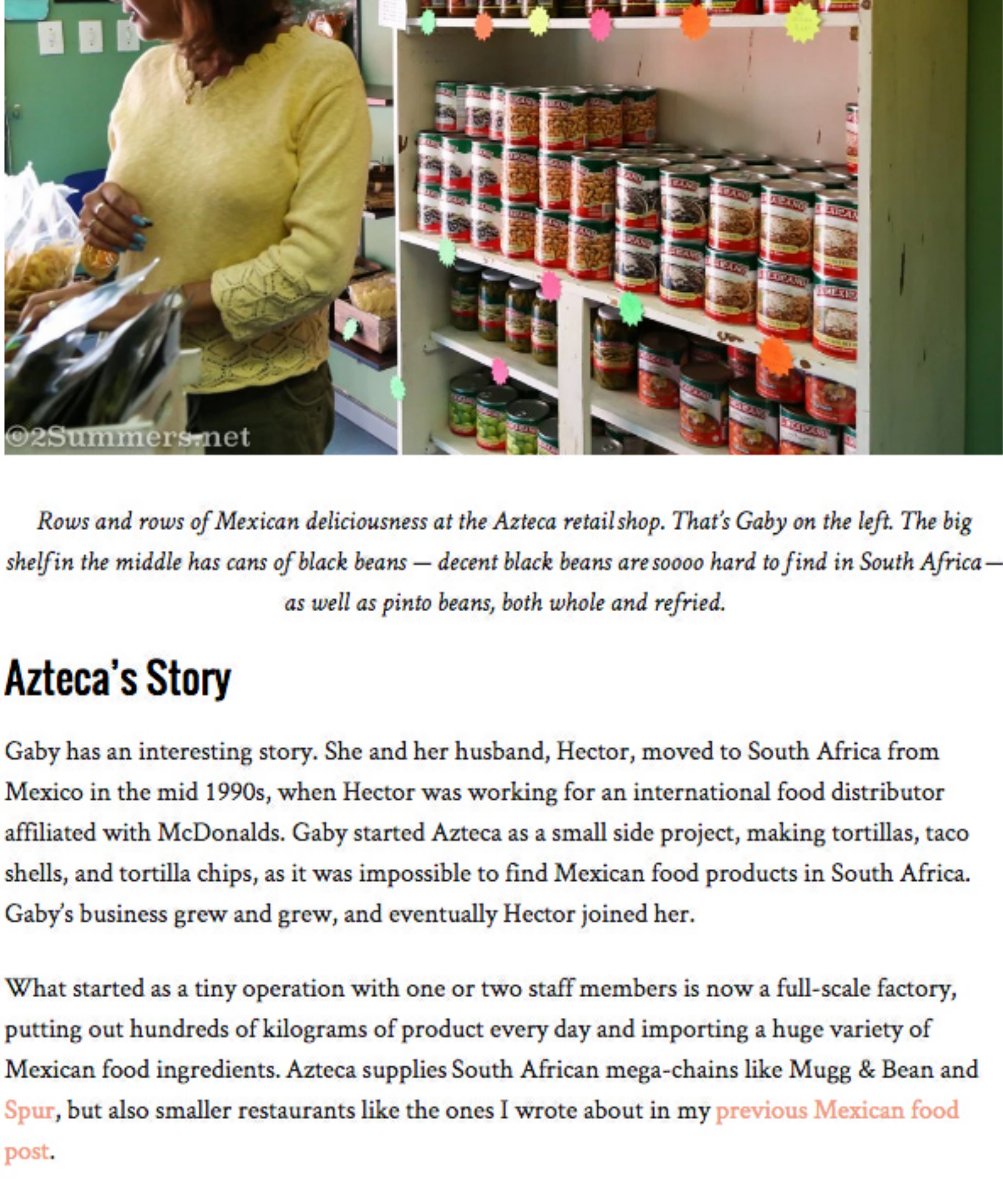


## JOBURG'S BEST-KEPT MEXICAN FOOD SECRET

A couple of weeks ago I received an invitation to visit **Azteca Mexican Food Products**, a Mexican food factory in Joburg. Azteca's owner, Gaby Agraz, reached out to me because I had just published a post about **Mexican restaurants in Johannesburg**. Most of the restaurants I wrote about are Azteca's clients, Gaby told me, and she would love to show me the business. (This wasn't the first time Gaby had extended an invitation. She first reached out to me more than a year ago but somehow I kept forgetting to follow up. I didn't know what I was missing.)

