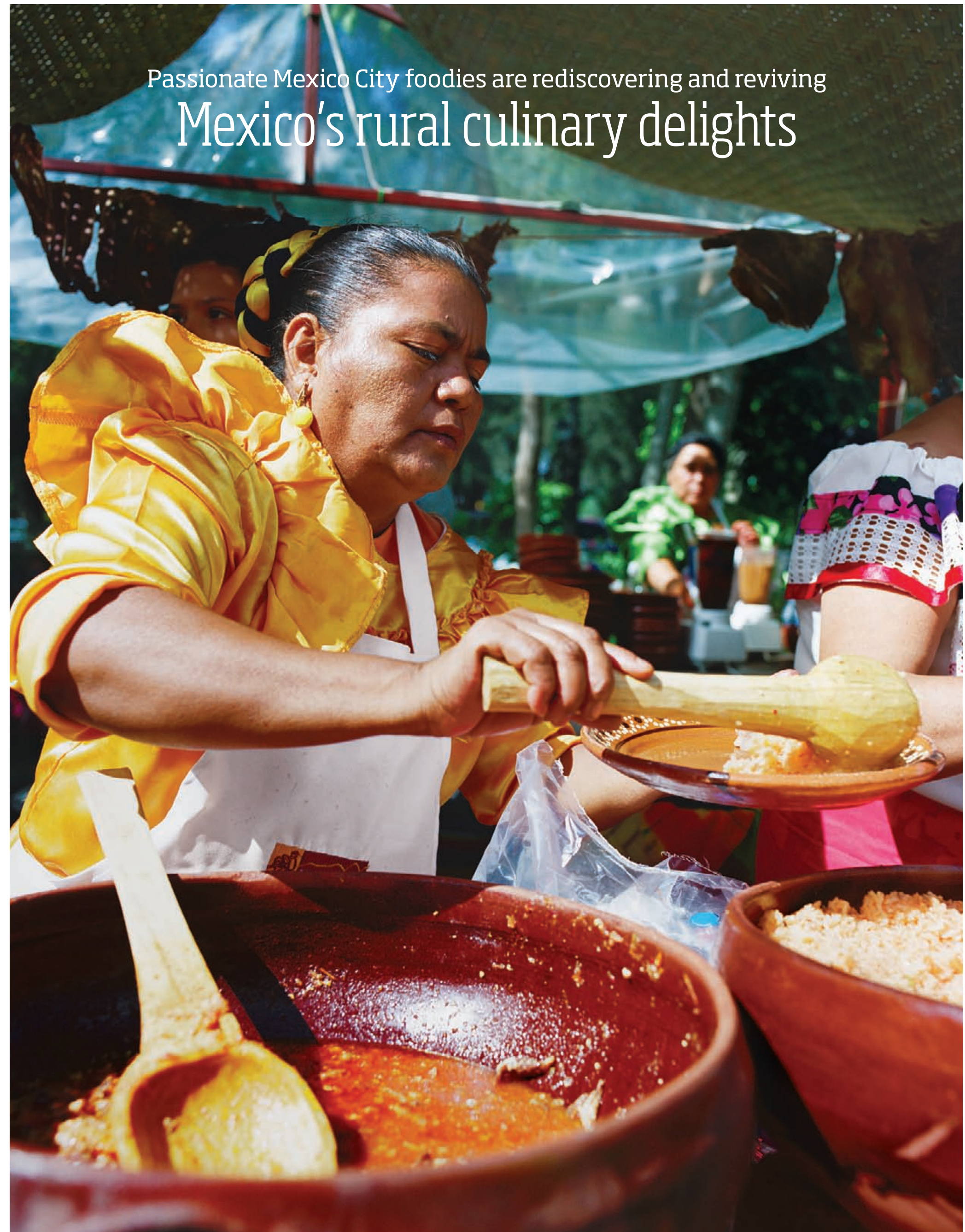


Passionate Mexico City foodies are rediscovering and reviving
Mexico's rural culinary delights





