

A (RELATIVELY) SHORT HISTORY OF MEXICAN COOKING

by Jim Peyton

Introduction

Everyone can understand food from the standpoint of taste, but learning where it comes from opens a portal to a new level of appreciation that will do nothing but enhance your dining experience. Reading a recipe often makes a dish appear simple until you learn how much work, passion, creativity, trial and error was invested over many centuries to create it. As I said in my third book, Jim Peyton's *New Cooking from Old Mexico*: "It is only with this knowledge that the enjoyment of food transcends sensual pleasure to become something much more profound—a cultural experience." And because its history is so rich and varied, nowhere is this more true than with Mexican food.

Our southern neighbor's cuisine is often described as a combination of Indian and Spanish cooking techniques and ingredients. That is basically correct, but is much too simplified to promote real understanding. Among other things, it ignores details of the key influences from both areas, including the contributions of the Germanic tribes, Romans, and North African Moors to Spanish cooking, as well as the countless regional offerings that formed Indian* (see author's note below) cooking. It also fails to mention the important influences of French, Asian, and Caribbean ingredients and techniques on traditional Mexican cooking.

The search for sustenance

The search for sustenance in Mexico was first conducted by men with weapons. The results of the hunt were supplemented by scavenged fruits, nuts and vegetables. As larger game animals either became scarce or learned to avoid humans, the small groups of hunter-gatherers were forced to increase their wanderings and focus their efforts on small game, such as rabbits, birds and fish. Eventually the people learned to plant seeds and to select those that produced the best results. This led to the development of staple crops—corn in the Americas, and wheat and rice in other parts of the world. This, in turn, allowed the establishment of permanent communities.

While the inhabitants were previously at the mercy of the weather and other forces that influenced the success of the hunt, most of these same vagaries still applied to agriculture and affected the increasingly larger settlements, causing a desperate search for solutions. Calendars were developed to better time planting and harvesting, and irrigation systems were invented to transport and conserve water. The people also sought to propitiate the gods with religious ceremonies, including human sacrifice, and made war on other groups whose lands appeared more productive.

Mexico

While the Mexican Indians came from Asia and had similar racial characteristics, they were far from homogenous. They spoke different languages and lived in different parts of the country, each of which had different resources that created different challenges to sustaining life. It is this latter element, more than anything else, that created the regional variations in food-ways that exist to this day.

Southern Mexico has hot weather and abundant rainfall, conditions that created dense jungles, but also produced poor food growing conditions as nutrients leached from the soil. The people in this area had access to small game, fish, tropical fruits, and other produce. These included cacao, which they learned to make into chocolate, and the orchid from which they produced vanilla.

The central plateau has temperate weather and sufficient rainfall that led to ideal growing conditions for the staples of corn, beans, squash, chiles, and just about anything else.

Northern Mexico is hot and arid and, before the advent of modern irrigation systems, reliable crops were possible only along rivers and near springs. It was here that the Indians retained, for the longest time, their ancient hunting ethic, and from where much of the threat of conquest came to those living in more productive parts of the country.

While corn, beans, squash, and chiles were the universal Mexican staples and made up much of the diet, other crops were also important, including tomatoes (thought to be originally from Brazil), tomatillos and amaranth. This latter item was especially significant as, in the spring, it ripened before corn, allowing the people to win the race against starvation brought on by their often perilous winter fasts. It was also used in religious ceremonies, much like Christian communion bread, and for this reason was banned by the Spanish conquerors. That is why, except for its use in the popular sweet called alegrías, it is rarely found in modern Mexican cooking.

From its development, sometime around 5000- 7500 B.C., corn (or maize as scientists like to refer to it) was, at first, used to make gruels called atoles, and stews, which often included the other staples of squash, beans, and chiles. Tortillas came much later, around 500 A.D. We know this because it was not until then that the flat, clay comales that were used to prepare them appeared. Once discovered, tortillas were used, as they are today, both as eating utensils and as part of the meal, either on the side as a bread accompaniment or to wrap the food into tacos.