I finally made the trek up to Midrand last week, with my friends Fiver and Candida. Once I got there, I couldn't believe I'd waited so long. Azteca is a magical Mexican food wonderland.



Rows and rows of Mexican deliciousness at the Azteca retail shop. That's Gaby on the left. The big shelf in the middle has cans of black beans — decent black beans are soooo hard to find in South Africa — as well as pinto beans, both whole and refried.

### Azteca's Story

Gaby has an interesting story. She and her husband, Hector, moved to South Africa from Mexico in the mid 1990s, when Hector was working for an international food distributor affiliated with McDonalds. Gaby started Azteca as a small side project, making tortillas, taco shells, and tortilla chips, as it was impossible to find Mexican food products in South Africa. Gaby's business grew and grew, and eventually Hector joined her.

What started as a tiny operation with one or two staff members is now a full-scale factory, putting out hundreds of kilograms of product every day and importing a huge variety of Mexican food ingredients. Azteca supplies South African mega-chains like Mugg & Bean and **Spur**, but also smaller restaurants like the ones I wrote about in my **previous Mexican food post**.

I've been eating Mexican food (or at least the Americanized version of it) for my entire life, and I've been to Mexico twice. I worked in a Tex-Mex restaurant in London for several months in 1994. But I never really understood what Mexican food was about until I visited this factory, owned by one of the few Mexican families living in Johannesburg.

For instance, I never knew that flour (wheat) tortillas are the staple food in northern Mexico, while corn tortillas are a staple in southern Mexico. Similarly, pinto beans are favored in northern Mexico while black beans are the bean of choice in southern Mexico. This explains why Tex-Mex cuisine, invented by those crossing the border between northern Mexico and the United States, usually features flour tortillas and refried pinto beans.

I never knew that tomatillos, despite being similar in appearance to tomatoes, are actually part of the gooseberry family. I had never heard of nopalitos: cooked cactus stems that taste like green beans. I didn't know that authentic corn tortilla chips are made with lime water.