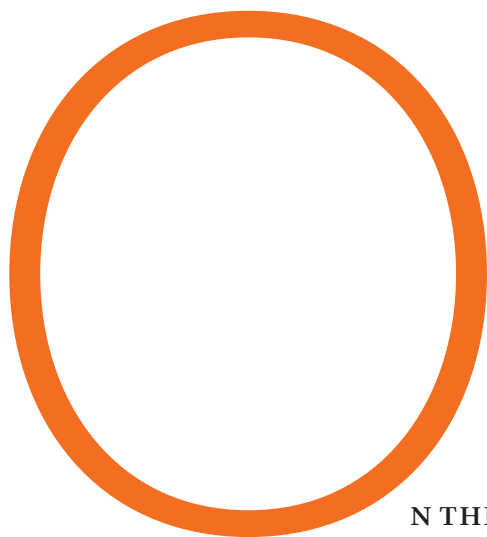
**MEXICO'S
SOUL
FOOD**

By Lygia Navarro

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TRUJILLOPAUMIER



On weekends, Cristina Palacio, below left, studies traditional cooking techniques at food festivals, such as this one in Morelia, Michoacán. Opposite, a Michoacán woman makes *gorditas de nata*, or cream cakes.



IN THE EDGE OF THE HIGHWAY from Mexico City to the tiny, sunbaked town of Santiago de Anaya stands a billboard with a message, farmer to farmer: “Dear *compañeros*: Do not sell your land—before long there will be better opportunities.”

Although Santiago de Anaya, in the Valle del Mezquital, is less than two hours from the capital, outsiders rarely visit. More often, people flee from here. It’s a land of sudden dust storms, squat concrete homes, and hills covered with mesquite and dry scrub. The town is surrounded by vast expanses of prickly pear cactus and the agave plant known as *maguay*—the only crops that grow here dependably. Young men in white cowboy hats reminisce about construction jobs in Florida and tomato-packing stints in Louisiana, where they can earn more in four hours than they do in a week working the fields here.

But once a year, during the first weekend in April, visitors arrive by the thousands to devour the peculiar delicacies proffered at Santiago de Anaya’s annual food festival. The unofficial motto is an old Mexican proverb: “*Todo lo que corre y vuela, a la cazuela*,” meaning “Everything that runs and flies, into the pot.” Inside the festival’s striped tent, indigenous N̄hañhú *señoras* peddle plates of food. Their eager customers include







Opposite, Michoacán's food centers around local ingredients, such as the spiky *chayotes espinozos* and searing-hot *chiles de árbol*. Above, vendors at the Morelia festival fry red snapper and prepare balls of corn masa for *corunda*, Michoacán tamales.

"Mexican food is like an art," says Cristina Palacio. "It has evolved, but its roots are incredibly deep—as deep as in China, as in India."



middle-class city dwellers wearing embroidered folk dresses, neighbors from surrounding villages who have braved rickety buses, and members of the far-flung Valle del Mezquital diaspora returning home. Through the swarm, I struggle to move forward as I search for culinary revivalist Cristina Hernández de Palacio, my guide for the day.

The crowds lurch toward each new scent, ingredient, and cook offering samples. They ogle pots of rabbit *mole* stew, skunks roasted in maguey leaves, magenta *xoconoxtle* (cactus fruit) marmalade, black-and-orange mesquite beetles toasting on wood-fired *comales* (traditional griddles), and my favorite of the sumptuous curiosities: bowls of tiny *escamoles*, firm white ant larvae that have the creamy texture of roe. Indigenous groups in the Valle del Mezquital once offered *escamoles* as tribute to the 16th-century Aztec emperor Moctezuma II.

Finally, I spot Palacio, an understated 59-year-old, in the festival's competition amphitheater. Wearing jeans and a white, long-sleeved Oaxacan peasant blouse, she is surrounded by the crew that films *Bocados de Nuestra Historia* ("Bites of Our History"), a public television program she helps produce. The program is one of many projects she works on with *Cultura Culinaria*, a Mexico City organization dedicated to preserving traditional Mexican food.

Though she is already an expert in the minutiae of Mexican cuisine, Palacio is here to learn. At nearly every stand she pauses to ask questions, listening intently until the moment each cook delivers that tiny nugget of new information that brings her a rush of joy: "What is that flavor in your *pulque* [maguey liquor]? Celery!"