For protein the Indians relied mostly on the combination of corn and beans. When available they also consumed small game animals, birds, fish, and, much less appealing to most of us, insects. Most food was cooked over coals, smoked in pits, or simmered in pots with water. These stews and pipianes were to be the basis for Mexico's most famous dishes, the moles, which were developed to their present forms after the Conquest. Frying was virtually nonexistent, undoubtedly because there was no fat to fry

with. There were no cows from which to obtain milk to produce butter, no pigs to provide lard, no chickens from which other cultures obtained fat, and game animals were extremely lean. Sometimes oils were squeezed from plants for other purposes, and the Maya had access to the very fatty marine manatee, but neither of these were used for frying to the extent that they left significant archeological evidence. These practices led to a low fat, nearly vegetarian diet.

At this time it is apt to mention the magical aspect of Mexican corn. I say “Mexican” corn because, after its discovery, it was sent around the world. Everywhere that people tried to use it as a staple—Africa, Europe and later the American South—they became ill and often died from a disease we now call pellagra. Numerous reasons were ascribed to its cause, but it was not until an article in Science magazine in the early 1970's that the explanation was revealed. There, it was disclosed that the process called nixtamalization, used by the Indians—and nobody else—to remove the skins of corn in order to make a smooth masa or dough, allowed the human body to absorb essential nutrients. The dried corn was simmered in a solution of water and an alkaline substance such as lime, wood ash, or seashells, and left to soak overnight. In the morning the skins were easily slipped off and the corn ground to a smooth consistency in order to make atoles, tortillas and tamales. That same process, which accounts for the Indians ability to live well on corn, is still in use today in the preparation of masa for tortillas and tamales.

Cacao beans were ground into chocolate, which was usually taken as a drink, either hot or cold. But don't imagine Montezuma finishing his day with what we think of as a mug of hot coco. Although things like chile and achiote (ground annato seeds) were added to the drink, it was rarely sweetened. In fact, pretty much the only sweeteners available were honey and aguamiel (honey-water extracted from agave plants). The latter was either drunk fresh as a soft drink or fermented to make a mildly alcoholic beverage called pulque. It was not until chocolate was sent to Europe that sugar was added.

Perhaps the most amazing aspect of the Indians use of chocolate is that they actually discovered how to make it. To produce chocolate, cocoa beans must first be extracted from their pods. Then they must be fermented for specific times at specific temperatures, during which time they germinate, then die. Without that brief germination there will be no chocolate flavor! The beans are then dried, after which they are roasted—once again for precise amounts of time at specific temperatures. As if this is not complicated enough, the shells must then be taken off, leaving the nibs, which are ground into chocolate. How on earth did they figure all that out? The same mystery shrouds the discovery of vanilla, which is made from an otherwise ordinary orchid found in Veracruz, and requires a similarly complicated process of fermentation and drying.

One thing that motivated the Indians culinary experiments was their great appreciation and respect for food. In addition to the rich legacy of recipes, we know this is true from the writings of Father Bernardino de Sahagún, who chronicled Aztec life directly following the Conquest in his General History of Things in New Spain (often referred to as the Florentine Codex). In discussing the people who had

been selected for sacrifice to the gods, he said in Volume I on page 20, "If a woman could sew or if she prepared food well, or made good cacao—from whose hand good food and drink came; [or if she was] a good interpreter; her also they set aside. The nobles took [such women] as wives."

We have a similar testimony to the importance of food from Bernal Díaz del Castillo, one of Cortés' soldiers, who wrote on page 355 and 356 of *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico* a description of pre-Conquest Mexico City. "So, having gazed at all this and reflected upon it, we turned our eyes to the great market-place and the host of people down there who were buying and selling; the hum and murmur of their voices could have been heard for more than a league. And among us were soldiers who had been in many parts of the world, at Constantinople, all over Italy and at Rome; and they said they had never seen a market so well ordered, so large and so crowded with people."

