

# CHILLIN'

## THE ICE COMETH, MAN



**Above:** Antonio San Miguel, 6, shows off his treat from Mr. Raspado Refresqueria on Wirt Road. Behind him are his brothers Alexis, 14, left, and Xavier, 11. **Right:** Many of the syrups served at Mr. Raspado are homemade.



# RASPAS ARE COOL

By CAROL RUST, Houston Chronicle

A sultry evening breeze kicks up, rustling the palm and banana leaves that hang low against the sky. A green parrot sitting atop his cage on an old, leaning picnic table in front of the snack stand chatters to himself. He calls out his own name, “R-R-R-Ricky,” with a rolling “r.”

The table sits on packed dirt, worn grassless by foot traffic. Lights around the small trailer where Eva Santana churns out her frozen delicacies—snow cones, melon waters and frozen fruit drinks—beckon occasional customers from the sidewalk as traffic whizzes by. They sit at the table, alternately crunching the contents of their plastic-foam cups with spoons and sipping them through straws. They watch Ricky as he wanders in and out of his cage, tentatively sampling the pieces of melon his owner has tied inside and always going back to his favorite toy, a tiny white plastic spoon. The customers speak mostly Spanish. The parrot does, too.

This seeming slice of Cozumel, complete with colorful wooden animal and snow-cone cutouts stationed near the road and plastic flowers tied to a two-by-four supporting a small air-conditioning unit, isn’t anywhere near the Caribbean. It is in the parking lot—right under the marquee, in fact—of Exotic Electronics, 1860 Wirt Road on Houston’s near west side.



**Left:** Come evening, Mr. Raspado Refresqueria seems like a little slice of Cozumel on a Spring Branch roadside.

The palm and banana leaves are artificial; Santana has tied them to her stand and two utility poles out front for atmosphere. This is the second summer she’s operated Mr. Raspada Refresqueria from the tiny snack trailer, taking orders and turning to chop the fruit that will go into her customers’ drinks or desserts. At lunch and after work, a line of thirsty but patient customers forms each day.



Across town on Houston’s east side, the Snow Queen answers the ever-clangling telephone at Bill’s Ice Co. Her real name is Mary Boggs, but she’s earned her nickname from the mostly Hispanic, mostly middle-age men who pedal their ice-chest-laden tricycle carts to her establishment off Griggs Road.

The ice company is a noisy place. Besides the phone, there’s the constant rumble of the ice-maker, which she keeps running 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And the clatters, as ice is released from the storage bin into buckets, from buckets to the grinder. The whine of the grinder, and a softer clatter as the “snow” is released into the men’s ice chests. The men are *rasperos*, so-named for the *raspas*, or snow cones, they sell.

Many of the *rasperos*, who make up about 90 percent of her business, pay her with plastic bags full of quarters.

Any extra orders she gets—from highway contractors needing to cool concrete before they pour it or from swimming-pool owners wanting to cool their water—she has to fill by buying from another wholesaler.

As the entire state withers from drought and heat, Boggs and her husband, Robert, and daughter, Lisa Garcia, work long hours to keep up with orders for ice. (Bill was the original owner of the ice company years ago, and the Boggs family never changed the name after they bought it. In fact, Robert has been called Bill so many times he's started answering to it.)

From Bill's, the *rasperos* fan out over the city and sell their cool treats to customers of all ages, who hear them ring the bells on their carts to announce their arrival. With 50 pounds of crushed ice, worth \$5, they can earn \$60 or more, charging \$1.25 a snow cone. The hot weather and thirsty customers keep them coming back, day after day, to refill their ice chests and restock their strawberry, lemon, grape, blue-coconut and cherry syrups they buy for \$4.25 a gallon.

In the middle of a long Houston summer, ice—whatever you can make with ice—is big business. “Some customers will call wanting to know if they can reserve ice for the next week,” Mary Boggs says. “But I tell them I can't do that. I sell to whoever comes first.”

Summer is her busiest time of year, but she also gets orders for snow in the winter from churches or schools that want their grounds covered. “I have a sister-in-law in the North who can't believe people pay for snow down here,” she says.



**Left:** Mary Boggs, whose nickname is Snow Queen at Bill's Ice House, says they sell all the ice they can make—about 20,000 pounds a week.



While most *rasperos* buy gallon plastic jars of flavored syrups, Eva Santana makes most of hers on a tiny stove in her snack trailer.

She starts each day by shopping for the fruit that will go into her *raspas*: watermelon, lime, lemon, cantaloupe, pineapple, orange, mango, guava. She doesn't even cut up the fruit ahead of time, but waits until customers order a dessert that calls for it.

Her version of *raspa* always includes a little fresh fruit on top along with the syrup. She named her most popular treat, a \$3, spicy fruit cocktail, the *chupacabra* in honor of the legendary bloodsucking animal that is said to be killing goats and sheep in Mexico. She sells most of her other treats for \$1 to \$1.50.

Aside from her four children, who range in ages from 21 to 11 and sometimes accompany her to the stand to help (and eat), she rarely gets visitors inside the trailer, where every square inch of counter space is taken up by a jumble of fresh fruit and syrup containers.

“I'm sorry it's so messy in here, but when you make everything fresh, that's the way it gets,” she says. She's chopping brown tamarind pods, which she will cook with water and sugar until the mixture becomes the syrup she'll use in certain drinks.

Next she cuts up chilies and cooks them to make a paste for a drink she calls El Diablito, a mixture of pineapple, orange, lime, tamarind, Squirt and the chili paste. She says the drink quenches thirst better than an ultra-sweet cold treat.

“When something is too sweet, it doesn't take away the thirst,” she says.

Once she's got the chili paste and tamarind syrup cooking, she boils rice and strains the water, adding sugar and cinnamon to form the base for her melon waters. When everything is ready, she sets up an umbrella over the picnic table out front and makes a quick trip home to get Ricky, the main attraction at her *raspa* stand besides the *raspas* themselves.

She imported the idea for her line of treats from her native Mexico. In tiny Apaxtla in the state of Guerrero, where she grew up, cart vendors peeled and sliced mangoes for customers and topped them with a sprinkling of red pepper and chili powder; another vendor sold flavored ice he shaved from a block.

But Santana doesn't do everything the old way—she grinds her ice from 300-pound blocks, bought from a wholesaler, in a machine at her home.

Her stand is open 1-9 p.m. every day from May to mid-October, except during hard rains. She sells about 1,000 raspas a week.

While she'll never get rich at it, she enjoys her work. As she hacks into a pineapple and puts a chunk of fruit into a blender for a pineapple snow cone a customer has just ordered, Ricky whistles in the background as a woman tries to feed a spoonful of flavored ice to him. The breeze stirs the plastic palm leaves, and another cluster of customers walks up to place an order. For Santana, it's a little slice of home.

Rust, Carol. "Raspas are cool." *Houston Chronicle*. July 21, 1996. pp. 1G, 4G.

Photo credits:

Children, syrups, and Mr. Raspado's—Ben DeSoto photos / Chronicle  
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