As the cameras roll, Palacio interviews the *pulque* producer, a man wearing a red Che Guevara baseball cap and a woven maguey-fiber sling that holds a gourd. *Pulque*,

Many rural Mexicans feel that they alone should be responsible for preserving their culinary heritage. "It is ours," says Jazmín Pérez Salinas.

Palacio's viewers will learn, is a historic commodity—and an inherently locavore one, as the delicate fermentation process makes it difficult to transport. The maguey's sole flower bud is removed before it blooms, leaving a cavity that fills each day with sweet liquid, or *aguamiel*, which producers collect in the gourd and then ferment into a tangy, cloudy drink. Low in alcohol (farmers gulp it in the fields for hydration), pulque has been essential to indigenous groups in Mexico's semidesert areas since long before the Aztecs used it in human sacrifices and in worship of the maguey goddess, Mayahuel.

This is what mesmerizes Palacio about Mexican cuisine. "It's like an art," she says. "It has evolved and changed, but its roots are incredibly deep—as deep as in China, as in India. The French have distinguished themselves with [culinary] techniques. But a cultural background of millennia? No. We absolutely have something to boast of."

Walking toward the exit after hours of filming, Palacio stops to buy a chile-roasted wild hare for her family. ("My job in gastronomic research is to eat," says her husband, Manuel, a stout life insurance systems analyst.) Trailed by the crew, Palacio leans in to chat with the vendor, who carefully packs the purchase for the trip to Mexico City. The woman reveals her family's trademark seasoning: *guajillo* chile and sesame seeds. "¡Andale!" Palacio says, the thrill of discovery in her voice yet again.

After Palacio leaves for Mexico City, I double back to talk with the hare vendor, Jazmín Pérez Salinas. Decked out in thick black eyeliner, a white peasant blouse with red embroidery, tight jeans, and a studded leather belt, the 24-year-old Santiago de Anaya native helps run her family's stand. Unlike many Mexicans her age, Pérez Salinas prefers thick, homemade corn gorditas instead of pizza or French fries, especially *gorditas* stuffed with sautéed *quelites*—delicate wild greens that many Mexicans consider "*comida de los pobres*," or "food of the poor."

"We love it that our food is known all over," Pérez Salinas says, beaming as she and her mother reel off a list of places their visitors have come from, as far off as Africa and Japan, including some who read about the family's stall on the Internet. "It is delicious, because everything—absolutely everything—is from here."

When I ask what she thinks about the role of researchers such as Palacio, Pérez Salinas quickly replies that academics from Mexico City should not be responsible for saving the ancient food traditions of towns such as hers. "It should be us ourselves," she says. "Because it is *ours*."

Vendors like Pérez Salinas and the *campesinos* who grow the ingredients certainly benefit from Mexico City's foodies buying their products. But, she admits, preserving the culture sometimes means adapting it for different tastes. She gestures to an empty case next to the chile-coated hares. Hours before, she had filled the case with a new delicacy her family created just for the fair: pizzas topped with tiny white escamoles. This compromise between traditional and modern tastes was the stall's single best-selling item of the day.

BEFORE I ARRIVED in Santiago de Anaya, I passed through the tiny village of San Miguel Huautla, in the indigenous Mixteca region of Oaxaca. There I visited Anastasia Velasco, a *campesina*, or peasant farmer, who works as a sustainable-farming educator. Velasco teaches other farmers about the importance of growing heritage vegetable crops, swearing off agrochemicals, and cooking and passing along ancestral recipes.

At the Morelia festival, farmers sell their produce, backed by a banner touting the Michoacán government's "buy local" campaign.

Sitting in the outdoor kitchen, I watched Velasco warm large tortillas and grill pads of *nopal* cactus over a wood stove as her herd of goats wandered nearby. She talked of her nieces and nephews who left to work as servants in Mexico City. "After they finish school," she said, "man or woman, it's off to the city. Why? Because they want money."

