WHERE DO MEXICAN CULINARY TRADITIONS COME FROM?

"WE NEVER ATE MEXICAN FOOD"

by Rachel Laudan

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“W hat you have to realize, Rachel,” said Maria Dolores Yazabal, good friend of Diana Kennedy and author of the highly regarded Mexican Gourmet (1995), “is that when I was growing up we never ate Mexican food.” The foremost Mexico City gourmets of the previous generation, assembled round the table in the antique-filled dining room of the city’s most prominent caterer Victor Nava, nodded in agreement.

Lula Bertrán, a key proponent of Mexican food, had organized the get-together so that the cuisine of mid-20th-Century Mexico City could be set on record. Lila Lomeli, gastronomic writer and investigator, Graciela Flores, author of the leading text for Mexican culinary schools (classic French cooking, of course), José Jorge Lopez Paez, the well-known novelist, and Guillermina de Martino, who acted as hostess for the Presidents of Mexico, all repeated the claim. This group of Mexicans did not come from the kind of families who ate Mexican food.

This was confirmation of what I had suspected for some time. Well-to-do Mexicans in the past did not eat what we think of as Mexican food. That they did not eat anything like Tex-Mex or Cal-Mex is not so surprising. But perhaps what is less widely recognized is that they did not eat anything like what I am learning to call “Interior Mexican”—the food made famous by such well-known authorities as Diana Kennedy, Rick Bayless, and Zarela Martinez. Many of them still do not. One friend, Patricia Begne, a lawyer specializing in women’s rights, never serves corn tortillas at home. Another friend, Godfrey Guillamin, who teaches philosophy at the University of Guanajuato, never touches chiles.

Randy Schwartz’s kind invitation to contribute to this newsletter offers me a splendid opportunity to muse with fellow culinary historians about some puzzles in the history of Mexican food. Please understand that all that I write is tentative and that I would love to receive comments and questions.

The Vogue for French Food

Obviously the first question is what did well-to-do Mexicans eat? The answer to that is clear. Throughout the 19th and 20th Centuries, they ate French food. In this they were just like the élite throughout the rest of the world. French food, like the French language, was a badge of belonging to the upper class from St. Petersburg to San Francisco, from Tokyo to Rio de Janeiro. If anything, the Mexicans were more Francophile than other peoples. French ideas and institutions became the official model for a Mexico that wanted little to do with Spain, the United States or England and that wanted to take its place amongst the most prosperous and sophisticated nations in the world. Although the French attempt to install Maximilian as Emperor of Mexico in the 1860s led to political disaster, it reinforced France’s cultural supremacy in Mexico. This lasted at least a hundred years. Only in the present generation has English replaced French as the second language of well-to-do Mexicans.

The Francophilia was reflected in the cuisine of Mexico. A Spanish translation of Brillat-Savarin’s Physiologie de Gout (1826) was published in Mexico City in 1852. The famous French chef Jules Gouffé (1807-1877) spent several years working at the Jockey Club in Mexico City. Until very recently, many cookbooks such as Luisa De Calderon’s Tecnicas de la Alta Cocina (1979) offered French food with an occasional Mexican touch. Single women from well-to-do families made a living instructing the daughters of their compatriots in French cooking. After marriage, these young ladies were well-prepared to supervise their cooks. Consequently generations of Mexican continued on next page
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servants became skilled in French cooking.

Far from being regarded as un-Mexican, French cooking was one part of a strategy to bring Mexico to its desired and deserved level in the world of nations. A telling story illustrates this. In 1876, the long presidency of Porfirio Díaz began, surviving until 1911, and bringing a period of stability to the country after many years of coups and foreign invasions. To show the deep historical roots of the Mexican nation, Díaz ordered the excavation of the pyramids at Teotihuacán just north of Mexico City. If you go there today, one of the few places to escape the scorching sun and muscle-aching ascents and descents of the ruins is a cave about half a mile from the largest pyramid. Today this huge lava tube going deep into the earth houses an enormous two-level restaurant. Hung on the uneven walls are photographs of the presidential dinner held there to celebrate the excavation. Diaz and a multitude of other dignitaries gaze at the camera. Seated at tables covered with snowy white linens and laid for a formal French meal, the diners wear formal morning dress or dinner jackets. Not a sign of the indigenous is to be seen.

Two Different Nations, Two Different Diets

It might be tempting to conclude that the vogue for French food was simply an interruption in the mixing of Spanish and indigenous cuisines. That is certainly the story that is endlessly repeated today. But it won’t do. In the three centuries between the Conquest and the French culinary epoch, the élite ate the cosmopolitan food of the Hapsburg Empire that in the 16th Century stretched from Spain to southern Italy, Austro-Hungary, the Low Countries and parts of Germany. Although in 1519 Cortés and his men reported glowingly on the sophisticated cooking of the Aztec élite, they were quick to get rid of it. By 1538, when Cortés and the new Viceroy from Spain gave a feast in honor of Charles V’s peace treaty with France, they served a complete Hapsburg meal: roasted kids and hams, quail pies, stuffed fowl and pigeons, blancmange, and escabeche of chicken, partridge, and quail. Birds and rabbits hopped out of great pies, the beaks of the roast birds were gilded, ladies nibbled on candied fruits, comfits and marzipan, and the three-day celebration finished with olives, cheese, cardoos and (the one concession to New Spain) native fruits. The publication of Francisco Motino Martínez’s Arte de Cozina (1623) provided cooks in New Spain with inspiration for the next couple of centuries. They turned out raised wheat bread, stewed meats spiced with costly black pepper, cinnamon, and cloves, and delicate confecions of sugar, nuts, fruits and egg yolks, all typical of Hapsburg cuisine.

The division between the foods of the upper classes and the foods of the poor mirrored the basic division of the New Spain into two “republics,” the republic of the Spanish and the republic of the Indians. As the Crown granted permission for the settlement of the country, it designated two kinds of urban areas: the towns (villas) of the Spanish and the towns (pueblos) of the indigenous. The Spanish, as we have seen, ate Hapsburg food. The indigenous continued to eat corn tortillas, beans, and chiles.

