

Why Mexican Cooking is a Healthy Choice

Before the Spanish Conquest, Mexico's Indian tribes had what by today's standards would be considered a nutritionally excellent diet. Their staples were corn, beans, and squash, enlivened by the addition of chiles. They also consumed many other vegetables and a large number of fruits. Their animal protein came mostly from seafood and lean game animals. While they ate the right kinds of food, their main challenge was to get enough of it!

The Spanish brought cows, pigs, chickens, sheep, and goats to Mexico. Those meats and their byproducts, such as milk, cheese, eggs, and lard added a great deal of fat to the Mexican diet. And instead of using healthy, monounsaturated olive oil as they did in Spain, in order to protect their domestic growers, the Spanish government made cultivation of olive trees in Mexico illegal, causing people to use lard.

The Spanish also brought their recipes with them, and during the ensuing years the two foodways merged to form a brand new cuisine. For the most part, the Mexican ingredients and recipes prevailed. Spanish ingredients were incorporated into the Indian recipes for tacos, tamales, stews, and entrees. Corn, beans, and other vegetables, as well as fruits, remained atop the resulting food pyramid.

While a few of the new dishes were indeed laced with fat, most of them were well balanced in terms of protein, fat, and carbohydrates. Just as importantly, most Mexican cooking was developed in rural areas, using high quality ingredients with no chemical additives and little or no processing. That was true even in the cities, such as Puebla, Oaxaca, and Mexico City.

Some of Mexico's most famous dishes, including the *mole*s, were developed in urban convents by Spanish nuns working with their Indian servants, using produce grown lovingly in their own orchards. And to this day, Mexican home cooks and chefs take great pride in the quality and nutritional goodness of their ingredients. In fact, much of our organic produce now comes from farms in Baja California, originally developed to support the area's burgeoning restaurant industry.

While Americans are far more knowledgeable and sophisticated about food than they were even a few years ago, some misconceptions nevertheless die hard. Among them is the notion that Mexican food is fattening and/or unhealthy. The main reason for that has to do with our narrow exposure to our southern neighbor's cuisine.

The first large wave of Mexican immigrants to the U.S. came to escape the devastation of the Mexican revolution in the early 20th century. The majority arrived with little or no money and just in time to experience our great depression, so large numbers of them were forced to live in poverty. To feed their families, they adapted their recipes to our least expensive ingredients, and necessity often forced them to use large portions of energy-giving lard. What were missing in the immigrant's diets were the traditional soups, entrees, seafood, and fresh vegetables that are the mainstay of interior Mexican cooking.

When those Mexican-Americans opened restaurants, Anglos found their offerings to be addictively delicious. The downside was that many of the menu items relied on large quantities of cheese, fatty meats, and fried foods. And they often used hydrogenated lard instead of the pure lard of Mexico. That is not to say that all Mexican-American recipes are unhealthy. Far from it! To demonstrate this, and to show just how healthy *and* delicious Mexican food can be, [Naturally Healthy Mexican Cooking](#):

[Authentic Recipes for Dieters, Diabetics, and All Food Lovers](#) includes many highly nutritious, low-calorie dishes from all aspects of Mexican cooking, including the Mexican-American cooking from Texas, California, Arizona, and New Mexico. *¡Buen Provecho!*