Now, when they return for the annual village festival, her relatives tell her, "I don't like the food from here anymore" and refuse to eat Velasco's homemade tortillas—or any tortillas. Instead, they down package upon package of Maruchan ramen noodles. Even at Santiago de Anaya's festival, alongside roast possum and sautéed palm flowers, savvy entrepreneurs hawk Maruchan, now a household name, although the festival officially prohibits it.

When Cristina Palacio and I meet up again in Mexico City after the food fair, I ask her how uncommon it is for a village like Santiago de Anaya to maintain its food heritage amidst the forces vanquishing many regional cuisines. "A lot has been lost already," she says, frowning. "In many towns, the pride has already disappeared. It was very sad what happened here in Mexico, that the indigenous were so denigrated. Many indigenous people lost their identity [and their cuisine] out of shame, or from trying to be like the city folk. In many other towns, they no longer have the ingredients to keep eating the same way, because the men have crossed the border, because the land has been abandoned, because the kids go away to study. So they don't follow the same way of farming, of hunting, of raising animals. Everything is lost."

While rural Mexico has spent decades shedding its indigenous eating habits—"poverty food," as food historian Rachel Laudan calls fried insects and such—Mexico City foodies like Palacio have been scrambling to rediscover them. For much of the 20th century, middle- and upper-class Mexicans saw their own food as a poor stepchild to European cuisines. Professional cooks were men, trained in-house at French, Italian, or Spanish social clubs, according to Alicia Gironella De'Angeli, the owner of Mexico City's El Tajín restaurant. Gironella helped lobby UNESCO to recognize Mexico's corn-based cuisine for its historical and cultural importance.

In 1983, she and a group of mostly female chefs pooled their collective knowledge—and personal funds—to establish the culinary preservation organization Cultura Culinaria. The group's mission is to "ennoble Mexican gastronomy, promote it, and reaffirm its prestige." Now well into its third decade, Cultura Culinaria comprises chefs, cooking school students, and anthropologists and other academics, who gather every few weeks in Mexico City for classes,







With more than 100 stalls, Mexico City's San Juan market supplies chefs and home cooks with produce and meat, as well as snacks such as *aguas frescas*, above left, and *pico de gallo*, above right.

Merchants at the San Juan market have known many of their customers for generations. "He knows my whole life," Palacio says of one fruit vendor.

lectures, conferences, and, with Slow Food Mexico, "taste laboratories" that connect organic farmers with restaurateurs.

Palacio first met Gironella in 2001, when she signed up for one of the chef's cooking classes. "We clicked," says Gironella. "Cristina's questions were so intelligent, and we definitely coincided in our way of looking at many details of Mexican cuisine." She immediately recruited Palacio to join *Cultura Culinaria*.

For Palacio, a former special education teacher with two grown children, it was the perfect retirement project. Today she works nonstop—with a minimal salary and usually behind the scenes—on dozens of *Cultura Culinaria* projects, including co-producing *Bites of Our History*, organizing a culinary history archive from a folk art library, teaching *Cultura Culinaria*'s food history classes at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and helping Gironella update her tome on Mexican cuisine, *The Larousse of Mexican Cooking*.

Although she has always lived a comfortable Mexico City existence, Palacio's interest in preserving Mexico's indigenous food is rooted in her childhood. Her father, a London-trained neurologist and "a great gourmet," took the family to dine in the country's best restaurants as well as standing-room-only *taquerías*. Family vacations consisted of road trips all over Mexico, where Palacio gained an appreciation for the country's diverse indigenous cultures.

She often stayed with her maternal grandparents for weekend visits filled with meringues and crispy mutton *flautas de barbacoa*, and her doting *abuelos* required that Palacio help clean and cook. (Her grandmother was the rare middle-class *mexicana* who refused to have servants.) Those rituals—first peeling peas, then helping prepare tamales, *chilaquiles*, and duck with black *mole*—left Palacio enamored with food and its traditions. "This is my life," she says. "As a girl, as a wife, as a grandmother."

A few days after our trip to Santiago de Anaya, I tag along as Palacio shops for Easter groceries in the enclosed San Juan market downtown, a magnet for Mexico City chefs. Palacio eats a tiny mango as we wander past escamoles, bright-red dried crayfish, chickens yellow from a diet of marigolds, goats and rabbits skinned everywhere except the feet to prove their freshness, fried pork rinds—each taller than a toddler—and snails crawling out of their containers and up the white-tiled walls.