In the convents, an important civilizing and culinary force in New Spain, the pattern was repeated. To be a nun, not only did you have to be literate and numerate but you also had to be Spanish. The nuns, whose chief duty was to sing the praises of God, also undertook charitable and educational duties. More important for culinary history, they ran the large institutional kitchens that were part of every convent. These kitchens turned out meals for the nuns, often very frugal at least in fasting periods, but invariably accompanied by white bread. The nuns provided what were essentially catering services, creating meals in the Hapsburg tradition, including versions of the famous mole, for their benefactors and for feasts for town dignitaries on the festival day of the patron saint of the convent.

Every nun, at least in most of the convents, had her own servant and, in addition, there were servants who worked for the convent as a whole. Servants, never Spanish but always indigenous, were essential. Preparing flour for bread and spices for main dishes meant grinding wheat and whole spices on grindstones, something Spanish ladies did not do. The servants, though, did not eat the results of their labors. They had corn tortillas, beans, and chiles. Within the convents, the culinary spearhead of New Spain, the sharp division between the meals of two races and two classes continued.

Four Forces That Shaped Mexican Taste

So where did the Mexican food that we learn from Diana Kennedy, Rick Bayless, and Zarela Martinez come from? It’s a complex question and I’m not sure that I yet understand the story. I believe, though, that four forces have played a role: nationalism, provincial pride, a nexus of children and servants, and the interest of foreigners.

The role of nationalism in creating Mexican food has been well explored by Jeff Pilcher in ¿Que Vivan
Los Tamales! (1998). Nationalist sentiment originated no later than the 18th Century as Mexican-born Spaniards (criollos) began to assert their difference from the Peninsular Spaniards. Although the mole created in the convents had Hapsburg and ultimately Arab origins, it was reinvented in Mexico in the 18th Century as a criollo answer to Hapsburg cuisine.* After independence was wrested from Spain in 1821, chiles en nogada (poblano chiles stuffed with pork meat picadillo, topped with walnut sauce and sprinkled with flat-leaf parsley and pomegranate seeds) became a national symbol, its green, white, and red colors echoing those of the Mexican flag.

To heal the wounds of the Mexican Revolution, a bloody civil war that began in 1910 and petered out at the beginning of the 1930s, intellectuals and artists, such as the archeologist Manual Gamio, the politician, philosopher and historian José Vasconselas, the film maker Emilio "El Indio" Fernández, and the muralists, created the movement known as mestizaje. According to this, Mexico's strength and identity derived from its mixing of Spanish and indigenous resources. In defiance of historical reality, they celebrated Mexican food as a prime example of mestizaje. Just as Paris-trained Diego Rivera painted murals of Indians harvesting maize, so his wife the painter Frida Kahlo, the granddaughter of Jewish immigrants, dressed in Indian costume and served tortillas and tamales, welcoming Trotsky to Mexico with a feast served in peasant bowls with spoons on the side. Even the group of Mexico City gourmetists admitted that as a sign of patriotism their families did serve Mexican dishes on national holidays.

In the provinces the French influence, although always present, was muted compared to the cosmopolitan capital. In the dignified and ceremonious settings of provincial towns such as Oaxaca, Puebla, Morelia, and Querétaro, middle-class families, even those with Spanish or French origins, had begun creating a bourgeois Mexican cuisine no later than the 19th Century and probably much earlier. Like the families in the capitals they employed cooks, teaching them the dishes they loved, and jotting down notes in a wealth of manuscript cookbooks. In the 1940s, the indefatigable cooking teacher and cookbook author Josephina Velasquez de León began collecting the provincial recipes that form the core of the corpus we now call Mexican cooking.

Servants from the countryside thus learnt, in convents or in households, the dishes of the criollo middle class. These dishes often had roots in Hapsburg and Arab cuisine but they had been modified by Mexican techniques: the use of some local ingredients such as chiles and fruits, the grinding of grains, seeds and other ingredients on a grindstone, the toasting of tomatoes, onions, chiles, and garlic on a griddle. Servants, I suspect, did a great deal to disseminate Mexican bourgeois cooking. They doubtless took much of what they had learnt back to their villages, enriching the simple peasant food of corn tortillas, beans, chiles and cactus products. They or their children moved to big cities, even to Mexico City. The Mexico City gourmetists told me that their families picked servants known to come from regions that had a flourishing bourgeois cuisine. They were unanimous that they were introduced to Mexican cooking by the servants, not by their parents, reporting with glee how they snuck into the kitchen to get tastes of the servants' food.

Finally, from the late 1960s or early 1970s foreigners became entranced with Mexican bourgeois cooking. The Spaniard Josefa Howard, who came to love Mexico's food while working as an interior decorator, was later to found the restaurant Rosa Mexicana in New York and write a fine memoir cookbook by the same name. The American Thomas Gilliland tasted Mexican food in San Angel Inn, one of the few restaurants in Mexico City that served it, and returned to Austin, Texas to found Fonda San Miguel. The Englishwoman, Elisabeth Lambert, married Mexican diplomat César Ortiz-Tinoco and went on to write The Complete Book of Mexican Cooking in 1967. And fast on her heels followed another Englishwoman, Diana Kennedy, who published The Cuisines of Mexico in 1972 and who for this, and her continued advocacy of Mexican food, was awarded the Order of the Aztec Eagle, the highest honor given to foreigners in Mexico.

The Culinary Scene Today

Many of the Mexico City gourmetists that I met moved smoothly from their backgrounds in high French cuisine to become promoters of Mexican food. They founded a support group for the mayorías (majors), the female cooks who in general substitute for male chefs in Mexican kitchens. They dug up recipes for foreign authors such as Diana Kennedy. They and others have advised on restaurants in Mexico City and abroad. Lila Lomeli has taken over the management of Rosa Mexicana in New York. And they wrote their own cookbooks such as Maria Dolores Yzabal's Mexican Gourmet, already mentioned.

Even today, though, the cuisines of the rich and the poor in Mexico are worlds apart. The poor continue to eat corn tortillas, beans, and chiles. The rich, even though they include Mexican food in their repertoire, eat the international and ethnic cuisine that is displacing French High Cuisine as the élite preference. A young couple who live down the hill from me reported how they sought out ethnic restaurants. They regularly drive the forty miles to the nearest big city, León, for a choice of Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Argentinian, Brazilian, Lebanese, or good old Tony Roma's for ribs. Mexican middle class housewives take Italian cooking classes and go to Italian restaurants with their families. Teenagers demand sushi. Their parents pick up Viennese-style cakes and pastries from the venerable bakery chain, El Globo. Lula Bertrán, who had arranged the meeting of Mexico City gourmetists, had welcomed me on my previous visit: "Where do you want to eat, Rachel?" she asked. "Since you know Mexico, we don't have to choose Mexican. What about the new Japanese place in Polanco (an upmarket section of Mexico City). Or the great new French bistro I've heard about?"

