

Apparatus: Viejo Verde

TO call an old person "viejo" in Spanish is about the same as "gaffer" in English. Mexicans are polite people who do not give up lightly the usages of respect, and my friend Jesus Maria Domingo Villorosi was a little shocked when I used the word trying to identify, in conversation, one of the ancients who potted about the winery in Tecate, manoeuvring casks and hoses.

"Certainly he is old," Jesus said, "but one does not with respect call him viejo."

"I would not say 'Hi, viejo!' I said. 'I should address him, naturally, as senior. I was describing him to you as an old man because I had forgotten his name, and in addition, I am seldom correct in Spanish.'"

"That is true," Jesus said judgmatically, "although for a gringo you do not make the sounds badly, yet you have too few words to be often correct."

Jesus was driving the La Rosa pickup to the winery to enquire about the number of gallon jars and five-gallon jars they had belonging to the ranch. Lucie Silva, in charge of the warehouse, had one figure, and so far the winery had another, several dozen smaller. It would take time and more visits, probably culminating in one from

Cecena, El Profesor's trouble shooter in Tecate, before the figures approximated. Meanwhile, the jars were being filled with concentrated, unfermented grape juice, which would keep La Rosa's guests in a state of intestinal virtue during the months when fresh grapes were off the menu.

I was in town with Jesus to see the cobbler round the corner from the winery. One of my Mexican fashion sandals, huaraches, had broken a buckle. The cobbler replaced the buckle in a few minutes, and charged me 50 centavos, which is about 4 cents in U.S. I bought a bag of tangerines next door at the groceria, and strolled back to the winery. Jesus was sitting against a barrel where the breeze flowed softly through the back door. I sat down beside him, placed the tangerines between us, and waited comfortably until he should have something to say. He watched two of the ancients skimming open casks of wine and then siphoning some of the clearer liquid remaining into other casks.

"They are indeed old," he said; "they have done this work all their lives, I think, but that one, Senor Medellin, has the look of a caballero." He paused while I scanned Senor Medellin's



"Federico Viejo also liked to work in gold and silver"

a very lively old man, who had a wonderful apparatus which in the end made him famous. He was always the blacksmith at my family's ranch, and he also liked to work in gold and silver. He gathered a collection of his work which he was proud to show to visitors. Money in those days was in silver and gold, and his collection was of silver and gold coins which he had made himself. My father used to say he was less fond of pennies, which were of copper, but he made some of them, too, so that his collection would be complete."

Jesus contemplated another tangerine, turning it over and over. "He would not have said pennies," he remarked. "That is a gringo word. Since the roads were built we live much closer to the border."

"Go on about the apparatus of Federico Viejo," I said, "leaving the pennies to the gringos."

Jesus smiled. "The Governor of the Territory used to visit my family," he continued, "and greatly praised the coins Federico Viejo had made, but because such work was illegal he asked that the collection should not be displayed constantly, or trouble might follow both for Federico Viejo and for himself, because he was known to visit the ranch."

"Federico Viejo put away his coins for a few weeks, but he was so proud of them that he could not leave them unseen, and again he brought them out."

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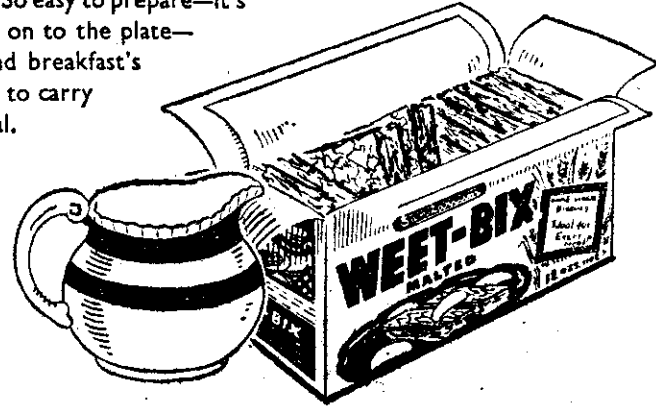
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