Palacio's shell of reserve softens as she greets vendors her family has patronized since before she was born: the vegetable saleswoman who attended her mother's wake, the fruit seller offering samples of his most succulent goods. Everyone

addresses Palacio formally as Señora in deference to Mexico's class divide. As the fruit vendor packs her purchases in boxes, he asks if Palacio is spending Easter at her weekend home in Cuernavaca. "*Si Dios quiere*" (God willing), she answers, turning to me. "He knows my whole life."

Palacio's driver loads the boxes into the minivan and takes us to a Walmart-owned Superama grocery store where Huey Lewis and the News blares from speakers. No one here knows Palacio. She fills her basket with Sensodyne toothpaste, putting her hand to her forehead in mock defeat as she recounts complaining to the manager about his meager stock of sausages.

Even though she prefers old-fashioned markets, Palacio understands the supermarket's appeal. "You can go to the bakery, the *tortillería* is right here, fruits, vegetables, dried goods," she says. "For many housewives or single people, it is much more comfortable." Yet after the explosive sensory experience at San Juan, Superama feels sterile. The produce looks pallid; the bread is unnaturally uniform.

Palacio laments the fact that so few of the items are from Mexico. "There is very little awareness," she says. "Many people prefer cheap products to Mexican ones."

THE LANDSCAPE of Mexican agriculture has changed drastically in the past 15 years. The country's agricultural industry has traditionally revolved around corn, much of it grown on tiny plots of land by farmers planting and harvesting by hand. For generations, Mexican farmers grew enough corn to feed their families and sold the excess to government distribution centers. But after the North American Free Trade Agreement was enacted in 1994, the distribution centers closed

“In food, there is a future.” says farmer Rigoberto González, who sells his produce to Mexico City restaurants through a collective.

Along the canals in Mexico City’s Xochimilco neighborhood, farmers raise flowers, produce, and even chickens on floating plots of land, using techniques pioneered by the Aztecs.

Mexico’s Best Food Festivals

Traditional Mexican cuisine varies widely from region to region, depending on the native produce, availability of livestock or seafood, and indigenous cooking techniques. These five festivals celebrate local specialties—from insects and frozen fruit pops to mushrooms and Mayan-influenced tamales. —LN

Feria del Hongo

San Juanito, Chihuahua

August

52/635-456-9050

After the rainy season is over, San Juanitans gather edible mushrooms from the pine forests in the mountainous Sierra Tarahumara. Dozens of varieties, including the meaty *amanitas* and the lobster-colored *orejas de puerco*, are on display for mycological enthusiasts and serve as the basis for all the dishes sold here.

Encuentro de Cocina Tradicional de Michoacán

Morelia, Michoacán

December

turismo.michoacan.gob.mx/p_evento.php

Held in Michoacán’s capital, the Encuentro de Cocina Tradicional highlights Michoacán cuisine—often considered the comfort food of Mexico—and its base ingredients: onion, *chile perón*, serrano chile, cabbage, chayote, and *limón criollo*, a citrus similar to Key lime.

Feria de la Paleta

Tocumbo, Michoacán

December

michoacan.gob.mx/ferias/

The two-story-tall *paleta* welcoming visitors to Tocumbo hints at the importance of the frozen fresh-fruit Popsicle to this town. Nearly every family here is involved in the *paletería* business. In December, Tocumbans return home from their far-flung franchises, making their best paleta recipes (such as mango, soursop, and cucumber-chile) for the festival.

Fiesta Tradicional Maya

Dzulá, Quintana Roo

March

Geographically separated from the rest of Mexico, the Mayans of the Yucatán peninsula developed their own distinctive cuisine, showcased in this festival. The dishes are often sweetened with honey (the Mayans have a history of beekeeping) and take advantage of the abundant local fruit. Tamales here are made from banana dough, not corn.