And should we be surprised? It is all too easy to divide the culinary universe into two worlds. In one world—the United States and perhaps England—westerners eat modern western food. In the other, people still eat their traditional ethnic foods. But if the above speculations are correct, the division is nothing like that stark.

* In the notion of mole as a symptom of criollo nationalism, I depart from an article I wrote with Jeff Pilcher, "Chiles, Chocolate and Race in New Spain: Glancing Backward to Spain or Looking Forward to Mexico?," The Cultural Topography of Food focus issue, Eighteenth-Century Life 23 (1999), 59-70.
MAIZE: MEXICO’S GIFT
TO THE WORLD

by Joan Peterson

Dr. Joan B. Peterson of Madison, WI was a founding member of the Culinary History Enthusiasts of Wisconsin (CHEW) in June 2000. She is a retired biochemist (University of Wisconsin, Madison) and author/publisher of the EAT SMART series of culinary travel guidebooks to Mexico, Brazil, Morocco, Turkey, Poland, Indonesia, and (forthcoming this autumn) India. Over the last 30 years, Joan and her husband David have traveled around the world and led tours to the Caribbean, Mediterranean, Europe, Asia, and Australia.

Entire civilizations arose in the ancient Americas based on growing and eating maize, or “corn” (Zea mays subspecies mays). Unlike other grains, maize can survive only by cultivation; it is incapable of sustained reproduction in the absence of human husbandry. In addition, both its nutrition and taste are immensely enhanced by cooking techniques that were discovered in its homeland. The world owes the peoples of Mexico a debt of gratitude for developing the knowledge of how to grow and prepare maize and turn it into delicious and nourishing foods.

Today, maize is the world’s third leading grain after wheat and rice. Every year, farmers in the U.S. alone harvest about nine billion bushels of maize. All parts of the plant, but especially the kernels, have commercial value, and a staggering number of products are made from it. Among them are foods and beverages, corn syrup and other nutritive sweeteners, corn oil, corn starch, animal feed, ethanol, and degradable plastics.

Human Hands Tamed a Wild Grain

Interestingly, the origins of such an important plant as maize have been difficult to establish. What did its wild progenitor look like? This has been the subject of much controversy.

According to the leading theory, the domestication of maize occurred in Mexico around 5000 BCE. Some of the best archaeological evidence that we have for this is found at excavations inside Coxcatlin Cave, which lies in the Tehuacán Valley in the state of Puebla, southeast of modern Mexico City. It is a richly stratified site with nine distinct phases of cultural change, ranging from pre-6500 BCE to 1540 CE. Numerous maize cobs were unearthed, the oldest of which revealed that the prehistoric plants bore pencil-thin, inch-long ears with very small kernels arranged in four to eight rows. It is likely that these plants were a variety of either “pop corn” (i.e., a type with hard kernels) or “pod corn” (i.e., a type with kernels individually enclosed in a husk). Over the course of hundreds or thousands of years, human selection produced higher-yielding plants with larger ears bearing more kernels. Today’s multi-rowed maize ear has upwards of 1,000 kernels.

If humans domesticated maize thousands of years ago, with which plants did they begin? Current evidence suggests that a probable direct ancestor of maize is its closest surviving relative: a tall, wild grass called teosinte (Zea mays subspecies parviglumis). Notice that maize and teosinte are close enough to be ranked within the same biological species; they can fertilize one another, and hybrids of the two plants are common. Yet if you looked at teosinte, an annual that still thrives today in Mexico and Guatemala, you would be hard pressed to notice its close kinship with maize. The profound differences in appearance reflect how much human effort must have been necessary to breed a truly nourishing grain from a mere grass.

One major difference between maize and teosinte is the size and structure of their respective ears and kernels. A teosinte plant has many small ears (no more than a few inches long), each having about 5-12 triangular kernels, or grains, arranged in two rows inside a husk. When ripe, the kernels easily separate and fall to the ground, especially if the plant is stirred by winds or animals. On the other hand, each individual kernel is surrounded by a hard, woody fruitcase (glume) that cannot be separated from it. Teosinte kernels are therefore difficult to chew and digest, and not even flour ground from them is palatable. With heat, the kernels can be made to pop and partly emerge from their fruitcases, but even then they are virtually inedible.

By contrast, a maize kernel is not imprisoned in a hard shell. Its softer, much-reduced fruitcase sits at the base of the kernel; it is encountered only when it gets caught, annoyingly, between our teeth when we eat corn on the cob. The kernel as a whole is surrounded only by a thin, translucent, edible hull (pericarp). On the other hand, since the kernels are durably attached to the cob, they do not disperse naturally and must be sown by humans. This explains why maize cannot survive in the wild—and provides solid evidence of the role of humans in its origin and evolution.

Diego Rivera, “Peasant Woman with Ears of Corn” (1927), a fresco mural at Chapango National College of Agriculture, Mexico City.
Another major difference between maize and teosinte is the location of their ears and the pattern of branching off the main stem. The main stem of a teosinte plant bears several elongated primary branches. A single such branch grows from most of the nodes along the length of the stem, producing what has been called a "candelabra" pattern. Each branch is tassel-tipped, and hundreds of little ears grow in clusters from secondary branches. Maize plants, by contrast, have only two or three quite short branches, and these are each tipped by one ear. Each stalk of maize has a single tassel, which appears at the very apex of the plant.

If teosinte did not provide ancient Mexicans with a palatable grain or flour, then why did they begin to harvest it in the first place? The archaeological record suggests that teosinte was in fact harvested, but not for consumption as a cereal. Even though the fruitcases of teosinte kernels are extremely durable, hardly any of them have been found at archaeological sites, and none have been found in the human coprolites (fossilized excrement) obtained at these sites, as would surely have been the case if such grains had been ingested. On the other hand, what is seen in the Puebla caves and at other sites in Mexico are ancient quids (chewed mouthfuls) of fiber from immature teosinte ears and stems, much as if someone had chewed on a plug of tobacco or a piece of sugarcane and then spit it out. Accordingly, some ethnobotanists propose that immature ears of teosinte, which are soft and sweet, were once eaten as a green vegetable, and that peeled stalks were chewed to extract the sweet juices from their pith, just as is done today with teosinte (and maize) stalks. This nourishment would have supplemented the major dietary staples of prehistoric populations.

