

Frequently Asked Questions on Mexican Cooking

1. Do people in Mexico eat the same dishes I find at my favorite Mexican restaurants here in the United States?

Yes and no. Most Mexican restaurants in the United States specialize in only one aspect of Mexican cooking, *antojitos mexicanos*, literally "Mexican-style whims." These are the corn and tortilla-based specialties that include dishes such as enchiladas, tacos, tamales, quesadillas, chalupas, and tostadas that evolved directly from the original Indian cooking. In Mexico today these *antojitos mexicanos* serve as inexpensive but delicious staples for those in the lower economic class, and are popular with the more affluent as informal snacks or light meals, much as we would eat hamburgers and hotdogs. In addition, it should be noted that most Mexican restaurants in the United States serve what is more properly referred to as Mexican-American cooking, an adaptation of the original, interior recipes to U.S. ingredients and cooking methods.

2. I have been told that to reduce the heat in Mexican dishes I should remove the seeds of the chiles. Is this correct?

No! The notion that a significant amount of heat is contained in the seeds of chiles is one of the most frequently repeated culinary myths (and often by people who should know better). The heat in chiles is caused by a substance called capsaicin. It is found in all parts of the chile, but least of all (approximately 5% by some estimates) in the seeds. The probably reason for the misunderstanding is that the greatest amount of capsaicin is found in the placenta, or veins of the chile, which usually lie close to the seeds. I do however, often remove the seeds unless they are an important part of the recipe (such as with some of the moles and salsas) because they can have a bitter taste and unpleasant texture.

3. What is the best antidote to the heat of chiles?

First, it should be noted that, Mexicans can be just as sensitive to chile heat as anyone else. So, a properly prepared Mexican dish should not require an antidote. If, however, you inadvertently sample a tortilla chip that has been dipped into a salsa that was prepared with the specific goal of bringing tears to your eyes and sweat to your forehead, the best antidote is a dairy product such as milk or cream, and starchy foods such as rice, beans and *sopaipillas* which tend to absorb the capsaicin. A sugar-laced cola is also helpful.

4. Why does Mexican food seem almost habit forming?

Studies have indicated that the ingestion of chiles releases endorphins in the brain. Endorphins are chemical compounds designed to act much as does any pain killer such as morphine. So, when the heat in your mouth signals your brain that something painful may be occurring, it reacts by producing a small amount of a very potent drug-like substance that creates an overall feeling of pleasure.

I do not find the same effect to be present, at least not to the same degree, in other chile-laced cuisines such as those of Sichuan and India, science notwithstanding. Perhaps it has something to do with the combination of cheese, corn, and endorphins?

5. Are there any low fat, low calorie Mexican dishes?

Yes. After all, the food of the original inhabitants of Mexico was almost entirely vegetarian and fat-free. It was not until the Spanish Conquest that fats and fatty foods were introduced. Enchiladas made with chicken, a tomatillo sauce and with very little cheese is a fine example as are many of Mexico's famous seafood dishes. Many of these low fat offerings, as well as those from other traditions, will be included in our diet section.

6. What is the difference between Tex-Mex cooking and that found in other areas I have visited in the United States such as New Mexico and Arizona?

All these cooking styles are properly termed Mexican-American cooking, and are regional variations within the broad definition of Mexican cooking. With the notable exception of the Mexican cooking of New Mexico, they were developed by Mexican immigrants who adapted their recipes to the new ingredients and conditions they found on this side of the border. In New Mexico, however, the cooking developed much the same as it did in Mexico, where Spanish ingredients and techniques mixed with those of the Indians. In New Mexico this meant, for the most part, the Pueblo Indians whose cooking was quite distinctive.

Regional differences in Mexican-American cooking include: In the Mexican cooking of Arizona, which came mostly from the state of Sonora, staples include burritos and chimichangas, often filled with dried, shredded beef, seasoned with chiles. These items, until recently, were rarely found in New Mexico or Texas. In New Mexico, sopaipillas, taken with honey or stuffed with meat are popular items rarely found elsewhere, as are stacked, rather than rolled, enchiladas. New Mexican chile sauces are made almost exclusively from their own distinctive chiles, both fresh (green) and dried (red) and are used almost exclusively to make sauces, with pork most often being the meat of choice. In Texas where beef is king, enchiladas are covered with a cumin-infused beef gravy made usually with ancho chiles, salsas usually

are made with jalapeño chiles, and puffy tacos are a specialty not found elsewhere. In California fish, such as in their famous fish tacos (both fried in beer batter and grilled) is very popular

7. Is it absolutely necessary to use lard to obtain an authentic flavor in Mexican cooking?

Yes and no. While olive oil was a favorite of the Spanish, it never really caught on in Mexico, where lard became the fat of choice. One reason for this is that, early on, fearing competition to its domestic olive industry, the Spanish crown forbade the planting of olive trees in Mexico. Although Mexicans have learned the dangers of too much saturated fat and are using more and more vegetable oils, lard is still a necessary addition for some traditional recipes such as tamales which require lard's distinctive taste. It should be noted that, despite its reputation, lard actually contains less saturated fat than butter. Also, rendering your own lard in small quantities is quite simple and produces a far more tasty result than the greasy, off-tasting variety made with hydrogenated fat that is found in most U.S. supermarkets. (Simply cut about 3/4 cup of pork fat into small pieces and microwave it for a minute at a time in a 2 cup or larger pyrex measuring glass that you have covered with high quality, food safe plastic wrap for a minute at a time, being careful not to burn yourself when you touch the cup's handle or with the steam when you remove the plastic. As soon as the fat has melted, and before it turns brown, pour it through a strainer into a sterile jar, then cool and refrigerate it. Use kitchen mitts and great caution when working with the hot fat, the cup, and the plastic wrap).

8. What is the difference between the Mexican cooking found in the United States and that of Mexico?

Some of the main differences between Mexican interior and Mexican-American cooking are: Mexican-Americans more often use ground meat and cheddar or Velveeta cheese, and bake their enchiladas in ovens with large amounts of thickened chile sauce and cheese, whereas in Mexico boiled, shredded meat and white cheeses such as asadero are the rule. In Mexico, enchiladas are usually made by dipping the tortillas in a chile sauce, frying them in oil, and filling and serving them immediately with just a little added sauce and cheese for a garnish. In Mexican-American cooking, enchiladas are usually covered with a large quantity of chile sauce or gravy, topped with cheese and baked before serving. Also, Mexican-American cooking is largely confined to the aspect of Mexican cooking called antojitos mexicanos (at least on restaurant menus) and is based primarily on the more simple cooking of the states of northern Mexico, from which most of the early immigrants came.