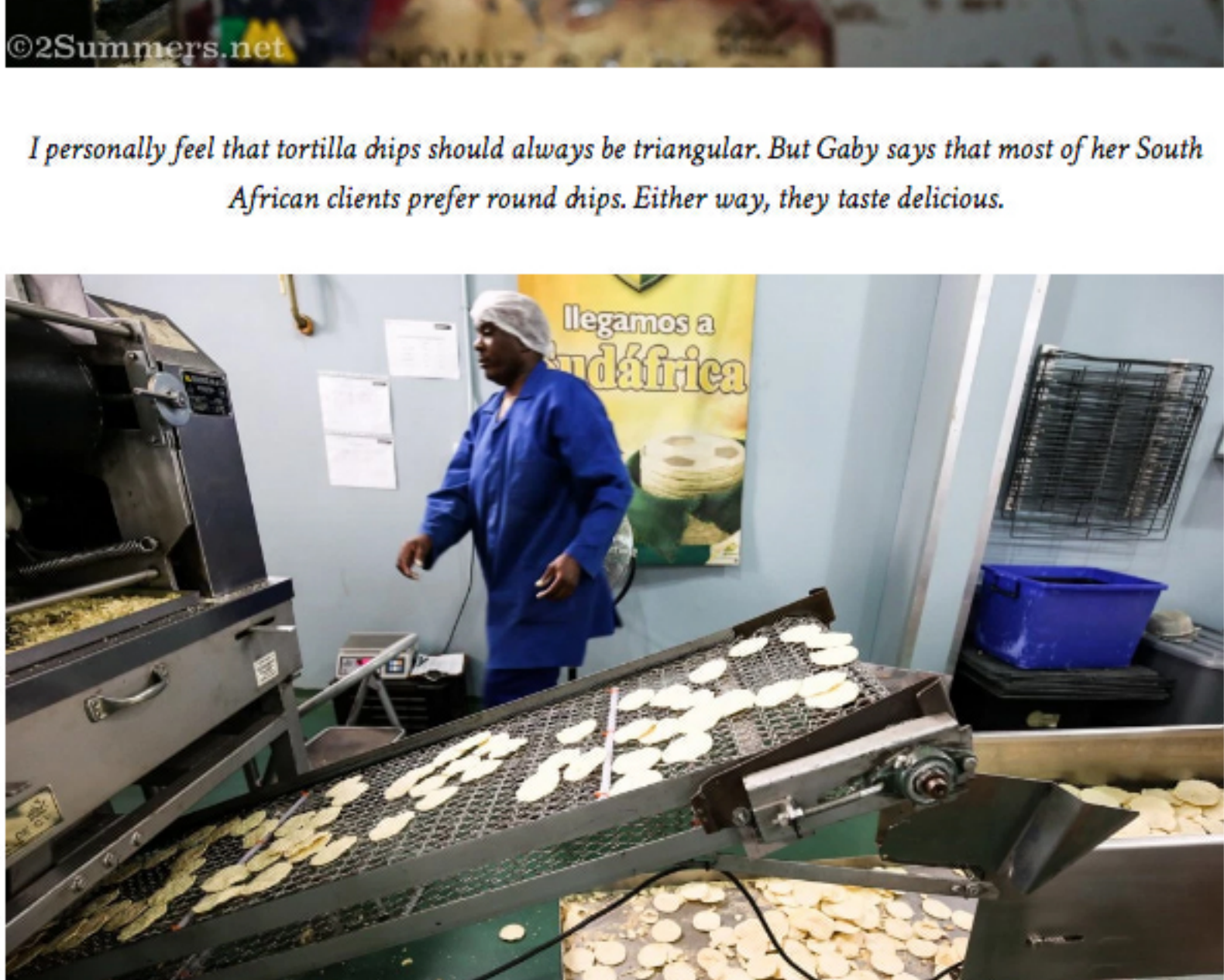
### Touring the Factory

Anyway, Gaby explained many of these things to us as we browsed around the retail shop. Then we donned hair nets and went into the factory.



The Azteca factory.

Azteca has two separate production lines, one for corn products and one for wheat products.