Scientists trying to elucidate the steps in the evolution of maize hypothesize that an early chance mutation led to reduction and softening of the teosinte fruitcase, allowing greater access to mature kernels for use as food. It is thought that the prehistoric maize cobs found in the Puebla caves manifest this mutation, and represent early stages in the domestication of maize from teosinte. Human selection for these favorable traits, through cultivation of plants displaying them, would have had enormous benefits for early farmers. Additional genetic alterations over a long period of time—also favored by human selection because they provided more food—completed the full transformation to maize. These alterations would have included suppression of the growth of branches (rise of apical dominance) and growth of fewer but comparatively huge ears at the tips of one or two much-shortened branches.

Plant geneticists have discovered that the main morphological differences between teosinte and maize are controlled by only a handful of genes. In fact, researchers have recently shown that the overall architecture of these two grains is governed largely by a single gene. When the maize variant of this gene is inserted into teosinte cells, the plant becomes structurally more similar to maize: the branches shorten, and they bear ears rather than tassels. Conversely, a maize plant having a nonfunctional gene for this trait becomes teosinte-like. These and other investigations at the molecular and morphological levels promise to further unravel the mystery of maize evolution.

Experimental strains of maize produced by crossing a popcorn with teosinte, a wild grass thought to be the ancestor of maize. Through a series of genetic crossings and selections for small ears, one can produce ears that resemble the earliest archaeological maize found in caves in the Tehuacán valley in Mexico. Shown here at approximately 90% of full size, the two ears with a central spike (left) are considered the equivalent of maize 4,500 years old; the ear with no central spike (right) the equivalent of maize 3,500-4,000 years old. Drawn by S.V. Medaris from hybrids raised by Nobel laureate George Beadle in the 1970s, provided by Dr. Hugh H. Illes, Emeritus Professor of Botany at the University of Wisconsin. Reprinted by permission of Ginkgo Press, Inc., from Eat Smart in Mexico: How to Decipher the Menu, Know the Market Foods & Embark on a Tasting Adventure by Joan and David Peterson; copyright © 1998 by Ginkgo Press, Inc.

Mexicans Unlocked a Secret of Nutrition

Maize cultivation played a key role in the rise of the great Mesoamerican civilizations, for its production provided the calories and nutrients that enabled populations to thrive and to expand enormously.

Here, too, however, human intervention was crucial. In its untreated state, maize is deficient in certain vital nutrients—the essential amino acids lysine and tryptophan, which must be obtained from food because they cannot be produced by the human body, and niacin, which is part of the vitamin B complex. Although maize actually contains these nutrients, they are trapped in otherwise indigestible parts of the kernel. Indigenous peoples were able to fully tap the food value of maize only when they discovered how to pre-cook the kernels in a solution of lime, derived variously from limestone, wood ashes, or seashells. It is this alkaline treatment, called nixtamalization, that increases the availability of the three aforesaid vital nutrients in maize and allows the grain to serve as a dietary mainstay.

The earliest recorded use of lime in ancient kitchens is from about 100 BCE. Lime-coated clay cooking pots have been unearthed at a site in Teotihuacán, the first great metropolis in central Mexico lying about 30 miles northeast of the modern capital. In preparing maize, dried kernels were heated in limewater, which not only made the grain more nutritious, as mentioned, but also softened it and loosened the translucent hulls for removal, allowing a smoother dough (masa) to be ground from the resulting nixtamalized kernels.

With a diet based on this nutritionally-enhanced maize continued on next page
supplemented with beans and squash that also grew in ancient gardens, the prehistoric peoples of Mexico had available the proper balance of amino acids to meet their daily protein requirement. The importance of the three vegetables was evident in the layout of the milpa, or maize field. Early farmers had small, repeating patches, with beans planted beside the maize so they could twine around their stalks for support, and squash planted in a circle around these.

_Masa Satisfied a Hundred “Little Whims”_

Maize remains a staple for most of the native populations living in the Americas. Nowhere is this more evident than in the cuisine of Mexico. It is the sole ingredient of tortillas, the ancient daily bread that has nourished generations of Mexicans. Lime-treated maize (nixtamal) is ground on a saddle-shaped grindstone (metate) daily to make home-made dough (masa), and balls of soft dough are patted back and forth between the hands to make these round, flat cakes. While a tortilla press (a Spanish invention) makes the process easier, many urbanites no longer make their own tortillas, preferring to buy fresh, ready-made ones from a neighborhood tienda. The versatile tortilla, and other foods prepared from masa, can be turned into a wide range of main and side dishes as well as beverages, appetizers, and snacks.

In particular, the tasty snacks that can be made with masa are so striking in their endless and ingenious variety that these were dubbed antojitos (little whims or cravings) by the Spanish. Among them is the sopío made from a thick, cooked tortilla pinched up around the edge to form a rim to contain a savory topping, then baked on a griddle (comal) when filled. This round or oval appetizer has many regional names and toppings. A round one can be a picada, garnacha, bocel, migada or pellizcada. An oval one, formed by flattening a cylinder rather than a ball of dough, can be a memela or chalupa. A gordita is a round or oval pocket of fried, usually stuffed masa covered with toppings. Typical stuffings are frijoles refritos, or well-fried beans, and chicarrón, or fried pork rind (a byproduct of the rendering of lard). Gorditas can be made several ways. The dough can be fried first and then split to form a cavity for the filling. Some puff up during frying, creating a natural pocket. Crunchy, fried tortillas garnished with any of several toppings are tostadas. Pieces of tortillas fried to a crisp and used as a garnish or edible tableware are totopos.

The tortilla also becomes a taco, flautas, quesadilla and enchilada. A taco is a tortilla rolled around a filling, and is more typically soft (unfried) than crisp (fried). Mexican tacos bear no resemblance to the hard, U-shaped shells encountered north of the border. A flauta is a large tortilla rolled tightly around a filling to form a flute-like cylinder that is then fried until crisp. An uncooked tortilla folded in half over a cheese-based filling and griddle-cooked becomes a quesadilla. The glamorous enchilada is a tortilla dipped in chile sauce, then fried and wrapped around a variety of ingredients. One of the dishes most missed by Mexicans when they are out of the country for any length of time is chilaquiles, a casserole made with yesterday's tortillas.