Muestra Gastronómica del Valle del Mezquital

Santiago de Anaya, Hidalgo

April

52/772-727-0274

During the weekend before Easter, Mexicans come to Hidalgo for the festival’s exotic ingredients, such as squirrels, mesquite beetles, possums, and ant larvae, many of which are available only in March and April. Nearly a thousand locals bring their variations on traditional dishes to the cooking competition.

and prices for American corn, subsidized by the United States government, dropped so low that Mexican corn farmers could not compete.

As the domestic market for Mexican corn was drying up, so was the land. With climate change, rains that had been dependable for centuries became increasingly scarce, and most farmers have no access to water sources for irrigation. Now, more than half of Mexico’s agricultural land has become too dry and overused to yield crops, with another 600,000 acres drying up annually. Between 1991 and 2002, more than one-fifth of all farmers—900,000 people—gave up on agriculture entirely. Every year, nearly a million people leave Mexico’s dry rural land for larger cities or the United States.

Oddly, one place where farming is coming back is Mexico City. Though the capital is now so parched that, in sections of the city, residents go without water for days at a time, the whole area was once a lake. When Spaniards arrived, the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán, where modern Mexico City now stands, was a floating metropolis of canals, gardens, and palaces on Lake Texcoco. The Xochimilco district, a rural section of southern Mexico City, is the only remaining portion of the city where the area’s original ecosystem and agriculture exist. Today, Xochimilco farmers still harvest food from ancient floating plots of land called *chinampas*, set on 114 miles of canals, and several have formed a successful urban farming cooperative.

At the market, Palacio warns me against going to Xochimilco: The *barrios populares* (working-class neighborhoods) are preparing for their big Easter fiestas, which can get raucous. When I arrive in Xochimilco to meet farmer Rigoberto González, however, I find a bustling market and quaint central plaza—a still-charming small town pressed on all sides by capital sprawl. A few blocks from this plaza, after crossing a series of canals reminiscent of Venice, González and I board his canoe to see his fields.

As songbirds chirp from the trees, and herons and ravens glide above us, González, a soft-spoken man of 36, rows. We pass laughing children swimming in the canals, and González waves at fellow *chinamperos* working tracts of corn, flower beds, and cow pastures until we reach his own plot of greens and herbs.

A Puebla native who married a Xochimilco woman, González joined the farming collective Productos de la Chinampa when it began two years ago. The collective sells fruit, vegetables, free-range meat, eggs, herbs, honey, pulque, and products such as homemade ice cream, tortillas, and *mole* to individual customers and more than a dozen Mexico City restaurants. Before the collective started, *chinamperos* sold their products only in the Xochimilco wholesale market. Like farmers across Mexico, they often could not make a living and had to emigrate to find work. Now González earns enough from selling his lettuce, greens, and parsley to hire workers to help him. Once the collective got going, some Xochimilco residents even began farming their long-abandoned *chinampas* again. Soon, González believes, people who were forced to leave to find work will return as well. Since my visit, he has left Productos de la Chinampa and is forming another collective with 20 other *chinamperos*.

Many Xochimilco *chinamperos* shun pesticides and fertilizers—even if they cannot afford to become organic certified—since the canal sediment they dredge up to spread on their fields is a free, natural fertilizer. These ancient techniques and stewardship of Xochimilco’s fragile environment are the *chinamperos*’ calling card, González says. “It’s a way to reactivate the whole area. If we sell more, then there are more *chinampas*. There is plenty of future here. In food there is a future.”

For socially conscious restaurateurs like Gerardo Vázquez Lugo, networks such as Productos de la Chinampa are essential to bringing food from campesinos to





At Los Danzantes, located in the colonial Coyoacán plaza, diners are serenaded by Norteño musicians while enjoying food grown on the chinampas. Opposite, Cristina Palacio steams Oaxacan tamales in her well-stocked kitchen.



“Restaurants have to look at farmers as partners,” says Marco Bernal, manager of Los Danzantes. “We are the coproducers of their product.”

capitalinos (Mexico City residents). “As individuals, it would be impossible for them to reach me,” Vázquez Lugo says. “I would have to travel all over the country in a truck hunting products, and I’d never live in Mexico City.” When he does find the exact product he has been searching for, whether through word of mouth or by coincidence, Vázquez Lugo says, “It is magical.”