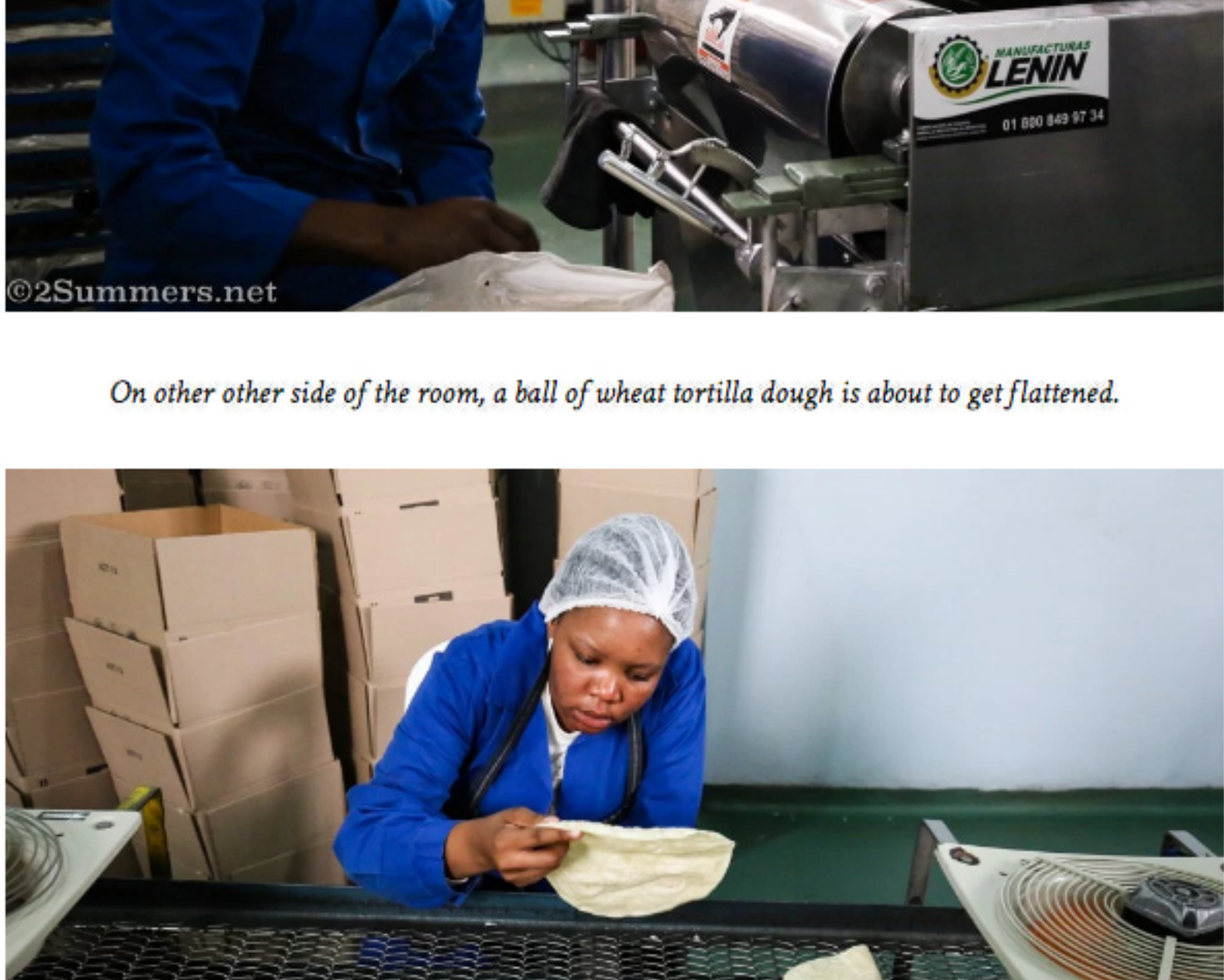
Dried corn (maize) used to create the traditional masa flour for corn tortillas and taco shells.