Alongside the tortilla, the tamal (plural tamales) is another ancient food based on maize. It starts with moist masa, traditionally ground from a large-kerneled white maize (cachaza huitlote) that is also used to make hominy dishes. The masa is then blended with lard until light (pre-Hispanic tamales were made without any animal fats, which were not readily available). The tamales are typically wrapped in maize husks, maize leaves, or banana leaves, steamed, and served "as is" without a topping (these days, they are sometimes not wrapped in leaves and steamed, but are instead cooked in a casserole dish). Many tamales are stuffed with a filling such as meat, poultry, chile peppers, beans, or squash blossoms. Sweet tamales have fillings of nuts, and dried and candied fruit. The dough is often tinted red with a dye made from a small insect (cochinita) living on the nopal cactus.

The Future of Maize is Threatened

Given the importance of maize as a food crop, especially in the Western Hemisphere, it is important to realize that the genetic diversity of this plant is threatened by the transformed agricultural practices of modern times.

As recently as 100 years ago, maize breeders maintained a heterogeneous stockpile of seeds. They selected varieties for traits such as the color, taste, and size of the kernels, and the plant's resistance to disease and adverse environmental conditions. The seeds of these farmers bred true from parent to offspring.

Now, however, almost all maize grown commercially in this country comes from a handful of hybrid seed varieties sold by private companies. Genetically diverse plant varieties have disappeared from the maize fields, giving way to uniformity. The offspring of these hybrids display unpredictable traits, so that new seeds have to be purchased every planting season.

Maize monoculture is becoming firmly entrenched, not only in the United States but in developing countries. This practice increases vulnerability to diseases, pests, and environmental stresses, creating the potential for future large-scale crop failures.

Maize is the product of a long history of human ingenuity. Yet today, due to human shortsightedness, the future of this amazing grain is not secure.
THE VARIEGATED LANDSCAPE OF MEXICAN CUISINE

by Randy K. Schwartz

A home had barely enough surfaces to hold all the different foods that were brought together when the Culinary Historians assembled for a grand Mexican fiesta this past December 15. It was our 19th annual participatory Holiday Theme Dinner, and from kitchen to buffet every "mountain and valley" was covered with bounty.

It was an elaborate gathering, but well-planned by Program Chair Julie Lewis. It was well-timed, too: the 4 p.m. start made for a fashionably-late Mexican comida (main meal), and December 15 was the last day before the nine-day celebration of Posadas that culminates on Christmas Eve every year. Posadas, the most important of the Mexican fiestas, recalls Mary and Joseph's search for the hospitality of an inn (posada) where Jesus could be born. It's a tradition at Posadas parties to fill an earthenware cooking pot with fruit, candy, and gifts and decorate it in the form of an animal. This piñata is hung overhead while children take turns with a stick, trying to whack it open while blindfolded.

Our own posada was the warm home of President Carroll "Mi Casa es Su Casa" Thomson and her husband John. Here, then, there would be no lack of hospitality—only a bit of grumbling from several members who missed the signup deadline and had to be turned away because there was literally "no more room at the inn." With 47 people participating, this was one of our biggest theme-meals ever.

Member Pat Cornett supplied many of our decorations, including animal wood-carvings brought back from a visit to Oaxaca. Another Mexican folk art, intricate papelitos picados (paper cutouts), were strung festively above our heads. They're made from the same brightly-colored tissue paper, called papel de China ("China paper"), that's used to decorate piñatas.

The meal was not only memorable, it was one that's worth remembering and learning from. Here in North America genuine Mexican food is a relatively unknown treasure—a bit like a piñata. But we needn't flail away at it blindly with a stick. Instead, let's take this opportunity to recall some of the foods and beverages that were contributed to our meal that afternoon, allowing us to survey the variegated landscape of Mexican cuisine.

Corn, Beans, and Chiles Are an Ancient Trinity

For literally thousands of years, making bread has been the most basic cooking chore of the native Mexican woman. Three times every day she kneels at a low, three-legged pedestal hewn from basalt. Rolling a tapered stone cylinder back and forth on the pedestal, she grinds kernels of corn (maize) into a pulp and then, with a bit of water, kneads the pulp into a smooth dough. Previously she's boiled the kernels with calcium in a clay pot over the fire, then skinned and thoroughly rinsed them; the pre-cooking softened the parched kernels, loosened their skins, and boosted their nutritional value (see Joan Peterson's article "Maize: Mexico's Gift to the World," p. 4). Now, moistening her hands, the woman takes a ball of the dough and pats it back and forth some 30-40 times to form a thin, round cake. Finally she cooks these briefly on both sides, without grease, several at a time on a low clay griddle set over the open fire. Although unleavened, they're pliable and slightly puffy when cooked.

These small flatcakes of corn were the daily bread of pre-Columbian Mexico. In the Nahuaul language spoken by people of Aztec descent, they were called tlacalli, but the arriving Spaniards gave their own names to these "little cakes" (tortillas), as well as to the pedestal (metate), the rolling pin (mano), the corn dough (masa), and the griddle (comal). Even if the equipment has changed, the tortilla has remained a staple food. Today, many Mexicans make them with labor-saving devices like a hand-cranked corn mill and a small metal tortilla press, or they simply buy from a local tortilleria. The corn tortillas for our meal [purchased by member Barbara DeWolfe from Mercado Sabor Latino, a new grocery in Ann Arbor] were made at Chicago's El Milagro Inc., a family-owned tortilleria started in 1950 by Mexican immigrant Don Raul Lopez.

So central was corn to the civilizations of Mexico that continued on next page
LANDSCAPE continued from previous page

each revered it as a gift of the gods and a sacred life-force. Zarela Martinez, in her cookbook/memoir Food From My Heart, describes a birthing ritual that she witnessed in a Mayan village in northeastern Yucatán. Right after birth, a midwife cuts the infant’s umbilical cord with an obsidian knife against an ear of corn, allowing the blood to bathe the kernels. The ear is then planted in a special plot called la sangre del niño (“the blood of the child”); the corn grown there will feed the child until puberty.