Spain

While the New World Indians had virtually no contact with foreigners, the people of Spain had nearly continuous interchange with other cultures. The Romans introduced wheat, bread, olives, and olive oil. The Germanic tribes contributed pork and lard, and the North African Moors, during their nearly 700 years of occupation, brought things like sheep, chickens, spices such as cinnamon and cumin, rice, fruits, nuts, advanced irrigation techniques, the process of distillation, and a great deal more. So, when Spaniards arrived in Mexico, they carried all these things with them.

Mexican Cooking

Unlike the situation in most other cultures, we know precisely when Mexican cooking as it exists today began: on Good Friday in the year 1519 when Hernan Cortés landed near present-day Veracruz. With the Conquistadors arrived the sum of their culture, including centuries of culinary tradition and many of their most important ingredients. What they did not bring was women to cook their food! The Spaniards followed the usual practice of conquering armies and formed liaisons with local women, giving them ingredients they had never seen and instructions they could not understand. The Indian women did what women have always done in such situations, either pretty much what they wanted to, or at least what they could get away with. In most cases that meant incorporating the Spanish ingredients into familiar forms like tacos, stews, and tamales. The latter is a perfect example of the genius of the cuisine's blending. Before the Conquest, tamales were made without fat and were very dry and not particularly tasty. Very soon lard was added, making them light and succulent.

One item that the Spaniards were firm about was their staple, bread, but even there they were thwarted. The wheat seeds they brought produced poor crops in the warm, humid climates of central and southern Mexico, and they quickly adopted the native corn tortillas.

The conquerors were much more successful in establishing other items, such as beef, pork, chicken, and sheep, although the taking and use of Indian lands to feed strange animals at the expense of their corn crops at first caused considerable friction. During the early years as this and other problems were solved, and as imports from Spain waxed and waned, the use of Indian foods increased.

A very simplified way of illustrating how Mexican food developed just after the Conquest is to say that, for some years, the people ate a combination of Indian and Spanish cooking, but in the sense that, instead of filling tacos with beans, squash or perhaps turkey as the Indians had done, they were now stuffed with beef, pork, chicken, lamb, and cheese, and these new fillings were often fried in butter or lard, as sometimes were the tortillas. (These were the fats of choice, especially lard, because to protect their home industry, the Spanish Crown forbade the planting of olive trees). But they were still eating tacos! In other words, the Indian cuisine absorbed the Spanish ingredients while keeping its own forms intact. Thus was created the tradition of antojitos mexicanos—the informal corn and tortilla-based dishes—tacos, enchiladas, tamales, quesadillas, burritos, gorditas, tamales, etc., as we know them today.

This process continued as Spaniards ranged outward from Mexico City to settle in more remote areas, including the most far flung Spanish outposts in present-day California and New Mexico. There, the mixture of the cuisines continued to develop based on local resources and Indian customs.

As the settlers moved north and west they found drier climates with hot summers and cold winters and discovered that wheat, which did so poorly in central and southern Mexico, thrived. Now they could finally make bread! But so ingrained had the use of tortillas become that, more often, wheat flour was made into a new type of tortilla.

As time went on and Mexico became more settled, food customs began to evolve, especially around Mexico City. Shipping from the Old World became more reliable, and the Spanish Galleons arrived regularly from the Far East, bringing new ingredients like mangos, ginger, and soy sauce.

There was also a significant increase in the immigration of Spanish women. Between 1520 and 1539 only 845 women were registered as coming from Spain, but by the end of the century there were over 10,000. At that time, one of the only alternatives for a well-to-do, unmarried woman was to join a convent, and those in Mexico were filled with intelligent, well-educated sisters, one of whose only creative outlets was cooking. The convents became centers of intellectual and artistic exploration, within the fairly strict limits sanctioned by the church. Many of them permitted servants, and the nuns worked in the kitchens with Indian women, trading ingredients and techniques. Some religious institutions also permitted slaves, and having African cooks, who advocated the use of bananas and pineapple, became a status symbol. On weekends, notables from the community came to the convents to discuss literature, art and music, and to sample the new foods, some of whose recipes they took with

them, creating new culinary traditions. New hands added new ingredients to the Indian stews, including cinnamon, cloves, raisins, coriander, aniseed, and onions, and the moles were born. The extensive use of egg yolks to prepare the paint used for religious art meant that there were ample egg whites available, and tropical fruits were incorporated into elaborate Spanish desserts. And so began today' upscale, traditional Mexican cooking.