In addition to buying from Productos de la Chinampa, Vázquez Lugo works with artisanal vendors who travel as many as 20 hours to bring their products to his restaurant, Nicos, and his new, ultra-Mexican locavore grocery, Nicolasa, in the Azcapotzalco neighborhood. He admits that dealing with small producers and farmer networks can be challenging: Producers have little capacity to supply goods on credit, their products are often painfully limited by seasons, and it can be tricky to get what chefs want when they want it. But, Vázquez Lugo says, the social benefit of ensuring that producers are paid a fair price, as chefs work to advance Mexico’s culinary heritage, ultimately makes it worthwhile.

Marco Bernal, the manager of the Mexican fusion restaurant Los Danzantes in Mexico City’s Coyoacán neighborhood, agrees. An early customer of Productos de la Chinampa, he remembers when restaurant staff had to drive to Xochimilco to pick up orders. “You have to look at them as your business partners,” says Bernal. “You are the coproducer of their product.”

The evening after I visit the chinampas, I stop for dinner at Los Danzantes and sit at an outdoor table overlooking the Semana Santa (Holy Week) revelers in the plaza. I start with *taquitos de chapulines*: moist handmade tortillas enveloping salty, crisp grasshoppers, avocado, and crumbly *queso*. They are sublime, but my spinach salad, with mango dressing and chunks of orange and grapefruit, brings a different kind of satisfaction. The greens, I know, are from González’s chinampa.

BEFORE PALACIO HEADS to Cuernavaca for Easter, I visit her at her condo in the Condesa neighborhood near Parque Chapultepec, Mexico City’s version of Central Park. Ever the generous cook, she offers to feed me numerous times as she gives me a tour of the kitchen, which she helped design when the building was constructed three years ago. She swapped the steel handles for wood—“This isn’t a restaurant kitchen, it’s a family kitchen!”—to complement her rustic furniture, and converted the maid’s quarters into a storage area for her assemblage of pots and pans as well as an extra freezer. She points out a bag of dehydrated grasshoppers she bought from Los Danzantes. “Those with a little *mezcal*. . .” she says, kissing her fingers with a sly smile.

I see the hare from Santiago de Anaya stashed in the freezer, too. At the festival, when I asked her why she bought that, rather than one of the more off-the-wall offerings, Cristina smiled a bit. “I prefer to get something that I know my family will eat.” Despite her best efforts, she said, “I don’t think they’d eat squirrel at my house.”

As we step inside the pantry, I swoon at her immaculately organized jars of Mexican cuisine’s primordial elements: dried shrimp, ground chiles, cones of blond and brown compressed sugar, tamarind, hibiscus, roasted pumpkin seeds ground to varying textures, organic coffee from Chiapas. The *mélange* exudes a spicy, caramel earthiness. When I ask which ingredient she couldn’t live without, Palacio looks at me as if I’ve asked her to choose between her daughter and son.

These days, Palacio’s foodie obsession has taken over her office as well as her



kitchen. Over the past year, she has been working to uncover a new branch of Mexico’s edible genealogy, in a groundbreaking project of culinary detective work. With anthropologist and *Bites of Our History* host Jiapsy Arias González, Palacio has been tracing royal recipes from a 16th-century colonial codex down to the everyday dishes, nearly unchanged, of modern Mexican cuisine. As she adapts the recipes to test in the kitchen, Palacio has just one regret: The writers of the codex only recorded what the wealthy of their day ate, not the common people’s fare.

She opens her computer and reads a letter she wrote to accompany her wedding gift to her daughter. It was a collection of recipes Palacio received as a wedding gift from her own mother, which she has been adding to ever since. “Putting this gift together has taken us many hours of constant and delicious work. Some of us learned and passed on our knowledge as oral history. In your hands is the continuation of this tradition. Take from us all this succulent heritage.” **A**

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LYGIA NAVARRO has written about Latin American culture and politics for *Virginia Quarterly Review*, the *Associated Press*, and *Christian Science Monitor*. She and photographers Joaquin Trujillo and Brian Paumier are profiled on page 8.