Beans, too, are a key to the Indian diet, complementing the protein available from corn. Over two dozen varieties of bean are indigenous to Mexico. A small, shiny black one with an earthy flavor is the most popular in the southern states. Frijoles negros oaxaqueños [prepared by Don and Ann Fowler] is a dish of these black beans long-simmered with onions, served in their fragrant broth with salt, eaten with a spoon or in a tortilla. In Mexico a sprig of epazote (Náhuatl épazol)—an herb related to the goose-foot and lamb’s-quarters of North America, and to quinoa of the Andean region—will invariably be added to the pot of black beans, providing a welcome pungency and odor as well as an anti-flatulent effect. Since epazote is difficult to find in Ann Arbor, the Fowlers made a version of the beans with cilantro instead.

Corn and beans, both of which could be dried, stored, and eaten year-round, were staples in pre-Columbian Mexico. The land didn’t teem with large, fleshy mammals of the sort that Old World populations domesticated for meat.* Turkeys and musk ducks were bred for the tables of the Aztec nobility, but for the common people meat was generally a scarce luxury.

Alongside corn and beans, the third member of the “food trinity” was the capsicum or chile (Náhuatl chilitl). This powerful little fruit became the most valued tribute item in the Toltec and Aztec taxation systems; bundles of chiles or their seeds were thus regularly carried northward from southern Mexico, where they were already being consumed by 7500 BCE. Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish missionary in the New World in the early 1500s, wrote, “Without chile, Mexicans don’t believe they’re eating.” Ask any Mexican and they’ll tell you why: hot chiles make food exciting! In addition, they’re much richer in vitamins A and C than are corn and beans, and their anti-microbial and anti-oxidant properties help retard spoilage and rancidity. Physiologists have also learned that chiles greatly stimulate the digestive process in the mouth, stomach, and intestine. Chiles were thus not merely pleasurable but an essential part of the Indian diet.

The spicy kick that chiles give to a dish is easy to taste in chile-glazed sweet potatoes [prepared by Dan and Elayne Steinhardt]. Rick Bayless prefaces his recipe for these by noting, “This casserole has all the homey appeal of the sweet, crusty, orange-scented sweet potatoes most of us put on our Thanksgiving tables. But keep in mind that these are Mexican—robust with chile, tempered with honey, perfumed with herbs and spices.” The potatoes are baked in a glaze of honey, orange juice, and a paste of toasted dried ancho chiles, oregano, black pepper, cinnamon, and cloves. Seasoning sweet potatoes with chiles is an old tradition—in fact, on Columbus’ second voyage, his physician Diego Chanca recorded seeing this custom among Caribbean natives.

Chopped or powdered dried chile is routinely sprinkled on fresh fruit in Mexico today, along with lime juice and salt. We had two versions of a simple orange-jicama medley that’s usually given that treatment. The Mayan-named xol-chon kek [Phil and Barbara Zaret] is from the Yucatán peninsula, and the Spanish-named pico de gallo [Mary Lou Unterberger] is from central and western Mexico. The jícama (Náhuatl xicamatl), a crispy tuber, is native to Mexico, while the bitter Seville orange was brought from the Old World; in northern climes, if only sweet oranges are available for this dish, cooks are advised to “embitter” them with the juice or zest of lemons, limes, and/or grapefruits. Pico de gallo (“rooster’s beak”) is what people’s fingers look like when they pluck up the cubes of fruit, making this what Mexicans call a botana, i.e., a very informal snack or hors d’oeuvre served at parties and bars.

With a beautiful platón de frutas (platter of sliced fruits) [Jan Longone], and a chili-shaker off to the side, we chose from other fruits popular in Mexico, both Old World (limes, mangoes, ladyfinger bananas, cantaloupe) and New (pineapple, prickly pears). Prickly pears (runas in Spanish) are eaten fresh and also made into preserves, candies, and a fermented drink. They’re the fruits of the Opuntia cacti, the same genus whose jointed, paddle-like leaves (nopales) are cooked and used as vegetables in Mexico. Culinarily, the other very important genus of Mexican succulents is the Agave or century-type (maguey in Spanish), whose flowers, stalks, and tapered leaves are eaten seasonally, and whose sap is made into syrup and sugar or fermented into pulque, mezcal, tequila, and vinegar.

Moles Brought the Chile to Center Stage

In the various regional moles that are Mexico’s most revered dishes, chiles are the center of attention, providing the basic flavor rather than simply a spicy accompaniment to other foods. This way of using chiles is a distinctive feature of Mexican cooking.

In Aztec times, molli was a generic term for a thick sauce made by finely mixing various ingredients, usually with a stone mortar and pestle or the same metate used to grind corn. The arriving Spaniards transliterated molli as mole, influenced by the coincidental Spanish verb molar (“to grind, to mill”). The ingredients of a molli might include fruits such as tomatoes (Náhuatl xicomatici, tomatillos (miltomati), and chiles, or such other things as herbs, seeds, and nuts. Everyone knows guacamole (Náhuatl ahuacamolli) [John Thomson], an uncooked mixture of ground avocados, tomatoes or tomatillos, fresh chiles, onions, and cilantro; in Mexico, it’s...
often dabbed into a warm tortilla, either solo or alongside other fillings. Less familiar in the U.S. are such cooked mole dishes as escamole and miximole, which incorporate ingredients like chopped nopales, ant eggs or larvae, tiny crustaceans, and frogs.

*Chilmolli* referred to a cooked molli made from dried, ground chiles along with various other ingredients. A tortilla or other food could be doused in it, becoming “en-chilled,” a concept later captured by the Spanish word *enchilada*. Today, reheat leftover mole, or a relatively simple mole made from scratch, is often used in this way. *Enchiladas de mole rojo* [Margot Michael] was a delicious example from a Rick Bayless recipe, using what he calls a “simple red mole” made from roasted *ancho* chiles, tomatoes, and other ingredients. The *ancho*, which is a dried *poblana* chile, accounts for most of the red color of this mole. Coarsely-shredded cooked chicken is moistened in the warm sauce and then rolled up in corn *tortillas*. The resulting *enchiladas* are plated, topped with additional mole, and immediately served hot. In other *enchilada* dishes, the *tortillas* are often fried on a griddle and/or dipped in the sauce before they are filled.