During this same time, Spaniards and Indians together began to adapt the traditional Spanish entrees made with meat and seafood to be served with New World ingredients and techniques. Examples of this branch of the cuisine include Mexican-style steaks and seafood dishes such as huachinango a la veracruzana (Veracruz-style red snapper).

As with olives and olive oil, the desire to protect domestic Spanish producers caused laws to be made precluding the establishment of vineyards. As most imported wine went for communion purposes, the settlers searched for new alcoholic beverages that were both good and affordable. Applying the process of distillation they had learned from the Moors to the fermented agave juice the Indians called pulque, they created tequila and mezcal, which, along with various crude brandies, became the drinks of choice. Later, European immigrants brought their brewing techniques and, to this day, Mexico produces some of the world's finest beer.

As the Indians had no beasts of burden and had not developed the wheel, there were no roads to facilitate communication. Because of this it took regional cooking styles a long time to find their way to other areas. Many of them were first spread by mule drivers, and one still finds dishes referred to as al arriera or "in the style of mule drivers." It was not until the development of the railroads in the early twentieth century that the spread of commerce, information, and recipes became both widespread and rapid.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Mexican elite considered France to be the arbiter of good taste, and, among other things, French chefs were imported. However, it was not long before the classic French cuisine was Mexicanized by the addition of chiles, beans, tortillas and other New World ingredients, setting the stage for the development of a more upscale, refined branch of Mexican cooking. Crepes stuffed with huitlacoche (corn mushrooms) and squash blossoms are an example.

As delicious as Mexican cooking was, Mexico's upper crust did not believe it to be elegant enough for some important occasions. But in the 1980's creative Mexican chefs picked up on the worldwide craze for fusion cooking and began mixing and matching from among the various branches and regions of Mexican cooking, including antojitos mexicanos, traditional Mexican entrees, such as the moles, the Spanish-based entrees, and the more upscale French/Mexican style. They used smaller portions and stressed appearance and presentation. In the process, they created a new, upscale aspect of the cuisine, which they called nueva cocina mexicana (new Mexican cooking). It now takes its place beside the

simple antojitos mexicanos and traditional Mexican entrees, and holds its own with the worlds finest cooking without losing the earthy, soul-nourishing quality that is so much a part of all Mexican cooking.

I am often asked to name my favorite Mexican dish, and I always reply, "It depends on my mood." Do I feel like something habit-formingly delicious that I can pick up and eat quickly, and without a lot of fuss? Do I want something more formal that reflects centuries of tradition like one of the moles, or perhaps a more familiar but still unique steak or seafood dish? Or, do I want something lighter, and more aesthetic and elegant? Mexican cooking has it all, and the choice is yours!

For further Information:

The above is only a quick summary of the history of Mexican cooking. For a more in-depth information see Jim Peyton's *New Cooking from Old Mexico*, by Jim Peyton Red Crane Books, 1999; and *Que vivian los tamales*, by Jeffrey M. Pilcher, University of New Mexico Press, 1999.

* Author's note on use of the word "Indian"

For those who are accustomed to the term "Native Americans" and are either perplexed or somehow offended at the use of the term Indian, I employ it because it seems to me to be the most accurate way of referring to the racially similar peoples who originally settled the Americas, including Mexico. In the term "Native Americans" the word "Native," in the sense it is used, means "indigenous," which, in turn, means "not introduced." Since historians agree that these people originally migrated from Asia the name is, by definition, incorrect. A more accurate and therefore acceptable description might be "First Americans." Even though Columbus and his contemporaries, mistakenly believing they had reached India, misnamed the people "Indians," that is what they were called by those who discovered them, and the word has been in common usage for many centuries.