photograph shows gentle Viola with a big bow in her hair and flashing-eyed Ernesto in a sombrero and red velvet jacket being marveled at by a sailor-suited little boy and Anglo ladies in shirtwaists.

In short, Casa Verdugo was what we would now call an ethnic showcase restaurant, complete with a menu in the shape of a tamale. And what was on that menu? Tamales, enchiladas, *frijoles con queso*, and *chiles rellenos*, of course. Also beef meatball soup (*sopa de albóndigas*) and *ensalada de salpicon*, a green salad topped with meat and onions in vinaigrette (today *salpicon* is usually a seafood topping, but given the local rancho tradition it probably was beef).

*Gallina a la Española* was likely *estofado de gallina*: chicken (by preference an elderly hen) braised with wine, tomatoes, and raisins. Tortillas at that time were an exotic food, not commercially available, so they were proudly mentioned on the menu. The wine list featured European as well as California wines. Luxury met exoticism.

Angelenos fell hard for Casa Verdugo, and so did tourists. Any visitor to Los Angeles had to see the missions, the orange groves, Catalina Island, Santa Monica’s pleasure piers, and the famous Casa Verdugo. Twenty-five thousand Shriners ate at Casa Verdugo during their 1907 national convention. The restaurant sold postcards with dreamy views for mailing to envious relatives back East.

Although the earliest newspaper stories about Casa Verdugo had never mentioned Piedad Yorba’s name, by 1910 she was well known. So the Pacific Electric Railroad’s September 25th announcement that it had fired Piedad Yorba (now known as Mrs. Charles Sowl following her second marriage) came as a shock. The *Los Angeles Times* reported the reason as a complaint about overcharging, but Piedad’s response implied another reason. “Por Dios!” Piedad was quoted as saying. “Will any one [sic] who has tasted the *chile rellenos*, the *albóndigas* and the *ensalada de salpicon* from a real Spanish kitchen ever consent to dine elsewhere? Will Senor Huntington himself, who personally
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By this time a number of the restaurant's fans had built houses in the neighborhood in order to be close by and they had taken to calling their unincorporated community Casa Verdugo. Casa Verdugo's population approached one thousand, a substantial number, considering that Glendale itself counted only 2,746 residents.

established this casa vieja because of a sentiment for the yesterdays of California history, permit it to become a commercial operation? The reporter did not pursue Piedad's implication that the railroad wanted to convert Casa Verdugo into something less than the luxury restaurant it had been. Nor did the Times evince any curiosity when the railroad, aware that their sacking of a popular figure made them look bad, floated two additional (and mutually contradictory) explanations: that they were simply consolidating operations and that Piedad had served wine to people who hadn't ordered a meal—a blatant appeal to temperance sentiment. However, the railroad simultaneously announced that it planned to double the size of the dining rooms and that American and Spanish chefs would be in charge of the kitchen. It is quite clear that the railroad intended to cash in on its now nationally famous restaurant property, regardless of culinary authenticity or the gracious, upscale presentation Piedad Yorba had specialized in. (Another improvement the railroad promised was a better electrical supply.)

Above: Piedad's daughter, Viola, and nephew Ernesto Martinez performing a ranchero dance.
Several of the people who had built homes in the area were millionaires. A shopping center had sprung up a block west of the restaurant, complete with markets, a theater, a department store, and a post office that would postmark letters CASA VERDUGO, CALIF.

Casa Verdugo residents fiercely resented the railroad’s maneuver. It not only spoiled their favorite restaurant but threatened to reduce property values in the area. These people very likely helped Piedad Yorba finance her next move. Within five weeks of being forced out, she had opened a new Casa Verdugo at a location roughly two blocks east of the first one. This was not an old adobe but a Mission Revival building—an ordinary turn-of-the-century bungalow except for its interior courtyard, tile roof with flashy espadaña gables, and a blocky, faux-adobe exterior. Now that Casa Verdugo was an established restaurant, it no longer needed a real adobe. In fact, a building more in keeping with Anglo dreams of the mission days was probably even more desirable.

For a few months the railroad continued to operate the original location as Casa Verdugo, but it soon discovered that it had badly underestimated the Spanish lady. On the advice of her wealthy and sophisticated neighbors, Piedad had incorporated as Casa Verdugo and copyrighted that name. In December she sued the railroad. The case dragged on until May of the following year. In the end the railroad had to desist from using the famous name it had gone to so much trouble to cash in on, and it was obliged to run the old adobe place as La Ramada, a name nobody knew. As for Piedad, she pocketed ten thousand dollars in damages, a serious chunk of change in those days. It is hard to underestimate the courage and tenacity the triumph represented. With all the power the railroads had in those days, Piedad’s victory was the equivalent of suing city hall.

The first ad for her new place appeared in newspapers on November 9, 1910, with copy that was likely written by Piedad herself:

**EARLY HOMES OF THE SPANISH DONS—**
were some of the most attractive and hospitable the world has ever known. Senora Piedad Yorba y Sowle will open her beautiful mission residence to the public tonight. This is the Only and Original Casa Verdugo

The same Spanish dinners that have made it famous around the world will be served as usual. Take the Glendale car.
First, we must recognize Piedad Yorba’s genius. Her Casa Verdugo was no mere restaurant but an overwhelming experience: romantic setting, aromatic flowers, exotic food, sweet music in a foreign language, colorful dancing. The “Polynesian” restaurants of the Fifties and Sixties would follow this same sensual formula, substituting pineapple pork and the hula for beef enchiladas and “La Cachuca.” Like the tiki places to come, Casa Verdugo was not selling food so much as an intoxicating vision of the good life, in this case the gracious leisure of an old-time Spanish rancho.

But something else doomed Casa Verdugo. From the beginning, the cult of Old California had been a matter of making a silk purse out of a sow’s ear. When hordes of easterners began moving to Los Angeles in the 1890s, they wanted to feel they had some compelling reason to live there. San Francisco could luxuriate in its colorful past—the Gold Rush, the days of the wide-open Barbary Coast—but as late as the 1870s Los Angeles had still been a sleepy Spanish cow town. The city boldly decided to romanticize the rancho days, which by the turn of the century already seemed long ago and far away. Until the 1920s editorial cartoons symbolized Los Angeles as a señorita dancing a fandango with a rose between her teeth. Here was something newcomers to town could preen themselves on. There were no rose-chewing señoritas back in Duluth!

During the teens, however, Angelenos began to realize they had something far more romantic to boast of than cattle ranches or fandangos. The city had Hollywood, the fantasy capital of the world, where you could see famous movie stars on the street, in the moment. The City of Angels no longer needed the days of the dons.

Nor did it need Piedad Yorba. When she died in Glendale on November 4, 1948, at age eighty-four, no obituary appeared in the Los Angeles Times. Her only memorial appears to be a public library branch named Casa Verdugo, near where the original adobe restaurant (long gone) stood a century ago. Even that name may actually refer to the community of Casa Verdugo, which doggedly held out against incorporation into Glendale until 1926.

It’s a shame. Piedad Yorba was a pioneer and, in fact, a star.