Many now-classic Chile mole, while rooted in Mexico’s distant past, also clearly reflect techniques and ingredients that were adopted from Europe much later. The results have been called “baroque” in their complexity. This can be seen in a dish such as mole rojo clásico de guajolote (classic red mole with turkey) [Eleanor Hoag]. Dried chiles of three different varieties (*mulato*, *ancho*, and *pasilla*) are first torn into pieces and rid of their stems, seeds, and veins. On a griddle or in a grill pan the chile pieces are fried in pork lard to round out their flavors, then left to soak in warm water for half an hour. Most of the other ingredients can be browned one after another on the griddle: *tomatillos*, garlic, sesame seeds, almonds, raisins, pieces of old bread or tortilla to make a thicker sauce, and slabs of turkey meat. Everything except the turkey meat is then finely ground, along with seasonings like black pepper, cinnamon, cloves, anise, and chocolate. This mixture is moistened and strained to form a smooth paste. More water or stock is added, and the resulting sauce is seared in hot lard (traditionally in an earthenware pot), then simmered until it thickens. To complete the dish, the browned turkey meat is braised in the deep-red mole; the two are presented together on a platter and sprinkled with more sesame seeds.

In the south, the state of Oaxaca is particularly renowned for its mole traditions. Further north, in Puebla, an 1877 cookbook included no less than 44 mole recipes! The most celebrated version of all is mole poblano de guajolote (Pueblan mole with turkey) [Richard McDonald and Linda Doros]. Its recipe is similar to that for the mole rojo clásico, but a higher proportion of *mulato* and *pasilla* chiles gives this mole a chocolate-brown color. Once known as the mole de olores ("mole of fragrances"), the rich, dark sauce came to be called mole poblano after its city of origin. According to legend, this particular concoction of mole and turkey was invented in Puebla in the 1680s by a nun of the Convento de Santa Rosa; she needed a main dish for a dinner honoring the Viceroy of New Spain, who was visiting the convent along with the Archbishop. While the details might be fanciful, the existence of such a story suggests that convents probably played an important role in the evolution of the classic moles that have been handed down. But the relative influence of Indian, European, and mestizo cultural elements in the creation of these rich dishes has remained a topic of intense debate (see Rachel Laudan’s article “We Never Ate Mexican Food,” p. 1).

Not long after the Conquest a Franciscan priest and ethnographer, Bernardino de Sahagún, visited the vast open market on the outskirts of the former Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. Among the many foods that he tasted was a sauce in which both chiles and pumpkin seeds had been ground up. A relatively simple mole in which finely ground seeds or nuts figure prominently is often called a pepián or pipián (from Spanish pepa, “seed”). Among the ingredients available for thickening and enriching a pipián are pepitas (pumpkin seeds), pine nuts, peanuts, and pecans—all of which were used in Mexico before the arrival of Europeans—as well as sesame seeds and almonds from the Old World. Our pipián verde de pollo (green pipián with chicken) [Laurie Hunter and John DeCicco] drew its green color from fresh serrano chiles, *tomatillos*, cilantro, and hulled pepitas. Pipián rojo de pollo (red pipián with chicken) [Alison and Guy Cooper], reddened from *anchos*, was enriched with hulled pepitas and dried corn.

The toasting, grinding, and other steps involved in making a full-fledged mole was arduous work in the old days, and ingredients like chiles, nuts, and spices (not to mention turkeys) are relatively expensive. Today, mole still has the aura of a special meal. Its preparation often signals a fiesta, birthday, christening, wedding, or funeral. Classic red mole with turkey is the most traditional main dish eaten on the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead, or All Souls’ Day, Nov. 2), when Mexicans celebrate the memory of their deceased ancestors. For the festive supper held on *Noche Buena* (Christmas Eve) before midnight mass, the leading dish is mole poblano with turkey. We also had three different versions of another platter that’s sometimes set out at that meal, *ensalada de Noche Buena* [Mila Simmons; Judy Steeh;

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of meat, or a whole tortilla might have been wrapped around the food as in burritos and chimichangas. We also sampled two kinds of empanada [Sonia Manchek], the turnover made with wheat-flour pastry dough: a baked one filled with shredded chicken, corn kernels, and chopped chiles, and a fried one filled with shredded beef and chopped chiles and tomatoes. Like leavened bread itself, empanadas were a concept imported from Spain, although the fats and other ingredients used in Mexico are somewhat different. Other common empanada fillings include boiled, diced potato with roasted mild chiles; picadillo, a sweet-and-sour pork hash; chorizo sausage; and fresh shrimp, crab, or tuna. Also popular are sweet empanadas of stewed or candied fruits, or of mashed sweet potato, pumpkin, or plantain.

The introduction of pigs, cows, sheep, goats, and chickens reshaped the landscape and economy of Mexico and the diet of its people. Within months of their Conquest in 1521, the Spanish brought herds of cattle and sheep, first to Veracruz and the Central Highlands, and later to the north, where much of the land would eventually be turned over to ranching. By mid-century, the first important pig farms were established in the high valley of Toluca, just west of the former Aztec capital. Eventually, the Spanish rulers allowed native people to raise animals themselves. Chickens and pigs, needing minimal space and upkeep, became especially common.

Cattle in Mexico, a lean breed to begin with, were grazed rather than being confined to feedlots; their meat was thus flavorful but tough. The flesh of chickens, raised in an open yard, likewise tended to be on the chewy side. Naturally, this meant that certain cooking techniques became favored over others. A tough old bird could be boiled, braised, or steamed, but it couldn’t easily be fried. A lean chunk of beef such as flank steak, brisket, or rump might well have been cut with the grain; if so, it could be shredded easily, or sliced butterfly- or accordion-style into thin sheets for saering on a comal or salt-drying in the open air. Otherwise, it could be boiled before use, long-stewed in a chile sauce, or cut into morsels to be marinated or grilled as with Tex-Mex fajitas. On the other hand, Mexican recipes seldom call for meat to actually be ground, the key exception being the acidulated meatballs called albóndigas.

Chipotle-peppered flank steak [Bob and Midge Lusardi] is cooked in a sauce made with chiles, tomatoes, garlic, and oregano, then served on a bed of caramelized red onions. The dish has a pleasant smokiness, for the chipotle chile is a jalapeño that’s been ahumado, i.e., smoke-dried on a bamboo screen over a fragrant wood fire. Another meaty dish brought to our meal was carne de puerco con calabaza [Joanne Nesbitt], a mildly-spiced stew of cubed pork steak, yellow crookneck squash, and kernels of corn. The stew is a specialty in Oaxaca, where it’s made with an indigenous winter squash (small pumpkin) having a green skin and sweet flesh.