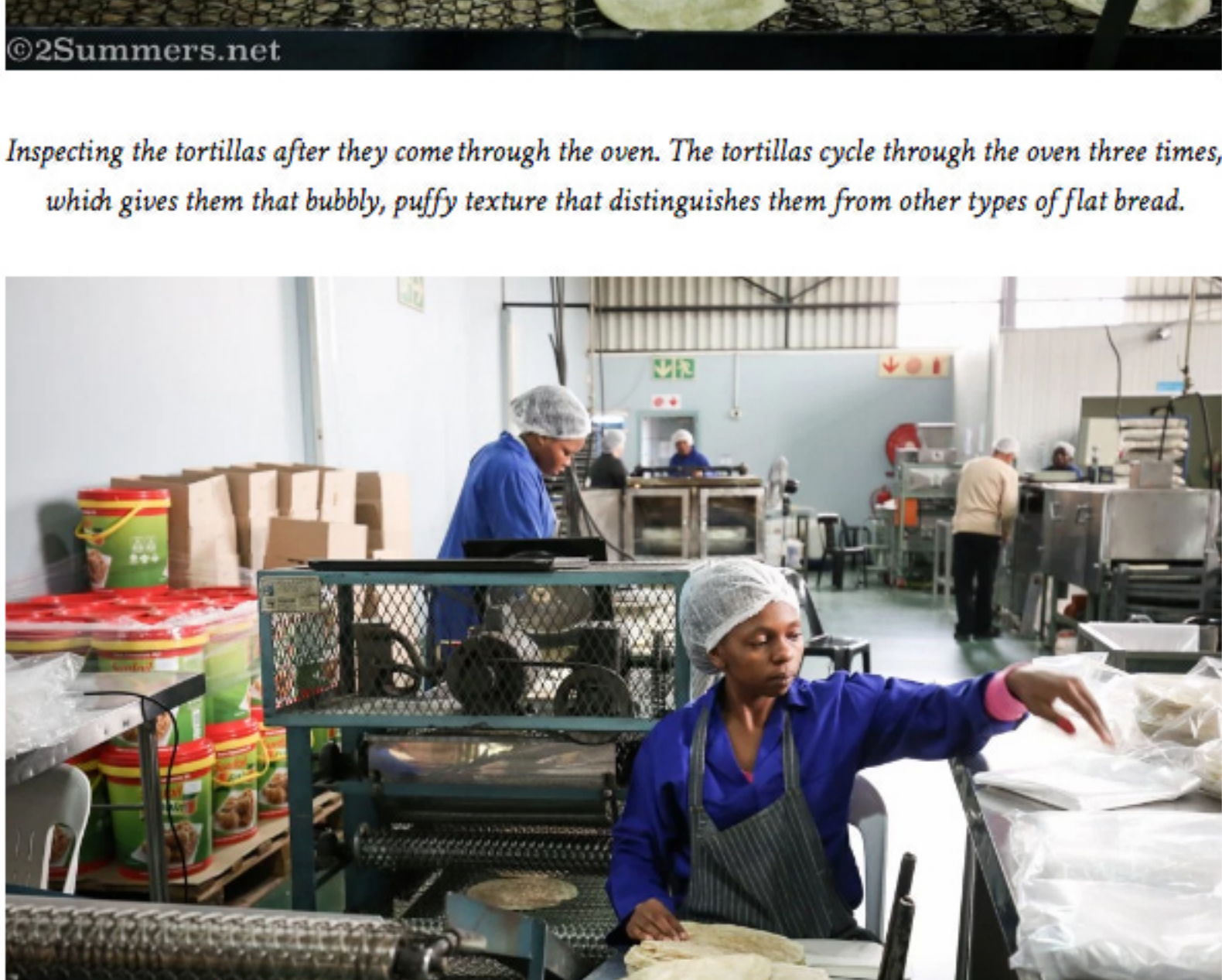
I personally feel that tortilla chips should always be triangular. But Gaby says that most of her South African clients prefer round chips. Either way, they taste delicious.



Chips!



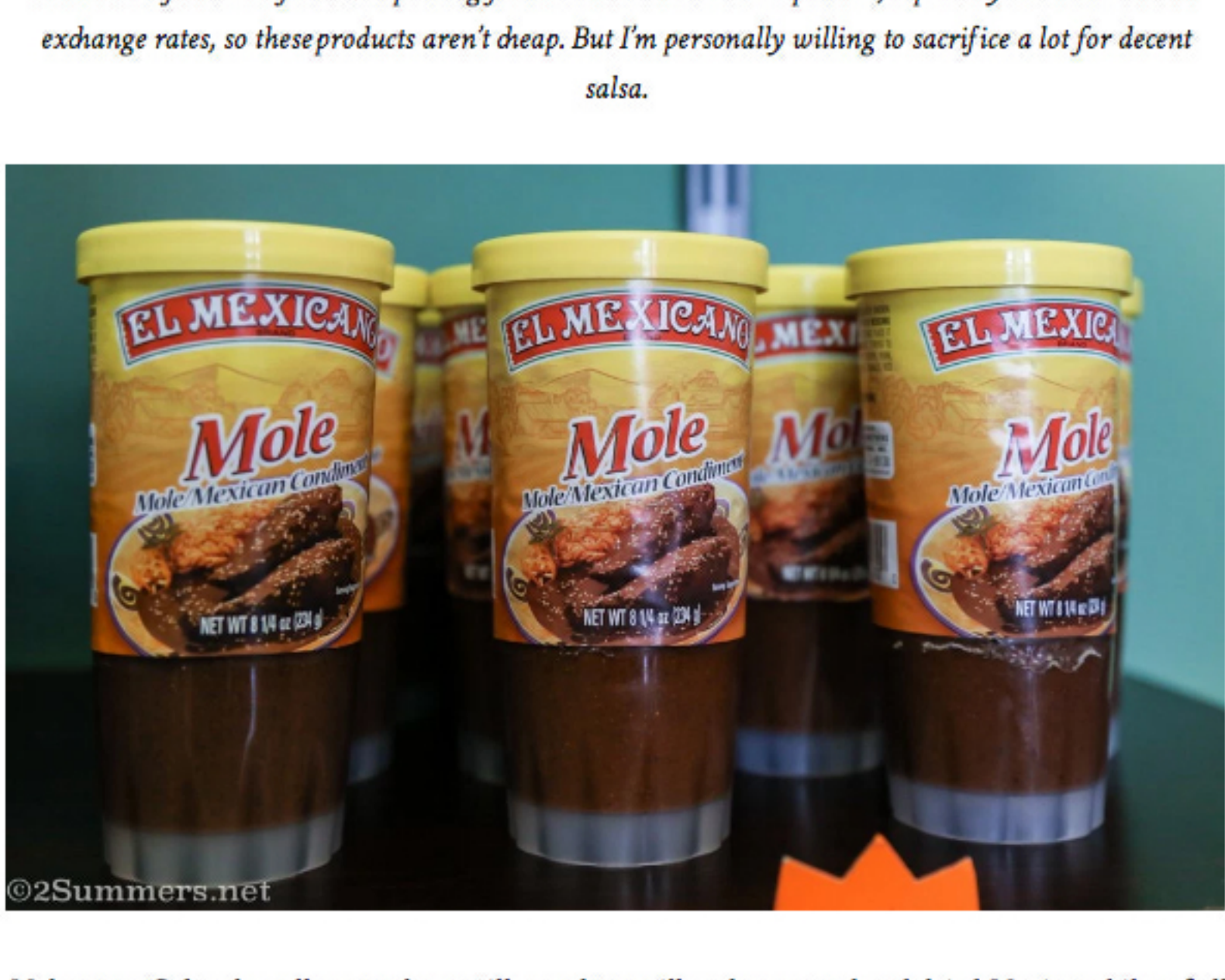
Sorry for the chip photo orgy. I just really like taking photos in factories. And I really like chips.



Candida, rocking that food prep hairnet, samples a chip out of the fryer.



On other other side of the room, a ball of wheat tortilla dough is about to get flattened.



Inspecting the tortillas after they come through the oven. The tortillas cycle through the oven three times, which gives them that bubbly, puffy texture that distinguishes them from other types of flat bread.



Packing the tortillas into bags. My friends and I took three of these bags home with us. They got eaten very quickly.

### A Mexican Shopping Spree

After the factory visit, we returned to the retail section for a massive shopping spree.



Different kinds of salsa for sale in the retail shop. Most of the foods in the shop are made in Mexico and distributed from California. Importing from North America is expensive, especially with the current exchange rates, so these products aren't cheap. But I'm personally willing to sacrifice a lot for decent salsa.



Mole sauce. Gaby also sells canned tomatillos and tomatillo salsa, canned and dried Mexican chiles of all kinds, hibiscus juice powder, carne asada seasoning, enchilada sauce, adobo sauce, and countless other Mexican specialties.

I walked out with a couple of bags of tortilla chips, wheat tortillas, mole sauce, tomatillo salsa, whole and refried black beans, hot sauce, and some canned chipotle peppers. Two days later I made chile, and it was delicious.



This photo is kind of creepy. But if you're a Mexican-food-loving North American living in South Africa, then I know you'll understand the significance of this beautiful can of black beans. (Photo: Fiver Löcker)

Azteca's retail store is open to walk-in customers during working hours. But if you don't have time to go to Midrand, they also deliver. **Contact them** for more information.