Animals supplied not only fats and meats but other products that became integral to the Mexican diet such as blood (for morcilla sausage), tripe and other organs, eggs, milk, butter, and cheese. At our fiesta, we were able to sample from a platter of Mexican and Spanish cheeses [provided by Jan Longone]. Two other dairy products were used as tradi-
tional toppings for a casserole-baked version of chilaquiles [Jane and Herb Kaufer], which combined slices of corn tortilla, zucchini, and mild peppers in a sauce of green chiles and garlic. The two dairy toppings were queso blanco, which is a creamy-white fresh cow’s milk cheese, crumbly and mildly salty (also called queso fresco, it’s found in various forms in Spain and throughout Latin America); and sour-cream, which served as an approximation to crema mexicana.

Chilaquiles is one of many dishes contrived as a way to make use of leftover tortillas. In the old days, the stale tortillas would be set out in the hot sun to harden further. Then they went into a stock pot with a brothy sauce of tomatoes or tomatillos, chiles, and herbs like epazote and cilantro (the name chilaquiles derives from Náhuatl chil-a-quetil “chiles and herbs”). This would be cooked until most of the broth had been absorbed, leaving the tortillas infused with flavor and softened but pleasantly chewy. Although a favorite these days for midmorning breakfast (almuerzo), more traditionally the dish served as a sopa seca or “dry soup,” an important course eaten just prior to the main course at the main meal of the day, the afternoon comida.

Almost any starch that’s cooked by the absorption of liquid could qualify as a sopa seca. It can be slices of leftover tortillas, tamales, white bread, or crêpes, layered and cooked in a sauce. It can be pasta noodles in a tomato or cream sauce, or budín, a savory pudding. But by far the most prevalent sopa seca is rice, primarily the everyday “red rice,” arroz a la Mexicana [Julie and Bob Lewis]. To make this dish, medium- or long-grain white rice is rinsed in cold water so that the grains won’t stick together, and then fried (traditionally in lard) to ensure a more fluffy and flavorful end-result. Next, the rice is cooked in a paste made from roasted tomatoes, onions, and garlic, and finally in chicken stock, until it absorbs the liquid and is left with a reddish tinge.

The Old World Was Preserved in the New

Arroz a la Mexicana is quite unlike any rice dish of Spain; that’s partly because rice came to Mexico not from Spain but from East Asia in the late 1500s. But plenty of other Spanish food customs, especially those that became firmly entrenched in Spain during medieval times, were more or less directly imported to Mexico. For example, most of the pastas of Mexico are clearly Spanish in origin. Earlier we noted a Moorish practice, the use of vinegar, citrus, or other acidic juices for adobo, albóndigas, and picadillo, likewise for pickling en escabeche. Also clearly of Spanish provenance are meats cured with salt and spices (sausages, hams, carne seca salted beef, salt cod, etc.), sweets made with cane sugar (cakes, cookies, puddings, custards, marzipan, candied fruits, etc.), and certain beverages (coffee, wine, horchata, etc.)

In Mexico just as in Spain, bacalao español (salt cod Spanish-style) [Joanne and Art Cole] is a signature dish for Christmas Eve, and is also important during Lent. The cod, soaked one day ahead, is flaked and then fried in olive oil along with a paste made from tomatoes, onions, and garlic. In both countries, ingredients like potatoes, bell peppers, olives, and almonds are also frequently incorporated. Joanne found the stiff, plank-like filets of cod “stacked like cordwood” at the store, just as they are in Mexican markets.

The postre (dessert course) was transplanted from Spain, neither replacing nor competing with anything that came before it in Mexico. The native Indians had their indigenous fruits and their honey, but they had no real tradition of sweets as a distinct category of food. The New World’s first sugarcane plantations were established by Spanish overlords, first on the Caribbean islands and not long afterwards in Mexico itself. The traditional form of sugar in Mexico is piloncillo—a molded truncated cone (“little pylon”) of raw brown sugar. The strong molasses-like flavor of piloncillo works quite well in capirotada [Toni Hopping], a Spanish bread-pudding traditionally eaten during Lent. Baked in a casserole dish, it consists of layers of sliced dried-out yeast bread, chopped almonds, and raisins or other fruits, sweetened with a syrup made from milk, sugar, cinnamon, and cloves.

Among the other sugary confections brought to our fiesta were carritos [Pat Cornett and Mel Amnis], little coconut cakes popular in Oaxaca; rollo de dañil y nuez [Mary Lou Untenburger], a rolled date-nut candy; and almendrado [Fran Lyman], an almond pudding. As in Spain itself, the most traditional sweets of Mexico are almost invariably associated with particular convents where nuns produced them—regularly and with finely-honed skills—for sale as a way to raise funds for their Catholic orders. In this way the sisters preserved Old World skills of baking and confection in the New World, while also utilizing some of the novel fruits, nuts, and other ingredients found there.

Piloncillo was the first kind of sugar used when beer brewing finally got underway in Mexico in the mid-1800s. The brewers were German, Austrian, and Swiss immigrants, which helps explain why the leading Mexican beers have been of the German lager variety, such as the light, crisp Corona from Mexico City and the richer Dos Equis from Orizaba, Veracruz [both supplied to us by Dan Longone]. Winemaking was also slow to get underway in Mexico. Grape vines were transplanted from Europe early on (1524) and were very successfully cross-bred with a native wild grape, but in 1543 the colonial government began enacting legislation to protect Spanish wine imports, stunting native production for centuries. In the kitchen and at the table, gastronomes often had to choose between expensive imports and relatively coarse domestic wines. Mixing a sangria [Marjorie Cripps], the iced Spanish drink of red wine, fruit-juices and -slices, sugar, and a touch of brandy, was a good way to punch up a mediocre red for drinking. Many people today prefer the simpler sangria mexicana, which puts the accent on lime juice, dispenses with the fruit chunks, and replaces the brandy with seltzer water.

The finest coffee beans of Mexico are grown in cool, cloud-enshrouded highlands in the south, especially on the slopes facing the Gulf coast. The industry, a world leader, is centered just east of Orizaba in Córdoba, Veracruz. Our Mexican-style coffee [courtesy of hostess Carroll Thomson] was dark-roasted and spiced with cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves; milk and brown sugar, the latter filling in for piloncillo, were also available for it. Coffee is the eighth and final course of a full, formal comida mexicana; it also nicely rounded out our informal one.

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